

## Book Reviews

### **The Death of Our Planet's Species: A Challenge to Ecology and Ethics**

Martin Gorke

*Washington, DC, Island Press, 2003, xvi + 408 pp., cloth, \$37.50*

This book is a long-awaited and hugely important contribution to all classes of environmental literature and to every field of environmental thought we can imagine. The book, originally published in German by environmental ethicist Martin Gorke and translated into English by Patricia Nevers, is an insightful confluence of two of the dominant streams in environmental scholarship—philosophy and ecology—and a stunning demonstration of how the humanities and the sciences can and should engage in a critical communal dialogue. One cannot help but think that the ghosts of noted ecologists Aldo Leopold and Paul Shepard—two thinkers who desperately called for the fusion of these ‘two cultures’ in the mid and late 20th century—would grin broadly at what Gorke has accomplished here.

Gorke's aim, as he puts it, is simply ‘to outline the *ethical dimensions* of species extinction’ (p. xi) by illustrating how species extinction is an ethical problem; one not reducible or resolvable by science and technology alone. Gorke also convincingly explains why the problem of species extinction is not resolvable by appeals to merely anthropocentric environmental ethical theories, no matter how inclusive or glorified or broadly construed they might be. In fact, Gorke presents the reader with one of the most persuasive cases to date against anthropocentrism, environmental pragmatism, and the ‘convergence hypothesis’, and in favor of a truly robust holistic non-anthropocentric environmental ethic.

Along similar lines, the book also delivers a *coup de grâce* to what Gorke refers to as ‘technical optimism’, the dubious view most famously advocated by the late economist Julian Simon which asserts that the problem of the environmental crisis is solvable via a technological approach: ‘new problems... simply reflect a temporary gap in our knowledge about the world and our ability to control nature, one that will eventually be closed by science and technology’ (p. 13). Siding with environmental scholars such as Lynn White, Jr, Garrett Hardin, Al Gore, and J. Baird Callicott, Gorke argues that this sort of untempered optimism is misplaced, mistaken, and even dangerous.

Gorke accomplishes his end in two ways, which mirror the two main sections of the book, and Gorke's own background with Ph.D.'s in both ecology and philosophy. The first half of the book, entitled ‘Hopes for an ecological solution’, is an up-to-date and insightful handling of the major issues and dimensions

of the philosophy of ecology. This section alone is worth the cover price and should be required reading for anyone working seriously in the environmental arena. But Gorke does not just make use of discussions of bio-complexity, non-linearity, and disturbance, and a critical and fascinating discussion of the reality and centrality of corporate entities such as species and ecosystems, to illuminate his readers on central points in contemporary ecological theory; although he certainly does that. It seems that Gorke's main goal here is to ask what kind of an environmental ethic is most compatible or consistent with an ecological worldview. If we are desirous of such ontological/ethical consistency, Gorke suggests that we should begin by rejecting the so-called pragmatic/anthropocentric/individualistic approaches that some environmental ethicists are fond of, and begin instead by viewing certain holistic/ecocentric approaches as *prima facie* correct, or at least as a sensible starting point.

This, then, brings the reader to the second half of the book, 'The debate about an ethical solution'. Focusing on the ontological/ecological relevance of species, Gorke makes a persuasive case for beginning there as our environmental ethical starting point.

Along the way Gorke's book delivers helpful discussions on a vast number of topics. Most notable is his original handling of the naturalistic fallacy (ought is not implied by is), and the corresponding normativistic fallacy, i.e. the attempt to derive facts about the world merely from the way we feel it ought to be. Additionally, we found his attempt to shift the burden of proof or the burden of first premises or first questions in the debate surrounding species extinction to be most laudable. He finally puts in words and arguments the feelings of many environmental scholars: why do we begin with assuming that we have to justify a species presence or intrinsic value instead of beginning with the assumption that they possess intrinsic value and therefore have a 'right' to continued existence? All along the path of the book, Gorke has created for us numerous other intellectual vistas at which the reader will undoubtedly pause, and be glad of it.

American environmental scholars will also note not only the wealth of references to German environmental scholarship (obviously to be expected from a German environmental scholar) but also the apparent sophistication and voracity of German environmental scholarship in general, as witnessed by Gorke's thorough treatment of this literature.

Hopefully, this book will also find its way into the environmental classroom. Together with Worster (1994), Keller & Golley's (2000) reader (a book whose introduction and section prefaces alone are incredibly helpful), and some other selected essays, Gorke's treatise would make for an outstanding central text in a course at either the advanced undergraduate or graduate level in the philosophy of ecology. It should also find its way into courses in environmental education, natural resource management, environmental policy and law, and environmental ethics.

Overall, the book is written in a tightly analytic style, the arguments are persuasive, and the content is provocative and richly significant. In fact,

we cannot think of a more important and unique contribution to environmental literature in quite some time.

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