

# **Ethical Sustainability**

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Hunched over a computer, stuffed into a cubical, surrounded by carpet, air-conditioning and over scale department stores, much of humanity, particularly those in developed countries, lament the growing abyss between Nature and society—between the environment and humanity. We are distinctly different and out of touch with the non-human world and given our current environmental crises, we must act soon to once again connect with the ‘out there,’ with Nature. This type of mindset, however, is significantly lacking in crucial considerations. What we have not considered are our egotistical assumptions about our differentiation from this “Nature,” assumptions that are surprisingly similar to the pre-Galileo assumptions regarding the cosmic placement of the earth. Again and again we are shown the falsities in our anthropocentric understandings. We have failed, in our discussions of the environmental crisis, to realize that humans *are* nature but beyond that, we *produce* “nature.” In fact, the notion of ‘unnatural’ does not exist. The discussion of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ in environmental ethics is irrelevant. What is actually being discussed is the question of sustainability. This particular term has as of yet remained undefined. A look at Deleuze, Spinoza and deep ecology will reveal that sustainability has everything to do with the distinction between ethics and morality.

### **Moving Toward a Comprehensive Understanding of Nature:**

The notion that humans are a part of nature, are nature itself, is not new news. Some of the earliest environmentalists in the U.S., including Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, argued this particular idea. Leopold wrote extensively on the idea of the world

as a connected entity, as an intricate web. He takes these notions from ecological understandings, such as sun energy which “flows through a circuit called the biota, which may be represented by a pyramid consisting of layers.” This pyramid “is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure. It’s functioning depends on the co-operation and competition of its diverse parts” (Leopold 141). Given this interconnectedness, Leopold expands upon the already existent concepts of ethics, which he says “rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” by including the land—the plants, animals and general assembly which we understand as nature. The implications of this land ethic “changed the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (Leopold 140). Here we see that with the land ethic, and the beginnings of deep ecology, Leopold and others began to understand humans as a part of the land, as part of the nonhuman community. No longer distinct from nature, humans shift from a position of power over nature to a position of necessary respect for non-humans. This is the proposed environmental ethic of Deep Ecology, the ethic in which sustainability and the question of “nature” will be further questioned.

Such an ideology is not only seen in the early roots of deep ecology. Deleuze describes the world in a system of flows and breaks, of machines, in which humans are a part no less and no more than all else encompassed in our knowledge of the world and universe. In *Anti-Oedipus*, he says, “Man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other—not even in the sense of bipolar opposites with a relationship of

causation, ideation, or expression...rather they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product. (“Anti-Oedipus” 4-5). Humans and nature do not stand against each other but rather are actually the same. Although Deleuze’s concept of the human/nature dichotomy is similar to Leopold’s in its understanding of the dichotomy’s sameness, in their inextricable connectedness, Deleuze differs from Leopold by his indication of how the two are the same. Deleuze understands the relation between nature and human as a product-producer relationship. Deleuze discusses the world from the point of view of a schizophrenic on a walk who sees “everything is a machine. Celestial machines, the stars or rainbows in the sky, alpine machines—all of them connected to those of his body. The continental whirr of machine.” The schizophrenic “does not live nature as nature, but as a process of production” (Anti-Oedipus 2). All relations in nature are mechanical, and are processes of production. Humans are a part, but not a central part, of a greater network of flows and breaks, of machines and differentiated substances.

Going further with Deleuze, a deeper understanding of the creation of substances is set up.

“First, there is chaos or the flows of difference that are life, prior to any organized matter or system of relations. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as the ‘chaosmos’. It is not yet a ‘world’; nor is it life perceived as a whole (cosmos) formed out of chaos; it is radically outside. Second, from the flow of difference or these singular forces and intensities certain organisms are differentiated” (Colebrook 76-77).

