

Conservation for Who?

Environmental Ethics as a mediator for “Nature” vs “Development”

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“We’re ending the theft of American prosperity and rebuilding our beloved country.”¹

- Doland Trump, 2017

President Trump’s recent decision to dismantle the EPA’s (Environmental Protection Agency) climate change policy sends a clear message about the President’s assumption that the protection of the environment against global warming entails the endangerment of America’s industry and economy.² President Trump’s ideology is paradigmatic of the dominant tendency to present as opposed, on the one hand, the approach supporting the conservation of wilderness and nature, and on the other, the approach favoring industrial and technological development. It is commonly assumed that our choice is either save nature or the economy, as is evident in Donald Trump’s decision making. But while it is clear that such opposition is a false dichotomy often deployed in order to protect corporate interests, this opposition between nature and development also raises a whole set of concerns regarding the intensions of conservation movements, primarily: *conservation for who?* This paper, then, aims to dismantle the specious premise that regards nature and development as opposites by suggesting that it serves a false dichotomy relying on problematic assumptions on both sides of the issue. After revealing the assumptions on both sides, my aim is to provide an alternative interpretation of the assumptions underlying this opposition and to introduce a specific ethical principle which emphasizes the intrinsic value of the non-human.

The Debate: Two Traditional Assumptions

Concerning the approach that opposes industrial development and views humans outside of nature and therefore as intruders into untouched wilderness we have Aldo Leopold, who in *A Sand County Almanac*, reinforces the debate by suggesting that wilderness is a resource that has the capacity to shrink but not to grow, and argues that anthropocentric activities like the mechanization of recreation has already overtaken nine-tenths of wilderness.³ He further explains that “[o]ne of the fastest-shrinking categories of wilderness is coastlines. Cottages and tourist roads have all but annihilated wild coasts on both oceans and Lake superior is now losing the last large remnant of wild shoreline on the Great Lakes.”⁴ Additionally, Nannerl O. Keohane, in *The Enlightenment Idea of Progress Revisited*, elaborates on the meaning of progress in the 18th century by suggesting that “civilization directs us to remove as fast as possible [...] natural growth from the lands.”⁵ He further contends that “[a]mong the elements prominent in Judaism (and Christianity) is the conviction that man was licensed by his creator to dominate nature for his own use.”⁶ Finally, according to a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), humancentric

¹ Dennis, Brady, and Juliet Eilperin. "Trump Signs Order at the EPA to Dismantle Environmental Protections." The Washington Post. March 28, 2017. Accessed November 10, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/trump-signs-order-at-the-epa-to-dismantle-environmental-protections/2017/03/28/3ec30240-13e2-11e7-ada0-1489b735b3a3_story.html?utm_term=.4a5bc30a74c1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Leopold, Aldo, and Tom Algire. *A Sand County Almanac Illustrated*. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1977: 194.

⁴ *Ibid.* 190.

⁵ Almond, Gabriel A., Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey. Pearce. *Progress and Its Discontents*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982: 24.

⁶ *Ibid.* 27.

environmental trends are threatening the balance of the planet.⁷ More specifically, the Commission uses forest degradation as an example of this point. They explain that 11 million ha. of forests are being eradicated annually, an area that cumulatively in 3 years would equal the size of India. Part of the issue in this case is that land is being reused for low-grade farmland.⁸ These negative externalities seem to be due to failures on the part of human development to mitigate its impact the environment. In other words, Leopold, Keohane, and the WCED all seem to support the approach that opposes development, since they view anthropocentrism as the ultimate cause of the environmental crisis.⁹

Concerning the opposite view, which sees industrial and technological development as more important than conserving, we read in James Scott's "State Simplification" that:

