
Pro Rege

Volume 22 | Number 3

Article 2

March 1994

Contemporary Environmental Ethics: A Tempest in a Teapot

John H. Kok
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kok, John H. (1994) "Contemporary Environmental Ethics: A Tempest in a Teapot," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 22: No. 3, 8 - 14.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol22/iss3/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Contemporary Environmental Ethics: A Tempest in a Teapot



by John H. Kok

Contemporary ideas about human responsibility for the environment vary greatly. In this article I will focus briefly on three issues: (1) some of the controversies raging within the field of environmental ethics, (2) critical questions regarding the role of science in resource management and environmental decision making, and (3) prerequisites for a Christian response to these controversies.

Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Facts and Values

Environmental philosophy, and with it environmental ethics, is that field that investigates the

Dr. Kok is Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College and the Editor of Pro Rege.

ethical responsibilities of human beings for the natural environment. As an acknowledged field of philosophy it dates back to Earth Day, 22 April, 1970. Environmental philosophy is thus a recent response to the growing sense of an environmental crisis. On the other hand, humans have always thought of their actions with respect to the nonhuman world in terms of right, wrong, or indifferent. For more than 2500 years people have methodically reflected on their relationship to the rest of creation and the creatures it contains.

Limiting myself to North America, I will mention a few reasons that have been given for why people should care for and not abuse the nonhuman world. John Locke, the English author of the American view that "all men are created equal" and endowed with "inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property," supported animal welfare because of the adverse effects cruelty to animals has on people: cruelty to any living creature demoralizes and brutalizes the perpetrator. The American Humane Education Association, begun in 1889 under the motto "Glory to God, Peace on Earth, Kindness, Justice and Mercy to Every Living Creature," heralded Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions* (1877), as "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Horse": a nation that does not stop cruelty to animals runs the risk of extending cruelty to people and, ultimately, of decline and decay as a civilization. These are decidedly anthropocentric approaches to this issue.

Others reject this human-centered approach and argue that since animals have nervous systems just as people do, and hence are capable of experiencing pain and pleasure, they have the same rights of

life and liberty as humans do. Henry David Thoreau (1845) considered what is not human to be a spirit-filled organic whole and argued "if some are prosecuted for abusing children, others deserve to be prosecuted for maltreating the face of nature committed to their care." For John Muir, a Civil War draft dodger who fled into the Canadian wilderness but later returned to the United States to champion the idea of national parks, the only basis for respecting the nonhuman world was to recognize it as part of the divinely ordered, created community to which humans also belong: humans, animals, plants, even rocks and water are all "sparks of the Divine Soul." He was convinced that the Christian separation of God, man, and nature obscured this truth. Nature, he generalized, must exist first and foremost for itself and for its Creator.

But rather than randomly reviewing various calls to action with respect to the nonhuman world, my case will be served better by a brief systematic review of the current types of arguments that have been given in support of an environmental ethic.

Although "environmental ethics" means many things to different people, most of the participants in this new academic field agree on one fundamental assumption, namely, that there is no right or wrong in nature. Nature is natural, and that is a fact. Nature, in this sense, is "neutral," subject as it is to natural law. Consensus has it that ethical norms and the values they generate are human constructs. Whether these norms are said to have been derived from a deity, to have evolved from experience, or deduced by logic, the predominant view claims that morals exist only in the human mind. It is humans who determine and define ethical eligibility and, in a sense, dispense rights. The source of this fact/value dichotomy can be traced back to developments hatched by David Hume and promoted by positivism. Most people, even today, uncritically adopt this fact/value dichotomy and simply assume—mistakenly, I would argue—that natural scientists deal with "objective" facts and that people in the humanities deal with "subjective" values. This split tends to leave the social scientists with two poles—a "knowledge base" and a "values base"—that need to be integrated.

Closely related to this sharp distinction between facts and values is the assumption that morals are nothing less (or more) than subjective, *self-imposed restraints on people's freedom of action*. This

modern attitude towards morality also has a history and can be traced back to John Locke's philosophy of limiting the freedom of *the* individual in the interest of the freedom, rights, and welfare of *all* individuals. Simply put, the argument is this: when each individual gives up a little of his freedom to self-determination, then the over-arching establishment that his assent creates (for example, that of a nation-state or an ecclesiastical institution) will work with an eye to the best interest of its members to guarantee the many rights to individual self-determination that remain. Any restraints imposed upon us "from above" are then really no more than a mildly restrictive and necessary means towards

*What does our life, liberty,
and happiness in Christ
mean for our stewardship
of the land?*

achieving what the self—the individual—determines to be of value.

