

Deep Ecology &

Virtue Ethics

Warwick Fox on an approach to the environment which is also a way of living

Deep ecology is one of about nine major approaches to our relationship with the world around us that have been mapped out by environmental philosophers in recent years. I'm not going to discuss all these approaches here, but it might be useful simply to categorize them at the outset before going on to focus on the deep ecology approach. First there are those approaches that ascribe only a use value or instrumental value to the nonhuman world. This covers the approaches of unrestrained exploitation and expansionism, resource conservation and development, and resource preservation. Second are those approaches that argue for a criterion of moral consideration that would attribute an intrinsic value to at least some, and perhaps many, members or aspects of the nonhuman world. This covers the sentience-based approach (that is, the animal welfare approach), the life-based approach, and the holistic integrity approach. Third are the so-called 'radical ecologies' of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology.

Some of these approaches have attracted quite a lot of attention in recent years, in philosophical circles, in the wider environmental movement and beyond. Deep ecology certainly has; for many people there is something quite intriguing about both the name and the ideas with which it is associated.

Deep ecology is associated with three central ideas. The first is that we should ask deeper questions about our relationship with the world around us, and indeed it is this idea that gives deep ecology its name. According to the influential Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-), who coined the term deep ecology in 1973, it stands for a deep questioning approach to our relationship with the world around us. For example, if an industrial pipeline is polluting a bay or if a factory smokestack is polluting the surrounding area, one response would be to say, for example, why don't you just build a longer pipeline out to sea or build a higher smokestack and thereby remove the problem from the immediate area? In contrast, the response of the deep ecology movement is the more radical one of asking searching questions about the situation and looking for solutions to what is causing the problem in the first place rather than simply responding to the symptoms of the problem.

The second central idea in deep ecology is the attempt to replace anthropocentric (that is, human-centred) forms of thinking, valuing, and acting with ecocentric (that is, ecology-centred) forms of thinking, valuing, and acting. This shift is held to flow from the process of asking deeper questions about our relationship with the world around us. From the



perspective of deep ecology it is simply no longer rationally defensible to believe that the world and all its creatures were made for humans and that humans are the only entities on the earth that are intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable in their own right as opposed to merely having an instrumental value.

The third idea is that of cultivating a particular kind of approach to our personal relationship with the world around us that Arne Naess refers to as "Self-realization!" By this Naess means the realization of as wide and deep a sense of Self as possible. Self is spelt with a capital S to indicate that it is an enlarged sense of self that we are talking about, not a narrow, atomistic sense of self; and the term "Self-realization!" also carries an exclamation mark to mean "do it!" – that is, "realize a larger

sense of Self!". But how exactly are we to realize as wide and deep a sense of Self as possible? For Naess and the other advocates of deep ecology the answer is: through the process of coming to feel a sense of commonality with the world around us. They see this as the most appropriate response to our contemporary understanding, informed by ecological and evolutionary theory, that we are indeed a part of the natural order of things. Thus Naess says "Every living being is connected intimately and from this intimacy follows the capacity of identification, and as its natural consequence, the practice of non-violence."

This emphasis on coming to identify with the environment takes deep ecology in the direction of what is now being called ecopsychology, because it represents a psychological approach to the question of our relationship with the world around us. Moreover, Naess often appears to be against thinking of this 'identification based' approach as an ethical one:

Care flows naturally if the 'self' is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves ... Just as we do not need morals to make us breathe ... so if your 'self' in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care ... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it.

But is it really the case that this represents a rejection of ethics? I now want to shift the focus of the discussion to consider the field of ethics in general in order to address this question.

There are three great traditions of ethics, namely virtue ethics, deontological ethics (also known as ‘duty ethics’), and consequentialism. Approaches that focus on those personal qualities – those qualities of character – that make someone a good person are referred to, appropriately enough, as virtue ethics. Focussing on the kinds of principles or obligations that people should respect and, hence, on the kinds of moral duties they should perform is referred to as deontological ethics, or duty ethics. Finally, those approaches that focus on the goodness or badness of outcomes, or consequences, are referred to as consequentialist ethics.

The most famous and influential examples of these three approaches have been Aristotle’s version of virtue ethics, Immanuel Kant’s version of duty ethics, which he called the categorical imperative or the moral law, and Jeremy Bentham’s and John Stuart Mill’s versions of consequentialism, known as utilitarianism.

An interesting distinction can be drawn between virtue ethics on the one hand and the other two approaches – that

is, duty ethics and consequentialist ethics – on the other hand. Specifically, virtue ethics is primarily concerned with our way of being in the world, with the qualities of character that make us who we are, whereas duty ethics and consequentialist ethics are primarily concerned with what we actually do or intend

to do in the world. The upshot of this is that from a strictly duty-based or consequentialist point of view it really doesn’t matter whether we *want* to perform a particular morally praiseworthy action or not, all that matters is whether or not we actually do it. Indeed, Kant is notorious for his rather extreme point of view that the real test of a genuinely moral action is whether or not a person performs the action in question against their own inclination to do so, that is, simply out of a sense of duty and for no other reason. For Kant, if a person performs a morally praiseworthy action because they actually want to do so then that may be a beautiful thing to do, but it doesn’t count as a genuinely moral action because it’s not done solely out of a sense of duty! Needless to say, this can lead to a rather dreary and uninspiring view of moral action.

