



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader (review)

Patrick S. O'Donnell

Philosophy East and West, Volume 57, Number 3, July 2007, pp. 400-405 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2007.0036>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217398>

*Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader*. Edited by Martin D. Yaffe. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001. Pp. ix + 422. Paper.

Reviewed by **Patrick S. O'Donnell** Santa Barbara City College

*Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader*, edited by Martin D. Yaffe, is an anthology that endeavors to represent fairly the "state-of-the-art" on Judaism and environmental ethics in a philosophically respectable manner. In large measure, it succeeds. The majority of its essays, first published in journals of Judaic studies and environmental ethics, are from the 1990s, while the earliest, from the forester and founder of the Wilderness Society, Aldo Leopold (1887–1949), dates from 1920. Max Oelschlaeger rightly describes Leopold as "perhaps the most influential environmental ethicist in American history" (1994, p. 3), an accolade owing principally to the conclusion of his posthumously published book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). However prescient and provocative, Leopold's "land ethic" was never expressed in anything close to a systematic ethical theory. The holistic environmental ethic that did take shape drew sustenance from embryonic ecological sciences, reflections on his wilderness experiences, and, interestingly, an English translation of *Tertium Organum* (1912) by the Russian philosopher and mystic P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947). Oddly, the essay by Leopold selected for this reader, "The Forestry of the Prophets," was written some years prior to the full flowering of an ecological and environmental ethic that envisioned species functioning, in one of "[his] favorite metaphors, like parts of an engine" (Nash 1989, p. 64). Moreover, his "land ethic"—and here we detect the influence of Ouspensky—intimated something akin to the Gaia hypothesis later formulated by the scientist James Lovelock, in which our planet as a whole has the properties of a cybernetic-like self-correcting system and a living organism. Given the anthology's avowed aims, this essay has little to recommend it save the tongue-in-cheek appreciation by a modern forester of the of the biblical prophets' practical knowledge of forestry.

The editor, Martin Yaffe, is Professor of Philosophy and Religion Studies at the University of North Texas, now home to the Center for Environmental Philosophy (publisher of the journal *Environmental Ethics*). Perhaps the essay by Leopold mentioned above was included to compensate for the drubbing Leopold suffers in Yaffe's rather long introductory survey to this anthology. Yaffe takes Leopold to task for venturing beyond "his own technical discipline forest ecology" in order "to criticize the ethical principles he claims to find in the Hebrew Bible," principles Leopold found wanting in his imaginative (but not unprecedented) attempt to extend the compass of urgent moral concern and ethical consideration to include animate and inanimate (inorganic) objects and processes of the natural environment. To be sure, Leopold's writings display the virtues and vices that frequently attend the work of "public intellectuals" with little fealty to disciplinary expertise outside their own area(s) of specialization. Leopold wrote in the first instance neither as an ethicist nor as a biblical scholar well-versed in hermeneutics; hence one is not surprised to learn that his "all-too-hasty critique of what he takes to be the biblical view is highly selective and dubious."

Impressionistic biblical interpretation is likewise found in the work of such historians as Arnold Toynbee and Lynn White, Jr., for they, too, have made, in Yaffe's words, "the same dubious charge that the Bible is ecologically unfriendly." Well known among ecologists and environmental ethicists, White's 1967 *Science* article "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" argued that biblical rhetoric countenanced if not directly contributed to the development of Christianity "into the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen" (White 1967, p. 25). Anthropomorphism is disturbing to environmentalists insofar as it is understood to encourage an image of human beings as "masters" of the natural world, the products and inhabitants of which are designed (merely) to serve our interests and needs—such instrumentalist (i.e., non-intrinsic) valuation thought invariably to sanction ecological degradation, including the devastating exploitation of natural resources, as well as the deeply troubling ill-treatment of (nonhuman) animals on a massive scale (on this, see Singer 1990). And yet there are environmental ethicists who do not dismiss certain species of anthropocentrism: "For example, strong reasons may exist to protect the environment out of obligations that we have to human future generations to protect their welfare and not saddle them with environmental harms" (Light and Rolston 2003, p. 9).

Just what is at stake in the question of anthropocentrism versus nonanthropocentrism can be gleaned from the following from Andrew Light and Avner de-Shalit:

The underlying assumption of almost all nonanthropocentrists is that nonanthropocentrism must be developed as an alternative worldview because most people are anthropocentrists. (This is in fact why many environmental philosophers feel there is a philosophical dimension to environmental problems: the history of Western philosophy has been successful in developing the faulty worldviews that assert that only humans have the kind of value that generates moral obligations.) Thus, the nonanthropocentrist advocating the intrinsic value of nature cannot rest after making a persuasive case to other environmental philosophers of the truth of his or her views. The case must also be persuasive to people who do not count themselves as nonanthropocentrists. It must be a case compelling enough to persuade anthropocentrists that they should accept the shift in burden of proof (or burden of protection) that is made manifest through a claim to the nonanthropocentric intrinsic value of nature. But that is surely a higher hurdle of persuasion than starting with an acceptance of the anthropocentric terrain and arguing from within that framework that there are more values at stake in an environmental controversy than just pure economic values in favor of development. (Light and de-Shalit 2003, pp. 6–7)

As Light and de-Shalit proceed to point out, environmental activists, lawyers, and policy makers "must speak to the opposition in the opposition's own largely anthropocentric terms or fail to be granted a hearing at all."