Although most do not take issue with the suggestion that morals are self-imposed restraints on human freedom, controversy has arisen as to whether environmental ethics, human morality with respect to the nonhuman world, should be motivated by human self-interest, or whether "nature," which itself cannot demand rights, should be considered as possessing interests or value that people ought to respect, even at a personal sacrifice. I will briefly review both of these conflicting motives.

More people every day are beginning to see how important it is to conserve/preserve the environment. Many of these people are persuaded that unless we do something soon, we risk the future of civilization as we now know it, if not the future of humanity itself. The thinking of this "enlightened" anthropocentrism runs something like this: we had better be good to the environment, so that over the long run it will continue to be good to us. Quite obviously, the ground here for self-imposed restraints is self-interest. Components of the environment are valued only to the extent that they serve human beings. For these people the environment has *instrumental* or utilitarian value.

An anthropocentric environmental ethic based on instrumental value assumes that there is only one way to relate to nature, namely, in terms of its possi-

ble use to human beings, and then often in terms of economic use. In this context people argue for an unpolluted environment as "the birthright of every American." They say people have "an inalienable right to a healthy ecosystem"; therefore it is right to protect and wrong to abuse nature. The environment must be protected for the benefit of this and future generations.

There is, however, a different anthropocentric ethic of self-interest that claims the environment has *intrinsic* value. Nature should be valued, not because humans can use it, but so that humans can enjoy it. This ethic often argues for the aesthetic value of nature, asserting that human beings have a right to delight in the beauties of nature. What is considered beautiful is independent of human use, but is nonetheless valuable for reasons of self-interest.

Increasingly, arguments have been raised against an anthropocentric environmental ethic in favor of a bio- or ecocentric environmental ethics that does not center itself on human interests. Although the "new" values attached to the environment are still thought to be created by human valuers, the values themselves are not grounded in an appeal to human self-interest. Humans are seen as moral agents who have a responsibility to articulate and defend the rights and interests of other occupants of the planet. Such a conception of rights means that human beings have obligations toward nature that are not rooted in self-interest. But here, too, a battle wages as to whether these values are instrumental or intrinsic.

Some will argue that if it can be shown that the existence of one creature benefits another creature, then the value or right to undisturbed existence of the former has been established. In other words, whenever it can be ascertained that something in nature helps preserve the health and natural functioning of one or more ecosystems (or to continue the natural evolution of species or to maintain the great chain of being, depending on one's worldview), that thing is said to have instrumental value, and hence a right to be left in peace.

The more radical position in this context argues that things in nature are simply valuable for their own sake. That these things *are there* should be reason enough for us to acknowledge their right to be. According to this ethics of biocentric or ecological egalitarianism, there is no legitimate

reason to discriminate against any organism, even those whose only function is to prey on people (e.g., the smallpox virus).

Within both the anthropocentric and biocentric positions I have outlined, a similar problem arises: Who/what is eligible for moral rights? What is to be included in humankind's moral community? Everything? If not everything, then where does one draw the moral boundary? With medically nondependent human beings, with (domestic) animals, or does the circle include *all* living organisms? Or is there reason to include as well rocks, soil, water, air, and the biophysical components that constitute ecosystems? Does the planet itself have rights, possibly even surpassing those of human beings? How do you determine what sorts of things possess rights? For example, under the instrumentalist conception of promoting "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," who determines the double criterion of "greatest" "happiness" and who/what decides who/what gets to be numbered? For those who defend either the notion of instrumental or intrinsic value, debate rages as to whether freedom ought to be restrained with respect to individuals or only to species/communities.

Given the anthropocentric ethic the question is this: Should morality be defined by individual self-interest or communal self-interest? At what point may a community's morals impose on an individual's freedom of action? To what an extent may an individual be free to nullify civic consensus? And which "part" of the individual—reason, the emotions, personal religious beliefs, economic interests—or of the community—the (informed?) majority, elected officials, the corporate world, nationalism, those below the poverty line—should be allowed to determine which restraints are in its best interest?

For example, the U. S. Forest Service and the American conservation movement have advocated the rational management and use of natural resources for present and future generations, seeking to protect the wilderness from the few, for the many. Some have opposed this policy by appealing to a land use doctrine framed in terms of John Locke's theory of property. They assume that the land has little or no value until someone works it. But when that happens, he who mixes his labor with the land makes it valuable and has, thereby, a natural and absolute right to it as private property.

Within nonanthropocentric environmental ethics debate brews concerning which things in the environment (animals, plants, nonliving things) are to be included in humankind's moral community and as to whether it is individual creatures or their species that are entitled to this protection. Must we reverence all life or just life-forms?

