

Book Reviews

Anthony Weston, *The Incomplete Eco-Philosopher: Essays from the Edges of Environmental Ethics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), xiii + 196 pp.

The most striking thing about Anthony Weston's book is its unusual title, which is not at all to say that there aren't other striking things about the work, but only that when such archaic spellings are featured prominently on the cover of a book, one naturally wonders what gives. As it happens, this question is never completely answered by Weston, but is instead addressed only tangentially, in reference to the incompleteness, not the incompleteness, of environmental philosophy.

Fortunately, archaism is no match for modernity. A quick Internet search yields at least one satisfying possibility. The "incomplete" in the eco-philosopher appears to be a reference to a 1972 Pete Seeger novel, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, in which Pete Seeger rather randomly rollicks through the history of folk music, much in the way that Weston rollicks through the history of environmental philosophy. And that, I should think, is a great place to begin this review.

The *Incomplete Eco-Philosopher* has no story line. It has no plot, not even a Communist Plot (cf. the aforementioned Seeger opus—you can't make this stuff up, readers!). It is a collection of eight previously published essays, bookended by one introduction and one appendix. Over the course of this exploratory foray, Weston attempts to drag philosophy back into the real world, to get philosophers to think more pragmatically about environmental issues: to embrace, once and for all, a naturalistic conception—a Deweyan, pragmatic conception—of value as process. As he eloquently says in the introduction, "[v]alues are not fragile or rare or delicate or endangered. We do not live in an axiological desert but in a rain forest. Everywhere the air is thick with them" (1).

As is customary in collected works, the substantive argument begins not in the first but in the second chapter, following immediately from Weston's overview and introduction. This chapter offers the reader a rough background in environmental ethics, as Weston wonders out loud what it might mean to "think ecologically." There he provides an overview of contemporary nonanthropocentrism, in which he suggests that

even some of the most aggressive nonanthropocentric theories rely nevertheless on anthropocentrized thinking. He notes that there is talk throughout environmental ethics of what “we” should do for the “other.” Our human vantage permeates every question we interrogate. Weston urges us to ask whether we have strong enough reason even to attempt transcending the trappings of our cultural background and social practices by pursuing these ostensibly nonanthropocentric ethical positions. He urges us to take a more evolutionary approach to values, permitting through exploration and metaphor the gradual co-evolving of a new set of environmental values. This can be done practically, he proposes, through our environmental practices. Such a challenge will create the “social, psychological, and phenomenological preconditions ... for the new stronger environmental values to evolve” (35).

From there, the book plies new ground. The third chapter seeks a theory of environmental devaluation. Weston proceeds by taking what is by now a familiar tack: comparing anti-environmentalism with other abrasive “isms.” He interrogates first the logic of misogyny, noting that misogynists are rarely aware of their predilections to disregard and downplay the interests of women. He draws parallels with racism as well, noting that they both depend on *reducing another*, on transforming her value, on *disvaluing* her. Such reductions are “self-validating,” he charges, feeding on themselves. The misogynist or racist plugs his bigotry into any interaction, and if the interaction fails, the presupposition guiding analysis of this failure is that fault must lie not with the misogynist or the racist, but with the other party. It is a short step from here to observing this self-validating reduction in the logic of animal-human interaction. Animals too are reduced, says Weston. Where Peter Singer famously characterizes such reduction as a kind of speciesism, Singer only notes the bias, he does not overcome it. Weston purports to go further than Singer, urging readers to consider not just our unrepentant reduction of animals, but our concomitant devaluation of the land. More than this, he proposes that the environmental crisis is a result not strictly of this reduction in reasoning, but also of this reduction in practice. Weston concludes on a more upbeat note, suggesting that we can inaugurate the dialectical opposite of the self-validating reduction, what he calls the “self-fulfilling inclusion.”

Building upon this call for self-fulfilling inclusion, Weston partners with Jim Cheney to co-author the fourth chapter. There the pair offer an analysis of environmental etiquette, which Weston and Cheney believe can serve as the alternative to environmental ethics. The chapter takes its leave of earlier chapters by moving in a considerably more positive direction. Environmental etiquette, the two reason, offers environmentalism a way out of oversimplified expansionist views that have otherwise

been so dominant in the literature. They launch into a heady critique of ethics as typically practiced. Framing the mainstream discussion as “epistemology-based ethics,” they note several features of the standard approach. For one, “epistemology-basing” conceives of ethics *as a response to* knowledge. We philosophers and environmentalists have before us some facts about the world, and we are positioned uniquely to respond to them. Naturally, it makes sense that under such a conception, it is important that the world is immediately *knowable*. We can assess our situation. They then also claim that this approach—the epistemology-basing of status-quo environmental philosophy—understands ethics fundamentally as an “incremental and extensionist” endeavor. If we philosophers want to initiate change in ethics, we tend to assume that it must happen incrementally, in baby-steps. Ethics will slowly evolve by expanding beyond a set of core principles or moral facts. The task of ethics on this epistemology-based model is to “sort out the world ethically” (67).

Weston and Cheney instead suggest flipping the epistemology-based approach on its head, turning to an ethics-based epistemology. What would such an ethics-based epistemology look like? Well, instead of thinking of ethics as a response to knowledge, “ethics-basing” might understand ethical action as an attempt to open up possibilities (68). Instead of thinking of the world as immediately knowable, ethics-basing might assume that hidden possibilities surround us at all times. Instead of conceiving of ethics as monistic, consonant, and continuous, ethics-basing should yield ideas that are sometimes pluralistic, dissonant, and discontinuous. Instead of seeking to sort out the world ethically, ethics should explore and enrich the world.

