

Patrick Curry. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

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Patrick Curry has attempted the uncommon: to produce a book that simultaneously acts as an undergraduate primer in environmental ethics while also remaining sensitive to the concerns of those who are likely his most enthusiastic disciples. He attempts this feat by revealing his political agenda early on. He explains in his introduction that he does not intend to provide a rigorous analysis of the many views in the environmental corpus but, more stunningly, that he starts “from the belief, or perception, that nature—which certainly includes humanity—is the ultimate source of all value” (p. 2). That’s a bold move, and a move that I’m torn about. Following his lead, I’ll lay my cards on the table in my first paragraph, or at least my second.

Although I appreciate his candor, I worry that sticking his neck out as far as he has, as early as he does, on what is arguably the most central question to the entire discipline of environmental ethics, condemns him to failure from the start. Imagine a primer on abortion ethics that proclaimed proudly in its preface that no rigorous argument would be given but that the author begins from the view that life itself is the ultimate source of all value. That’s a tough pill to swallow. Nevertheless, if you can get past this gargantuan horse tranquilizer, Curry’s book has its merits.

Having aired my concern, allow me to offer this defense of Curry. One reason that he may feel compelled to speak so frankly is that a great deal of work in environmental ethics has focused not only on arguing on behalf of the environment but also partly on legitimating the subject matter to other philosophers. Consequently, many texts seek redemption from academics by arguing that what they do matters to mainstream philosophers too. I take it that it is this latter concern that has Curry discounting questions about nature’s value. Perhaps my defense here is mere charity, but I think it is a real problem for the branch of applied ethics now called “environmental” that it so frequently offers arguments on its own behalf. It is unfortunate that, in stating his own position so clearly, Curry also undermines any possibility of addressing the varying alternative positions that he seeks (ostensibly) to present fairly throughout the book.

This observation aside, I’ll now say something more shocking: I think environmental ethicists should adopt and write more books like Curry’s, but perhaps not for the reasons that you expect. Here’s why. The book is straightforward, clear, and most important, an overview of the primary doctrines in environmental ethics. Above all, it is down to earth. Undergraduates love that. They need it. And Curry does a fine job of delivering. Very few other texts in environmental ethics have that to offer.

The book is divided into 12 chapters. It seeks, predominantly, to give the reader a sense of the vast body of literature that has come to characterize environmental ethics. Given that the body of literature is pretty large and is growing by the year, to accomplish this in a slim volume is quite a feat. As I’ve already mentioned, Curry’s introduction reveals the book’s greatest vulnerability: It purports in

identifying its bias not to kowtow to the specter of impartiality. Step beyond this, however, and you will find much to value.

Consider this: Early on, Curry discusses the earth in crisis. The language is incendiary, but presumably intentionally so. As Curry has made clear, this is a book in which we can expect his view to be laid bare. His charged language offers a compelling place to start a class. We're talking about a *crisis*, after all, not a scholar's bowl of mental popcorn. Students need to get *serious* about this material.

Curry then spends several chapters discussing ethics more generally. And thank goodness he covers not only rudimentary ethical terminology but also some of the primary schools of thought! It is astonishing that introductions to the fundamentals of ethics are rare in environmental ethics primers, despite the fact that environmental ethics courses generally do not require prerequisites in philosophy and also tend to draw from a pool of students with predominantly practical and nonphilosophical backgrounds. Those who have taught environmental ethics with some of the more popular textbooks will know that this all-too-common oversight often leads to aimless classes and clueless students. (Of course, one reason for *this* oversight may be that the mainstream ethics fundamentals are not the same fundamental schools prevalent in the niche of environmental ethics. Hume and Darwin have a far broader reaching influence in EE circles than, say, Kant for instance. This presents a problem for Curry as well.)

