

## At the Intersection of Ecology, Philosophy, and Ethics

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Review of Strachan Donnelly, edited by Ceara Donnelley, and Bruce Jennings, *Frog pond philosophy: essays on the relationship between humans and nature*. University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, USA, 2018.

In his “Introduction,” Strachan Donnelley offers up the work of *Frog Pond Philosophy* in this way: “I want to add to what is really a common quest: to live well in thought, action, and spirit, in the reality into which we have been born and must perish.” This is something that most of us toiling in the sundry environmental fields have in common, a point of interdisciplinarity if ever there was one. But Donnelly knows this: Realities are created, crafted by choices we humans make in the world.

Ecologists should know something: ideas matter. And we live in a world of contested ideas, and those contested ideas make themselves known in the real world in real ways. Many ecologists know this and argue strongly for the inclusion of philosophy and ethics in conservation and natural resource programs and decision making (Staltz et al. 2018), but some strong voices in ecology and conservation remain dismissive of the importance of philosophical debate. A particularly powerful articulation of this dismissal comes from the debate over so-called “new conservation” and whether conservation ought to be rooted in appeals to the instrumental or intrinsic value of nature (a common phrasing of the debate that itself might get the idea behind intrinsic value wrong): “These efforts must be underpinned by a stronger focus on synthesizing and expanding the evidence base that can identify what works and what fails in conservation so that we can move from philosophical debates to rigorous assessments of the effectiveness of actions” (Tallis and Lubchenco 2014). But what counts as an effective action in the first place is rooted in part in decision (unconscious or not) about philosophical and ethical ideas. Or, as Donnelly puts it in reference to our current environmental crisis, “beyond all questions of greed and parochial self-interest, among other innumerable factors, how much depends on our having the wrong set or rack of fundamental ideas in our heads?” Quite a lot actually, the book goes on to illustrate.

*Frog Pond Philosophy* is a solid and accessibly written introduction to some of the main discussions in environmental philosophy. This is environmental philosophy for a lay audience, or for an audience from another environmental discipline, and that’s a good thing. Donnelley died in 2008, and this book is a collection of his wide-ranging writings over time, put together by his daughter and his long-time colleague.

The book includes essays on the works of other thinkers. Some of these are philosophers: Rene Descartes, Heraclitus, Baruch Spinoza, and Alfred North Whitehead. Some are natural scientists: Charles Darwin, Aldo Leopold, and Ernst Mayr. A few are religious scholars such as Francis of Mepkin. Ecol-

ogists who question the direction of the dominate worldview will find a deep kinship in the history of thinkers presented in this book who push in a different direction.

The book also contains conversations about important topics in the philosophy of science, and an illustration of why these topics matter. The reader will encounter, for example, discussions about positivism, or the position that the only real or authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that such knowledge can only come from positive affirmation of theories through strict scientific method. They will grapple with the battle between reductionism (the belief that we understanding something when we reduce it to its constituent parts) and holism (the belief that understanding something comes by considering the relationship of its complete systems to its whole) in science.

The book is also full of good and important questions, questions that ecologists and those they train should be grappling with, perhaps in the confines of a seminar or reading group. An example concerns the possible introduction of wolves to the Adirondacks: would an offshoot of the reintroduction of wolves be the development of a more inclusive conservation ethic, or would we further alienate humans from nature by instead creating a “Disney-like theme park” because of the need to manage wolves after their reintroduction? Asking these questions and answering them directly impacts management. If we strive for the former (create the conditions to prompt a new ethic) and to avoid the later (not allow for alienation from nature), for example, then we would have to engage in certain actions and avoid others. This would then also impact science (including social science) in that we would need to learn certain things about the system and forego others. This and other topics in the book also draw sharp attention to the necessity of interdisciplinary discourse to not only solve, but to even understand, our environmental challenges.

While the book is both thoughtful and worth a read, it is important to acknowledge that Donnelley’s background is highly specific. He is a Euro-American male born into a wealthy family, able to fly to his favorite fishing hole in Wisconsin and back to his family’s first or second home (homes that have names, lovely names) to garner his experiences with nature. His philosophical and religious heroes in the book are also all white and all male. This is not to demean in any way the man or the reality Donnelley was born into and the life he lived, but it is important to acknowledge nonetheless. It is sometimes the case that such a background creates uncomfortable moments when writers offer certain critiques (e.g., when on p. 92 Donnelley, a father of five, comments critically about overpopulation without acknowledging his own role in that identified problem). At the same time, Donnelley uses this privilege wisely as well, often taking aim at precisely a worldview that seemingly rules (and ruins) the current world: a worldview where nature is only instrumentally valuable, where humans view themselves over and above the rest of the world. Because of his critique, those of us outside of the dominant worldview will find an ally in much of Donnelley’s work here. And because of his background, Donnelley was able to create an important and timely environmental NGO, The Center for Humans and Nature, whose mission “is to explore and promote human responsibilities in relation to nature—the whole community of life.”

Donnelley also calls for those in the natural sciences to join him. He writes, “We will need bullfrog philosophers,” able “to express the pond’s natural music.” But we will also need those bullfrog philosophers to be steeped in philosophy and ethics, or to partner with environmental philosophers and ethicists. *Frog Pond Philosophy* can serve as a welcome primer for ecologists interested in dipping their toes into the world of environmental philosophy and ethics. Ecologists will discover, I believe, a history of

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thought with which they find kinship. It is only through a combination of both the best information about the working world and rich expressions of value that we will arrive at an understanding of how we and our children ought to live in the world, with dignity and grace, now and for all time.

#### Literature Cited

Staltz, D., J. Justus, and B. Huffaker. 2018. The crucial but underrepresented role of philosophy in conservation science curricula. *Conservation Biology* 33:217–220.

Tallis, H. M., and J. Lubchenco. 2014. Working together: a call for inclusive conservation. *Nature* 515:27–28.