

Book Review Essay

Perspectives on Environmental Ethics

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Jamieson, Dale. 2008. *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sagoff, Mark. 2008. *The Economy of the Earth*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sandler, Ronald. L. 2007. *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Most introductory texts in environmental ethics (and philosophy in general) are anthologies, and there are advantages to this approach. No philosopher is an expert on all aspects of the field, especially if practical concerns such as climate change, population, biodiversity and globalization are addressed. Moreover, if a course is taught by a single professor, an anthology exposes students to different positions on controversial topics written by their advocates, not merely mediated through the professor's worldview. Another advantage is that students have to grapple with challenging material that was written for professionals and academics, not just students.

Students often see anthologies as disjointed, however, while a single-author text has coherence. Moreover, the editor of an anthology can, without much thought, include several articles presenting a range of positions on a topic and just leave it to readers to decide which they prefer. The single author has to address the similarities and differences between a range of views, to make connections, to help readers who know nothing about the field to which the book is an introduction, to think for themselves. A single author can survey a field much more completely than can the editor of an anthology: in one of the books reviewed here, Jamieson provides a digestible summary of Kantianism in six pages; Kant himself does not, which explains why he is rarely anthologized. All three of the books considered in this review are singly-authored, with both the strengths and weaknesses of that approach.

It would be hard to find three more different books in the same field to review. Jamieson's *Ethics and the Environment* is a textbook, principally for courses in environmental ethics but also for courses in "ethics proper or in environmental studies" (p. ix); it is also intended to appeal to a wider audience seeking an

introduction to the field. It serves as an introduction to ethics, with a focus on issues involving animals and the environment. Sagoff is a pioneer in the field of environmental ethics; *The Economy of the Earth* concentrates on the relations between environmental ethics, economics, law, politics and policy. His book, a collection of essays on closely-related themes, will appeal to professionals and scholars in those areas, as well as to the general reader with a reasonable knowledge of environmental issues. It is a 2nd edition of a book originally published in 1988 but, as he notes, the two are quite different: only three chapters are very similar to the first edition. Sandler's book, *Character and Environment*, is much more specialized, and is aimed largely at academic philosophers, though it would make an excellent text for an upper level reading course for philosophy majors. This review considers each in turn.

Jamieson says in his preface that *Ethics and the Environment* is aimed at students in environmental philosophy, including epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, history of philosophy, aesthetics, and political philosophy, as well as ethics. Ethics do not develop in a vacuum: ecofeminist writers such as Karen Warren¹ emphasize that the dominant view of the environment as a set of resources to be exploited is both historically and logically connected to patriarchal thinking. Of course Jamieson doesn't have the space to explore anything other than ethics (and, regrettably, he does not include ecofeminism) in detail, but at least he draws attention to the wider context. Readers seeking a longer work that includes issues of epistemology should read Warwick Fox's outstanding recent book, *A Theory of General Ethics*.²

A major strength of Jamieson's book is that it is much broader than most texts on environmental ethics. The first chapter provides a context in which to discuss "the environment" as an ethical question. It touches such topics as the concept of environment, aesthetics, predator-prey relationship, elephant poaching, whether humans are part of nature, morally ambiguous human relationships, off-road vehicle access to wilderness—all in the first five pages. Later chapters examine the nature of morality, including realism, relativism, subjectivism, and theological based ethics, meta-ethics, and the main ethical theories in the "Western" tradition.

One of Jamieson's core concerns is the relationship between human and other animals, especially domestic animals and "factory farming." He details the horrific treatment of animals and presents, largely approvingly, the positions of utilitarian Peter Singer and animal rights theorist Tom Regan on why we should cease to exploit animals and become vegetarians. Despite the pollution caused by intensively raising animals, Jamieson's concern is the suffering of animals, particularly in the United States. He overlooks practices in other areas where genuinely organic and free range meat, dairy products and eggs are widely available; in the UK, a third of all eggs sold are free range.³ As philoso-

1. Warren 1990.

2. Fox 2006

3. Anonymous 2007.

phers such as J. Baird Callicott point out, our relationship with domestic animals is hardly the central problem in environmental ethics.⁴ Even if their “liberation”—whatever that might mean in the case of the millions of animals confined in farms and intensive facilities around world—is desirable, what does our exploitation of animals as such have to do with the environment?

Jamieson also gives an interesting, though selective, overview of several other issues. He discusses theories such as biocentrism (life as the focus of value) and ecocentrism (ecosystem as the focus of value), and presents case studies involving conflicts of values. There are many references to Singer and Regan but very few to seminal figures in environment ethics such as Leopold and Callicott.

Sagoff has consistently advocated valuation of nature in terms of non-market concepts—moral, aesthetic, cultural, and political, and continues this advocacy in *The Economy of the Earth*. In fact, the dominant theme of his body of work is the contrast between “two visions of the natural world” (p. 1). He illustrates this by reference to a New Yorker cartoon which

. . . depicts a pair of Puritans . . . leaning over the rail of the Arbella as it made landfall in the New World. One says, “My immediate goal is to worship God and celebrate His Creation, but long-term, I plan to get into real estate.”

Unlike some environmental philosophers, Sagoff does not argue that economic valuation should be rejected outright. He emphasizes, however, that we should not confuse these two different visions of what constitutes value. Conservation biologists, he argues, should be concerned with the intrinsic value of nature, while environmental economists should measure the performance of the economy. He distinguishes between the Kantian approach to governance (based on moral principles and aesthetic judgments) with the welfare-economic approach (based on consumer preferences). We are all both citizens and consumers and we should act according to different values depending on which role we are playing.

