

Toward an Environmental Ethic



From ancient roots to modern philosophies

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Influence of Classical Greek Philosophy on Our Concept of Nature



by Professor Ed Krumpe



- **The World has Rational structure.**
- **This structure is Knowable.**
- **By engaging in rational thought, man could uncover the secrets of a rational world.**
- **By identifying a single fundamental principle of nature, all knowledge would follow.**

Influence of Classical Greek Philosophy

- Study of the elements as perceived through the senses was of no significance, only reason could reveal truth.
- Complexity was highly frustrating.
- Reductionist method emerged -- parts are isolated & studied out of context of the whole.
- Gave birth to the Scientific Method.
- Resulted in the rift between the sciences and the humanities.



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Influence of Classical Greek Philosophy

- Biased against observation of the interaction of complex systems
- Incapable of observing damage to natural systems
- Consistently failed to provide a foundation for environmental thought
- Has persisted from Galileo's time to well into the 20th century



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The Judeo-Christian Influence

- **Wilderness and wild nature was a barren wasteland -- the absence of God.**

Manifest Destiny and Utilitarianism

- **Man has the God-given right & moral duty to master nature.**
- **Natural resources exist to serve mankind.**
- **Became the dominant philosophy that has shaped America's use of natural resources.**

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The Judeo-Christian Influence

Economic Utilitarianism

- **Gifford Pinchot introduced economic utilitarianism to American environmental issues.**
- **Defined conservation to be the "wise use" of natural resources to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people.**
- **Aesthetic values were defined only in terms of economic utilitarianism.**

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The Judeo-Christian Influence

Anthropocentric Philosophy

- It is man's destiny to manifest his will over nature.
- It is right to change nature in the service of man.
- A man-centered philosophy should be applied to natural resource decision making.



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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Nature

"In the beginning..."

- Columbus and the Pilgrims found too much wilderness!
- Wilderness was seen as the cause of the pioneer's miseries, a barrier to progress, prosperity, and civilization.
- Since the 1600's we have taken pride in our frontier spirit, westward expansion, & our pioneering heritage.



Map of Wilderness in USA
in 1492

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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Wilderness

Wilderness Tamed!

- The colonists populated the East coast with towns and cities.
- Gradually the constant fear of wilderness subsided.
- People no longer had to fight the wilderness for survival.
- People began to sense the ethical and aesthetic values of wilderness.

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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Nature

Deism, Sublimity & Primitivism

- Deism associated nature with religion

Wilderness was pure nature, untouched
by evil humans.
- Sublime beauty seen in wild nature, in contrast to urban settings where man's works were superimposed on those of God.
- Primitivists believed man's happiness & well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization.

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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Nature

Exploitation & Scarcity

- The remarkable exploitation of the eastern forests made people realize wilderness was disappearing.
- Scarcity was a necessary precondition for recognizing wilderness as a source of human values, and eventually its preservation.

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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Nature

The Roots of Appreciation

Nationalism -- it was in the *wildness* of nature that our country was unmatched!

- **Writers:**
Wm. Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir
- **Artists & Photographers:**
Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Wm. Henry Jackson

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Historical Origins of Attitudes Towards Nature

Calls for Preservation

- **George Catlin, Thomas Cole, Horace Greeley & Henry David Thoreau:**
early advocates of sparing, cherishing, & setting aside areas to preserve their wildness for the sake of civilization.
- **George Perkins Marsh**
argued that preserving wilderness was compatible with progress and economic welfare.

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Towards a Non-anthropocentric Philosophy

A Land Ethic

- **Aldo Leopold:**
". . . a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability & beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Any examining of man's relationship to nature must be done "in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient."

The outstanding scientific discovery of the 20th century is not TV or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism.

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Towards a Non-anthropocentric Philosophy

Nature Knows Best Philosophy

- **Barry Commoner:**
The third law of ecology is "Nature knows best," meaning that "any major man-made change in a natural system is likely to be detrimental to that system."



Doing nothing is thought to be better than doing something because any action will most likely have bad consequences whether or not it succeeds in solving the initial problem.

