

Roger S. Gottlieb

Morality and the Environmental Crisis

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At least since the days of Lynn White Jr's essay 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' in 1967, and arguably much earlier, the environmental movement has grappled with the types of root questions about human purpose that are habitually associated with the domain of religion. At the same time, the practicalities of influencing policy in most Western liberal democracies have pushed much political environmentalism towards reformism that sidelines such root questions, instead favouring technocentric tinkering. Relatively few scholars have tried to stay on top of both religious environmentalism and political struggle, but one who has done so is the American philosopher Roger Gottlieb. Working from a background in Marxian thought and Holocaust scholarship, he has carved out a distinctive perspective that synthesises eclectic spiritual influences with radical environmentalism in a series of high profile volumes: *The Ecological Community* (1996), *A Spirituality of Resistance* (1999), *A Greener Faith* (2006) and *Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters* (2012) have all made an impact, as has his editing of the four volume collection *Religion and the Environment* (2010). With this latest book, he seeks to philosophically examine a wide range of vital ethico-political questions and synthesise some of his previous arguments in a way that is stimulating and inclusive of religious perspectives while remaining scholarly and intellectually accessible. An important part of the book's rationale, however, and one that Gottlieb evidently wants to highlight, is the role of background contexts – ecological, cultural, institutional, political – to moral action in today's world. By his own lights, his first concern is 'with a general, widespread moral malaise' that afflicts us all, namely 'the effect of the environmental crisis on our capacity to ... be good people' (pp. 1–2), and this in turn means that the book will necessarily raise more questions and dilemmas than it can solve.

Structurally, the book consists of ten chapters that cover a wide range of themes while retaining a discernible trajectory. Chapter One lays out the interconnected system of motifs and challenges that the book addresses: the unavoidable ways that environmental deterioration is now enmeshed in our lives, the roles of religion and philosophy in our culture, the ecocidal dynamics of today's capitalist economy, the intertwining of this economy with politics and institutional scientific rationality, the morally compromised character of human agency under these conditions, and finally the potentialities for positive social and ecological change. Chapters Two and Three then deal distinctively with various arguments for nature's moral worth and significance. Rather than yet another iteration of familiar contestations over fine grained differences in intrinsic value theory, animal rights discourse or interpretations

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of the Leopoldian land ethic we find something different: though clearly familiar with these debates and sometimes using them as touchstones, Gottlieb instead invokes spiritual virtues of gratitude, care, recognition of kinship and commonalities, acknowledged dependency, and humility. This treatment stems from his prognosis of the motivational roots of ecological destruction, that our consumerist culture generates self-destructive addictions which are reinforced by multiple socio-political factors. In this situation, 'it is not people who have power, but people's *desires*' so that 'ultimate power resides in those who shape desires' (p. 49), but nature can offer a way out of the acquisitive ego's psychological confinement because 'the natural world functions without ego' and so 'in this way, at least, nature has an independent and profoundly valuable spiritual identity' (p. 31). In Chapter Three he accordingly develops these ideas to invoke a range of communicative, spiritual and experiential strategies that envision possibilities for a future ecological democracy, one in which we may overcome our technological and consumerist enframings to become citizens of the natural world, and this naturally leads on to the concerns of Chapters Four and Five. In the former, Gottlieb addresses several vexed questions about nonhuman animals' moral claims upon us – for example, meat eating, laboratory testing, and the role of hunting with respect to environmentalism – and expresses his vegetarian moral loyalties while suggesting some win–win options, but unusually, his primary focus is on context, of how much can feasibly be morally demanded of people under particular social circumstances. In the latter chapter, he examines the related matters of moral line-drawing and equality, partly accepting some conventional inequalities in moral considerability for contextual reasons but ultimately placing the broader questions beneath the parameters of virtue. Under these parameters, the question of which uses of nature are permissible is answered by Gottlieb according to the standard that they must 'reflect spiritual virtues of self-awareness, acceptance, gratitude, compassion and love', with 'a *loving* connection' being 'the surest path to human satisfaction – to other people and to the world around us' (p. 134).

This takes us into the second half of the book, where the focus becomes explicitly political. Chapter Six features an engaging discussion of the extent of responsibility that each of us in wealthy countries bears for the environmental damage that we collectively cause, given the extent to which we are locked into particular social structures of need, expectation and dependency. Here Gottlieb deploys a distinction developed by Jaspers and Heschel, that between *responsibility*, which may be unavoidable and thus pardonable, and *guilt*, which operates when we actively perpetrate a wrong that we could avoid (e.g. promoting climate change denial while knowing it to be untrue). Yet while this clarifies moral culpability, it does not of itself help change the socio-economic structures that are driving ecocide – an extermination of planetary life that Gottlieb repeatedly compares to the Holocaust – onwards. For that task we need political movements that can generate transformation, so Chapter

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Seven deals with the philosophy of political change. Here Gottlieb lays out some of what he regards as distinctive about environmentalism, namely that ‘a good deal of environmentalism takes as its object ... *all of life*’ (p. 167) while examining the movement’s familiar tensions: reformism *vs* revolution, Gandhian non-violence *vs* violence when provoked, and more. Chapter Eight examines competing notions of rationality within society and their relationships to the emotions, noting both the contemporary crisis of reason and the ways in which some conceptions of rationality skew towards exploitative ends, as noted by critics such as the Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt and, most recently, Anthony Weston. In the brief Chapter Nine, Gottlieb addresses the pervasive despair in much of the environmental movement today, attempting to rally some sensible hope through arguing that uncertainty and despair about the future ‘can recede just because of what you *can* be certain about: the value of the beings who are suffering; how you feel about them; what you want to do to ease their pain and, just maybe, make a brighter future for a few of them’ (p. 220). Fittingly, Chapter Ten then concludes the volume with two opposing possible futures, each described by an intergenerational pair of protagonists: the first a barren, post-apocalyptic nightmare of suffering for isolated human survivors, the second a hopeful and kindly community-based vision of simple living and conviviality with nature.

This summary can only roughly outline a rich volume, full of engaged reflection and sometimes passionate argument. Inevitably given the focus on contexts of moral choice, thinkers looking for neat, highly scholastic conclusions to intricately conceived philosophical dilemmas of limited applicability will find the broad openly pluralistic ethos of the book, with its appeals to common moral intuitions and virtues across faiths and cultures, to be fuzzy. But there is another conception of the philosopher’s job, in my view a nobler one: that is the philosopher as lover of wisdom, engaged in constant learning and questioning, dedicated to bringing better thinking and through it the means for better lives to the general populace. And in *that* sense of philosophy Gottlieb has done a superb job in this book, drawing upon his long experience and wisdom to bring together multiple enlightening reflections, traditions and arguments while attending to the practical and emotional problems and strains of being an environmentalist in our beleaguered times. Recommended.

PIERS H.G. STEPHENS
University of Georgia, USA