White was well aware that biblical verses were open to different, more nuanced or sophisticated interpretations:

[White] was perfectly willing to concede that Christians [and presumably Jews as well] of the 1960s might form a commitment to environmental responsibility from their reading of Genesis. He agreed that there was a biblical basis for environmentalism. But his

point was that for nearly two thousand years the Christian tradition had not been so construed. Instead people used Scripture to justify the exploitation of nature in the same way defenders of slavery used it to justify ownership and exploitation of certain classes of humans. (Nash 1989, p. 89)

White's argument remains plausible, although, at times, he appears to confuse correlation with causation, if not committing the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, to wit: "modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and . . . modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature" (White 1967, p. 27). Commenting on White's interpretation of Genesis 1 : 28, Jeremy Cohen's essay contends that "premodern readers of the verse, Jews and Christians, found in it relatively little bearing on the natural environment and its exploitation." Apart from its anachronistic interpretation of biblical passages, White's essay leaves us in the dark as to the specific historical agents responsible for invoking and entrenching the biblical passages under discussion. It becomes, in the end, impossible to ascertain precisely the burden of guilt that Christianity in general and the Hebrew Bible in particular must assume for the contemporary global ecological crisis, including the effects of global warming, deforestation, shortages of fresh water supplies, soil erosion, a species extinction rate at its highest point in 65 million years (hence a precipitous decline in biodiversity), and so forth and so on.

Illustrating the psychologist's availability heuristic, Richard Lazarus observes that "in many respects, the quality of the natural environment in the United States is better on an absolute scale than it was over three decades ago, notwithstanding the tremendous increases in [economic] activity during the same period" (2004, p. xiv). In other words, Lake Erie is not dead, smog levels have visibly declined in Los Angeles, the Cuyahoga River is no longer burning, and, what is more, "the issues . . . of what might be called the 'second environmental crisis,' are more genuinely global in scope" (Goodin 1992, p. 4)—meaning, in effect, that the environmentalist's case before the North American public regarding the urgency of the environmental crisis has become immeasurably more difficult to make, a difficulty compounded by the fact that the environmental consequences of current production practices and consumption activity are *long-term* and hard to calculate accurately.

Dale Jamieson (2002) has exquisitely captured the heart of the problem, one in which the philosopher's training becomes apposite if we believe the problem amenable to reason: "Our moral psychology . . . is remarkably unresponsive to large-scale issues, especially those that involve people and events that are not close at hand" (p. 34). Media attention may mean that we respond to distant strangers suffering from tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes, but the public's—and the media's—attention is notoriously short-lived: an entire generation has forgotten Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the *Exxon Valdez*. Perhaps the lesson to be derived from White's essay, whatever the shortcomings of the actual argument, is simply that Hebrew scripture and Christian dogma have to this point proven rhetorically and practically impotent in the face of the Promethean conquest of nature. It thus behooves Jews and Christians alike to redeem their traditions, to articulate a reli-

giously grounded environmental ethic of stewardship or trusteeship that is ecologically sound and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, Jews and Christians might want to respond to the appropriation of dominion theology in an apocalyptic key by the so-called Wise Use movement (see Hendricks 2005). New Christian Right Reconstructionism is dominion theology with a vengeance, a pressing concern when *Time/CNN* and *Newsweek* polls find that well over 50 percent of respondents subscribe, literally, to the apocalyptic prophecies of the Book of Revelation.

Yaffe's introductory essay and assessment of the contributions to this volume is quite thorough—indeed, to a fault, for what is best served as an appetizer or hors d'oeuvre is more like the main course itself. That is to say, all but the most diligent reader or academic specialist may finish the introduction wondering if there is any need to peruse the individual contributions themselves. A less detailed analysis of each essay might have been replaced by a discussion that locates the anthology within the larger contexts of the “greening of religions,” recent developments in environmental ethics (and here I would include attempts to incorporate the array of capital assets found in nature within economic reasoning; see, e.g., Partha Dasgupta's *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment* [2002]), and the variegated worldviews and philosophies circulating in and around the environmental movement: “deep” and “reverential” ecologies, social ecology, red-green philosophies, eco-feminism, eco-pragmatism, reformist (professional) environmentalism, post-modern bioregionalism, process theology, eco-fascism, and so forth (cf. Zimmerman 1994).

