



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Smith, Michael. "Environmentalism: Spiritual, Ethical, Political."
Environmental Values 15, no. 3, (2006): 355-363.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5973>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2006. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

Environmentalism: Spiritual, Ethical, Political

MICHAEL SMITH

*Department of Philosophy,
1879 Hall,
Princeton, NJ 08540, USA
Email: msmith@princeton.edu*

ABSTRACT

The normative foundations of the environmental movement can be thought of in a range of different ways. The present paper is a commentary on very interesting papers by Thomas Dunlap, Thomas Hill and Kimberly Smith, who take up the spiritual, ethical and political perspectives respectively. Their accounts are described and evaluated.

KEY WORDS

Environmental movement, death of environmentalism, nature, religion, intrinsic value, plural values, middle-level values, social contract, mutual accountability, Leopold, Rawls, Eckersley, Scanlon, Schellenberger, Nordhaus

Should we live our daily lives in the way suggested by the slogan, 'Reduce, recycle, and reuse'? Does it matter that one fifth of the world's tropical rainforest was destroyed between 1960 and 1990, or that all tropical forests may be gone by the year 2090? Should Australia and the USA do an about face and give their support to the Kyoto Protocol? One characteristic of environmentalists is that they insist on asking questions like these and answering them in a particular way – or, perhaps better, answering them in a particular way within certain bounds, for there is certainly room for some disagreement on substantive issues within the environmental movement. But is this the best way for us to understand what it is to be an environmentalist? Is the environmental movement simply that loose coalition of people and groups that give particular sorts of answers to such questions and agitate for corresponding reforms? Though we ordinarily seem happy to label people 'environmentalists' in something like this way – call this the coarse-grained conception of what it is to be an environmentalist – a more fine-grained conception would certainly seem to be possible.

Those we label 'environmentalists' on the coarse-grained approach give very different reasons when you ask them to justify their answers to questions like those just asked. Some are preoccupied with the value of people's autonomous pursuit of their projects, and insist that the health of the environment, in some respect or other, is a necessary precondition of people being able to pursue their projects; some argue on the basis of their understanding of what the virtues are and require of them; some insist that the maximisation of human and non-human welfare requires us to adopt certain environmental policies; and some argue on the basis of a more radical view like Aldo Leopold's land ethic, an ethical view which can be interpreted either in secular terms as the claim that the natural environment has intrinsic value, or in more pantheistic terms (Leopold 1949).

To the extent that people give these different reasons for their environmental concerns, it seems that there is room for not just disagreement on substantive issues within certain bounds, but for disagreement about the *real* justification for environmental concern. The real justification may lie in one of these reasons rather than another. An alternative, then, would be to reserve the label 'environmentalist' for those who give the *correct* reasons when asked to justify their answers to questions like those asked at the outset, whatever those reasons are. On this more fine-grained approach, our classification of people as environmentalists would depend on what we take the ultimate justification for their environmental concern to be.

In 'Environmentalism, a Secular Faith' Thomas Dunlap in effect argues in favour of this more fine-grained approach. Conceiving of environmentalism in the more ordinary coarse-grained way has, he thinks, led to serious problems for the environmental movement, problems that can properly be addressed only if we think about environmentalism in the more fine-grained way: indeed, only if we think of environmentalism in terms of the kinds of reasons that he thinks provide the ultimate justification for environmental concern, reasons of a more spiritual nature.