Some defend what they call the "interest principle": something has to possess the ability to be harmed or benefitted, and to be aware of such treatment, in order for people to think meaningfully about its rights. This eligibility criterion leaves room for people—also future people—and particular animals. But it does not include species or plants or mountain ranges; all of these have insufficient cognitive equipment to be aware of their wants, needs, and interests. Albert Schweitzer, however, would have disagreed. The ethical person, Schweitzer wrote in 1923, "shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush any insect as he walks." But someone like Aldo Leopold, held by many to be the "patron saint" of the modern environmental movement, would have disagreed with both of these programs. Ethics, as he sees it, is the body of self-imposed limitations on free action that derive from recognizing that "the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." Leopold's holistic ethics demands that individual organisms, be they wolves, deer, or human beings, are always subordinate in importance to the "healthy functioning" of the "biotic mechanism." He advised that natural dynamic balances, calculated by ecological research, determine the appropriate human action. If stabilizing the biotic community requires culling the herd (because of too many wolves, or too many deer, or, presumably, too many humans), so be it.

The controversies (the tempest) I have briefly reviewed are taking place largely within a secular arena (the teapot) that assumes the validity of a fact/value dichotomy in which morals are seen as self-imposed restraints on people's freedom of action. It seems to me that a convincing and viable Christian alternative will (negatively) show that this dichotomy rests upon a questionable foundation as well as expose the fiction of human autonomy, that morality consists of self-imposed standards. Before the face of God, given the reality of sin, in addition to our status as creatures, any acclaimed right

to life, liberty, or happiness, is presumptuous. But a Christian response will also have to articulate (positively) what our life, liberty, and happiness in Christ, Creator and Redeemer, *means* for our stewardship of the land. God's covenant, sealed in the second Adam, is after all, also with the earth. This inner reformation of contemporary environmental ethics is no small task, for it demands that we both oppose the idolatry and articulate an obedient and convincing antidote for its extremes.

As others have said with respect to the problem of poverty, the root of these controversies is ultimately a religious problem, rooted in unbelief. Nevertheless, an answer to these problems will re-

*The inner reformation of
contemporary environmental
ethics is no small task.*

quire more than a fervent prayer. God's response to a spiritual problem is to damn the lie and to work out, over the course of time, a way of restoring and healing. We are called to do the same with fear and trembling by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Science and the Ethics of Environmental Crisis

Part of humankind's normed and, therefore, value-laden response to the steadfast words and works of God is science as we now know it. Some sciences, like ecology and other environmental sciences, or at least some of those working in these sciences, have become a resounding gong and a clanging cymbal, proclaiming under the banner of statistical probability, if not absolute scientific proof, an imminent environmental crisis. How should Christians respond to this scientific voice of doom, this urgent call to ethical action?

As in all cases, what one considers to be tenable and reliable depends on the lived worldview or perspective that defines one's basic convictions. By perspective I don't mean first of all what one, standing in a particular historic tradition, and situation, sees, accepts, expects, and understands, but rather *that which predisposes one* to see what one sees, understand what one understands, choose what one chooses. One's perspective is that which discloses one's situation, that which directs one and makes one take sides in a situation. One stands within a

perspective as within a light beam; it illuminates one's existence, one's situation, one's world, and thus enables one's sense of everyday orientation. In the context of everyday experience that is cut by this perspective we also know the difference between a house and a home and when spring is in the air. We know why little sister will never forget the night the family cat had kittens on her bed and how revolting sour milk tastes. The meaning of these things, as well as our understanding of them, lies interwoven in a rich fabric of reference to still other things. (For example, one can probably not understand what a nail is without knowing what a hammer is.) The things we experience everyday stand, one could say, in internal relation to each other.

Science has a peculiar way of looking at things and relationships. Its perspective is per definition a limited one. This is true for any science, be it philology, philosophy, physics, pharmacology, phenology, or phonetics. When we put on the spectacles of methodical, scientific analysis, a framework of reference different than that of non-scientific, everyday experience is introduced. Every science abstracts from the full fabric of everyday experience, bracketing out various properties and relations in order to focus on one aspect or dimension of things.