Eric Katz' essay attempts to link genocide and ecocide with the concept of “domination” in a manner similar to the employment of this concept in Bookchin's *Ecology of Freedom* (Bookchin 1982) and some ecofeminist literature. Unfortunately, the concept of domination is nowhere analyzed or clearly spelled out (much like the concept of “exploitation” was for a time in the Marxist literature), and passages such as the following are closer to an assertion than an argument: “Anthropocentrism [in which “human interests, satisfaction, goods, and happiness are the goals of public policy and human action”] as a worldview quite easily leads to the practices of domination, even when such domination is not articulated.” Insofar as one can tease out the pertinent premises, they are of the tenuous, slippery-slope variety. Katz even detects nefarious motives behind the practice of ecological restoration of degraded ecosystems (restored to a semblance of their original states) as a result of its permeation by “anthropocentric ideology”: “we relieve our guilt for the earlier destruction of natural systems, and we demonstrate our power—the power of science and technology—over the natural world.” Elsewhere, Katz has gone so far as to argue that “the practice of ecological restoration can only represent misguided faith in the hegemony and infallibility of the human power to control the world” (quoted in Light and Rolston 2003, p. 399). Andrew Light has elsewhere provided us with a lucid critique of Katz' argument against both the idea that we can restore nature and the practice of attempting to restore it (*ibid.*, pp. 398–411).

Jeanne Kay's “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible” suggests that any environmental ethic of Jewish pedigree will need to confront seemingly incontrovertible

theological propositions found in the text: that creation is in a covenantal relation with the Creator; that the biblical concept of nature is *strongly* anthropocentric; that nature is God's instrument of divine award and retribution, "and its beneficence depends on human morality" (therefore, "humans indirectly bring about environmental destruction as the outcome of sin, or . . . directly through foolish arrogance"); that God manifests Himself in "natural theophanies"; and, finally, that "nature in the Bible may be loved for its beauty, its utility, or its unfathomable ways, but . . . it [is] incapable in itself of sustaining life." That said, and as evidenced in more than a few of the essays, Jews can rely on their religious and philosophical traditions for the conceptual resources with which to construct an environmental ethic. Among these conceptual resources we count the halakhic principle of *bal tashchit* ("you must not destroy"), extrapolated—rabbinically extended—so as to entail "the demand for acute environmental sensitivity" (Jeremy Cohen); God's ownership of the land, meaning that we are stewards or trustees of the land and its bounty, "hence we discover that the care of the natural world . . . was an implicit part of [the] rabbinic image of the good person" (David Ehrenfeld and Philip J. Bentley); the prohibition against causing *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim* (the "pain of living things"), which some have interpreted to imply an abstention from killing animals, and thus an argument for vegetarianism; and observance of the sabbatical (*shevi'it*) and jubilee years (in Yaffe's words, "correctly understood and applied").

Yaffe's decision to include Steven Schwarzschild's "The Unnatural Jew" is especially commendable, for it clearly goes against the current. According to Schwarzschild, "Jewish philosophy (in the exilic age) has paradigmatically defined Jewishness as alienation from and confrontation with nature." To the extent that this generalization may be true, it is further testament to the obstacles that must be overcome by Jews committed to the greening of their religion. In one sense, Schwarzschild has proffered an explanation for the fact that

the Jewish voice has joined the environmental movement relatively recently. Jews are not among the leaders of the environmental movement, and environmental activists who are Jews by birth have not developed their stance on the basis of Judaism. With the marked exception of the Bible, the literary sources of Judaism have remained practically unknown to environmental thinkers, and Jewish values have only marginally inspired environmental thinking or policies. (Tirosh-Samuels 2002)

In addition to the oft-cited "urban character" of diasporic Judaism, the dearth of Jewish philosophical reflections on the natural world has been attributed to the intellectual and ethical attention given to the Holocaust; the nature of Zionism; the Israeli-Arab conflict, and especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the Jewish-Catholic dialogue; and the meaning(s) of secular or cultural Judaism.

In conclusion, this anthology, alongside a volume generated from a series of conferences on religions and ecology held from 1996 to 1998 at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions (Tirosh-Samuels 2002), convincingly demonstrates that Judaism is capable of formulating an ecological theology and environmental ethic relevant to the contemporary global environmental crisis, assuming

here that the value systems of religions are essential to mobilizing people to care for the environment (be it natural or unnatural) and to preserving environmental resources, ecosystems, and biodiversity for future generations.

#### References

- Bookchin, Murray. 1982. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books.
- Dasgupta, Partha. 2001. *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Goodin, Robert E. 1992. *Green Political Theory*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press / Blackwell.
- Hendricks, Stephenie. 2005. *Divine Destruction: Wise Use, Dominion Theology, and the Making of Environmental Policy*. Hoboken, NJ: Melville House.
- Jamieson, Dale. 2002. *Morality's Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Lazarus, Richard J. 2004. *The Making of Environmental Law*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Light, Andrew, and Avner de-Shalit. 2003. *Moral and Political Reasoning in Environmental Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Light, Andrew, and Holmes Rolston III, eds. 2003. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Nash, Roderick. 1989. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. 1994. *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Singer, Peter. 1990. *Animal Liberation*. New York: New York Review of Books.
- Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava, ed. 2002. *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, for the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School.
- White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 : 1203–1207. Reprinted in Ian G. Barbour, ed., *Western Man and Environmental Ethics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. 1994. *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.