

BOOK REVIEW

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Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction. By Robin Attfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2018, pp. 137. ISBN: 978-0198797166.

This book is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. The first part provides a helpful overview of the history of environmental ethics and discusses popular philosophical approaches to our relationship with nature as well as the basic values and principles that inform it. Robin Attfield pays particular attention to recent efforts to move beyond the traditional view that concern for the environment is ultimately based on concern for humans exclusively. He rejects this view and instead defends an ethic that assigns intrinsic value not only to human individuals but also other natural entities such as individual non-human animals, entire species, and ecosystems. In the second part of the book, Attfield draws the reader's attention away from fundamental issues of theory to some more practical aspects of environmental ethics, such as the interface between environmental concern and religious thought as well as social and political activism. He dedicates a full chapter to the ethics of climate change, arguably one of the most pressing moral issues of our time. He suggests that "each person has an equal right to emit greenhouse gases to everyone else" (referencing the widely discussed contraction and convergence principle for reducing concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide, p. 114).

Environmental ethics investigates the moral relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. Philosophers first identify key principles and values that guide our interaction with our environment. Based on these values, we can draw up a set of behavioral guidelines, which, when followed, will establish ethical behavior that protects our environment (p. 114). A discussion central to environmental ethics, especially in our time, maintains that the problem of environmental degradation cannot be examined without exploring the human impact upon nature (p. 1). Environmental ethics, like any other discipline, is situated in a socio-economic, political, and ideological context that interrogates human activities, and our moral assessment of those activities; even more essentially it inspires new insights about ourselves. A dawning awareness of the unexpected side-effects of human activity on the environment, and of how human actions are capable of imperiling whole

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species and ecosystems, emboldened ethicists to expand their focus to environmental concerns (p. 3).

Attfield challenges the reader to look beyond the historically dominant Western view that only human interests matter, and that we humans may treat nature as we please, and makes a request to all people to adopt a new attitude in which nature matters as well. The view that nature matters has recently received an endorsement of unique power from different philosophers as well as social and political movements, such as the social ecology movement pioneered by the socialist Murray Bookchin, who regards ecological problems, like other problems, as fundamentally social in nature. He explains the oppressive treatment of nature as an extension of the hierarchies of domination that have long blighted humanity, such as the oppression of one class by another, or discrimination on the basis of color or gender (p. 87).

Philosopher and ethicist Richard Routley shows in fascinating detail through his thought experiment, ‘The Last Man’² that nature cannot stand in isolation from human decision. “If the ‘Last Man’, a survivor of a nuclear holocaust, lays about him, eliminating, as far as he can, every remaining living being, animal or vegetable, what he does would be permissible for the traditional view, but in most people’s intuitive judgment his action is to be condemned as wrong” (p. 4). Routley’s view goes against the traditional Western view that only human interests matter and supports a new environmental ethic which calls us to consider other creatures as well. It is part of what makes the book important. It sheds light on the traditional view which Dale Jamieson and other philosophers develop different theories and application of other approaches. Including virtue ethics, deontology, the contract model of ethics, beneficial practices, and traits which not only shifted the center and extend our understanding but also narrates real life environmental findings to dominant ethical theories (chapter 4).

In discussing the central issues of environmental ethics, Attfield is critical of environmental pollution, climate change, and species and habitat loss, and he urges us to give greater consideration to future generations. For example, he thinks that, “if we release radioactive substances with half-lives of several centuries (or bury them insecurely), then the generations living in those centuries become relevant to our current responsibilities” (p. 33). Future generations should be involved in policy decisions about conservation,

² Richard Routley. 1973. Is there a need for a new environmental ethic? Proceedings of the XVth World Congress of Philosophy, Varna, Bulgaria, September 17-22. Bedford, New Hampshire : Sophia Institute Press, pp. 205-210.

sustainable living, and care for the natural species of the planet, which mostly depend on the early and sustainable introduction of environmental education.

Serious ecological concerns include water pollution, air pollution, oceanic pollution, species and habitat loss, global warming which results in climate change, due to the release of 'greenhouse' gases such as carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. Most people believe that these problems are exacerbated by industrial and other human activity, as is reflected in reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In 1995, the IPCC affirmed that human responsibility for global warming was 'more likely than not'. By 2001, they declared it 'likely', and by 2007 'very likely'. By 2013, they concluded that it is 'extremely likely' (p. 111).

In conclusion, Attfield rejects the historically dominant Western account, according to which only human interests matter, and proposes an account in which other organisms matter as well. This latter account implies every person is responsible and accountable for the treatment of nature as it involves ethical constraints on the treatment of nature. The traditional Western account contains no ethical constraints on the treatment of nature as it puts man at the centre and excludes the moral significance of the lives of other organisms. The great achievement of Attfield's book is to demonstrate that there is a coherent, intuitively plausible, and useful conception of inclusive environmental protection. It is firmly rooted in the tangible and avoids the traditional view which is exclusive, which does not take into consideration the lives of other organisms, and which endangers future generations. The book will be of interest to students taking courses in environmental ethics, but also to students who are taking philosophy and geography, and to people of other professions engaged with the environment.