



## BOOK REVIEWS

Dale Jamieson, ed. *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001. xvi, 531 pages.

In the preface to this collection, Dale Jamieson says he mainly hopes the book will find its way into the hands of those who simply want to learn something about the subject. Needless to say, the essays are provocative and tendentious, for their authors are among those who have done the most to make environmental ethics what it is. Still, the authors are consistently attentive to the aim of being informative. The result is a superb reference work, and a pleasure to read. The book comprises thirty-six chapters gathered in four parts. Although we have space to discuss only a few, nearly all are thoughtful, well written, and eminently worthy of discussion.

Part one offers ten chapters on cultural traditions. A good discussion of the idea of stewardship runs through Eric Katz's essay on "Judaism," Robin Attfield's on "Christianity," and several others, too. Andrew Brennan's discussion of Malthus and Darwin in "Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Philosophy" is concise and enlightening.

Part two comprises six chapters on contemporary environmental ethics, beginning with John O'Neill's "Meta-Ethics." O'Neill describes various meta-ethical positions: realism, error theory, and expressivism. Realist theories, O'Neill holds, include such theories as deep ecology, according to which nature has intrinsic value. Intrinsic value, O'Neill notes, comes in several flavors. The phrase has been used to contrast with instrumental value, extrinsic value, subjective value, and has also been used to refer to what qualifies an entity for moral standing. These ideas are not coextensive (p. 165). For example, valuing mountains or birds for their own sake does not imply that they have moral standing. Robert Elliot's article on "Normative Ethics" discusses consequentialist, deontological, and virtue-based ethical theories. Gary Varner's essay on "Sentientism" continues the discussion of moral standing, intrinsic value, and holism.

Against those who denounce the land ethic as environmental fascism (to use Tom Regan's memorable phrase), J. Baird Callicott's essay patiently and convincingly responds that Leopold intended the land ethic to extend rather than replace traditional human-centered ethics. This leaves us with a land ethic that is more plausible but also notably less radical than many have taken it to be. Moreover, while Callicott defends Leopold against charges of misanthropy, he presumably would not want us to conclude that everyone who claims Leopold as an inspiration is equally innocent.

Freya Mathews chronicles the development of deep ecology from a comprehensive world view to an activist program aimed at minimizing human impact



on nonhuman nature. According to Mathews, the philosophy first articulated by Arne Naess in 1973 has given way to the philosophically agnostic activist manifesto published in 1985 by Bill Devall and George Sessions (with input from Naess). The new manifesto abandons explicit insistence that to be non-shallow, one has to buy into an awkward and arguably gratuitous philosophical package deal that includes socialism, egalitarianism, feminism, organismic metaphysics, and political decentralization. (Robyn Eckersley's essay on "Politics" notes that green parties pay lip service to decentralization while advocating bigger and more centralized government in practice, partly because "simply ceding political and economic control, including environmental management powers, to local communities does not in itself provide any guarantees that those communities will exercise their powers in an ecologically responsible manner" [p. 323]. On the other hand, ceding powers to national governments is no guarantee either, and deep ecology's original insight remains that people tend to be greener when making decisions about their own back yards.) The new deep ecology focuses on the intrinsic value of nonhuman (alongside human) life, on the truism that humans are a part of nature, and on the empirical rule of thumb that even well-intentioned human interventions in nonhuman nature typically do more harm than good, so that our environmental goal should be, so far as we can, simply to let nature be.

Mathews notes that from a post-colonial perspective, deep ecology's valorization of wilderness is problematic. "Wilderness-oriented deep ecologists often point to hunter-gatherer cultures as exemplars of the deep ecology ideal of noninterference with nature . . . However, this assumption has been challenged and rejected by many of the first peoples themselves. . . . In idealizing indigenous peoples as simply part of nature, deep ecologists are in fact perpetuating racist misunderstandings (p. 229). Mathews might agree, though, that this stereotype was more a problem for the original package deal than for the more circumspect ecological perspective that superseded it. Mathews closes by suggesting that promoting subsistence as a personal ideal (by which she appears to mean not subsistence, precisely, but rather striving for a smaller ecological footprint) is less confrontational than demanding wilderness preservation (at someone else's expense). Following Naess, she counsels that while we should not expect to be able to save the world, it is within our power to manage our own footprint, and in exercising that power, we can transcend the trivial and live joyfully.

