

Gregory Bassham

Environmental Ethics: The Central Issues

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Studying ethics in 2021 comes with a steep price. Global concerns, from pandemic to climate, beckon us to ask old questions with new intensity. Should we return to the philosophical canon, revising it when necessary? Is it wiser to emphasise contemporary debates, eschewing apparently dated ideas? Does philosophy matter today for concrete problems anyway? What can it teach non-philosophers and neophytes? Who or what *should* matter to us?

Climate change is an obvious place to start, since it comes pre-loaded with numerous philosophical and existential puzzles. From animals and wilderness, religion to social justice, even population and technology – climate change presses us to think deeply about a variety of issues. More importantly, it requires us to connect conceptual, historical and practical dots. As 2020 has shown, synthetic thinking is an urgent desideratum. Luckily, the new introductory text *Environmental Ethics: The Central Issues* (2021) approaches moral issues holistically, with an eye to arguments and their application. Gregory Bassham offers an accessible and affordable multi-directional blueprint to help us think about current problems. *Environmental Ethics* engages broad enough issues to attract a variety of learners, including philosophy, public policy and environmental science majors.

As a blueprint, it is compact enough to aid those who wish to veer off the beaten path. This encourages a range of approaches in the classroom, opening space for instructors to touch on the history, development and interconnectivity of philosophical ideas. We can effortlessly move from principles in Kant or Mill (Chapter 1), to those challenged by biocentrism and ecocentrism (Chapters 4 and 5), and see how they play out today vis-à-vis environmental justice (Chapters 8 or 11). Or, we might connect virtue ethics with deep ecology (Chapter 6) and civil disobedience (Chapter 14).

Environmental Ethics is divided into two main parts. Part 1 (pp. 3–117) lays out ethical thinking basics, reflects on ethics and religion, and dives into classic environmental frameworks. Along the way, Bassham outlines the central arguments and concepts, often putting them in dialogue with previous chapters and current events. This will be a boon to students and teachers alike. He also details perceived problems with received views, ending the book's first part with his 'moderate ecocentrist' resolution. Part 2 (pp. 121–218) then dives into a number of hot issues. Some are classic problems situated in today's world, including vegetarianism, animal agriculture and tragedy of commons. Yet, he always manages to reorient those topics so students will find them engaging. In this case, for example, we reflect on GMO foods (Chapter 10, pp.

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150–4), consumeristic values, and the sustainability of capitalism (Chapter 9, pp. 137–142).

Some instructors may wish to jump chapters, as noted above. Others may simply use Part 1 chapters as springboards to primary texts in the canon. For instance, it would be easy to move from Chapter 1's introduction of duty ethics to selections of Kant's *Groundwork*; then, from Chapter 3's animal rights overview to arguments from Tom Regan's *Case for Animal Rights*.

For applied courses, *Environmental Ethics* sets the stage for public policy, engineering and science students to practise, as it were, case-study dress rehearsals. For example, by juxtaposing arguments in anthropocentric ethics with ecocentrism, instrumentalist problems in current issues like geoengineering (Chapter 13) and the sixth mass extinction (Chapter 12) become clear. From here, the instructor may transition to historical case studies in environmental law or politics. They could then foster enrichment of these chapters by asking students to research de-extinction technologies, cloud seeding attempts, debates on stratospheric aerosol injections, and other related 'techno-fixes' (pp. 196–7). The combinations generable from Bassham's blueprint are endless, and this does not even speak to the accessibility of its exposition: such clarity is unsurprising given Bassham's previous work on pop-culture classics like *The Hobbit*.

Despite this, the book does suffer some shortcomings. Interestingly, they can function as pedagogical vehicles for deeper exploration. Let us consider a few of them. First, very brief and limited consideration is given to classic normative ethical theories (pp. 10–20), with discussion on feminist care ethics and rights-based views left out altogether. This is no major worry, as instructors could easily supplement here. Chapters on classic environmental positions are also subject to questionable treatment. Ecofeminism, for instance, is given a very short shrift, lumped in with a split-chapter on deep ecology (problematic for obvious reasons, since those schools had many disagreements in the past). The four-page ecofeminism treatment in a 200+ page book seems unjustified, especially since greater development could have facilitated interest in related current issues, like environmental racism vis-à-vis climate change (Tuana 2019).

Second, although there is value in introducing multiple religious perspectives (Chapter 2), little consideration is given to non-Western approaches. Bassham frequently appeals to Pope Francis and stewardship-type ethics, which makes sense assuming a Western audience. Nonetheless, it would have been nice to see more alternatives. Confucian role ethics might be one place to start, since any meaningful climate solution requires dialogue with China (Parkes 2021). In Chapter 2 Buddhism and Daoism get one paragraph each (pp. 29–30), and Confucianism is unmentioned in the book. These oversights are surprising given burgeoning contributions in environmental philosophy. Consider, for example, work on Confucianism and climate change (Hourdequin

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2010). Since Bassham's holistic pragmatism gains its plausibility through implicit reliance on the environmental convergence hypothesis, these omissions are unfortunate. After all, he admits that our 'planetary emergency' demands solutions 'that can serve as a big tent' (p. 106).

These concerns lead us nicely to Chapter 7. Bassham offers his own moderate take on ecocentrism, meant to satisfy environmentalists and yet practical enough to garner widespread support to affect meaningful change. The author acknowledges that his sketch is merely provisional (pp. 106 and 115), so there is no need for critique here. Notwithstanding potential flaws, this chapter is pedagogically rich. While earlier chapters depict Bassham's critical evaluation of classic approaches, Chapter 7 offers an opportunity to see how philosophers synthesise their own ideas in action. Students have a unique chance to criticise the author by learning from his own critical method.

On the whole, *Environmental Ethics* will be a great addition for a variety of individuals. Instructors wishing to change up their course materials will find this short text helpful for getting to the heart of key arguments and fresh issues. Those new to the environmental side of applied ethics will also greatly benefit. Lastly, independent learners, students and environmentalists will find countless starting points for further exploration. The book's recurring emphasis on totality with a pragmatic edge – from theory and practice, analysis and synthesis, past and future – is indeed needed for today's global challenges, ones with such steep prices.

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