It is after the chapters on ethics generally that the book starts to tilt strongly in the direction that Curry is advocating. In chapter 6, Curry discusses what he calls "light green" or "shallow" ethics. He does so by way of a brief discussion of the precautionary principle, the definition of sustainability, and of Hardin's lifeboat ethics. This discussion is followed by yet another brief discussion of what he calls "mid-green" or "intermediate ethics." Here, he covers animal liberation, animal rights, and biocentric arguments. He follows this coverage with two chapters on "deep green" or ecocentric ethics, one of which he dedicates to a wide swath of theories in general—among the deep green he includes Leopold's land ethic, Lovelock's Gaia theory, deep ecology, deep green theory, left biocentrism, and ecofeminism—and the other of which he dedicates to asking whether deep green ethics can be postsecular.

Despite this interesting division, the book is strongly lopsided in its treatment of these three shades of green. To the shallow green he devotes 7 pages, to the mid-green he devotes another 7, and to dark green he devotes a whopping 32 pages, followed by an 8-page nightcap on the question of whether deep green ethics can be postsecular. I'll admit, the division of the middle section of the book into shades of green is a novel and perhaps controversial way to think about the different schools, but I think it sufficiently intuitive to provide the undergraduate with a beneficial and memorable taxonomy. On the downside, it is hard to reconcile Curry's decision to describe the three mainstream schools of ethics in the first section of the book and then to divide the remainder of the book into the shades of green.

Curry closes down the book with three chapters on green politics. Chapter 10 covers moral pluralism and pragmatism, chapter 11 offers an overview of green citizenship, and the final chapter provides a case analysis of overpopulation. In fact, the final chapter offers a particularly trenchant example of how a pluralist approach, with deep green overtones, might be used to assess a problem. It offers relevant facts, introduces important nonphilosophical notions—ecological

footprint, carrying capacity—and usefully discusses a pluralism of views that could go into decision making about overpopulation.

To summarize, there are some very nice aspects to this book, particularly at the beginning in the nonenvironmental discussion, but also some crippling downsides. I like that the book is short and pocket-sized. It is accessible in a way that many undergraduate students will appreciate. Moreover, it is exactly the right number of chapters for an easy fit with the academic semester, making the job of the course designer easy. I also appreciate its coverage of the three primary schools of ethics and basics of argument. I should reiterate, however, that the treatment of these three main schools is cursory and therefore not a sufficient introduction for the undergraduate. To make these chapters work, the instructor would be advised to supplement with another ethics text. Curry includes one case study at the end of his book, which adds to the book's appeal. Finally, I sincerely appreciate that Curry is above board about his political agenda.

On the downside, I think it is this selfsame forthrightness that hobbles the book's usefulness. It is one thing to confess that one has an agenda guiding editorial choices and yet quite another to abandon balance in favor of that agenda. With its lopsidedness, the book runs the risk that Curry's honesty will be his undoing.

The book is well-suited for a lower division course in environmental ethics that will be heavily supplemented by other more central texts in environmental philosophy. I mentioned at the beginning—or, at least, near the beginning—that environmental ethics needs more books like this, and I still think this to be the case, but I think that the prudent professor will supplement the text with considerably less partial readings. This book is an easy read, it is well-written, it is straightforward about its political leanings, and it may help to clarify some of the extremely abstruse debates that tend to spring up throughout almost all other courses in environmental ethics.

—Benjamin Hale
University of Colorado at Boulder

Benjamin Hale is an assistant professor of environmental studies and philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is the director of the Center for Values and Social Policy in the Philosophy Department, as well as affiliate fellow in the Center for Science and Technology Policy at the Cooperative Institute for Research in the Environmental Sciences (CIRES). He writes primarily in the areas of neo-Kantian environmental ethics, Habermasian discourse ethics, and natural resource policy.

Mikko Saikku. *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.

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In *This Delta, This Land*, Mikko Saikku tells the story of what happened in the land wedged between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in the northwest corner of the state of Mississippi. A Finn who has studied extensively in the United States, Saikku brings a European perspective to his study of North America. Drawing on the ideas of Flores (1994), Braudel (1981; the famed French historian of the Annales school who advocated the long view/histoire de la longue duree), and Haila and Levins (1992), Saikku constructs a bioregional history of successive