Deep Ecology


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Adherents of the deep ecology movement share a dislike of the human-centered value system at the core of European and North American industrial culture. Deep ecologists argue that environmental philosophy must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants, needs or desires.

The popularity of deep ecology spans from headline-grabbing environmental activists dressed in coyote costumes to scholars of an astonishing assortment of backgrounds and interests. Authors have made connections between deep ecology and ecological science (Golley 1987), religions from around the world (Barnhill and Gottlieb 2001), New Age spirituality (LaChapelle 1978), direct action/ecological sabotage (Foreman 1991), the poetry of Robinson Jeffers (Sessions 1977), the land ethic of Aldo Leopold (Devall and Sessions 1985), the monism of Baruch Spinoza (Sessions 1977, 1979, 1985; Naess 2005), and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (Zimmerman 1986). Such variety is invigorating, but it makes it difficult to find the common thread in all these diverse manifestations of deep ecology. As one commentator has observed, “Any one who attempts to reconcile Heidegger’s with Leopold’s contributions to deep ecology finds the going rugged” (Oelschlaeger 1991, p. 304). (To differentiate between the broad popular and narrow academic usages of deep ecology, the term Deep Ecology will be used to denote the latter.)

Much more narrowly, deep ecology represents the psychologization of environmental philosophy. Deep ecology in this sense refers to an egalitarian and holistic environmental philosophy founded on phenomenological methodology. By way of direct experience of nonhuman nature, one recognizes the equal intrinsic worth of all biota as well as one’s own ecological interconnectedness with the life-world in all its plenitude.

Understanding Deep Ecology in its academic sense demands reading the work of four environmental philosophers: the Norwegian Arne Naess, the Americans George Sessions and David Rothenberg, and the Australian Warwick Fox. Deep Ecology is inextricably associated with Naess (Katz et al. 2000, p. xv) and owes its prominence to him. Naess’s many strengths—strong will, humble demeanor, playful personality, estimable academic reputation, aversion to judgment, predilection for inclusivity, and an odd mix of interests—have stimulated many others to spend considerable amounts of time, talent, and energy teasing out the nuances of his creative insights.

ORIGINS OF THE DEEP ECOLOGY MOVEMENT

Arne Naess invented the term deep ecology in a famous 1973 English-language article, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” By “ecology movement” Naess means a cosmology or worldview. Naess faults European and North American civilization for the arrogance of its human-centered instrumentalization of nonhuman nature. He contrasts his new “deep” (or radical) ecological worldview with the dominant “shallow” (or reform) paradigm. The shallow worldview, which he finds to be typical of mainstream environmentalism, is merely an extension of European and North American anthropocentrism—its reasons for conserving wilderness and preserving biodiversity are invariably tied to human welfare, and it prizes nonhuman nature mainly for its use-value. The deep ecological worldview, in contrast, questions the fundamental assumptions of European and North American anthropocentrism—that is, it digs conceptually deeper (Fox 1995, pp. 91-94). In doing so, deep ecological thinking “is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilization” (Naess 1989, p. 45 [italics in original]). This radicalism has inspired environmental activists of many stripes to hoist up Deep Ecology as their banner in calling for nothing less than the redirection of human history (Manes 1990).

Naess, like Socrates, makes no claims to certainty. In word and deed, Naess instead has inspired others to engage in deep philosophical questioning through example. Naess’s own environmental philosophy, eco-cosmos T (1986, pp. 26–29)—named for his secluded boreal hut, Tvergastein (Naess 1989, p. 4)—is meant to serve as a template for other personal eco-cosmoses (philosophies of ecology).

ACADEMIC DEFINITIONS OF DEEP ECOLOGY

Deep ecology in its narrow academic sense rests on two fundaments: an axiology (The study of the criteria of value systems in ethics) of “biocentric egalitarianism” and an ontology (the study of existence) of metaphysical
holism which asserts that the biosphere does not consist of discrete entities but rather internally related individu-
alts that make up an ontologically unbroken whole. Both principles are rooted in an intuitive epistemology remi-
niscent of Descartes’ “clear and distinct” criteria—once
you grasp them, their truth is beyond doubt.

The first principle, biocentric egalitarianism—known
also by other phrases that combine biocentric, biospheric,
and ecological with equality and egalitarianism (Naess
1973, p. 95; Devall and Sessions 1985, pp. 67–69)—holds
that biota have equal intrinsic value; it denies differential
valuation of organisms. In the words of Naess, “the equal
right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious
value axiom” (1973, p. 96 [Naess’s emphasis]). In the
words of the sociologist Bill Devall, writing with George
Sessions, “all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as
parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic
worth” (1985, p. 67). Naess shrewdly preempts invariable
attacks on this idea of the equal worth of all organisms by
adding the qualifier “in principle” because “any realistic
praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppres-
sion” (1973, p. 95). This qualifier has not, however, staved
off criticisms of biocentric egalitarianism.

