
Marion Hourdequin’s introductory textbook *Environmental Ethics: From Theory to Practice* offers a broad overview of environmental ethics. Consonant with its title, the first half focuses on various ethical approaches and the second on implementation and action. I will begin with a few thoughts on a dominant theme of the book before discussing the chapters in more detail.

The great strength of the text is the variety of ethical approaches on offer. Particularly welcome are environmental applications of Chinese philosophy and an extended discussion on feminist ethics. But even more marginal suggestions, such as bioregionalism and artistic engagement with the environment, get almost as much space as the most influential ethical systems. I found this equanimity refreshing, levelling the playing field for students new to environmental ethics to quickly develop a sense of different approaches. I also found the analysis of three prominent moral systems (utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and Kantianism) to be very fair-minded.

This fair-mindedness may be a consequence of Hourdequin’s favoured theory, ‘relational ethics’, which is extremely ecumenical and holds that we should attempt to “consider all of the relationships” (214). The relevance to environmental ethics is that we can expand the scope of ‘all’ beyond human beings to sentient species and beyond sentient species to plants and perhaps even to non-living environmental entities.

According to relational ethics, we consider ourselves as embedded within our relationships, relationships that inform or determine how we ought to make ethical decisions. However, after discussing her view (211-214), she concludes from a discussion of
Zhuangzi imagining himself to be a butterfly that “we ought not to take our own perspective too seriously” (216). (She endorses similar types of perspective-taking in discussions of Aldo Leopold [78] and Arne Naess [79-80].) Taken literally, this stands in strong tension with the view that it is our relationships that matter (which are naturally a function of our perspective). Her point, however, is meant to be that we need to be able to stand apart from our perspective – where ‘our’ could be individually or culturally or historically situated. This is a very natural suggestion to make, but I suspect it may often not be of much help – especially in the context of environmental ethics.

If we take the relational view, she claims we could, for instance, take the perspective of the butterfly. I believe she would also endorse taking perspectives of other nonhuman animals, and perhaps even non-living entities, such as ecosystems. I suppose Houdequin thinks that adopting the butterfly’s perspective will allow us to see how our actions affect it. However, I do not think that taking such a perspective helps us to discover our impacts. It would help the butterfly more for me to scientifically compare the impacts of different pesticides, for instance, than to picture life floating on the breeze. In other words, it will require empirical knowledge of the world to be able to determine what effects our actions will have, especially in the context of the environment. Introspection or projection may not be the best guide to our effects on nonhuman beings. So, while I welcome her emphasis on more relationships, I am less sure of how we are meant to act in light of these relationships.

I now turn to the structure of the text. The first chapter emphasizes that scientific practices require value judgments. While this may not be contentious among philosophers (or scientists!), it is worth stressing in an introductory text. She suggests, for instance, that economic cost-benefit analyses assume that “If the economic costs of taking a particular action exceed its economic benefits, one ought not take that action” (9). She sensibly notes that certain values may be more opaque because they are more commonly shared, but that a better understanding can be developed through the consideration of alternatives. At the end of the chapter, Houdequin briefly introduces metaethics, tentatively suggesting that universalist moral realism is encouraging for environmentalism because “[...] a metaethical view that allows for some distance between what people believe to be right and what actually is right seems to make room for the possibility of moral progress” (23). It was surprising to find a discussion of metaethics in a book of applied ethics, especially as this brief discussion is too sketchy to make any substantive points. First, taking a metaethical position does not seem necessary for the other positions in the book. Second, it is unclear why she needs to conjoin universalism with moral realism. This risks confusing introductory students since the relativism/universalism and irrealism/realism debates are often viewed as orthogonal.

The second chapter I found the strongest. Houdequin weighs some of the strengths and weaknesses of three prominent moral systems: utilitarianism, Kantianism and virtue ethics with particular focus on their applicability to and concern with environmental ethics. She acknowledges the historical respect that utilitarians have offered for other animals as well as the intuitive pull that Kantianism has in making certain types of action morally impermissible. She notes that Kantianism has historically been less amenable to
environmental ethics, since it emphasizes human rationality. This is true, although Christine Korsgaard has recently argued (e.g. in the 2014 Uehiro Lectures) that animals are not of lower moral standing simply because they lack rationality. In terms of virtue ethics, Houdequin suggests that modern environmentalists can expand virtue ethics to include gratitude and simplicity, and that virtue ethics has helpfully emphasized moral education and development.

In the third chapter, Houdequin begins her defence of her own view by considering arguments that these three ethical systems are anthropocentric. I especially appreciated her inclusion of Goodpastor’s argument that hedonistic utility is not of fundamental moral import since sentience and hedonic states may be merely evolutionarily advantageous traits (68). The purpose of this chapter is to increase the range of valuable objects (e.g. ecosystems) via relational theories (including Chinese philosophers). However, some points – e.g. that ecosystems ‘produce’ value, so we should think of them as having value (74) – are less convincing. It anthropomorphizes ecosystems to claim that they ‘produce’ or ‘foster’; it may be equally plausible to say instead that they form the (potentially necessary) background conditions for objects or animals that are themselves valuable.

The fourth chapter closes the theoretical first half of the book. An extended and interesting discussion of ecofeminism emphasizes (i) feminist concerns with dualism; (ii) their impact on our thinking about the environment; and (iii) to what extent feminists must subvert gender binaries in addition to or before tackling environmental considerations. The second half of the chapter discusses intragenerational and intergenerational justice.

The fifth chapter begins the second half of the book on applications. Fittingly, the chapter includes concrete examples of environmental schemes: ‘new urbanism’ tries to form less sprawling and more liveable cities, and agricultural schemes bring season or sustainable produce to members – Houdequin also includes a helpful reminder that local does not equal sustainable (126). A particularly interesting suggestion from Peter Kahn was that we get inured to environmental damage because it happens over generations, each accepting their initial state as normal (129). The rest comprises a discussion of sustainability with an emphasis on the under-determination of how and when sustainability should apply.

The sixth chapter discusses climate change. It introduces the debate over discounting, several of the important reasons why climate change is a wicked problem, the most relevant issues of justice, and the moral challenges of geoengineering. The chapter does an excellent job in selecting the most relevant philosophical questions, but suffers slightly when discussing discounting (although it is far from alone). An important point it misses is the distinction between pure utility discount rates and consumption discount rates. For instance, discounting the value of experiences or years of life (pure utility discounting) is contentious, both in philosophy and in economics; however, discounting consumption in a growing economy may be thought of as a straightforward way of incorporating the opportunity cost of capital.
The seventh chapter examines restoration and rewilding. A variety of views on restoration are considered, from Robert Elliot’s claim that it ‘fakes’ nature to Eric Katz’ claim that it is another way of controlling nature. Even if one wishes to restore in a historical manner, it is still unobvious how to determine the appropriate state to ‘return’ it to – or even if it should be a state, rather than a set of system dynamics. An interesting discussion of ecological ‘historic range of variability’ emphasizes these dynamics, such as forest fires that regularly clear out dead biomass (172-173).

In the final chapter, Houdequin discusses two ways of engaging with our values before turning to a short defence of her own view. The first way is grounded in the pragmatic tradition, which is antitheoretical and practice-driven. The focus here is to take practices and discourses seriously as initial data and then work on or within them to change (198). The second way is to communicate via literature and art.

I hope the impressive variety of views touched on in this relatively slender volume is clear, although I have not been able to explore all of the topics covered. While I would have appreciated more specific explications of her own view, Houdequin’s book serves as a solid and broad introductory textbook to environmental ethics at an intermediate or senior undergraduate level.

Kian Mintz-Woo
University of Graz