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BOOK REVIEW

WARREN NEILL

Canadian Issues in Environmental Ethics, Alex Wellington, Allan Greenbaum, and Wesley Cragg, eds. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997. Pp. 405. US \$23.95 ISBN 1-55111-128-54 (Paperback).

From the moment I first opened this book, I was struck by how different it is from most of the other anthologies in environmental ethics with which I am familiar. And the difference is not simply that the book concentrates on issues that are particularly relevant to the Canadian scene. A much deeper difference lies in the fact that the book is not focused around the central theoretical disputes that have dominated recent philosophical discussions in environmental ethics. Although the usual debates about anthropocentrism vs. bio/ecocentrism, preservation vs. conservation, deep ecology vs. social ecology, individualism vs. holism, the role of economic analysis, and so forth, do turn up in the readings, the book is not designed as a comprehensive and rigorous look at these theoretical issues. Rather than concentrating primarily on conceptual analysis and theoretical concerns, the approach of the book is to provide overviews of specific, concrete environmental problems that are important in Canada. This allows for the inclusion of abundant empirical information of great interest to anyone interested in environmental matters, including those who live out-

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side of Canada. Numerous comparisons are made between environmental problems in Canada and those in the United States and other countries. The approach of the book is aided by the highly interdisciplinary nature of the selections, the majority of which are original contributions written for this anthology. Although the book is clearly aimed primarily at Canadians, anyone interested in environmental issues stands to benefit from reading it, particularly insofar as it sheds light on the importance of paying attention to contextual detail as well as theory.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on resource use, including selections on forestry, fishing, mining, agriculture, biotechnology, and energy. The second section looks at nature preservation, examining issues such as endangered species policy and the effects of meat eating on the environment. The third and final section is on environmental justice. Here, the selections focus on the disproportionate effects of resource exploitation on First Nations people. For example, we are treated to Laura Westra's challenging defense of Mohawk actions during the Oka crisis of 1990 (Westra, "Terrorism at Oka"). Also included in this section is an insightful article on the much-overlooked issue of environmental education (Pamela Courtenay Hall, "Environmental Education in a Democratic Society"). I found this chapter to be one of the most outstanding selections in the collection. I strongly recommend it to all people involved in environmental education.

The book begins with a fine introduction by the three editors in which they give an overview of the different approaches taken by environmental thinkers and activists. As the editors see it, there are three ways in which one may approach issues in applied environmental ethics. The first approach consists in applying conventional anthropocentric ethical theories, notably utilitarianism, various versions of social contract theory, and other rights-based and duty-based ethical theories to environmental issues. The second approach is to critique traditional anthropocentric ethical theories and then apply nonanthropocentric ethical theorizing to the environment. This second approach also encompasses other types of radical environmental thought which are wider in scope than normative ethical theorizing. These other approaches are categorized as belonging to either a cosmological or political stream of environmental thought. According to adherents of the former, environmental problems are primarily the result of faulty metaphysical or cosmological paradigms. Adherents of the latter stream,

which includes both social ecologists and at least some ecofeminists, assert that the abuse of nature is the result of relations of domination and subordination among humans and hence can only be solved by analyzing hierarchy and oppression among humans. The third and final approach to dealing with environmental problems is the pragmatic approach. This approach involves moving away from abstract theorizing towards an emphasis on particular problems. According to many adherents of this pragmatic approach, choice of ethical theory does not have much relevance when it comes to dealing with and solving specific environmental problems. There is suspicion directed at any attempt to deal with complex real-life problems with any single set of principles. There is also a rejection of the conception that there is a stark separation between descriptive facts (obtained largely through value-neutral scientific inquiry) and normative principles (arrived at by philosophers or through the political process).

The book tries to include selections that encompass all three of these approaches, and to a certain extent it succeeds in this aim. However, this is not to say that I am in complete agreement with the editors' classification scheme. One of the weaknesses of the scheme that is presented is exemplified by the fact that, contrary to what that scheme implies, almost all of the historically important proponents of traditional utilitarianism (notably Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill) explicitly adopted nonanthropocentric theories of value. The way that the tripartite division that is presented skips over this fact is not insignificant, as it can lead to an easy dismissal of all traditional ethical theories as being uniformly anthropocentric and hence inadequate as foundations for environmental ethics. This mistake is in fact evident in several of the selections in the anthology. For example, Alan Drengon and Duncan Taylor assert that the dominant, mainstream model of modernism is entirely anthropocentric, and then they characterize this model as having a utilitarian value system (Drengon and Taylor, "Shifting Values"). This overly simplistic picture of traditional utilitarian value theory highlights one of the dangers of paying only cursory attention to the theoretical component of environmental issues. It makes it far too easy to uncritically accept a holistic, ecocentric outlook without adequate argument. In effect, a false dichotomy is set up between, as Drengon and Taylor present it, the anthropocentric, expansionist model of modernism, in which "nature is regarded essentially as a storehouse of resources to be utilized for the meeting of ever-increasing material needs by an ever-increasing human population" and, on the other hand, an eco-

centric, ecological paradigm. But the fact is that many more options are available. Once this is recognized, it is no longer so clear that all traditional ethical theory is hopelessly inadequate as a foundation for environmental ethics. In fact, it should be noted that Wendy Donner recognizes the nonanthropocentric nature of Bentham's utilitarianism in her well thought-out discussion of "Animal Rights and Native Hunters."

