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DEEP ECOLOGY

Environmental philosophy has a particularly strong record of seeking to rethink the direction of modern society. This has involved a willingness to take an interdisciplinary approach and to learn from traditions that mainstream Western thought has marginalized. This is not without dangers, but it makes for an approach that can be very diverse and radical. This dynamic can be seen in one of the most prominent theories in environmental philosophy: deep ecology.

5.1 AGAINST THE DOMINANT PARADIGM

The basic worry in deep ecology is that many current environmental efforts are not adequate because they are not radical enough. The word “radical” here refers to the root, like a radish. Hence the claim is that many current environmental efforts do indeed do something, but they are not getting to the root of the problem. The name “deep ecology,” then, is meant to draw attention to the difference between “shallow” environmental approaches that are superficial and inadequate and approaches that are more radical and fundamental.

According to Bill Devall, shallow approaches fail to challenge the “dominant paradigm” in modern society.¹ He means by this the “values, beliefs, habits, and norms” that are widely accepted now. These include a commitment to economic growth, that the main purpose of government is to enable the “production of commodities” to ensure the material wellbeing of citizens, and that technology can fix our problems. New is better than old,

the future is better than the past, more is better than less, more commodities lead to a higher standard of living. Overall, the dominant paradigm privileges the economic and ties it directly to progress.

The economically driven dominant paradigm can recognize environmental problems, but it funnels them through this lens in such a way that it seeks technological solutions that don't fundamentally challenge economic growth. Devall calls environmental efforts that don't challenge the dominant paradigm "reformist environmentalism."² These approaches can include building parks, encouraging recycling, improving resource management, increasing awareness of environmental issues, developing ecofriendly practices and technologies, etc. These efforts are not bad; in fact, many of them have led to improvements. But the changes they suggest tend to be incremental and fail to radically challenge the status quo.

5.2 SHALLOW VS. DEEP ECOLOGY

Deep ecology claims the status quo is unsustainable and inadequate. According to Arne Naess, who coined the phrase "deep ecology," we see this when we compare shallow ecological approaches to deep ecological approaches.³ To summarize Naess's six examples:

- (1) Pollution. Shallow: approaches seek technological solutions, send polluting industries to the Global South, and use economic incentives to manage pollution. Deep: approaches examine how pollution affects entire ecosystems, not just humans, question how economic growth and technology are primary contributors to these issues, and critique how the Global North is externalizing pollution onto poorer countries.
- (2) Resources. Shallow: approaches see the natural world as resources that can and should be used by humans. If humans use too many of them, market forces will increase their value and conserve them. Deep: approaches reject the idea that the natural world is comprised of resources and that human values are their only or primary measure. We need to examine and alter our productive and consumptive practices.
- (3) Population. Shallow: human overpopulation is an issue for the Global South. Human welfare is privileged over ecosystem health. Deep: the rapid increase in human population is leading to environmental destruction worldwide.
- (4) Cultural Diversity and Appropriate Technology. Shallow: Industrialized countries need to support the Global South as they modern-

ize and adapt modern practices. This will inevitably involve social and cultural changes. Deep: Western technologies may be part of the problem, not the solution. Modernization efforts are not only colonial but may alter traditional practices that may be or may have been more ecologically sustainable than Western practices. Modernization may be ecologically and culturally destructive.

- (5) Land and Sea Ethics. Shallow: the natural world is divided into pieces that are the property of individuals. Wildlife, water, and land are resources that humans need to manage with the aid of technological innovations. Deep: Nature does not belong to humans and ecosystems are disrupted when they are divided and used according to the whim of human “owners.” If we want to seriously protect the environment, we need to see it and treat it in terms of ecosystems with its own needs that may not fit with human purposes.
- (6) Education and the Scientific Enterprise. Shallow: we need more experts, more technology, and more science. Deep: we need radical change to our economic system and the exploitative aspects of our technological and scientific practices. We need to shift to a more holistic approach that respects the biosphere more fundamentally.⁴

These are the examples that Naess articulated in 1986, before the scientific consensus of the danger of climate change. On that issue, we see very similar shallow approaches being taken: hope for technological solutions, use of economic incentives to encourage changes in behavior from companies and individuals, international commitments among nations regarding climate goals, and so forth. None of these approaches fundamentally challenge unsustainable economic practices or the modern faith in technological solutions. But what if these problems are caused by our metaphysics, economics, and technologies?