Dunlap's argument for this conclusion begins with his account of the origins of the environmental movement. He tells us that these lie fairly and squarely in:

... a view of nature Ralph Waldo Emerson and his disciples (particularly Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and John Burroughs) made part of American culture – nature as the doorway to higher realities, a spiritual refuge and a source of wisdom – and that Americans made the basis for nature preservation into the 1960s. 'In wildness is the preservation of the world', Thoreau said, and the Sierra Club emblazoned that, with an Ansel Adams picture, on devotional posters. Ecology, showing how our daily actions shaped nature, placed scientific foundations under Transcendentalism's moral and spiritual quest and gave people a guide by which to shape their daily lives. (Dunlap 2006, p. 323)

But somewhere along the way those who came under the sway of the environmental movement either failed to recognise its religious roots or thought that

ENVIRONMENTALISM: SPIRITUAL, ETHICAL, POLITICAL

these roots were irrelevant. Alliances were formed with groups that had no interest in the deeper spiritual values to which environmentalists were originally committed in order to achieve outcomes on particular issues. Dunlap illustrates this tendency in his lament about a

... collection of papers on wilderness [that] found some thirty justifications for it; plans to preserve wilderness relied on everything from removing its commercial value to capitalising on it; and appeals for wilderness piled one argument on top of another, apparently hoping if one did not convince readers another would. (Dunlap 2006, p. 326)

Moreover, many of those who claimed to embrace the conclusions of these arguments apparently failed to see just how demanding some of the justifications really were:

Environmentalists ... cite Aldo Leopold's land ethic often and with reverence and see it as a guide to our policies and even to life, but the land ethic rejected accepted values in very deep ways. The conventional view saw freedom in terms of power to shape the world and society as the creation of autonomous individuals who surrendered some of their freedom for the benefits of association, while the land ethic saw a world where each was tied to all, which made autonomy and freedom in the ordinary sense impossible and probably destructive dreams. It saw the individual as, in some ways, constituted by the system, rather than the other way around, and it made the community's health, not the individual's fulfilment, come first. (Dunlap 2006, p. 328)

There is therefore, in Dunlap's view at least, only an unholy alliance to be made between those who embrace Leopold's land ethic and those who embrace the value of people's autonomous pursuit of their projects. Moreover, such unholy alliances explain why the movement has fragmented into a whole array of ever smaller and smaller special interest groups that have no coherent system of values in common with each other and whose influence is, accordingly, dissipated.

The way forward, according to Dunlap, is for environmentalists to clarify the core values that drive their environmental concern, and, in his view, this requires a general recognition of the *spiritual* nature of those core values:

Environmentalists ... find the language and concepts of religion unfamiliar and uncomfortable ... They ought to overcome this bias, if only for perspective, since they have by default adopted so much of the radical individualism and personal salvation of Protestantism. Politically, the movement has been stalled for the last twenty years and its most visible current debate is over the putative 'death of environmentalism'. Commitment, enthusiasm, nineteenth-century Romanticism, nostalgia for a vanished wild America, and ecology have done all they can. Consciously admitting and carefully examining environmentalism's roots in secular faiths and conventional religion may be necessary for progress. (Dunlap 2006, pp. 328–9)

Thus, as Dunlap sees things, environmentalists should return to their spiritual roots. Just as '[t]hat ultimately religious element provided much of the power and passion behind the movement' in its inception (Dunlap 2006, p. 321), so he thinks that a more fine-grained conception of environmentalism in terms of its religious justification would give the movement the cohesion and impetus required to move forward.

There are both strategic and philosophical questions to be addressed here. Suppose we agree with Dunlap that the environmental movement has stalled and that that is a bad thing. The strategic question is how best to reinvigorate the movement. Dunlap's answer is that those involved should align themselves with others who embrace the core religious values that, as he sees things, provide the real justification for environmental concerns. But this seems to beg the crucial question. For even if Dunlap is right that the environmental movement has its origins in spiritual values, it is by no means clear that he is right that those involved in the movement now who are best placed to reinvigorate it are themselves animated or disposed to be animated by those sorts of religious concerns. This crucial question is, of course, empirical, but it is a striking fact that Dunlap says nothing in support of his own preferred answer to this empirical question. Moreover the fact that the vast majority of justifications on offer for environmental concern are ethical in nature, but not spiritual, gives one pause for thought. To repeat, however, the question is an empirical one, so perhaps we should defer judgment.