Part three comprises seven chapters on environmental philosophy's disciplinary "neighbors," including a helpful and thoughtful essay on "Aesthetics" by John Andrew Fisher. A. Myrick Freeman's essay of "Economics" is a concise description of neoclassical economics as a framework for studying environmental issues. Economics is the study of scarcity, and of trade-offs that scarcity necessitates. Freeman says economists treat cost-benefit analysis as



the rational response to scarcity. Further, cost-benefit calculations should weigh future benefits and costs less heavily than current ones.

Discounting is uncontroversial when costs and benefits are internal to the decision maker. If you ask me how much I would pay today to be given a dollar a year from now, I would not pay as much as a dollar. I would pay less, perhaps about ninety-five cents. Properly valued, then, a future dollar sells at a discount. That is why there is nothing irrational about borrowing against the future to get a profitable project off the ground, even though the cost of borrowing a thousand now will be more than a thousand later. But here is the catch. There is nothing wrong with taking out a loan, so long as we *pay it back*. But there is something obviously wrong with taking out a loan we have no intention of repaying. In other words, discounting is one thing when the cost of raising capital is internalized; it is something else when we borrow against *someone else's* future rather than our own. We have no right to discount the price *others* (including future generations) will pay for our projects. We have no right to discount externalities. If we do discount externalities, the problem is not discounting per se but rather the willingness to impose net costs on other people. (Logically, discounting applies to future benefits as well as to future costs, so if we care enough about future generations to avoid doing them net harm, discounting per se won't make any difference, so long as we consistently apply the discount rate to the whole equation.) *Redistributive* discounting is objectionable: morally, economically, and sometimes ecologically as well.<sup>1</sup>

Kristin Shrader-Frechette's essay on "Ecology" distinguishes between hard and soft ecology, arguing that both approaches (hard ecology's emphasis on being value-free, judging theories solely in terms of ability to predict, and soft ecology's emphasis on ecosystem integrity) are inadequate: hard ecology because methodological value judgments (what sort of data is important, when it is more important to avoid false negatives than false positives, etc.) are unavoidable, thus making a purely quantitative, predictive ecology impossible (p. 306); soft ecology because even proponents acknowledge that soft ecology is vague to the point of giving up the aspiration to formulate testable hypotheses. And if the vagueness of central concepts (stability, equilibrium, integrity, or carrying capacity) is unavoidable, Shrader-Frechette says, they nevertheless have an undeniable heuristic value. A practical ecology can deploy these concepts and avoid hard and soft extremes through case study, natural history, and the articulation of rules understood as empirical generalizations rather than as universal laws. She goes into helpful detail in sections on why ecology has limits and on what ecology can accomplish within those limits.

<sup>1</sup> This paragraph largely is borrowed from David Schmidtz, "A Place for Cost-Benefit Analysis," *Philosophical Issues* 11 (2001): xxx-xxx. Reprinted in David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott, eds., *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works* (New York: Oxford Press, 2002).



Part four comprises thirteen chapters on environmental problems (population, biodiversity, animals, climate, etc.). Mark Woods's essay on "Wilderness" explains standard (and a few not-so-standard) problems with the very concept of wilderness. Wilderness is supposed to be untrammelled by definition, but how "untrammelled" does land have to be to count as wilderness? Does it matter whether the trammers were Lakota Indians rather than French fur trappers? Woods says we do well not to adopt a purist conception of wilderness. There is a difference between being affected by human contact and being transformed or destroyed by it. Woods also mentions a moral argument against attempting to preserve wilderness at the expense of the aboriginal peoples whose displacement is called for by official wilderness designation. To Woods's moral argument, we may add that ignoring interests of local people is impractical as well. Probably no elephant has ever been saved by telling local Africans who live with it on a daily basis that they are expendable but the elephant is priceless.

Thus, when Holmes Rolston, III in his essay on "Biodiversity" writes "Saving endangered species can even, at times, take priority over the preferences of persons—or even the lives of persons, as with the shoot-to-kill policies for poachers of elephants and rhinos" (p. 410), we respectfully disagree, for practical as well as moral reasons. Richard Leakey began his tenure as head of Kenya's Wildlife Service in 1989 gloating about all the poachers they were going to kill, but within a year reported to the U. S. State Department that there were about a hundred hard-core poachers in Kenya, their identities were known, and some of Leakey's rangers were among them, but there was nothing he could do because their political connections were better than Leakey's. Giving renegade rangers a license to kill anyone who got in their way did not help the elephants.<sup>2</sup> On the plus side, Rolston's essay contains a superb discussion of scientific and philosophical puzzles involved in the concept of a species.