5.3 GOING DEEPER, LOOKING FOR ALTERNATIVES

The basic argument of deep ecology, then, is that modern industrialized countries are only superficially committed to the environment and that more serious efforts must be far more radical. This requires a fundamental rethinking and reworking of Western thought and practice. Challenging the assumptions that underlie and justify these practices is frustratingly difficult, as not only are they often taken for granted, but they are tied to modern self-understanding, meaning, purpose, and modern ethics. As we saw Rémi Brague argue in Chapter 2, technology is not just a neutral tool, but often functions as a moral imperative. Technology allows us to “fix” the

world and make it better for humans. Not surprisingly, technology then has strong positive moral valences and can even function as a kind of modern faith. Shallow ecological approaches repeatedly seek technological solutions.

Deep ecology claims that there is something fundamentally flawed about this approach and is faced with the task of critically examining these assumptions and seeking alternatives. To do so, deep ecologists cast their nets far and wide. According to Devall, they turn to Eastern thought, Native American thought and practice, the minority of Western thinkers that criticize Western modernity, the scientific discipline of ecology, and art.⁵ From Eastern and Native American thought and practice, they seek ways of understanding and acting in the world that are more balanced with the natural world. From critical Western thinkers, they seek to understand what has gone wrong. From the scientific discipline of ecology, they seek an approach that is holistic and address these issues by examining interrelations and systems instead of only parts. From art, they seek new ways of perceiving and experiencing the world.

This means that deep ecology tends to range over much broader terrain than typical academic work. This can be refreshing if one feels constrained by these limits, but it also comes with dangers. These dangers include potentially being superficial, appropriative, overly romantic, reductive, or colonialist. We will discuss these problems in more detail in other chapters.

This willingness to range far and wide also means that deep ecologists often include spiritual concerns in their writings and explore literary approaches. This doesn't mean that deep ecology is not interested in science—its very name points to ecology. If anything, deep ecology is concerned with radically changing our practices toward the natural world and each other, and this is not a matter of generating more scientific knowledge, but of changing how we live. We can see this with Naess's articulation of an eight-point "platform" of deep ecology.

5.4 PRINCIPLES OF DEEP ECOLOGY

Naess's platform of deep ecology is as follows:

- (1) The wellbeing and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
- (2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

- (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- (4) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life *requires* a smaller human population.
- (5) Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- (6) Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting situation will be deeply different from the present.
- (7) The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in the situation of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.
- (8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try and implement the necessary changes.⁶

It is important to notice that the very first point is a rejection of anthropocentrism in favor of ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the idea that humans are superior to or more valuable than the rest of nature. Ecocentrism rejects anthropocentrism by putting entire ecosystems at the center of focus instead of only humans. Naess is clearly seeking to move away from anthropocentrism toward ecocentrism, although what this would actually mean for humans is highly debated and controversial. In the next chapter, we will explore more fully what it would mean to treat entire ecosystems as valuable rather than humans only.

It is also worth noticing here that while Naess is resisting anthropocentrism, he does not seem to fully embrace an ecocentric position that might treat humans as equal to the rest of nature: his third point insists that humans should not diminish ecological “richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.” This does imply that humans must reign in their uncontrolled destruction of the world, but seems to allow some degree of potential destruction as necessary for “vital needs.” He recommends smaller human populations and less human domination of nature but does seem to think humans can establish sufficiently sustainable relationships with nature.

