

Stephen M. Gardiner and Allen Thompson (eds.)

The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics

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This volume is part of the *Oxford Handbook* series. Like others in that series it provides ‘an authoritative and state-of-the-art survey of current thinking and research’, in this case, the field of environmental ethics. Editors Stephen Gardiner and Allen Thompson have put together an anthology featuring 46 new articles from established thinkers in environmental ethics. Each of the articles provide a review and an informed entry point into various aspects of the field without necessarily providing a consensus view on the topic, though often providing a sense of what may be further developments in that topic.

The editors’ choices reflect three decisions about the current state of environmental ethics (2016). The first decision was to reflect what they call the ‘increased politicization of environmental ethics’ (p. 3), namely the increase in current writers on issues of justice and other political values. The second editorial decision was to include work from authors beyond the traditional areas of moral philosophy. To this end, the volume contains works by philosophers of science, political philosophy and theory, applied ethics, and philosophy of law. Doing so connects the field with a wide range of insights regarding environmental debates. Finally, the editors sought to avoid topics that have been covered extensively in other anthologies, topics such as different cultural or religious attitude towards the environment or different world views regarding the relations between humans and Nature. The editors have sought to focus on ideas, concepts, problems, and issues that take as given how human activity has affected environmental change at a global level in systematic ways. The editors see the articles provided as a set of ‘maps, compasses, and other tools that one might take along when setting out on an evolving journey whose destination is yet to be decided’ (p. 5). This volume succeeds in helping new scholars see further ahead in the field.

This short review cannot provide a full description of the rich content and range of this anthology. But, even a brief overview can convey the scope of the work. The Handbook is divided into eight sections, with each section containing 5–6 essays, each approximately a dozen pages in length, with each devoted to a key concept utilised in environmental ethical issues, as well as an introductory essay by the editors, and a standard biographical sketch of each contributor.

Section One provides the social and historical context for environmental ethics, with essays describing the history of the field up through the beginning of the new century; the efficacy of using environmental science to inform policy and ethical questions; the use of market-based economic solutions to environmental problems; the adequacy of traditional concepts of justice for addressing environmental problems; what role state and non-state actors can have to promote a common environmental good; and finally, a critical response to those who would celebrate and embrace the Anthropocene with global, human centred activities.

Section Two addresses the subjects of value, what entities should count morally and how they should be considered. It contains essays on anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric loci of value: humans, conscious animals, all living entities, ecological wholes, and wild nature. Section Three provides a contrast to Section Two by providing essays on the nature of environmental value itself, essays that connect environmental philosophy with normative claims and meta-ethical claims and theories. In it there are essays on relation between truth and goodness in meta-ethical claims found in environmental ethics, the view that environmental commitment requires a commitment to the use of practical reasoning, the hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches to environmental ethics, and nature and justification of claims of aesthetic value in nature.

Section Four presents essays on different theoretical approaches to normative issues in environmentalism. To that end it provides essays on the consequentialist, deontic, environmental virtue ethics, care ethics, and spiritual basis for thinking about how we ought to think about the natural world.

Section Five addresses many of the classic issues in environmental ethics, providing overviews of the key concepts that are used to frame the different debates within environmental ethics. These concepts include: the problems of assigning moral responsibility, environmental justice, the role of gender, sexual inequality, and various gender-based perspectives in shaping environmental issues and problems, the nature of human rights and how they must be protected in the face of human caused environmental harms.

Section Six continues the discussion of specific environmental issues more directly. The essays here provide examples of application of environmental thinking on issues of pollution, population, energy production food, water, the implications of mass extinctions, technology, and attempts at ecosystem management.

In many previous anthologies (and some chapters in this anthology) the topic of global climate change (GCC) was often addressed by using it to illustrate key dimensions of a problem such as mass extinction or limits to growth. In a unique approach, Section Six presents a contrasting approach with essays that explore the key ethical features of the problem. To that end there are essays on the moral requirement to aid in CO₂ reduction, especially in developing countries, the moral necessity to preserve the material interests of individuals, but also the cultural identity of people impacted by climate change, the difficulties of international diplomacy in addressing GCC, and the ethical dimensions at geoengineering solutions to GCC.

The second distinctive feature of the anthology is in its final section. Many other anthologies and texts have ended with a discussion of global climate change. This work provides an insightful collection of essays on why the requisite social change to resolve environmental issues is so difficult and what approaches can be taken to resolve them. Thus, the work concludes with essays on how to deal with the nature of environmental conflict, the efficacy of a pragmatic approach to such problems, a way to resolve the conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice, and finally, ways to move from environmental thinking to environmental action.

With such a wide range of topics, issues, and positions presented, the work achieves its primary goal of presenting the current state of environmental ethics. Any reader wishing to gain a specific understanding of a particular issue within the field can use this handbook as a resource. The works provide a good overview or jumping-off point, with the references at the end of each article providing further direction for the reader's exploration. I tested this by selecting several essays on topics I was not as fully informed on as I would have liked. By reading each one I came away with a deeper sense of what were the central points or key issues of debate, and a sense of direction on how to explore each one in further detail. With the necessity of providing short essays, a lot of material was compressed in to small space, with the result that many essays read like encyclopedia entries, though the literary style and abilities of many of the authors let their individual voices shine through. With the cost at over \$100 USD, the volume should be available for use in libraries, but those individuals studying the field will find the work worth the cost.

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