

# Review of Robin Attfield's „Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction“

Thomas Pölzler, University of Graz

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Writing a short introduction to an academic field or topic is a much undervalued craft. With its „A Very Short Introduction“ series Oxford University Press has recently successfully brought this craft back to the fore. In one of the series' newest additions Robin Attfield addresses the field of environmental ethics.

Attfield's book begins with a sketch of environmental ethics' history. Starting from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and accelerating around 1970, humans have become increasingly aware that they are causing environmental problems. This led to the demand for a non-anthropocentric ethics, i.e., for also considering non-human interests. Sentientists, for example, argue that all sentient beings have moral standing. Biocentrists expand this concern to all living beings, whether sentient or not. And according to ecocentrism, even ecosystems or species deserve moral consideration.

The book's second chapter focuses on concepts central to environmental ethics. Having defined “nature” and “environment”, Attfield moves on to more controversial ethical terrain. He argues that as all living beings have a good of their own, they all have moral standing (although the extent of their moral considerability varies); and that all living beings' flourishing is intrinsically valuable. This version of biocentrism is mainly supported by Routley's Last Man thought experiment. Even if some catastrophe left only one human on Earth who is about to die, it would seem wrong for this human to destroy non-human animals or plants.

In his chapter on intergenerational ethics Attfield argues that we are also morally responsible for all future beings that are foreseeably affected by our actions. In particular, we have a duty to enable them to meet their basic needs. This duty is not undermined by the non-identity problem (according to which we cannot harm future people because they owe their existence or identity to our present actions), and it is only sometimes weakened by social discounting (according to which the interests of future beings weigh less because our actions' consequences are uncertain, people prefer present over future benefits, or future generations will be richer).

Chapter four introduces normative ethics. Attfield first argues against Rawlsian contractarianism, virtue ethics, and deontology; mostly on grounds of these principles being unable to (sufficiently) account for the good of non-human and future beings. Then he explains and endorses a version of consequentialism: we ought to perform actions that are part of beneficial practices or result from beneficial character traits. Following Attfield's biocentrism, whether a practice or character trait is beneficial is said to be determined by its consequences for all affected living beings, human and non-human, present and future.

Next, the book turns to sustainability, i.e., the idea of a practice having the capacity to be maintained indefinitely. Attfield endorses this idea's association with economic development (as economic development helps to alleviate poverty, diseases, etc.). There is a discussion of sustainable development's influence on international development goals and of the precautionary principle. Finally, Attfield argues that biodiversity loss is bad both because of present and future non-human beings' intrinsic value and for anthropocentric reasons (e.g., the forfeited opportunity to use plants for pharmaceutical purposes).

The sixth chapter explains social and political movements that contributed to environmental ethics. In Attfield's view, deep ecology, ecofeminism, social ecology, and the environmental justice movement all hold valuable insights; yet, taken by themselves, each of these positions is too extreme, implausible and/or focused on present human interests. Green parties in politics are claimed to have incorporated themes of these movements in somewhat more promising ways, and have complemented them by other concerns, such as opposition to economic growth (which is endorsed in a qualified way), sustainability, and climate change action.

Attfield's discussion of environmental ethics and religion starts off with the charge that theistic religions have promoted human-centered and domineering attitudes towards nature. This charge is shown to be doubtful. Both Judaism, Christianity and Islam rather seem to have led many people to believe that humans are stewards of nature. While this idea does not entail concrete policy directives, Attfield claims that it has been valuable in guiding people's attention. Finally, he also reviews the environmental stances of other religious traditions.

The book's last chapter discusses the ethics of climate change. Science strongly suggests that by emitting greenhouse gases humans cause serious climate-induced harm to present as well as to future human and non-human beings. There is thus a strong ethical case to be made for mitigation and adaptation (at least assuming the precautionary principle). Attfield considers several ways of allocating emission rights, endorsing "contraction and convergence" (which distributes these rights increasingly equally among people all over the

world, while at the same time continually reducing the emissions total). He also stresses the importance of switching to renewable energy and warns against the risks of climate engineering.

Having outlined its content, I will now turn to critically evaluating “Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction“.

A major determinant of introductory books’ quality is whether they represent the targeted field or topic in a comprehensive and balanced manner. Attfield does well in this respect. Maybe he could have cut down his discussions of social and political movements, and of environmental ethics’ relation to religion. Maybe he should have paid more attention to the value and preservation of wilderness, and to population ethics (especially to the sensitive issue of population planning). Apart from that, however, it seems to me that its shortness notwithstanding, the book covers most of environmental ethics’ main topics, and in proportion to their significance.

Another important criterion for introductions is that they are accessible to a general audience. Again, one may issue minor complaints. For example, readers would have had an easier time orientating themselves if each individual chapter started with a more extensive introduction and closed with some concluding remarks. The book as a whole ends somewhat abruptly too. Yet, in total, Attfield provides an excellent springboard for the uninitiated. His language is clear; there is a well-balanced mix of abstract theorizing and concrete examples; and the covered positions and arguments are explained in sufficient detail.

As suggested by my summary, “Environmental Ethics: A Very Short Introduction“ differs from some similar works in that it does not purport to remain neutral. Throughout the book Attfield takes stands on the issues that he discusses, and provides arguments for these views. In my opinion, this is a merit. The book helps those who are new to the field to dismiss some obviously problematic claims (such as deep ecology’s theory of self-realization). Moreover, Attfield’s positive views and arguments strike me as highly plausible; and he presents the main alternatives to them in fair ways.

From a more academic perspective, another minor criticism about the book is that it does not explicitly address the question of environmental ethics’ definition. In Attfield’s view, it is not just the application of general moral principles to cases that involve environmental problems, and it does not require particular substantive views (such as non-anthropocentrism). I agree. But what then makes an issue an issue of environmental ethics? For example, what distinguishes views in this field from some of the primarily social, political, and religious views that the book addresses?

As is typical for philosophers, my critical evaluation of Attfield's book has disproportionately focused on its weaknesses. Let me thus close by emphasizing that in sum these weaknesses are far and few between. Attfield provides a well-balanced, clear, accessible and instructive introduction to environmental ethics that can be recommended to lay persons just as well as to philosophers who would like to refresh their memory or to gain an initial overview of the field.