

Ronald Sandler

Environmental Ethics: Theory in Practice

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Environmental Ethics: Theory in Practice is a new and important textbook in applied environmental philosophy published by *Oxford University Press*. Leading environmental ethicist Ronald Sandler presents the reader with a thorough survey of approaches in the field. The primary goal in this textbook is to highlight the importance of philosophical theory and methodology that undergirds the manifold approaches to environmental ethics. Focusing on the relevance of theory assists the student in appreciating the connection between theory and practice with regard to daily life, the environment, and policy. Making this philosophical connection, Sandler suggests, is necessary for cultivating critical thinking skills requisite for responsible citizenship and education in environmental science and policy, which, in turn, enables the development of informed outlooks and broadened perspectives. Through careful reflection on the issues and theories presented in *Environmental Ethics*, individuals will be in a stronger position to make sensible and enlightened choices with regard to our (and the planet's) present and future condition.

Despite being packaged in a survey-style textbook format that is typically seen by students as dry and unexciting, Sandler has crafted a wonderfully helpful book: his transparent writing style is accessible and insightful, capable of attracting students averse to the textbook method. *Environmental Ethics* will be valuable for the undergraduate student of environmental science or policy, as it will ease her into the ethical and philosophical dimensions of her field. Additionally, it will be beneficial for any citizen willing to consider how our unsustainable values justify ecologically damaging behaviour. Thus, *Environmental Ethics* will be a welcome primer due to its clear explication of classic issues in ethical theory, the history of environmental ethics, and recent ethical trends apropos of the environment.

After introducing the reader to basics of the field (pp. 2–37) and anthropocentric theories (pp. 90–137), the heart of *Environmental Ethics* begins by analysing environmental versions of standard normative theories such as consequentialism (pp. 168–197), deontology (pp. 198–221), and virtue ethics (pp. 222–240). Sandler then delicately and painlessly guides the reader to sojourn in more remote and unorthodox positions in environmental ethics, such as ecocentrism (pp. 242–271), biodiversity loss (pp. 294–328), ecofeminism (pp. 330–343), and the question of the Anthropocene (pp. 410–420). Its seventeen chapters are neatly divided into seven parts. These parts aid the reader to synthesise the information, preparing her to follow Sandler as he journeys, as it were, across manifold ecosystems of environmental thought. For example, the second part (pp. 40–65) concerns the moral and theoretical status of nature; the third and fourth parts (pp. 89–240) consider environmental ethics from the individualist standpoint, whereas the fifth (pp. 241–328) highlights the striking difference of holistic approaches found in deep ecology and the land ethic. This structure assists the student in surveying the landscape of environmental ethics, and helps the layperson decide which chapter is most conducive to her interests. For instance, the camping enthusiast will find the chapter on ecocentrism intellectually stimulating, as this theory has direct implications for activities like outdoor recreation and hunting (pp. 257–260).

The logic guiding the book's structure is roughly historical, deviating occasionally in order to develop more complex views when students are more capable of handling nuanced philosophical argumentation. On this rationale, the student can appreciate how various environmental theories are embedded in certain traditions. For example, Singer's consequentialist animal welfare ethic is a natural extension from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill. Sandler is wise to present the progression of the chapters this way, as it not only aids the student in grasping the historical development of philosophical thought, but also allows her to make a seamless cognitive bridge from one normative theory to another more complex or difficult one. By contextualising and emphasising the importance of theory in each chapter, Sandler shows how one can act in the world more meaningfully once one has developed the theoretical skills and perspectives conducive to environmental praxis.

Throughout *Environmental Ethics*, Sandler makes use of a number of opportunely placed pedagogical 'boxes' in order to engage readers. For example, in a chapter discussing the normativity of nature, Box 3.1 (pp. 42–44) presents a stimulating discussion on the aesthetic and ethical status of wilderness. Again, in a chapter on deep ecology, Box 12.2 (pp. 277–279) considers eco-terrorism as one tactic for undermining institutions that destroy and exploit nature. Here, the reader is led to question whether deep ecology indeed has violent implications and whether these are ever justifiable. The use of these boxes as a pedagogical device is simultaneously a limitation and strength of this textbook. On the one hand, it is an asset because it presents interesting and timely cases, such as the problem of environmental racism and justice with regard to the Flint water crisis (pp. 355–359; 361–363), which is still an ongoing concern. These boxes invite the reader to apply environmental theories to actual world problems – one of the main goals of the textbook. In short, the boxes facilitate readers to critically connect theory with real-world issues.

However, the boxes remain a limitation to the text as well. For they often appear undeveloped; the box-discussions would benefit the reader best if they were more explicitly integrated back into a given chapter's theory. For the most part, they terminate in questions that lack the supported guidance needed for students new to philosophy. Notwithstanding this minor limitation, Sandler's use of the boxes in this truncated fashion makes sense, since extending them might detract from the flow and progression of chapters. Furthermore, the query-oriented nature of the boxes allows teachers to pursue them in the classroom if necessary.

The last chapter is of particular interest for showing how Sandler's book engages with the reader in a philosophically insightful way. 'Over the course of this textbook', states Sandler, 'we have seen that a well-informed and comprehensive understanding of the human-nature relationship is crucial to developing a well-justified theory of environmental ethics' (p. 410). This textbook has been preparing the reader for the realities of the newest juncture in human history: the Anthropocene. 'Because of this, *if* the human-nature relationship were to radically change, then the perspectives from which we ought to think about environmental values, principles, and responsibilities *might* need to be revised as well' (p. 410). Humanity's influence on planetary systems suggests that we require a new paradigm in thought. Humanity will be required to assess the human-nature relationship anew, and this brief closing chapter obliges the reader to contemplate the significance of the Anthropocene. Is the Anthropocene a legitimate geological epoch? What sort of ethical entailments does it

necessitate? Though Sandler appears largely dubious about the merit of Anthropocene discourse, he invites the reader to reflect further upon the meaning of the Anthropocene.

To conclude, what makes for a good philosophy textbook is not the mere presentation of information, but the capacity to engage the reader and broaden her horizons. *Environmental Ethics* does just that – it not only functions as a fruitful introduction to the field of environmental ethics, but it also enjoins the reader to philosophically re-evaluate and re-imagine humanity's place in the world. Because of these virtues, Sandler has succeeded in his proposed task for this book. Accordingly, this will be a welcome addition for any teacher or student of environmental ethics.

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