The more philosophical question is related. Is Dunlap right that spiritual values provide the *real* justification for environmental concerns? The answer to this question is best explored, I think, via a brief discussion of Thomas Hill's 'Finding Value in Nature'. The main aim of Hill's paper is to show how much convergence there is between human-centred arguments for environmental policies and arguments that are radically non-human-centred. The human-centred arguments Hill discusses draw on the resources of contemporary virtue ethics.

A key question that opens the way to broader reflection is, 'What sort of person would do that?' This calls for thinking about attitudes, understanding, and sensibility more often discussed under the ethics of virtue than in theories of rights and costs and benefits. Apart from concerns about the natural environment, our attitudes and acts that express these attitudes are often objectionable even though they violate no one's rights and harm no one – or at least they are not objectionable solely because they violate rights or cause harm ... The ungrateful heir who spits on his grandmother's grave after the genuine mourners have left expresses an attitude that seems bad independently of rights, benefits, and harms. Similarly ... those who despoil the natural environment often express objectionable attitudes rooted in ignorance, self-importance and patterns of aesthetic insensitivity that, if not themselves vices, give evidence of deficiency in the natural bases of human excellences, such as proper humility, gratitude and aesthetic appreciation. (Hill 2006, pp. 331–2)

ENVIRONMENTALISM: SPIRITUAL, ETHICAL, POLITICAL

As Hill goes on to show in the remainder of his paper, the attitudes possessed by virtuous agents may even include attitudes like *valuing the natural environment for its own sake*, an attitude the proper understanding of which, as he convincingly demonstrates, albeit surprisingly, need require no commitment to a metaphysics of intrinsic value (Hill 2006, pp. 335–9). Notwithstanding their independence, then, it follows that there is a striking convergence of opinion on substantive answers to environmental questions between those who accept the more agent-centred approach associated with contemporary virtue ethics and those who believe that the natural environment has intrinsic value. And this, in turn, puts pressure on Dunlap's assumption that the real justification of environmental concern lies in spiritual values.

The pressure here comes not from an argument which refutes Dunlap's assumption that such spiritual values exist and support environmental concern – though, speaking for myself, I am doubtful about the existence of such values – but rather from the assumption that there is a *conflict* between justifications of environmental concern in such spiritual terms and those in other more secular terms. Hill puts the point in the following way:

Although sceptical of uncritical talk of 'intrinsic values', I also believe strongly that the wrongness of most objectionable acts and attitudes is *over*-determined. It is usually a mistake to say that *the* reason that something is morally objectionable is such and such (just one thing). So whether there are other, less human-centred, reasons against the environmental practices I discussed is another issue – left open by my argument. (Hill 2006, p. 332)

And, he might well add, whether there are other more *spiritual* arguments against certain environmental practices is left open as well.

If Hill is right then the upshot is that the reasons for answering questions like those asked at the outset of this essay might *all* be correct: or, anyway, many of those reasons might correctly be given for answering a great many such questions, with perhaps different sets of reasons being appropriately given for different questions. The affirmative answers environmentalists give to those questions, and questions like them, might in other words be massively *over*-determined. Seen in this light, the more fine-grained conception of environmentalism that Dunlap recommends would seem to be both unmotivated philosophically, and potentially wrong-headed as strategy. If the real justification of environmental concern is *plural* in nature – if there are many different values and some large range of them speak in favour of our adopting various environmental policies – then, whether or not those involved in the environmental movement are animated or disposed to be animated by specifically religious concerns, surely the best way to reinvigorate the movement is by developing some common language of evaluation that has broad appeal to all of those who embrace one or another of these plural values. A strategy that speaks only to those who hold certain values and not others would seem to be unnecessarily alienating.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, when we think about a reinvigorated environmental movement in this sort of way the movement begins to look a lot like a political party. What I mean by this is that, much like a political party, the environmental movement, so conceived, would draw its normative support from a variety of ethical sources: some who align themselves with the movement, much as some who align themselves with a particular political party, would do so because they focus on certain values, others because they focus on other values. But there would be no deep tension here, not if values are plural. Moreover the movement itself, much like a political party, would be successful precisely to the extent that it succeeded in promoting all of these values simultaneously.