The valuing of human beings over other life forms in
the teleology of a great chain of being (Lovejoy 1936) has
been a key feature of the European–North American intel-
lectual tradition—and, to the dismay of deep ecologists, a
feature of some prominent variants of environmental ethics
(Birch and Cobb 1981; Bookchin 1982; Rolston 1988).
Biocentric egalitarianism aims directly at this target.
By denying humans special moral consideration, Deep
Ecology is not just nonanthropocentric, but anti-anthropo-
centric (Watson 1983).

Sessions has categorically rejected any differential axi-
ology on the grounds that hierarchies of value lay the
groundwork for claims of moral superiority. Quoting John
Rodman (1977, p. 94), Sessions cautions that any compa-
rative axiology merely reinstates a “pecking order in this
moral barnyard” (Sessions 1985, p. 230). At a 1979 confer-
ence devoted to reminding philosophers of the purpose of
their discipline (namely, deep questioning), Sessions
warned environmental ethicists of the temptation of look-
ing to a metaphysics based on intensity of sentience. “The
point is not whether humans in fact do have the greatest
degree of sentience on this planet (although dolphins and
whales might provide a counterinstance), deep ecologists
argue that the degree of sentience is irrelevant in terms of
how humans relate to the rest of Nature” (Sessions 1985,
p. 18). The second principle is metaphysical holism. One can
apprehend ontological interconnectedness through enlight-
enment or “self-realization.” (Devall and Sessions 1985,
pp. 67–69; Naess 1987). As Fox says, “It is the idea that
we can make no firm ontological divide in reality between
the human and the nonhuman realms. . . . [T]o the extent
that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological
consciousness” (Fox 1984, p. 196). Through this awaken-
ing, the ontological boundaries of the self extend outward,
incorporating more and more of the lifeworld into the self.
This insight discloses that there is in reality only one big
Self, the lifeworld, a notion developed in the article “The
World Is Your Body” (Watts 1966).

This method of self-realization is identification: By
recognizing the intrinsic worth of other living beings, one
recognizes the solidarity of all life forms. Naess, upon
watching a flea immolate itself in an acid bath under a
microscope, empathized with the suffering flea, identified
with it, and thereby felt deeply connected with the entire
lifeworld (1987, p. 36).

Once ontological boundaries between living beings are
recognized as illusory, one realizes that biophysical
interests are one’s own. Devall and Sessions assert that “if
we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming our-
selves. There are no boundaries and everything is inter-
related” (1985, p. 68). In the words of the environmental activist John Seed, the statement “I am protecting the
rain forest” develops into “I am part of the rain forest
protecting myself.” I am that part of the rain forest
recently emerged into thinking. . . . [T]he change is a
spiritual one, thinking like a mountain, sometimes
referred to as ‘Deep Ecology’” (Devall and Sessions
1985, p. 199). Because the rainforest is part of the activist
Seed, he is inherently obliged to look after its welfare.
The rainforest’s well-being and needs are indistinguish-
able from Seed’s.

Naess and Sessions have emphatically emphasized
the phenomenological spirit of deep ecology and down-
played ddicta; the psychological realization of metaphysi-
cal holism makes ethics superfluous. As Naess has said,
“I am not much interested in ethics or morals. I am inter-
ested in how we experience the world. . . .” (Fox 1995,
p. 219). In Sessions words, “The search . . . is not for
environmental ethics but for ecological consciousness”
(Fox 1995, p. 225).

THE EIGHT-POINT PLATFORM
Growing out of the knowledge of nature’s concrete con-
tents is the recognition of the need for some kind of
political action. To this end Naess and Sessions laid out
an oft-cited eight-point program (that they conjured while
camping in Death Valley in 1984) For example (Naess
1986, p. 24), in the diagram Buddhist, secular philosoph-
ical, and Christian first principles (the boat) converge in
the eight-point platform (the waist), which then justifies
an array of activism (the skirt [see Figure 1]). Buddhist
metaphysics might channel through the waist of deep
ecological principles calling for environmental action to
reduce consumption; secular metaphysics might channel through the waist of Deep Ecology calling for action to reduce human population growth; or Christian metaphysics might channel through the waist of Deep Ecology to call for action to preserve biodiversity. Both the eight-point platform and the apron diagram imply that Deep Ecology is above all an ontology and incidentally an ethic.