Allan Holland's essay on "Sustainability" discusses pros and cons of weak and strong criteria for evaluating the sustainability of a given path of economic development. To satisfy strong criteria, we develop measures of natural capital, then pursue economic development in ways that preserve natural capital. By contrast, to satisfy weak criteria, we develop measures of total capital—human and human-made as well as natural—then pursue economic development in ways that preserve total capital. Weak criteria allow increases in human-made capital to offset decreases in natural capital. We might worry that strong sustainability threatens to rule out development altogether, but weak sustainability offers little by way of environmental protection. Holland argues that both criteria can be defended against the obvious objections, but that neither is problem-free. Although Holland is no cheerleader for economic

<sup>2</sup> As reported in Raymond Bonner, *At the Hand of Man* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 18, 134, 293.



approaches to environmental protection, he discusses several insights, some of them fairly subtle, that economic approaches make available to us. However, while there are advantages to viewing nature as a stock of capital (it allows us to contrast living off capital with living off income, and to appreciate warnings implicit in the contrast), there are sometimes subtle pitfalls as well. The essay closes with a brief but sobering look at prospects for cultural sustainability in an era of economic and technological globalization. Holland's essay is a model of how to do practical philosophy.

Lori Gruen's essay on "Technology" exhibits a similarly nice balance. She concludes, "Technology is surely implicated in much environmental damage, . . . [I]t is tempting to think that technology, in itself, is objectionable. Such an argument, however, is hard to sustain. If nature is valuable, as many have argued, then technology can be used to inform, educate, and assist in promoting its value" (p. 447). As Kristen Shrader-Frechette once said in conversation, technology is part of the problem, but it has to be part of the solution, too. Gruen focuses on education, but obvious promise for environmental progress also lies in areas of solar power technology and birth control technology. A complementary point, mentioned in Ian Simmons's essay on "History," is that low income or low access to technology does not necessarily mean low environmental impact (p. 293).

Like Gruen, Mark Sagoff in his essay on "Consumption" argues that technological progress often lets us do more with less. Sagoff thus rejects the wholesale technological pessimism of people like Paul Ehrlich (pp. 480–82). It was no fluke that Ehrlich lost his infamous bet against Julian Simon. (Simon invited Ehrlich to select any raw material he wanted, and any date in the future more than a year away, offering to bet that the inflation-adjusted price of whatever Ehrlich selected would be lower by the target date, indicating decreasing rather than increasing scarcity. In 1980, Ehrlich selected five minerals—chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten—and a target date in 1990. Ehrlich lost on all five counts. Simon renewed the invitation: any raw material, any future date. This time, Ehrlich declined.) Increasing consumption in the sense of higher living standards does not imply increasing consumption in terms of natural resource input. Sagoff argues that we can enjoy higher standards of living even while reducing our ecological footprint. In part, this is due to our ability to discover ways to reduce our need for relatively scarce inputs, as when petroleum was developed as a substitute for whale oil, thereby increasing our quality of life and saving whales in the process. Of course, that petroleum can replace whale oil is not a natural fact but an artifact of technological process. In a well-functioning economy, consumption that transforms resources into waste (p. 473) occurs in tandem with production that transforms waste into resources (e. g., technology that recycles copper or replaces it with fiber optic cable made out of sand). This was what Simon understood and Ehrlich did not. Sagoff hastens to add, though, that just as there



is a logical gap between having more stuff and consuming more natural resources, so too is there a gap between having more stuff and living a better life. The overworked American, Sagoff says, is not having fun.

Paul Thompson in his essay on "Land and Water" writes that because only two percent of the U.S. population is directly involved in agriculture, but farms use far more land and water than cities do, any serious environmental ethic pertaining to land and water must first and foremost be an agricultural ethic. So, how are farmers to arrive at environmentally sound practices? Thompson's positive suggestion is that agricultural ethics needs an ideal of functional integrity. Ranchers who feed their cattle grain shipped in by rail are severing a connection between their land's carrying capacity and the scale of their business. They would move toward sustainability if they were to rely less on outside inputs and instead try to preserve and regenerate the capacity of their own land to feed their own cattle. Although Thompson does not mention it, he might agree that the most crucial outside input is not grain but simply cash. One way to immediately, substantially, and easily (but for interest-group politics) reduce the environmental impact of agriculture: stop subsidizing it! For example, sugar cane is being grown in Florida, obliterating the Everglades in the process, not because anyone wants the product but because the subsidies are worth hundreds of millions to a single well-connected family. (For further information, look up "Fanjuls" on the web.) To paraphrase Thompson, any serious agricultural reform has to begin with a resolution to stop giving people cash prizes for undermining our political system, our economy, and our natural environment to boot.

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