Early European States viewed forests primarily through the fiscal lens of revenue needs. The vocabulary used to organize nature typically betrays the overriding interests of its human users. In fact, the term "nature" is in utilitarian discourse, replaced by the terms "natural resources" in which the focus is on those aspects of nature that can be appropriated for human use. [...] Thus, plants which are valued become crops; the species which compete with them are reclassified as weeds, and the insects which ingest them are reclassified as pests. Thus trees which are valued become timber while species which compete with them become "trash" trees or underbrush. The same logic applies to fauna. Those animals which are highly valued become game or livestock, while those animals which compete with or prey upon them become predators or "varmints".¹⁰

Here Scott provides a clear understanding of how anthropocentrism promotes the need to dominate the natural world. In support of Scott's characterization of man as the center of existence, Vinay Krishin Gidwani in "Waste' and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal" furthers the argument by enhancing the view that land has instrumental value, as seen in the case of the way early settlers divided property in India. Wasted land in early British settlements meant unproductive land in terms of revenue:

Revenue generation was without doubt a driving force for English land settlement policies. This guiding criterion yields the interpretations that "waste" was nothing but "revenue waste" – a residual category for land unproductive by way of revenue receipts.¹¹

This idea of nature as nothing more than warehouse of resources for humanity's use finds one its most salient characterizations in Martin Heidegger's essay "Questions Concerning Technology" wherein he derides the view of nature as a stock-house:

⁷ The World Commission on Environment and Development. *Our Common Future*. Oxford Paperbacks, 1987.

⁸ *From One Earth to One World: An Overview by the World Commission on Environment and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987: 2.

⁹ Almond, Gabriel A., Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey. Pearce. *Progress and Its Discontents*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982: 29.

¹⁰ Scott, James C. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998: 192-193.

¹¹ Gidwani, Vinay Krishin. "'Waste' and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal." *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 4 (1992): PE 40.

It remains true, nonetheless, that man in the technological age is, in a particularly striking way, challenged forth into revealing. That revealing concerns nature, above all, as the chief storehouse of the standing energy reserve. [...] Modern science's way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces. Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies its apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.¹²

Ultimately, then, it is clear that for centuries nature – from the perspective of humans – has been exploited for the benefit of human development irrespective of environmental concerns, concerns regarding scarcity, biodiversity, and more.

Conservation: for Who? A False Dichotomy

Having illustrated the dubious assumptions of these opposing views of nature, a fundamental question emerges that critically challenges the intensions of conservation. Is the conservation of nature an act to protect wilderness or an act to make nature more readily available, efficient, and productive for human progress?

Gilfford Pinchot, in “The Fight for Conservation”, seems to suggest that conservation stands for development. What conservation does is to ensure the maintenance of resources for the current generation as well as the future.¹³ In view of this, the main principle of conservation then supports the assumption that nature is an inferior entity that serves human needs. For Pinchot then, conservation stands for “the greatest good to the greatest number for the longest time.”¹⁴ Leopold, on the other hand, proposes that conservation is a superficial act. According to him “[f]lood-control dams have no relation to the cause of floods. Check dams have no relation to the cause of floods. Check dams and terraces do not touch the cause of erosion.”¹⁵ While conservation serves to minimize the negative externalities produced by human flourishing, it must not be interpreted as a cure to the degradation of nature.

A few examples can help demonstrate why conservation principles are based on false premises. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing describes the growth of mushrooms in landscapes that have been heavily disturbed by human intervention. While these mushrooms will grow in proximity to trees and not on an outdoor basketball court, those mushrooms collapse the idea of an opposition between nature and humans. In other words, we don't have to terminate humanity for nature to stay alive.¹⁶ What is shown here is that despite the extinction of several species because of

¹² Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper & Row Publishers: 21.

¹³ Pinchot, Gilfford. *The Fight for Conservation*. Gloucester, United Kingdom: Dodo Press, 2016: 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁵ Leopold, Aldo, and Tom Algire. *A Sand County Almanac Illustrated*. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1977: 194.