In most cases, what we aim to study scientifically is a complex of factors, some of which are more or less independent of each other. For example, in the case of phenology, climate is one thing and the migration of birds is another, or in phonetics, the position of the tongue with respect to the oral cavity is one thing, and the sounds produced another. Distinguishing what is different within its limited field of investigation, science seeks to grasp universal, enduring, or resolute relations that obtain within the field. In scientific analysis, many things are "left out of the picture" for the moment. Many internal relations are either ignored or "externalized," coaxed to speak for themselves, through a process of theoretical distillation, statistical analysis, or experimentation in the laboratory, "all other conditions remaining the same." The sum of the parts of the scientific experience, which aims at a logically coherent, communicable theory, is thus no longer identical to or congruent with the whole as it presents itself in the original (prescientific, everyday) experience of individuality and communality, of similarities and differences, of diversity, regulari-

ty and change. It is *more* in that it can deepen our understanding or enhance our ability to describe something; but it is at the same time *less* in that it is the compilation of a limited number of dimensions and not the whole, where it is seldom the case that only one or two things change and everything else remains the same.

For example, one significant ingredient in the natural sciences' peculiar way of looking at things is that it usually assumes the principle of uniformity. In doing so, it presupposes coherence in accordance with a universal law, namely, that like causes have like effects. In other words, adopting this principle predisposes one to look at phenomena from the point of view of causality. And, of course, when one says that *every* object has a cause, one is indicating what one really means by an "object." Things that do not fit or cannot be made to fit into a causal nexus are then often dismissed as scientifically insignificant.

The Modern Age has by and large yielded to the temptation to take the natural scientific snapshot of things as the real, best, or most reliable perspective on the world. But if in our perception of things, we begin to presuppose that *everything* is joined in an unbroken causal coherence, it is no wonder that E.J. Dijksterhuis, for example, should associate modern science and the *mechanization of the world picture*. And I must say that ecology, too, at least in its current, common terminology bears witness to this propensity to see the world in terms of a very complicated mechanism. I have mentioned Aldo Leopold's criterion of a "healthy functioning biotic mechanism," but here are a few more examples. The English ecologist Arthur Tansley disliked the anthropomorphic connotations of the term "biotic community." Instead, he used hard physical science, reduced nature to chemicals and energy, and described how these flowed through living things according to the laws of physics. And so, rather than "community" he proposed in 1935 the now popular term "ecosystem." Still today many ecologists understand environmental interdependency primarily in terms of energy transfer and find a systems analysis approach—input, output, and feedback loops—the best way to model reality. In a similar manner, the relatively popular concept of "niche" (though a very old word) was originally coined by Charles Elton in the late 1920s to designate the specialized place determined by the

process of evolution that a species occupies in the biotic community. The assumption here is that the purpose of nonhuman life is not to help or hinder humans, but that organisms exist *simply* to perform a role that their characteristics, and those of their environment, necessitated. Together they are moving from an early stage of competing against each other to a climax state of balanced interrelatedness and steady-state cooperation, in which less energy will have to be expended on increasing production and more on self-sufficiently furnishing protection from external vicissitudes.

In making these points, I am not suggesting that we may not avail ourselves of scientific abstraction, of ecology or the other natural sciences, or of concepts like "food chain," "ecosystem," or "energy flow." My point is rather that we must remain aware of what this artificial way of dealing with reality implies. All of the sciences can be said, in their way, to be mapping created reality. What their "maps" look like will be similar in some ways, for they are all human records of an investigation of the same earthly creation. But they will also be different, in part because different disciplines focus on different aspects or fields within that same earthly creation, in part because some cartographers consider their map or their aspect of reality to be the only important one, and in part because some cartographers will confuse the reality of their map with the reality it attempts to map.

Modern technology, for example, as it imposes the "uniformity of nature" onto society in a concerted effort to meet real and perceived needs, all too often fails to critically engage these kinds of foundational questions. For example, while all theoretical statements of causal/correlative "necessity," "If x, then y," *can* often be translated into technological imperatives, "Do x in order to bring y about," we must face up to the validity of such a translation. Academics, theoretical inquiry, methodical analysis, scientific modelling—these activities, when recognizing their limits, are not a slippery slope. But degradation of creation will result from their uncritical use and wholesale employment.

Rachel Carson's influential book *Silent Spring* (1962) tried to make people understand that the growing ability to dominate and control nature could prove counterproductive. Others refer to this reality as the "dialectic of the Enlightenment." As Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in the same year that

Carson first became concerned about the lethal potential of DDT (1946), "the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant." Humankind, they were convinced, was paying for its increased power by becoming alienated from that over which it exercised its power.