**CRITIQUES OF DEEP ECOLOGY**

The deep-ecological principles of biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism have elicited robust critiques. Some of the most interesting debates have centered on the normative status of Deep Ecology. Naess maintains that Deep Ecology is essentially *descriptive*. For Naess unmitigated empiricism or “ecophenomenology” (Brown and Toadvine 2003) promotes a direct experience of the qualities of nature—its “concrete contents” (Naess 1985). Deep Ecology, he argues, is simply an enumeration of general principles that command the assent of persons open to the direct apprehension of nature.

Scholars have found the disclaimer that Deep Ecology is not a normative system—and ought not be judged as such—disingenuous. They have treated Deep Ecology as the legitimate object of the analysis of moral philosophy. Some regard Deep Ecology as stringent axiological egalitarianism that is useless in adjudicating conflicting interests. If all organisms are of equal value, then there is no basis upon which to make prescriptions because the kind of value distinctions necessary for evaluating the moral situations of environmental ethics are deliberately disqualified. The principle of biocentric egalitarianism, on this view, renders Deep Ecology impotent as an ethical theory. Environmental ethics is predicated on the possibility of a *nonegalitarian* axiology. In the words of the American philosopher Bryan Norton, “The 120,000th elk cannot be treated equally with one of the last California condors—not, at least, on a reasonable environmental ethic” (1991, p. 224). Baird Callicott has surmised that environmental ethics must manifestly not “accord equal moral worth to each and every member of the biotic community” (1980, p. 327). These scholars argue, therefore, that biocentric egalitarianism must be scrapped (Sylvan 1985).

In a similar vein Fox has argued that the leveling axiology of orthodox Deep Ecology must be forsworn. If all organisms are really of equal intrinsic worth, the deep-ecological doctrinaire might just as well eat veal as vegetables (Fox 1984). In reality, Fox predicted, deep ecologists probably tend to be vegetarians, because—in the words of Alan Watts—“cows scream louder than carrots” (Fox 1984, p. 198). Orthodox Deep Ecology, Fox contends, does itself a disservice by employing a definition of anthropocentrism which is too narrow to usefully determine the limits of praxis. Until deep ecologists take up this challenge and employ a workable definition of anthropocentrism, they may well become known as the.

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**Figure 1. Arne Naess’s Apron Diagram.** CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

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advocates of “Procrustean Ethics” as they attempt to fit all organisms to the same dimensions of intrinsic value. (Fox 1984, pp. 198–99).

Not eager to be labeled a procrustean ethicist, Fox persuasively argues for a position that abandons biocentric egalitarianism and instead asserts that all biota have intrinsic value but are not equal in intrinsic value because the “richness of experience” differs (Fox 1984, p. 198). On this point Fox aligns himself with the Whiteheadian-inspired environmental ethics based on intensity of sentience (Ferre´ 1994) that Sessions so adamantly opposes.

To mark the difference between his sophisticated refutation of deep ecological thinking from orthodox Deep Ecology, Fox rechristened his theory transpersonal ecology (1995). Fox has since moved beyond Deep Ecology and has developed a more integrated approach that encompasses interhuman ethics, the ethics of the natural environment, and the ethics of the human-constructed environment (Fox 2006). In contrast, Sessions has reasserted the importance of deep ecology’s ecological realism as opposed to social constructivism (2006) as the philosophical foundation for a “new environmentalism of the twenty-first century” (1995).

Naess has steadfastly resisted any gradations or differentiations of intrinsic value among organisms in light of such criticisms. Responding to Fox, Naess wrote that some intrinsic values may differ, but not the kind he talks about. He and Fox, said Naess, “probably do not speak about the same intrinsic view” (Naess 1984, p. 202).

Naess has reiterated his intuition that “living beings have a right, or an intrinsic or inherent value, or value in themselves, that is the same for all of them” (Naess 1984, p. 202). As Naess conceded early on (1973), brute biopsychic reality entails some forms of killing, exploitation, and suppression of other living beings; the aim is to do more good than harm, to respect on an equal basis the right of every life form to flourish (Naess 1984). Nevertheless, some philosophers have found such a guideline essentially vacuous, like vowing honesty until lying is warranted (Sylvan 1985a), thus undermining the very foundation of the principle itself. If any realistic practice deals with few situations where biota may be valued equally, then the principle is empty.

According to some critics, there are irresolvable structural tensions between biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism in ecological value systems (Keller 1997). They argue that, in light of the real functions of living natural systems, it is impossible to even come close to affirming both the ability of all individuals to flourish to old age and the integrity and stability of ecosystems. The necessity of exterminating ungulates such as goats and pigs for the sake of the health of fragile tropical-island ecosystems is but one example. Regard for the health of whole ecosystems might, therefore, require treating individuals differently, because individuals of different species have unequal utility (or disutility) for wholes; if that were the case, then viewed from the standpoint of an expansionary holist, biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism might be mutually exclusive and inconsistent with each other to the extent that at least one would have to be abandoned—or perhaps both (Keller 1997).