In pointing out that portions of the anthology sometimes pay inadequate attention to the complexity of the theoretical issues in environmental ethics, it behooves me to reemphasize that this is not the main focus of the book. In many cases, well thought-out recommendations are made concerning how to deal with practical environmental problems even when theoretical issues are ignored or dealt with in a somewhat cursory manner. This is certainly the case with the article by Drengon and Taylor discussed above, in which the authors set out detailed recommendations for sound forestry policy. Moreover, the false dichotomy of ethical principles that is set up by these authors is of some use in that it enables the reader to gain insight into how groups who are strongly opposed to each other with regard to issues such as forestry policy see themselves and how they see each other. This is surely an important task to achieve if we are to succeed in bringing opposed groups together.

David Oppenheim's and Robert Gibson's selection on biotechnology regulation is another good example of a piece that offers detailed and thought-provoking recommendations while steering clear of the traditional theoretical debates in environmental ethics (Oppenheim and Gibson, "Ethics for New Life Forms"). Although I might have hoped for more selections which provided in-depth examination of these debates, the detailed factual information and recommendations we are given concerning specific environmental problems is a welcome change from much of the material in the environmental ethics literature. There has been a tendency for philosophical writing in the field to remain entirely at the level of abstract reasoning without sufficient attention being paid to describing the contextual details of real-world situations. It is a significant virtue of this anthology that it steers clear of this mistake. We are given much information about concrete problems such as the conflict over forestry policy between the Algonquin of Barrière Lake and the governments of Québec and Canada (Elisa Shenkier and Thomas Meredith, "The Forests at Barrière Lake"). The article discussing this issue gives us insight into the vast differences that exist between the value systems of the groups involved. Such an un-

derstanding is clearly essential if politically equitable solutions to environmental problems are to be reached in real-world situations. In another selection, we get an interpretation of the history surrounding the failure of Canadian resource management plans for East Coast fisheries to achieve their goals of ecological and economic stability for the fisheries (Raymond Rogers, "The Aftermath of Collapse"). Elsewhere, we are given a detailed examination of the issues surrounding the problem of dealing with nuclear waste from CANDU reactors (Andrew Brook, "Ethics of Wastes"). I was particularly impressed with the way that Brook blends a wealth of contextual detail with discussion and application of traditional ethical principles. In another fascinating selection, we are told the shocking story of the politically motivated muzzling of federal fisheries biologists involved in a study of a proposed Alcan hydroelectric project in British Columbia (Lionel Rubinoff, "Politics, Ethics, and Ecology"). These and many other examples provide us with an enormous amount of useful information about specific environmental problems on the Canadian scene. It is certainly welcome to have such extensive factual detail about specific environmental issues. As I have already indicated, however, I do feel that some of the theoretical issues deserve to be examined more closely. There is of course some controversy concerning the proper role of high-level ethical theorizing in the discussion of practical environmental problems. Some will argue, not completely without merit, that too much time is wasted on debates about abstract, philosophical distinctions and as a result the environmental problems that we face go unresolved. Others will go even further and insist that such theoretical debates are of little or no importance to those concerned with solving practical environmental problems. A position similar to this is adopted by several authors in the anthology, including, for example, Wesley Cragg, David Pearson, and James Cooney in their excellent article on the ethics of surface mining (Cragg, Pearson, and Cooney, "Ethics, Surface Mining and the Environment"). However, there are surely many concerned environmentalists who, like myself, feel that philosophical theorizing has an important role to play if we are to arrive at justified and effective solutions to environmental problems. As I have pointed out, although such theoretical discussion is not absent from this book, it is clearly not its primary focus, nor its primary strength. For this reason, those teaching courses in environmental ethics may wish to supplement this text with additional material so as to allow for a more careful look at some of the theoretical debates in the field. At the same time, however, I think that anyone

teaching a course in this field, particularly in Canada, should be grateful to have an anthology that provides such a wealth of contextual detail about particular environmental problems. A great service would be done if every Canadian college student were to read this anthology (although this is not to suggest that the book will only be of interest to Canadians). In reading through the selections, I came across innumerable concrete examples that have stimulated and challenged my thinking about how we ought to deal with the natural environment. I found R.D.H. Cohen's article on the environmental impact of the cattle industry in the prairies particularly challenging, although in choosing Jeremy Rifkin as his main target, he has perhaps made things a little too easy for himself (Cohen, "Cattle and Prairie Ecology"). Furthermore, I have been reminded that philosophers sometimes spend too much time in the world of ideal theory and neglect the realities of what is going on here on Earth. For this reason alone, this text is to be highly recommended.