The key to reinvigorating the environmental movement, if this is right, would thus seem to lie in the ability of leaders to articulate a shared framework of *middle-level* values – these are less abstract values than those that provide individuals with their the ultimate justification for their environmental concerns, but are values which can themselves be argued for on the basis of a whole variety of such abstract values – to provide the common focus for those involved. It is no easy task to articulate such middle-level values, but the genius of the leaders of political parties is, in part, their ability to do just that; for it is the common focus provided by such middle-level values that stops political parties fracturing into ever smaller and smaller special interest groups. Unsurprisingly, the articulation of such middle-level values seems to be one of the goals that Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, the authors of ‘The Death of Environmentalism’, have set themselves with the creation of the Breakthrough Institute.

Other political aspects of environmentalism are addressed by Kimberly Smith in her ‘Natural Subjects: Nature and Political Community’. Smith asks the extremely difficult question whether environmentalism forces us to rethink the standard resources available in political theory. For example, as she points out, political theorists typically take political justification to be a function of the effects of political arrangements on the human beings who are themselves subject to those arrangements. If we accept this account of political justification then it follows that it is appropriate to recognise the wrongness of acting in a certain way towards the natural environment to the extent that so acting has some such effect on human beings.

Smith readily acknowledges that many environmental wrongs are appropriately given political recognition for this kind of reason:

[E]nvironmental justice advocates use traditional understandings of distributive justice to contest the distribution of environmental harms and benefits, and the language of rights to seek greater participation in environmental policy making. Advocates for sustainable development can draw on our long tradition of conceptualising the political community as something that extends through time and therefore has to achieve intergenerational continuity. For that matter, much environmental politics is best understood, quite conventionally, as using political institutions to deal with collective action problems. (Smith 2006, p. 344)

But the problem with this account of political justification, as she sees things, is that it makes the effects on human beings of various political arrangements the sole determinant of political justification. Mightn't we instead rethink the resources available to political theory so as to make the effects of political arrangements on non-human animals, or the natural environment, more directly relevant to their political justification? These are large and difficult questions, but let me focus on just one of Smith's proposals.

Smith notes that many political theorists believe that political justice is best understood in terms of the social contract. The idea, roughly speaking, is that the *justice* of a certain political arrangement is fixed by whether or not those who have to live under that arrangement would consent to living under it if they were asked for their consent under certain conditions. As Smith rightly notes, many political theorists are reluctant to suppose that non-human animals could be parties to such a social contract, and are therefore reluctant to admit that we could act unjustly towards non-human animals. Whatever the nature of the wrong of acting in a certain way towards non-human animals, that wrong isn't *injustice*.

But Smith thinks that this reluctance to suppose that we can act unjustly towards animals is without foundation.

[T]o many political theorists the idea of a contract with nonhumans seems inapt. John Rawls refused to extend his contract doctrine to nonhumans on the grounds that they lack the capacity for a sense of justice. Robyn Eckersley, too, concedes that there is something 'strained and ungainly' about extending to the nonhuman world concepts that have been tailored to protect human interests. To do so, she suggests, seems to involve anthropomorphising natural entities. More troublesome, I think, is that to make a contract one also must have the ability to conform one's behaviour to rules generated through social processes; most natural entities don't have that capacity. On the other hand, many humans (infants, the mentally deranged, etc.) lack a sense of justice, the capacity to conform their behaviour to rules, and even the capacity to consent. And some animals (most dogs, for example) do seem to have some sense of fairness and can follow rules. Surely the easy distinction between humans and animals – that all humans are moral persons and all animals are not – has been substantially undermined by ... animal rights theorists ... (Smith 2006, p. 346)

But is Smith's response to those who suppose that we cannot act unjustly towards non-human animals adequate? I suspect that it is not. The problem is that she doesn't address the most plausible interpretation of the social contract conception of justice.