Moreover, Naess does not outline specific policy suggestions here. Deep ecologists are not afraid to suggest specific policy changes (as we will see in the next chapter), but they do not think these changes will occur without fundamental rejection and alteration of the dominant paradigm. The suggestion—that philosophical and even spiritual changes must occur first and

foremost at a fundamental level—flies directly in the face of the dominant paradigm, which is overwhelmingly inclined to treat environmental issues as technical issues with technical solutions. Not surprisingly, most politicians and scientists tend to ignore deep ecological approaches. It remains to be seen if there will be some breaking point that will result in fracturing the dominant paradigm.

5.5 SPIRITUALITY

Perhaps most jarring to the dominant paradigm, some deep ecologists turn not only to philosophy but also to spirituality. The claim here from deep ecologists is that the dominant paradigm is not only philosophically problematic but spiritually damaging. In modern life, we tend to be alienated from the world. Some deep ecologists believe that healing both the damaged environment and our own damaged selves requires reconnecting spiritually with the natural world:

For deep ecology, the study of our place in the Earth household includes the study of ourselves as part of the organic whole. Going beyond a narrowly materialist scientific understanding of reality, the spiritual and material aspects of reality fuse together. While the leading intellectuals of the dominant worldview have tended to view religion as “just superstition,” and have looked upon ancient spiritual practice and enlightenment, such as found in Zen Buddhism, as essentially subjective, the search for deep ecological consciousness is the search for a more objective consciousness and state of being through an active deep questioning and meditative process and way of life . . .

A nurturing nondominating society can help in the “real work” of becoming a whole person. The “real work” can be summarized symbolically as the realization of “self-in-Self” where “self” stands for organic wholeness. The process of the full unfolding of the self can be also summarized by the phrase, “No one is saved until we are all saved,” where the phrase “one” includes not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rain forest ecosystems, mountain and river, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on.⁷

In this passage, Buddhist concerns with overcoming the self are combined with environmental concerns. The claim here is that overcoming atomistic or hyperindividualistic self-understanding requires seeing oneself

as part of a larger organic whole and seeking to care for this greater whole instead of only the atomistic self. Ostensibly, this would help heal both the alienated modern individual and the environment and promote a more nurturing relationship between humans and the world around them.

5.6 DEEP ECOLOGY AND ECOCENTRISM

While deep ecologists seek to move away from anthropocentrism toward a more ecocentric approach, ecocentrism is not limited to deep ecologists. One famous example of an ecocentric approach that predates deep ecology is Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Thus, while most if not all deep ecologists are committed to ecocentrism, not all ecocentrists are deep ecologists. As such, it makes sense to present ecocentrism as a new chapter, even though there is much overlap between these approaches. Because of these connections, I will delay assessing deep ecology until after the presentation of ecocentrism in the next chapter.

5.7 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Deep ecology suggests that many current environmental efforts are not radical enough. Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Why would deep ecologists turn to Asian and Native American philosophy? Is this a good idea in your opinion? Why? Why not?
3. Deep ecology also claims that the current environmental crisis is also a spiritual crisis and that it would require spiritual solutions. Why might some resist this? Do you think they are correct? Why or why not?

5.8 FURTHER READING

The original articulation of deep ecology starts with Arne Naess's 1973 paper "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement." Devall and Sessions's *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* is the classic book-length study of deep ecology. Fritjof Capra's *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* is an interesting example of attempting to combine spirituality with science. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism* is the classic anthology of deep ecological writings and includes responses to critics.

Notes

- 1 Devall, Bill. "The Deep Ecology Movement." *National Resources Journal*, 20/2 (1980), 219–303.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Naess, Arne. "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Perspectives." *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, no. 102 (1986).
- 4 This is not a direct quotation of Naess but my summary of his discussion.
- 5 Devall, Bill. "The Deep Ecology Movement." *National Resources Journal*, 20/2 (1980), 219–303.
- 6 Naess, Arne. "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Perspectives." *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, no. 102 (1986).
- 7 Devall, Bill, and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2007), 66–67.