As an illustrative example, he describes his students’ reactions to the Supreme Court decision in *Sierra Club v. Morton* (1972). This case involved a (successful) challenge to a proposal by Disney Enterprises to develop a ski resort in the Mineral King Valley wilderness area. Most of the students had no desire to visit this area in its wild state but would have done so had the development gone ahead, because it would have been comfortable and convenient. But they also almost unanimously agreed that the Court was right to find against the development, thus clearly separating their consumer and ethical preferences, in favor of the latter.

Sagoff contrasts willingness to pay with political theory based on “moral, aesthetic, spiritual and ethical goods” such as rights, self-respect and dignity. He

4. Callicott 1980.

then applies both these perspectives to issues of overconsumption. He also eventually argues for a reconciliation between nature and culture, emphasizing that what appear to some to be irreconcilable dualisms are not separate at all, by noting that “Europeans tend to perceive the natural as part of their cultural heritage” (p. 157). Sagoff also asks whether we can “put a price on nature’s services” and concludes that we cannot. Of course, we depend on “nature’s services” for our very survival, but they are not marketable, and therefore cannot be assigned a specific price.

Sagoff also considers the relation between science and religion. Surprisingly, it turns out that there is considerable common ground between at least some Calvinist theologians (notably Jonathan Edwards) and conservation biologists. Sagoff also notes that the early colonial settlers saw wilderness as “otherness,” as hostile and terrifying, which is how it is portrayed in Biblical texts (p. 175). Later writers, however, took a different view: “Edwards . . . provides a theological basis for an environmental virtue ethic” (p. 191). Sagoff also links the Puritan tradition to environmental science via the notion of “connectedness” and a shared admiration of nature’s aesthetic value. The environmental movement, he claims, is dying because it has come to embrace “an authoritarian, secular, scientific, collectivist, elitist, anti-democratic, cosmopolitan, querulous intellectualism” (p. 207). He predicts, however, that environmentalism will be revived by the support of the kinds of people who supported it from its early days in the 19th century: “Hunters, anglers, backpackers, birders, and other sportspeople . . . Evangelical and other Christians who recognize a religious duty to care for Creation . . .” (p. 207–8).

Sandler’s *Character and Environment* will appeal to the academic philosopher with a particular interest in ethics, especially in virtue and/or environmental ethics. His work will also have a broader appeal. He writes in a non-technical style, and uses interesting examples to help explain his position, most notably in his chapter applying virtue ethics to genetically modified crops.

In Western philosophy, there are three dominant ethical theories, all stemming back to classical times. Deontological or “Kantian” ethics are based on the nature of actions or, most commonly, rules, which are held to be right or wrong in themselves. Rights-based ethics are often considered to be deontological, because violation of rights is seen as inherently wrong. To claim that killing me would violate my right to life is, if accepted, a clear reason to spare me. Consequentialist ethics are based on the idea that actions or rules are right if performing or following them has, overall, better consequences than not doing so. The most influential consequentialist theory is utilitarianism: one ought to do whatever will bring about the greatest increase in the general happiness or will maximize interest or preference satisfaction. Utilitarianism and its derivatives, cost-benefit and risk-benefit analysis and similar approaches, dominate economic policy debates and often other policy areas, especially in secular societies. Virtue ethics switches the focus from actions and consequences to persons and their character. It was first elucidated in the West by Aristotle but is also central to

Buddhism. Virtue ethicists emphasize moral development. For the deontologist, moral development typically consists of a commitment to doing some kinds of actions and avoiding others (commonly specified by rules) and the utilitarian requires one to pursue the general happiness, but for the virtue ethicist moral development consists in becoming a certain kind of person with the disposition and desire to act virtuously. The notion of role modeling is a derivative of virtue ethics: one admires a person (who could be anyone from Jesus to Rachel Carson to Derek Jeter) and aspires to be like him or her—as in the bumper-sticker, “What would Jesus do?” Of course, it is not that the virtuous person does not care about the consequences of her actions or believe that believe that it is wrong to murder. Nonetheless, virtue ethics is quite distinct from the other two theories.

Virtue ethics fell out of fashion for much of the 19th and 20th centuries but was revived, almost single-handedly, by Alistair MacIntyre.⁵ It is often regarded as not just a better theory, but as essential to morality, because, as Sandler notes, having the right rules does not determine right behavior. The relevance of this approach to environmental ethics is obvious: environmental regulation generally takes the form of rules, and even if we know how we ought to act as a “good environmental citizen,” we do not always or even usually do so. In an earlier paper, Sagoff noted that “I have an ‘Ecology Now’ sticker on a car that leaks oil everywhere it’s parked.”⁶

Virtue ethics has become widely accepted in areas such as business and health care ethics, notably in the idea of the “ethic of care” that is widely regarded as central to good nursing practice. Environmental ethics has recently been dominated by a fourth approach to ethics, axiology. In this view, ethics is based on the recognition and protection of intrinsic value, which is often identified with ecological integrity, aesthetic value and a high degree of “naturalness.” But it is one thing for environmentalists to identify value in nature, quite another thing for them to persuade people to live by those values. Sandler argues, persuasively, not only that virtue ethics provides a firm basis for environmental ethics but that, to be a virtuous person one must necessarily care about the environment.

These three books (which should be read in the order in which they have been reviewed) together provide a general overview of environmental ethics, an account of its relationship with related areas such as environmental economics and politics, and an exciting new development in the field.

References

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5. MacIntyre 1981.

6. Sagoff 1983.

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