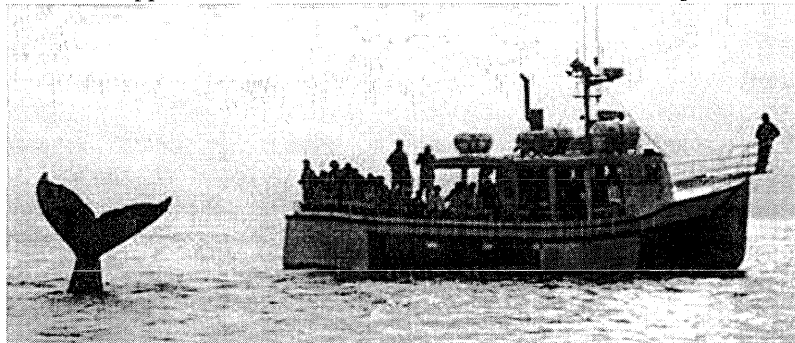
From the point of view of virtue ethics, we could argue that the kinds of qualities that we might want to cultivate in our character are precisely those qualities that lead us to want to do the kinds of things that duty based and consequentialist

ethics would say we ought to do. This can lead to a much more inspiring conception of moral action, for it is one in which we seek to cultivate a questing for and love of the good in ourselves. The fact that virtue ethics addresses itself to the constitution of our innermost being means that there is a sense in which the various approaches to virtue ethics can even be thought of as spiritual paths.

If we want to pursue this approach to ethics (and to a this-worldly form of enlightenment?) where can we look for inspiration? The early Greek philosophers virtually ‘cornered the market’ on virtue ethics. Not only does Aristotle provide the most famous example of an approach to virtue ethics, but the major schools of Hellenistic philosophy that followed him – the Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics – also developed approaches that were primarily concerned with the cultivation of certain qualities of character, particularly those held to lead to lack of mental disturbance or, more positively, mental tranquillity (*ataraxia*, *apatheia*).

Aristotle argued that the goal of life is happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) and that this state is best achieved through the cultivation of certain intellectual and moral virtues. For Aristotle, these virtues are all to be found in the mean between extremes; for example, the virtue of courage

represents the mean between the extremes of rashness and cowardice, and the virtue of truthfulness represents the mean between the extremes of boastfulness and understatement. You can see from this that Aristotle’s



version of virtue ethics can be seen as an ethics of what we might these days call ‘personal development’, ‘personal growth’, or ‘self-realization’, since it is concerned with bringing out the best in ourselves through the cultivation of certain kinds of personal qualities.

The early Greek philosophers have much to tell us about the ways in which we might want to, or ought to, develop our characters, realize ourselves, or, as some would put it these days, ‘grow’. But while the Greek idea of virtue ethics offers a rich and potentially joyful and inspiring resource for those thinking about ethical problems, do the early Greek formulations of virtue ethics offer anything that speaks to our present environmental predicament? Well, I can see ways in which, for example, Aristotle’s formulation of virtue ethics could be adapted to modern circumstances, such as the idea that cultivating the general personal quality of preferring a mean between extremes in all things should lead to forms of action in the world that steer a middle ground between unrestrained material consumption on the one hand and extreme, personally

“ For Aristotle the virtue of truthfulness represents the mean between the extremes of boastfulness and understatement. ”

limiting material frugality on the other hand. But, that said, I don't think ecocentric thinking came very easily to the early Greeks themselves, for there is a very strongly anthropocentric flavour running through much of their work. This is a point that has been expanded upon at some length, but suffice it to say that the essence of this general orientation is captured by Aristotle in the *Politics* where he says "Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man ... Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man."

Jumping to the present, however, we now possess an evolutionary and ecological understanding of the world that was simply not available to the early Greek philosophers.

Moreover, we also have an ecological crisis on our hands to spur our thinking about the nature of our relationship with the world around us. Considering the contemporary development of deep ecology, then, we should be able to see from the preceding discussion that the deep ecological idea of cultivating a wider and deeper sense of identification with the world around us can be conceived not only under the heading of 'psychology', and, more specifically, as an approach to ecopsychology, but also as an ecologically sensitive form of virtue ethics. For virtue ethics of whatever form are all concerned with the cultivation of qualities of character that are considered for one reason or another to be highly valuable. Thus, the personal attempt to cultivate a wider and deeper sense of identification with the world around us must certainly qualify as a deeply ecologically-informed approach to virtue ethics. So when Arne Naess objects to ethics saying "Just as we do not need morals to make us breathe ... so if your 'self' in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care ... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it" he is objecting, as he himself notes at points, to a Kantian conception of ethics, which sees the essence of moral action as consisting of the onerous performance of moral duties that fly in the face of personal inclinations. Instead, Naess would prefer us to adopt the more inspiring and spiritually uplifting path of cultivating the virtue of identifying more widely and deeply with the world around us, so that we feel spontaneously inclined to defend the integrity of the world where it is threatened.

This opens out into a wealth of further questions, all of which require, and many of which have been given, much more detailed elaboration. For example: Are there various forms of identification? How can they best be cultivated? What are their relative advantages and disadvantages? Indeed, that is the nature of philosophy, always opening out onto further questions, encouraging the path of seeking, honouring the journey to Ithaca rather than the arrival itself.

© DR WARWICK FOX 2000

Warwick Fox is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Centre for Professional Ethics, University of Central Lancashire. This article was developed from a paper he gave at a seminar in a series held by the International Association for Greek Philosophy. This annual seminar series is staged for a general audience and is held on the site of Plato's Academy, located in the suburbs of present day Athens.

*For more on the theme of this article, see Warwick Fox's book *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (SUNY Press, New York 1995 and Green Books, Totnes 1995)*