According to Colebrook’s interpretation of Deleuze, it is not until flows become differentiated from each other, or it is because of the differentiation of flows that distinctive objects emerge. More simplistically, however, everything is from the chaosmos. If the chaosmos is conceived of as all that exists, all the natural basics of the world, then we, humans, ultimately spawn from natural flows and are therefore natural

beings, or machines. This is comparable and runs parallel to Leopold's idea of interconnectedness. The chaosmos is similar to an undifferentiated nature—nature as a whole prior to distinctions. To use a metaphor of sorts, the chaosmos is comparable to a collective of atoms. Those atoms form elements, which combine to form life forms, etc. Everything we come in contact with is from this chaosmos (because it is all-inclusive). Any reorganization of this chaosmos still is a form of the chaosmos. So, if the chaosmos is nature before differentiation, then anything created from undifferentiated nature is still natural. If *we*, humans, reorganize these elements, these flows, if we combine them into different flows, they are *still* natural. In fact, they are always and already natural because their raw ingredients are natural. Because the raw ingredients of any composition of elemental flows are natural, everything we create and everything we do is also natural. There is, in fact, nothing that is artificial, nothing that is unnatural because nothing lies outside of the chaosmos, the undifferentiated nature.

If we are natural beings, and what we produce must also be natural, then our cities are an environment and are nature. Concrete, for instance, is composed of materials that, in their rawest form, come from the earth. Many would argue that human involvement produces the unnatural, but it is not unnatural to combine substances of the earth. Non-human animals combine these substances just as humans combine them. Take for instance the process of photosynthesis in plants. The plant will combine carbon dioxide, water, sun energy and its own chlorophyll to produce glucose and oxygen. Here is a process producing a product that occurs in 'nature' quite 'naturally.' How is it, then, that the combination of a hammer, nails and wood cannot be a natural process, or that the

combustion of a car's engine is not natural? These processes, flows or machines are done by natural machines (humans).

### **Ethics Within Deep Ecology as Ethical Sustainability:**

It is therefore something other than nature that must be focused on in environmental ethics. But first, we must delve into a clear understanding of the meaning of ethics, which can be achieved through a look at the distinction between the ethical and the moral. Spinoza calls into question the good and evil binary and replaces it with the good and bad binary. Among the examples that he uses is that of Adam and the forbidden apple. According to Deleuze's writings on Spinoza, "God does not prohibit anything, but he informs Adam that *the fruit, by virtue of its composition, will decompose Adam's body*. The fruit will act like arsenic. At the outset, then, we find Spinoza's basic thesis: what is bad should be conceived of as an intoxication, a poisoning, an ingestion" ("Spinoza" 30). The "bad" is not an object, a thing, a person, a noun. The "bad" is merely a relationship into which things enter that creates a negative outcome. The apple is not bad and neither is Adam, but the relation between them has the potential to become bad because the apple can harm Adam. For the sake of explication we've disregarded potential implications of good and bad for the apple. Spinoza also understands these objects as each having a *conatus*. Joachim defines *conatus* as "a force, whereby it *strives to persist in its being*" (Joachim 192). It is when these forces come in contact with one another, when they relate to each other, that one object may cause harm to the other. The relation of the apple to Adam, in whatever form it occurs, is a natural occurrence and is also, in Deleuzian terms, simultaneously a machine and flow that is part of the producer-

product relationship. The distinction between Adam's consumption of the apple and his refusal of the apple is a relationship that either agrees or does not agree.

But how does this conception of ethic compare to the idea of ethic in Deep Ecology? Leopold believes that ethics had not yet traversed the environmental landscape. He sought to begin such an ethic by proposing that "an ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on the freedom of actions in the struggle for existence" (Leopold 139). This limitation is the abstinence of entering into a 'bad' relationship. It is a decision, above all. The key difference between Spinoza and Leopold is that Leopold's proposition centers around a choice on the part of humanity between the good and the bad whereas Spinoza discusses the distinction between what constitutes and defines good and bad. Leopold goes on to decipher what is good in terms of right and wrong. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold 144). Here, another key distinction is shown between the two ideologies. To Leopold, a thing can be either good or bad. This does not work if we understand that things can enter into different relations and are therefore never fully bad or fully good. Again, the apple is not good or bad, it is the relationship to Adam that can be either. If we are to take 'thing,' and replace it with 'relation', however, we are left with a distinction of good relationships—one of which (stability) will be explored later. Leopold also explicates the use of the ethic as "a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual" (Leopold 140). Ethics are to be used as an instrument in handling problematic areas. When the earth is threatened by global warming, ethics will guide us away from a self-indulgent,

self-serving lifestyle (habitus in the sense of Bourdieu, if you will) and into a broader consideration of all that surrounds us.

