

“Deep Ecology: Continuing the Conversation”

Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rothenberg, eds., Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. Pp. xxiv-328.

Nina Witozek and Andrew Brennan, eds., Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999. Pp. xix-492.

Since its inception in the 1970s, the philosophical subdiscipline of environmental ethics has made a noticeable impact both within and outside the academy. The environmental philosophy known as Deep Ecology has become one of the major full-fledged and recognizable theories of environmental ethics thus far generated. It has also become a movement of sorts, inspiring study centers, nature reserves, and countless individual practitioners. Over the past thirty years, its theoretical conversants as well as its practical aficionados have engaged in an interesting and creative discussion on the underpinnings of Deep Ecology.

Although these are two very different books in form, taken together, these two discrete collections serve to nicely update the reader on the latest thinking in the environmental philosophy of Deep Ecology.

Philosophical Dialogues reads like a good long conversation with an old friend. It is arranged in a wonderfully dialectical fashion with papers critiquing the philosophy of Deep Ecology and Arne Naess' rendition of that philosophy followed by responses from Naess himself; sometimes with responses by third parties. Of course, those of us within environmental ethics know full well that Naess is a giant, a philosopher and man of almost mythical proportions, a thinker we have all come to respect. Part of the success of this volume is the way in which it is set up, as a conversation with this great philosopher, Arne Naess. I wish more books were assembled this way, as thorough dialogues with our greatest living minds. Volumes so arranged, featuring the other founders and leaders of environmental ethics—e.g., Val Plumwood, J. Baird Callicott, Holmes Rolston, III—would be welcomed additions to the environmental ethics literature. Although it is not possible to comment on all of the themes covered in this stout anthology, and certainly not on all of the fifty-five (!) individual essays contained herein, some of the highlights merit attention. The discussion between Alfred Ayer and Naess on the metaphysics of Deep Ecology is not only incredibly entertaining, but also intensely insightful and important. Many key themes in Deep Ecology are touched upon in this exchange. Also provocative and instructive is the discussion motivated by William French on the question of the sensibleness and defense of “biospherical egalitarianism.” French's critique, together with Naess' response and a commentary by Baird Callicott, go a long way toward making sense of the discussion. En route, this collection also introduces its reader to other key debates within Deep Ecology and environmental ethics as a whole. For example, various ecocentric environmental ethics profess to be holistic in nature (no pun intended). But what does that mean exactly? There appear to be different varieties of holism at work here, varieties which desperately need sorting out. How does the philosophy of Deep Ecology jibe, or not jibe, with other environmental theories such as Social Ecology or Ecofeminism. What does Deep Ecology

imply from the point of view of environmental policy or wilderness preservation? All of these, and more, are covered in this highly recommended book.

If there is one concern I have with Naess' approach it is that he sometimes seems to be engaging in what might be called 'argument by concession.' Of course conceding certain points along to the way toward defending one's position is admirably humble. However, at times, it seems as if Naess gives away so much of "the core" of what has always been thought to be the crucial elements or underlying principles of Deep Ecology, that at the end of the day there is very little, in anything, left to point to and say "Yup, that's Deep Ecology." In my opinion Naess flirts dangerously with the fine line between agreeing to tweak and modify ones position in the face of dissent on the one hand, and giving it all away on the other. By the time I finished the book there was very little I felt comfortable calling Deep Ecology.

Beneath the Surface is vastly different in form. It is much more of a traditional anthology without the dialectical structure. It does, however, contain some superb essays from a number of of the principal environmental philosophers working today. A few of the essays are reprinted from a 1996 issue of Inquiry, but most are fresh for this volume. Of the fourteen essays in this book, perhaps the most notable is from Australian philosopher Val Plumwood. Attempting to make sense of the debate which has yet to fully boil over in environmental ethics—whether we ought to center ethical inclusion on the basis of the similarity or shared qualities and traits between ourselves and others, or whether we ought to strive to develop an ethic of where it is the "otherness" of those not like us that ought to prompt our moral sensibilities—Plumwood nicely summarized this discussion and warns us about getting inappropriately bogged down in this debate. According to Plumwood, "We need a concept of the other as interconnected with self, but also as a separate being in their own right (65)...," but we need also "tackle the main critical problem:...the search to reimagine our relationship to the non-human and to seek change in the main system of commodification that is destroying the Earth (77)." Almost without exception, every other essay in this collection is an important piece in a larger discussion over certain key elements in the philosophy of Deep Ecology.

Both of these books are designed for those somewhat acquainted with the basics of Deep Ecology. They are not primers; they are sophisticated, updated, and somewhat technical accretions to the basics of Deep Ecology set out in the 1980s by Naess and other Deep Ecologists like Warwick Fox, Bill Devall, and George Sessions. However, with a little background they would both make helpful texts for graduate, and perhaps advanced undergraduate, seminars in environmental ethics. There is a lot of fodder for thought and discussion and contemplation in these two books. If you want to update yourself on the latest thinking in Deep Ecology, and on many of the key issues in environmental ethics and environmental thought in general, then reading these two books would do just that. Both the authors and the editors have provided welcomed and worthy contributions.

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