Doing nothing is thought to be better than doing something because any action will most likely have

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Towards a Non-anthropocentric Philosophy

Respecting the Authenticity of Nature

- Complexity is a distinguishing feature of natural beauty that sets it apart from artistic beauty.
- We want an art object to be original, the actual result of the artistic process.
- Likewise, we want the beauty of nature to be authentic, the result of natural processes only.

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Towards a Non-anthropocentric Philosophy

Respecting the Authenticity of Nature

- When we make plans to help or improve nature, the plans are not nature's but our own.
- The result is the stifling of natural creativity and the transformation of natural objects into human artifacts.
- No matter how natural they may look, they are no longer original, no longer authentic.

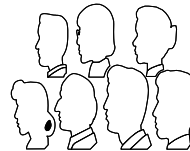
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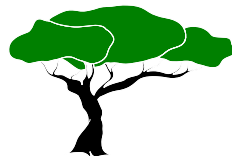
Towards a Non-anthropocentric Philosophy

The Anthropocentric Perspective

- The primary value of wilderness is that it exists to be used for recreational purposes, thus yielding human values and benefits.



The Biocentric Perspective



- The major goal is to permit natural ecological processes to operate as freely as possible in perpetuity because wilderness values to society ultimately depend upon the retention of naturalness.

ultimately depend upon the retention of naturalness.

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Biocentric Versus the Anthropocentric Philosophy

Both provide human benefits from wilderness.

The distinction is from what are the primary benefits derived?

- **Anthropocentric -- Benefits are derived from wilderness recreational use and enjoyment.**
- **Biocentric -- Benefits are derived from, and dependent upon, the *unmodified naturalness* of the wilderness ecosystems.**

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Resource Conservationists believe

- **Natural systems are no more than a collection of parts**
- **Homo sapiens is related externally to the ecomachine**
- **The market objectively determines the worth and value of all things, cultural and natural**
- **National and per capita income are a measure of societal well-being**
- **Progress can be determined according to the utilitarian formula of the greatest good for the greatest number**

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Preservationists

believe that natural systems are:

- **Self-creating, evolutionary wholes with synergetic characteristics that preclude complete reduction and analysis.**
- **Homo sapeins is related internally to the environment.**
- **Human actions can impair the ability of natural systems to maintain themselves or to evolve further.**
- **Human values go beyond those measured by the national income and include the preservation of wildlands and life.**

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Ecocentrists

believe that:

- **Natural systems are the basis of all organic existence, and therefore possess intrinsic value.**
- **Humankind is an element within rather than the reason to be of natural systems, and is hence dependent upon intrinsic value.**
- **Ethical human actions (actions which promote the good life for humankind) necessarily promote all life on earth (preserves such intrinsic values as diversity, stability, and beauty).**

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Deep Ecologists

believe that:

- All life on earth has intrinsic value.
- The richness and diversity of life itself has value.
- Human life is privileged only to the extent of satisfying vital needs.
- Maintenance of the richness and diversity of life mandates a decrease in human population.
- Humankind's relations to the natural world presently endanger the richness and diversity of life.

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Deep Ecologists

also believe that:

- Changes are necessary
- "Green societies" value the quality of life (e.g., peace & beauty) more than the quantity of life (e.g., GNP)
- Individuals subscribing to these fundamentals of deep ecology are obligated to promote sociocultural change

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Ecofeminists



believe that:

Mother Earth is a nurturing home for all life and should be revered and loved as in premodern societies.

- Ecosystemic malaise and abuse is rooted in androcentric concepts, values, and institutions.
- Relations of complementarity rather than superiority between culture and nature, the human and nonhuman, and male and female are desirable.
- The many problems of human relations, & relations between the human & nonhuman worlds, will not be resolved until androcentric institutions, values, & ideology are eradicated.

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Eco-fatalists believe that:

- Neither the earth nor mankind exists for any particular reason.
- Population growth & industrialization are natural ecological processes.
- We don't owe "nature" anything, any more than nature owes us.
- We are all doomed, so we might as well exploit all we can from nature right now before somebody else grabs it!

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Fundamental Questions

- Do humans have rights?
- Do rocks, snails, wildlife, plants have rights or intrinsic value?
- If so, isn't it really that "we" value having them around?
- Would you sacrifice human well-being for the "rights" of plants or animals?



Fundamental Questions

- Is there an ethical way humans should view nature?
- What might be some common rights be for humans or "nature?"