Science itself is exposing the repercussions and in some cases the environmental ruin that an allegiance to science has wrought. People are beginning to see that science and technology cannot deliver the goods they once promised. Some respond that these goods could not be delivered because

God's response to a spiritual problem is to damn the lie and to work out a way of restoring and healing.

social, economic, and political planners positivized only part of the picture. But their conviction that, had the missing parts been included, we would be in much less trouble now does not heal those disillusioned with a faith in science. Desperation and fear are moving many toward Eastern religions with their emphasis on the spiritual rhythm and "dance" of the cosmos. Once again we are hearing a very strong cry: "Back to nature!" I suspect that part of the enthusiasm for the field of ecology lies in a last-ditch hope that maybe this science can enlighten human beings to work and live in equilibrium and harmony with the rest of nature. But is "How can we restore the balance?" the right question?

The chaos of post-modernism says not: the natural world, for many post-modernists, exists in a state of flux dominated by chaos and disharmony, and science, for any post-modernist, is not an all-wise, trustworthy guide. Most are resigning (or trying to resign) themselves to the fact that change proceeds without any determinable direction and goes on forever, never reaching a point of stability. Seemingly random events elude our models of how things are supposed to work. After all, they argue, each little snowflake turns out to be completely unlike any other. *Patches*, they say, not *ecosystems*, will have to do.

However, the Christian does not have to choose between the uniformity of nature and the chaos of post-modernist rationality. There is a third way.

A Christian Response to this Spiritual Crisis

American liberalism endorses freedom, political equality, toleration, and self-determination and is based on a heartfelt belief in the goodness and intrinsic value of the American individual. As a product of Europe's revolutions for democracy and the North American frontier mentality that there is always more beyond the horizon, it explains our national origins, delineates the ongoing mission, and anchors the ethics of most. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as natural rights are a cultural given in North America and essentially beyond debate. Most North Americans join in chorus with Frank Sinatra as he merrily sings, "I'll do it my way!" But, as we have seen, doing it our way is leading us nowhere fast. The tempest continues to rage.

Can the tempest be stilled? Christians know it can: "Be still, and know that I am God." By embracing God's promise-command to obedient action and by acknowledging the response character of creation, Christians can, have, and must begin anew to imagine what knowing God means in this context, also with respect to the responsibility he has given us to work and care for the earth. His unified command may well require a diversity of responses. Obedience in the grid of grain fields will look different than obedience in the jungle of the city. But God's covenanting promise to give us the heart and mind and strength we will need, commands us to serve actively and obediently in all things.

Ours is a shared (individual and communal) responsibility: The current debate about property rights, about public or private control of the land, hides a deeper issue. Stewardship in responsible service to the Creator and to one another are the first principles here. Individual initiative toward solving an environmental problem, such as pollution, may satisfy one's conscience or allow one to feel morally superior, but it will not make a significant difference. There are, nevertheless, important interconnections between personal ethics and politics that must exist if political action is to be effective and enforceable. Environmental problems are not going to be solved through political action alone. Appropriate political policy cannot be achieved without

the support of ordinary citizens; and before citizens can offer such support, they need to develop, understand, and come to grips with their responsibility to the environment.

How one responds to God and his promise-command to his earthly creatures affects everything one thinks and says and does. Values are not added, but part and parcel of being creatures before the face of God. He sets the standard and defines the meaning of the being of all of his creatures.

Obedience in these things requires a wisdom that is defined and informed by Scripture, self-critique, and lived conviction.

Only Scripture can help us keep creaturely diversity in proper perspective. Without his Word, we wonder and wander in a world without God. In its light we must work together at distinguishing differences in their (historical, cultural, social, economic, political, etc., and ultimately religious) context. We have to realize that science as a prosthesis, making what is small large and bringing what is far away near, always gives a warp to reality. Because of this, scientists should, along the way, concern themselves with the foundations and history of their discipline. A critical Christian scientist not only makes use of the optical apparatus that the discipline places at her disposal, but should also inspect the apparatus itself. She knows to use it to enhance her vision, but she also knows when to lay it aside. Science does not necessarily know best. What it sees must in turn always be seen in terms of the perspective of the whole.

This implies that Christians must together seriously consider the claims bandied about, both pro and con, with an eye to a self-critical evaluation that is rooted in a positively articulated and biblically informed thetical stance. When that happens the fruits of faithfulness will follow.

We are called to walk thankfully with God in the way of truth and life, already on this side of the grave. This joyful walk ought to include forthright talk with others as to how we know *life*, what living the *truth* requires, and why we reject the *lies* we do. These, too, are the fruits by which we shall be known. Putting our hands to the plow (snow plow, political plow, educational furrows, living and working everyday), we look up as children of God, to the side as neighbors and stewards, backward to a history of insights and failures, and forward to the future of continuing service to The King.