

of nature, human nature, and the proper relationship between humans and nature that we have inherited from the past. White made a start on that project, but he hardly finished it. And, second, we have to think up new ideas about these same central concerns. So that's one good reason to study environmental ethics. Ultimately, it's the only thing that can save us from ourselves. Call me megalomaniacal, but I still believe that – after nearly 40 years of working at it.

But there's another good reason to study environmental ethics. Being a world saver is a hard job. I mean, you do, in fact, have the weight of the world on your shoulders, don't you? And that's not easy to bear. It would appear to make it difficult to get out of bed in the morning. And you can feel guilty about going to sleep at night, or taking a night off to catch

a movie, or going on vacation. If what you are doing is saving the world, and you're serious about it, you better keep at it 24/7, hadn't you? There's a lot at stake. So, it would be nice if there were something about that work which has its own inherent reward. And it does, fortunately. It's a labor of love. You do love the Earth, don't you? But almost as much, and maybe you haven't found this out yet – but you will if you study environmental ethics – the *ideas* about the Earth and our relationship to it are also to love. The work itself has a certain charm and beauty about it. Philosophy – this kind of philosophy, anyway – is enchanting; it's seductive. In this domain of ideas you can go where no one has ever gone before. So, it's a voyage of discovery as well as a labor of love. And for me, that's the best reason of all to study environmental ethics. Try it and see if you feel the same way.

Warwick Fox

What is the world like and how should we act in the light of this? We cannot simply “read off” what we *ought* to do from how we believe the world *is*: to do so is to commit the “is-ought fallacy”; to fail to understand that *descriptive* claims and *normative* claims (i.e., claims about the norms, goals, or standards of being and behaving that we should cultivate, respect, or promote) are logically different kinds of claims. Even so, the kinds of answers we have given to questions regarding how the world *is* have always had a pervasive shaping and constraining influence upon our answers to questions regarding what we *ought* to do, even if they have not directly determined them. For example, if we think that an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good being that we refer to as God made the world, then it becomes easy to argue that since God is the source of all goodness (which we can take as an allegedly descriptive premise), and since we ought to strive to partake in the nature of that goodness (which constitutes a rationally appealing normative premise), then we ought to praise, worship, and otherwise follow the guidance of God (which is a normative conclusion).

It turns out, however, that the best *explanatory* answer we have in regard to how the universe *is* is the naturalistic account offered by the sciences, by the

kind of patient observation and testing of hypotheses against an independent reality that is undertaken by fields of study such as cosmology, biology, ecology, and psychology. This account shows, among other things, that humans – for all their special features – are an evolutionary outcome of natural processes; that we are relative newcomers to the weird and wonderful parade of life on Earth; that we are related, no matter how distantly, to all other life on Earth; that we are ultimately just as dependent as all other forms of life on Earth on the continuance of suitable life-sustaining conditions in the biosphere (and heating up the atmosphere is not one of them); that we are currently in the throes of the sixth great extinction event in the history of life on Earth; and that, this time, it is human activity (rather than, say, an asteroid impact or sudden, naturally caused climatic change) that is primarily responsible for this reduction in the diversity of life on Earth.

If this is how things *are*, then what should we *do*? Well, for starters, it would seem incumbent upon all of us to think hard about the nature of our relationship with this world of which we are a part, and on which we are ultimately just as dependent as any other species, and to ask ourselves how we ought to act in the light of these reflections. Since the field

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that specializes in this kind of inquiry is environmental ethics, this suggests that everyone who is capable of doing so should study at least some environmental ethics as part of their general education. The study of environmental ethics is a core component of the ecoliteracy we all need to develop if we are to have a future worth having; a future in which we at least maintain rather than further diminish the present quality, abundance, and diversity of life on Earth. I'm therefore with the renowned Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson when he said back in 1989, "Environmental ethics, still a small and neglected

branch of intellectual activity, deserves to become a major branch of the humanities during the next hundred years"¹ – well, I'm with him except for one thing: I'm worried about his timescale!

Note

- 1 Edward O. Wilson, "Conservation: The Next Hundred Years," in David Western and Mary Pearl, eds., *Conservation for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 7.

Eugene C. Hargrove

There are many reasons for studying environmental ethics. Most important to me is that it helps a person better understand his or her own views about the environment. Our views are shaped by a history of ideas that we are often only dimly aware of, if at all. As a result, we usually express our views either as social facts, which we can't really defend, or as unsupported (subjective) personal opinion. Trapped at this level of understanding, we fall easily into an arbitrary relativism. We say: "There is no right or wrong. It's just a matter of how we feel. I feel one way and you another." This way of thinking assumes that we each independently think up what we feel in isolation, not realizing that most of what we think is derived from historical traditions that we can only vaguely articulate. In the early 1970s, when I was writing my dissertation in philosophy, I was also leading an effort to protect a cave in central Missouri from water pollution. As the political struggle continued, I became curious about why I was saying the things I was saying and why my opponents were saying the things that they were saying.

Later, I researched the views on both sides and discovered that both were based on a history of ideas that were many centuries old. My opponents would say, "I worked that land. What right does anyone have to tell me what to do? No one has that right." It turned out that this view was already held by the Germanic tribes when the Romans first met them around 100 BC. It is part of freehold farmsteading,

according to which a free man ("freeman") obtains control of his land by using it. This practice was carried across Europe to England, where it found its place at the level of the shire or county court, the oldest continuous form of government in England. In 1066, William the Conqueror brought this form of land-use practice to an end by imposing feudal law. Six centuries later, when British colonists arrived in North America, they tried to abandon feudal land-use practice in favor of a return to freehold farmsteading. Defended by Thomas Jefferson, drawing on common law and John Locke's theory of property, it eventually became law: the Homestead Act.

My own position was based on an aesthetic tradition, a mixture of natural history, science, and art. At the end of the Middle Ages, educated people were taught that nature was not beautiful. However, this view was transformed over several centuries via landscape gardening, landscape painting, and, later, photography, nature poetry and prose, and natural history science (biology, botany, and geology). The aesthetic experience of nature led naturally to a desire to preserve places of great beauty and scientific interest. My defense of the cave came from this four-century-old tradition. When we don't know the origin of our ideas, they often appear weak (they are just how we feel), and they are, as a result, beyond analysis, criticism, and improvement. Falsely believing that we have made up our ideas, and not realizing that nearly everyone else stands at