This conceptual understanding of the good/bad binary applied to environmental ethics is what we have begun to call sustainability. The first written definition of sustainability occurred in 1987 in *Our Common future* by the WCED (World Commission on Environment and Development, or the Brundtland Commission) and said sustainability is the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Mebratu 501). From this ambiguous definition emerged much of the current environmental thought which, generally speaking, accepts that there is an environmental crisis and that, “we must make a fundamental change to overcome the crisis” (Mebratu 504). So sustainability has become a pivotal concept in environmentalism. However, it has remained clandestine within texts, undefined and accepted as being understood by the reader. In a common understanding of the term, this sustainability is a way to procreate, to regenerate a world in which all good relations continue to exist indefinitely. A sustainable future implies that we do not *change* the world too drastically too quickly. The goal of sustainability is to produce a human species that can operate with the world in relations that keep us and non-humans in a balance, allowing all to live and continue to live without majority extinction. As Mebratu says of our conception (possibly misconception) of past civilizations, “most of them contain a strong component of living in harmony with nature and with one another. This is the logical essence of what we, today, call sustainability” (Mebratu 517-518). Specific identification of deep ecology perceives sustainability most concretely in terms of Gaia. “Gaia is a total self-organizing



and self-reproducing, organic, spatio-temporal, and teleological system with the goal of maintaining itself” (Mebratu 511). Gaia is comparable to a kind of *geist* of the world—an intrinsic being of earth whose impetus is its own survival. This idea of Gaia finds contradiction, however.

### **Contradictions: Nature as a Sustainable Concept:**

A problematic connection in our understanding of the current environmental crisis is that nature is only nature if it is sustainable. In deep ecology terminology, Gaia, a conceptual form of the earth, is by definition sustainable. But this cannot be if anything produced from the *chaosmos* is natural. The extinction of dinosaurs was not unnatural just as the indefinite existence of cockroaches is not unnatural. Something that is unsustainable is not something that is unnatural. A species that goes extinct due to human meddling does not necessarily mean that their extinction was artificial, was unnatural. We produce that which is natural and therefore our own possible extinction or our interference with the extinction of other animals, possibly even the extinction of the earth, is natural. The problem becomes explicit when Leopold says “the combined evidence of history and ecology seems to support one general deduction: the less violent the man-made changes, the greater the probability of successful readjustment to the pyramid” (Leopold 143). It is as if the pyramid is a natural order of things—a truth that humans have the capability of diverting from. But this is not possible and is exactly the contrary. There is no way in which humans can leave that which is natural. No, sustainability is not indicative of the natural, and it is not something intrinsic to nature. Extinction, an unsustainable event, is a question of good or bad, is an *ethical* question.

The ethic of Sustainability calls for a slow change, a change that will allow that which we know to continue to thrive, but also allow for gradual evolution. It does not call for stagnation, but is opposed to what we perceive to be destructive progression. Leopold explicates this idea in terms of ethical thought. “When a change occurs in one part of the circuit, many other parts must adjust themselves to it. Change does not necessarily obstruct or divert the flow of energy; evolution is a long series of self-induced changes, the next result of which has been to elaborate the flow mechanism and to lengthen the circuit” (Leopold 141). One is to assume this circuit is that of nature, but nature is all inclusive of human and his/her tools. So when Leopold says “man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen” (142), he is correct, man-made relationships are bad because they do not continue the relationships that we as humans have always been accustomed to and believe are good, but he is neglecting a comprehensive understanding of nature. These tools are too nature, and if we are to treat them as such, then the current environmental ethic of sustainability encounters problems.