As I understand it, the crucial feature of just social arrangements, on the most plausible interpretation of the social contract conception, is that they are arrangements that can be *justified to* those who have to live under them (Scanlon 1998). This in turn entails: (i) that those who have to live under those social arrangements

have the capacity to choose to live under them; (ii) that it is reasonable for them to make that choice and actually live under those social arrangements; and (iii) that this is in part because they are in a position to believe, reasonably, that the same is true of the others who have to live under those social arrangements. The assumption, in other words, is that when a social arrangement is just, those who have to live under those arrangements can reasonably expect each other to live under those arrangements and hence can hold each other responsible for their failure to do so. In this way a system of justice, conceived in social contract terms, constitutes a system of *mutual accountability*.

We can now see why Rawls thinks a sense of justice is required for participation in the social contract. For a sense of justice amounts to no more than the possession of the capacities required to be a part of a system of mutual accountability. We can also see why excluding human infants and the mentally deranged from the social contract isn't an arbitrary exclusion. For the fact, assuming it to be a fact, that human infants and the mentally deranged lack the capacities required for participation in a scheme of mutual accountability – we do not, after all, hold them responsible for their failure to choose to live under just social arrangements and nor can they demand such conduct from us – means that they cannot be parties to the social contract in which the terms of that scheme of mutual accountability gets fixed. Finally, we can also see why Smith's response to Rawls – her observation that some animals can follow rules – is inadequate as it stands. For the capacity to be a part of a system of mutual accountability requires much more than the mere ability to follow rules. It requires the capacities mentioned in (i), (ii) and (iii), capacities which, to the best of our knowledge, non-human animals lack. If Smith wants to argue that we do have duties of justice to non-human animals, then she must argue that, in some sense, non-human animals do have those capacities

Of course, even if this is right and we do not have duties of justice to human infants, the mentally deranged and non-human animals, it doesn't follow from this that we can treat them how we please. All that follows is that the obligations we have towards them aren't grounded in the fact that *they* are parties to a scheme of mutual accountability. But nor, it seems to me, were our obligations towards human infants, the mentally deranged and non-human animals ever plausibly thought to be grounded in that fact anyway. Rather, they're grounded in facts about the value of their lives. What does follow, however, is that to the extent that *we hold each other* accountable for our failure to live up to our obligations towards them, these facts about the value of the lives of human infants, the mentally deranged and non-human animals must in some way have an effect on the kinds of principles which it is reasonable for us to agree to in the social contract.

Similarly, if we side with Rawls and Eckersley against Smith then, to the extent that we hold each other accountable for our failure to live up to our obligations towards the natural environment, whatever it is about the natural

ENVIRONMENTALISM: SPIRITUAL, ETHICAL, POLITICAL

environment that grounds our obligations towards it – and here we recall not so much the potential plurality of such reasons for such obligations mentioned earlier, but rather the *middle-level* values that are meant to have much broader appeal – must in some way have an effect on the kinds of principles which it is reasonable for us to agree to in a social contract. The real task for a political theorist who thinks environmentalism has some political upshot is thus to identify what those middle-level values are and then to show how and why they have that effect.

REFERENCES

- Dunlap, Thomas. 2006: 'Environmentalism, a Secular Faith', *Environmental Values* **15**: 321–30.
- Hill, Thomas. 2006: 'Finding Value in Nature', *Environmental Values* **15**: 331–41.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Reissued by Ballantine Books 1986.
- Scanlon, Thomas 1998: *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press.
- Shellenberger, Michael and Ted Nordhaus. 2004: 'The Death of Environmentalism', <http://www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf>
- Smith, Kimberly K. 2006: 'Natural Subjects: Nature and Political Community', *Environmental Values* **15**: 343–53.