To flesh out this proposal, Cheney and Weston consider in the remainder of the chapter several cases of ceremonial worlds. It is their view that ceremonial worlds open up the hidden possibilities of the world by disclosing what was otherwise concealed. They see the swaggering braggadocio of Western ethics as primarily unethical, as shouting down everything that does not fit in a tidy knowledge-based model, and claim that this is “*the* fundamental ethical failure: failure to acknowledge and understand ourselves as living in a larger animate universe; and failure too—crucially—to draw out, to coparticipate with, that very universe” (85). Instead, we drive it into silence, and then take that silence to confirm our own centrality, as if we really were the only ones with anything to say. What is unclear to me, however, is just how we can successfully elide the intense epistemological demands of any action-guiding scenario. If ethics-basing is to work, it cannot work well without some knowledge-basing as well.

Following this discussion, Weston takes yet another tack on the same theme. He includes a screed on “multicentrism” in which he lambastes

the standard views in environmental ethics as focused on expanding the centrism that are generally introduced as alternatives to anthropocentrism. He suggests that they begin from the standpoint that the only appropriate response to anthropocentrism is expansionism. All of these centrisms are more or less oriented around providing the correct and singular centrism, but they are themselves somewhat human-centered, insofar as they function by offering analogies to our own human values.

By the sixth chapter, Weston shifts to characterize environmental ethics as fundamentally a design challenge. Philosophy is slowly shucking the presuppositions of its theoretical forbears by *de-anthropocentrizing* itself. He is extremely pessimistic about this prospect of de-anthropocentrization, proposing that it cannot succeed on its own terms. The world is so thoroughly anthropocentric that any de-anthropocentrizing is doomed to failure. We cannot de-anthropocentrize with the simple stroke of a pen, or with the publication of a book, but we must de-anthropocentrize from the ground up. This design challenge is a job for philosophers, since much of our thinking about the world emanates from the “givens” of the world. In order to shift our thinking, we need to redesign the world and approach the environmental project as such. To encourage us, Weston draws on the analogy of developing a new clock—a clock that is not etched with the presuppositions of Newton and Copernicus, but rather that captures the full nonanthropocentric breadth of the earth. We must become post-anthropocentrists, enriching the connection between species. We need to design *with* nature.

As someone who has followed closely the developments of new urbanism, I share Weston’s enthusiasm for the power of design in reorganizing. But how, realistically, is the “philosopher designer” to do this? There are many questions to ask and answer about the design changes, but it cannot be the case that philosophers—a group of individuals who, speaking generally, don’t care enough about their own appearance to match their shirt with their slacks—are equipped to undertake this job. It is true, perhaps, that philosophers can participate in this process by helping urban and environmental designers understand the principles that undergird their design sensibilities—and here there really is perhaps a fair bit of reimagining that must be done—but it is difficult to fathom how this project of world reconstruction is to get off the ground.

Weston dedicates the seventh chapter to questions of pedagogy. He asks: What would happen if teaching went wild? What if we could get ourselves to rediscover our connection with the rest of the earth?—and he leans heavily into the environmental education literature, citing figures such as Paolo Freire, John Holt, Ivan Illich, and, naturally, John Dewey. Weston wants teaching and teachers to be engaged with their pedagogy, to be more than mere fact-purveyors. There’s something in

this volume for everyone.

Nearing the end of the book, we are offered two mental vacations: one to the Galapagos and the other to outer space. The eighth chapter explores the dispute over creationism and evolution to gain traction on the question of our cultural/environmental impasse. Drawing on a moderately autobiographical retelling of his experiences in the Galapagos, Weston seats the impasse primarily in a failure to contextualize concepts within the wider cultural discussion.

The ninth chapter is truly out of this world. Unlike so much of the rest of the literature in environmental ethics, Weston raises questions about outer space. Why should environmentalism be limited to questions about the earth? Why not also interrogate the human project that is space exploration? Surely there's a fair bit to glean from the goals and objectives of humankind's most ambitious undertaking. Earth-based environmentalism is limiting, he suggests. Just as we need a more contextual, social, and practical environmentalism, so too do we need a cosmic environmentalism. This is actually a really interesting and innovative chapter, and it would be nice to see more work from other authors in the environmental community on this topic.

Weston's book is a relief to read. I think his thesis is original, and I'll be sure to refer to his insights in my future work. Would I teach with this book? Probably not; but that's not an objection to its content. It's just a fact about the nature of the book. It's meant for disenchanting environmental philosophers and pre-ordained pragmatists, people who are already engaged and interested enough in doing practical philosophy but a wee bit in the weeds with regard to alternatives. Having said this, I might well recommend and encourage graduate students who work at the intersection of philosophy, policy, and politics, to pick up this book for a review of how one can do philosophy and remain relevant to practitioners. Since I regularly teach a fair number of students who fit this profile rather nicely, I'll happily be recommending this as reading for many years into the future. I suspect that Weston will be just fine with the gradual promulgation of his work, since, as the great Pete Seeger once said, "songs won't save the planet, but neither will books or speeches."

Benjamin Hale

University of Colorado at Boulder