

George M. Woodwell

A World to Live In: An Ecologist's Vision for a Plundered Planet

Cambridge/Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016

ISBN: 978-0262034074, \$29.95, 248 pp.

In *A World to Live In: An Ecologist's Vision for a Plundered Planet*, ecologist George M. Woodwell compels readers to face the fact that current and future generations are charged with managing the climatic disruption engendered by humanity. Woodwell illuminates how we ended up with the climate crisis, what routes have failed, and what solutions are still open. By urging the reader to conceive of the earth-system as a living, flourishing organism and looking toward such exemplars of environmental thought as Darwin, Marsh, Leopold and Carson, Woodwell is able to present his readers with a plausible future-oriented vision toward sustainability in an age of environmental pessimism. A guiding motif is Woodwell's injunction to view the world as a single, holistic, evolutionary system, reminiscent of Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. For example, part I – 'Life on the Skin of the Earth' (pp. 3–49) – focuses on roots of the crisis and how his vision of the earth as a living, breathing organism remains vital to overcoming it. Indeed, when we approach the earth-system with this interconnected outlook, argues Woodwell, we become empowered to confront climate change, biodiversity loss and human rights violations.

A World to Live In underscores the importance of this holistic vision of the earth. With ecology and climatology gaining a normative edge – becoming therapeutic and prescriptive for sustainable governance; and with new research on the intricate ways in which social equity is indelibly connected to the biosphere by means of feedback loops and oscillating cycles, this view of the earth-system from a living, holistic standpoint outgrows its Romantic excesses; today, it becomes an essential outlook for tackling the moral and epistemic dimensions that climate change impresses upon us. For example, how can science grapple with such an interconnected system? How can ethical theories come to terms with the collective demands climate change requires – demands that cross normal ethical time-scales? For addressing these challenges in a lively style capable of reaching myriad audiences, *A World to Live In* sits nicely alongside other classics such as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), James Hansen's *Storms of My Grandchildren* (2011) and Tim Flannery's *The Weather Makers* (2006).

While retaining his ecological focus, Woodwell effortlessly introduces philosophical concepts such as the tragedy of the commons (Chapter 5, pp. 67–87), the mitigation/adaptation debate (Chapter 7, pp. 103–118) and moral and political dimensions of the crisis (Chapter 6, pp. 89–102 and Chapter 9, pp. 137–154). The tragedy of the commons is just as relevant today as it was when Hardin penned it in 1968; the undue rhetorical strategy of politicians focusing on adaptation instead of assuaging the underlying systemic causes of climate change throws us deeper into the path of disruption. These are undoubtedly essential concepts for environmental philosophy and climate ethics. Woodwell's ability to broach these topics concisely will make this

book useful for students of ecology and environmental science interested in the historical and philosophical dimensions of ecology. It also works well as an introduction to key ideas for the student of philosophy interested in climate ethics and environmental philosophy. It provides easily digestible accounts of the historical, scientific and political contexts of the Anthropocene and the ethics of climate change. These accounts matter for both the ecologist and philosopher: the ecologist, because she needs the conceptual clarity to discuss the pressing issues adequately; the philosopher, because she needs the historical and scientific contexts to contribute in any meaningful way to the discussion.

One refreshing aspect of this book is the way in which Woodwell skilfully navigates the seemingly heterogeneous terrains of history, politics and applied ethics, all the while maintaining the reader's interest with anecdotes from his long career as an ecologist. This book shows how lessons of the historical roots of the crisis, the political and ideological deadlocks that drive it, and a conceptual anchor for effecting a new trajectory toward ecological stewardship converge into Woodwell's vision of *a world worth living in* – one in which we care where we've come from, where we are going, and how we are essentially integrated into the larger picture of an earth-system. Consequently, the book has a certain usefulness for those who have difficulty synthesising such disparate, seemingly esoteric, information. Woodwell shows how this can be done, providing a blueprint for application to the reader's everyday life, profession and attitude toward the world.

Though Woodwell does a good job at highlighting the climate crisis from the unique perspective of Lovelock's Gaia, his pragmatic solutions in the final chapters remain rather unconvincing, treading firmly in the anthropocentric tradition that Woodwell himself condemned in the earlier chapters. For example, in the penultimate chapter, Woodwell urges us to restore primary forests and shift to non-carbon sources of energy (p. 166). These are indeed important goals, yet they still presuppose humanity's superiority to nature: we are charged to restore nature only because we are its rightful stewards. These solutions preclude focusing on deeper issues such as ethical and metaphysical presuppositions embedded in our culture: for example, the bifurcation of humanity from non-rational nature or our uncritical attitude toward technology. Many environmental philosophers and ecologists – such as Leopold, Callicott and Naess – have noted the limitations of the anthropocentric vision, obliging us to look beyond this human-centred paradigm.

Nonetheless, these problems are beyond the author's intended aims for the book, which is geared primarily toward introducing the crisis and its roots to newcomers in environmentalism, and offering pragmatic, policy-oriented goals. And despite Woodwell's realism about the difficulties of transitioning to sustainable technologies, he nevertheless provides the reader with a much-needed sense of optimism in an age of unrelenting pessimism: 'These transitions will not flow easily, but they offer fascinating, fresh, even excitingly attractive possibilities in low-energy,

clean, comfortable and more nearly stable world – a New Departure to be taken with confidence and enthusiasm’ (p. 171). Furthermore, his solutions sit nicely with many analytically oriented pragmatic and consequentialist approaches in contemporary climate ethics. In this regard, Woodwell has accomplished his goal of providing a concise, clear and compelling introduction to the layperson about climate change and its moral and existential dimensions.

This is a notable book and a worthy capstone to Woodwell’s ecological career. It will be a valuable resource for a variety of readers, especially those needing to get up to speed on the current state of affairs vis-à-vis climate change. ‘How did the corporate world manage to be allowed amorality in contributing to destructive growth and environmental corruption? And how did it manage to be taken seriously in its argument before government and the public that it had the right to poison the world?’ (p. 192). Woodwell’s ability to apply his own experiences toward answering these questions produces striking images. And, by imbuing these images with a sense of urgency, the author invites readers to consider deeply the existential import of their current place in history.

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