DEEP ECOLOGY, SOCIAL ECOLOGY, AND ECOFEMINISM

Social Ecologists and ecofeminists have also formulated robust critiques of Deep Ecology. Social Ecologists, speaking as secular humanists of the European Enlightenment tradition, have excoriated biocentric egalitarianism as misanthropic. In a particular Murray Bookchin criticized Deep Ecology for reducing humans from complex social beings to a simple species, a scourge that is “overpopulating” the planet and “devouring” its resources (1988, p. 13). Bookchin argues that Deep Ecologists’ ahistorical “zoologization” prevents them from seeing the real cultural causes of environmental problems (1988, p. 18).

In the estimation of ecological feminists, the idea of self-realization is patriarchal. The Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, for instance, argued that the notion of the expanded self results in “boundary problems” stemming from the impulse of subordination (Plumwood 1993, p. 178). There are serious conflicts of interest between constituent members of larger wholes, and she has argued that expansionary selfhood does not adequately recognize the reality of these conflicts. In the political arena, she contends, the expansionary holist is forced into the arrogant position of implying that anyone in disagreement does not in fact understand what is in her or his own best interest. Instead of approaching a situation of conflicting interests with a conciliatory attitude (e.g., “I realize your interests are different from my interests, so here we have a real conflict of interest that we need to resolve by compromise”), the expansionary holist approaches the situation, tacitly or overtly, self-righteously (e.g., “I know what your real interests are, and here we have a conflict because you don’t seem to understand what your own interests are—whereas I do, fortunately for you.”) Ecofeminists suspect that self-realization is a front for an imperialistic philosophy of self, springing from “the same motive to control which runs a continuous thread through the history of patriarchy” (Salleh 1984, p. 344).

Consider the activist John Seed. According to the ecofeminist critique, there is nothing to guarantee that the needs of the rainforest should govern those of Seed: Why should Seed’s needs not dictate the needs of the rainforest? (Plumwood 1993). Or why should the needs of unemployed loggers not trump the needs of Seed and the forest?
Even while consenting to some of the insights of deep ecological questioning, for the unemployed logger the need to feed and cloth her or his children might easily outweigh any concern for ecosystemic integrity and stability.

Furthermore, some ecofeminists argue, affirming the ontological interconnectedness of all human and nonhuman organisms and the nonliving environment does not necessitate an embrace of the holism of self-realization. In an article that has become required reading for students of Deep Ecology, the Australian philosopher Richard Sylvan notes that the premise that individuals are not absolutely discrete does not entail the conclusion that all relations are internal and that individuals are ontological chimeras. "Certainly, removing human apartheid and cutting back human supremacy are crucial in getting the deeper value theory going. But for this it is quite unnecessary to go the full metaphysical distance to extreme holism, to the shocker that there are no separate things in the world, no wilderness to traverse or for Muir to save. A much less drastic holism suffices for these purposes" (1985b, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these various critiques have contributed to a significant consensus that Deep Ecology has reached its logical conclusion and has exhausted itself (Fox 1995). For example, in the respected textbook Environmental Philosophy (Zimmerman et al. 2005), the section on Deep Ecology, which enjoyed a coveted place in the first three editions, was eliminated in the fourth.

Compared to other prominent theories, Deep Ecology has not crystallized into a complete system. As Rothenberg states in the English revision of Naess’s earlier Økologi, samfunn, og livsstil; deep ecological thinking is process without end (Naess 1989, Rothenberg 1996). For Rothenberg (1996), Deep Ecology is a set of prescient “hints” about the real relations of culture and nature. These hints are to environmental philosophy as a tree trunk is to roots and branches (Rothenberg 1987). Inverting the apron diagram, Rothenberg visualizes the platform of Deep Ecology as a tree, its conceptual roots deriving nourishment from various religious, aesthetic, and speculative soils and its branches reaching out into the world, enjoining various types of political action (1987). Rothenberg’s ideas have stimulated new ways of thinking about the ways in which humans experience nature and about the limits of human language (1996).

Deep Ecology is less a finished product than a continuing, impassioned plea for the development of ecosophies (roots and branches) that merge shared nonanthropocentric core principles (the trunk). At the same time it is clear that Deep Ecology has earned a permanent and well-deserved place in the history of environmental philosophy; that this outlook has generated an abundance of academic articles and books in the field of environmental philosophy is ample testimony to its enduring influence and importance.

SEE ALSO Biozentrum; Ecological Feminism; Holism; Naess, Arne.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

With its howling wolf logo, the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife is one of the better-known North American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that