The idea of sustainability, in the sense that it is ‘good’ is an anthropocentric viewpoint. Anthropocentrism stands in contrast to biocentrism. The pivotal distinction between them is the differentiation between values. Biocentrists have close parallels to deep ecology and the land ethic, placing intrinsic value in all of nature. Anthropocentrism, on the other hand, sees value as instrumental. What is instrumentally valuable to humans is therefore worth ethical consideration. The implications of the placement of value for biocentrism is that humans are placed as equal to non-humans, with no more importance—hence *biocentrism*. Likewise, Anthropocentrism, places

humans at the center. Ethical sustainability places the human at the center by seeing the earth as having, above all, instrumental value to our existence. It relies on the idea that what ultimately sustains us, the earth that can grow our food and produce the objects that fulfill our needs, needs to remain static, or rather static enough so that we may adapt along with it. There would be no ‘environmental crisis’ if we foresaw a future in which humans could continue to live. Granted, there would still be those individuals fighting for the rights of animals, but the crisis at hand would not be viewed as such. It is only because it ultimately determines *our* fate, because the world is instrumental to *us* that the UN has formed a consensus around global warming, that renewable energy is being investigated at all, that CFC’s were banned due to ozone depletion.

The ethic of sustainability is the current environmental ethic of what we see to be our environmental crisis. This ethic, however, is not discussing nature, but is instead addressing anthropocentric ethical considerations of the perpetuation of the human species. If the ethic of sustainability was considering nature, it would also consider the wellbeing of our cities, thoughts, etc.—the sustainability of concrete, carbon dioxide, fluorescent light bulbs and all other human production. When considering environmental ethics, two points must be kept in mind. The first is that environmental ethics and the ethic of sustainability have nothing to do with nature. The second is that sustainability is not indicative of the natural.

### **A Glimpse at Feminism in relationship to Nature and Ethics:**

Eco-feminism and particularly the feminist writings of Judith Butler, in some ways, nicely follow the inclusion of human in nature. Briefly, eco-feminism calls

parallels between the feminist movement and environmental ethics. It shows that the patriarchal hegemony pervasive in the majority of societies in current times parallels the dominant attitude we, as a collective of humans, have toward the environment. Karen Warren states this in her texts and says, “The promise and power of ecological feminism is that it *provides a distinctive framework both for reconceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethic which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature*” (Warren 213). Eco-feminism explicates the hierarchical differentiation humans have created between nature and human, and critiques this notion. While some may argue that eco-feminism holds this binary within its own critique, it is feminism as discussed by Judith Butler that I wish to look at more closely. In her opening paragraph on “‘Women’ as the Subject of Feminism,” she says, “For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (Butler 2). From the start, Butler recognizes there is no ‘true’ form of the woman—that she has been perceived of as having a form, a universal identity, but that this form can change. If extrapolated to Deleuzian thought, all these forms become natural. It is rather ethics that sets them apart. It is the relationship between the man and the woman that is bad or good. Understood more deeply, it is the category, the common perception of what these subjects *should* look like and the relationships that they *should* have that constitutes the ‘bad’ relation. The critique of our male-dominated world becomes the choice to perceive the male/female relation differently, not to resort to a ‘natural’ pyramid as the land ethic suggests. The ethic of

feminism is quite similar to ethical sustainability. What creates a good relationship, a sustainable relationship, is that which allows for the greatest number of indefinite relationships that will allow for the needs of current and future generations. Socially speaking, this applies to equal treatment and consideration for all humans regardless of their bodily parts or social identification.

Feminism, however, falls into a trap when it begins to discuss naturalization. Butler understands the relationship between the political and gender role in the sense that Foucault understands the relationship between production and juridical systems. “The political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation” (Butler 3). It is the political power that *produces* gender roles which then become naturalized. As a linguistic term, naturalization lies in contradiction to the more inclusive understanding of nature. That which is always and already natural cannot be naturalized. Gender roles are not unnatural, just as any other human construction. The real pivotal question, then, is the *ethic* of gender which has no relation to nature (because it is always already natural).

Sustainability has nothing to do with nature, but is the ethic of environmental ethics. The relationship between human and nature is pervasive and misunderstood quite explicitly in environmental ethics and needs also to be looked at in surrounding ethics—such as eco-feminism’s roots in feminism itself. Too often is ‘natural’ used to describe ethical. Ethics and nature are separate entities that need to be reconsidered in much of contemporary philosophy.

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