¹⁶ Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017: 3-4.

human intervention, human and non-human beings can (and do) co-exist and flourish. The Matsutake mushroom is a creation due to the disturbances caused by humans. Additionally, pigeons, rats, squirrels, raccoons, and even foxes survive because of human disruptions. Likewise, a case study in the lagoon of Venice demonstrated that the ecosystem within the Venice Lagoon is one which seems to benefit from human intervention. As the study's outcomes illustrate, human intervention promoted the flourishing of the ecosystem of the Fingeri basin effectively.¹⁷ In other words, it is evident that humans are capable to live with other species and the solution is not necessarily a pristine environment free of human development, but instead a moderated balance between the needs of both humans and non-humans. This in turn allows for a revised understanding of what conservation is and for *who*.

Finally, Leopold seems to provide a clear critique for conservation that dismantles the problematic premise of the nature vs. development debate. For Leopold, it is due to the failure to view nature and society not as opposite but as symbiotic system that has led to our inability to engage with nature in a more productive way. Leopold explains:

[A] system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are [...] essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts. It tends to relegate to government many functions eventually too large, too complex, or too widely dispersed to be performed by government. An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations.¹⁸

In other words, following Leopold's conclusions as well as the various examples of human and non-human species symbiotic co-existence, the assumption of a dichotomy between nature and development falls apart. While conservation usually means conservation of what humans "like", it fails to address the fact that nature does not conserve itself; nature is always in flux. Or, stated as a principle, we might think here of Heraclitus's well-known aphorism: "You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are flowing in upon you" (Fragment 12). Hence, the critical question *Conservation for Who?* can only be examined through an alternative framework wherein nature and development are not seen as opposed but beneficially co-existent or part of one and the same world. As such, we need an ethical principle that affirms this intertwining and supports the proliferation of diversity and the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of all forms of life on earth.

The Alternative: An Ethical Principle

In his well-known work *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza argues everything is nature. For him humans are not "a state within a state"; they are not an exception to the rules of nature: "[T]he laws and rules of

¹⁷ Bastianoni, Simone. "Use of Thermodynamic Orientors to Assess the Efficiency of Ecosystems: A Case Study in the Lagoon of Venice." *The Scientific World JOURNAL* 2 (2002): 255-60. doi:10.1100/tsw.2002.88: 255-256.

¹⁸ Leopold, Aldo, and Tom Algire. *A Sand County Almanac Illustrated*. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1977: 214.

Nature [...] are always and everywhere the same” (*Ethics* III, preface).¹⁹ According to Spinoza, this means that “whether man is led by reason or solely by desire, he does nothing that is not in accordance with the laws and rules of nature” (*Political Treatise* CH. 2, Sect. 5).²⁰ Spinoza then rejects the traditional opposition between the two assumptions unpacked at the beginning of this paper. Moreover, Leopold in “Wilderness” introduces the idea of an ethical principle. For him, “an ethic, ecologically, is a limitation of freedom of action in the struggle for existence.”²¹ Thus, environmental ethics should promote a co-operative dynamic between human and non-human that further protects the destructive tendencies toward the non-human. In a way, an ecologically ethical principle expands the “boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or collectively: the land [...] homo sapiens transforms from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”²² As such, an approach engaging with ecological ethics must be combined with Spinoza’s view that “everything is nature” because this allows for the redefinition of our place within the natural in such a way that our own flourishing can and should accommodate and even promote the flourishing of non-human entities and aspects of the world.²³

By way of conclusion, the movement known as Deep Ecology seems to provide us with certain criteria that can further support an ecological ethic. Deep ecologists claim that “anthropocentrism may represent the human will dominate the environment, but it threatens the human world as much as the non-human world.”²⁴ Thus, deep ecologists advocate for the concept of “intrinsic value”. All human and non-human beings have an intrinsic value which automatically rejects the human-centric approach that sees nature as only having instrumental value *for humans*. Particularly clear is Arne Naess’s characterization of this idea:

Homo sapiens may be capable, in suitable circumstances, and upon the basis of a wide perspective, of recommending its own withdrawal as the dominant living being on earth. By such an act humans would confirm (just as we do in many other actions) that mankind is not bound to the values “useful for human beings” or “suitable to humans self-preservation” when “utility” and “self” are taken in a narrow sense... Would we as human beings subject ourselves freely to the political will of an alien species which had more or less the same characteristics as us, but which lacked our tendency to torture, torment and exploit one another? The decision would perhaps take a few centuries, but I believe it would be positive. We would abdicate if we were sure of them... Human beings would lose something of their own essential nature if they refrained from abdication.²⁵

Here, Naess addresses a common object to the idea of intrinsic value, namely, that it is impossible to escape the fact that human values—even one positing the intrinsic value of the non-human—are always for purposes. But rather than allowing this undercut the intrinsic value thesis, Naess points

¹⁹ Spinoza, B. *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*. Ed. Matthew Kisner, Tr. Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

²⁰ Spinoza, B. *Political Treatise*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Intro. and notes Steven Barbone and Lee Rice. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000.

²¹ Leopold, Aldo, and Tom Algire. *A Sand County Almanac Illustrated*. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1977: 202.

²² *Ibid.* 204.

²³ *Ibid.* 207.

²⁴ Jonge, Eccc. De. *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*. Routledge, 2016: 10.

²⁵ Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Trans. David Rothenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 169.

out that humans can in fact value their own ability to make space for non-human others, thereby transcending the narrow, anthropocentric notion of utility.

But while it is clear that this criterion supports the equality of the human and non-human, it fails to become self-sufficient primarily due to the fact that intrinsic value doesn't guarantee the elimination of harm or pain to both humans and non-humans. For instance, a mosquito that carries malaria, under the assumption that it has its own intrinsic value, should not be eliminated as a species, even though it harms the human.²⁶ Since, then, the theory of intrinsic value is not sufficient to guarantee on its own the equal moral consideration of both human and non-human species, deep ecologists have introduced the principle of *biocentric egalitarianism*.

Biocentric egalitarianism proposes an equal moral consideration among species.²⁷ This approach promotes a right to moral consideration. But again, should the plasmodium parasite that carries malaria be equally evaluated as a human being?²⁸ Instead, ecologists speak of an eco-centric approach that allows for a view of ecosystems as worth of value whether they are alive or not. However, both biocentric egalitarianism and intrinsic value are still insufficient to provide us with the right criteria for an egalitarian approach to ethics.

Finally, *ecological holism* seems to fill in some of the gaps in biocentric egalitarianism and that of intrinsic value.²⁹ The value of this approach lies in the fact that individual interest is substituted with the collective interest of the ecosystem as a whole. In other words, what humans need to develop is an "ecological conscience" that accepts our role as *within* nature. Conserving or preserving nature is a human value but that doesn't mean that nature doesn't suffer from human actions. Holism allows for a productive relation between the human and the non-human. And while it is clear that flourishing entails instances of inter-species violence, it does not imply an "anything goes," but requires that some species thrive at the expense of others. This approach commands us to see non-humans not solely as preys, nor humans solely as perpetrators. Rather, flourishing involves the safeguarding of many species often intertwined, and enveloped in human landscapes or economies, working with and against each other.³⁰ In this way, we can remain vigilant by testing our decisions against the ethical principle of holistic flourishing, thereby promoting that implementation of policies that seek to minimize the negative impacts of humans on non-humans. In short, we should figure out ways to enrich and diversify all of nature, whether human or non-human.

²⁶ Jonge, Eecy. De. *Spinoza and Deep Ecology: Challenging Traditional Approaches to Environmentalism*. Routledge, 2016: 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 25-26.

³⁰ Ginn, Franklin, Beisel, Uli, Barua, and Maan. "Flourishing with Awkward Creatures: Togetherness, Vulnerability, Killing." *Poetics Today*. May 01, 2014. Accessed November 16, 2018. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/4/1/113/26162/Flourishing-with-Awkward-Creatures-Togetherness>.

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