

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**BRUCE MORITO, *Thinking Ecologically: Environmental Thought, Values and Policy*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood. 2002, 259p.**

There is no shortage of works analyzing and proffering counsel on the devastating ecological crisis we are now facing. Most suggest some form of economic, political or technical tweaking, adjustment, or reform. For philosopher Bruce Morito the solution lies in nothing less than a radical overhaul of what it means to be human, a re-definition of our place in nature.

*Thinking Ecologically* is ambitious in its efforts to tackle a wide range of issues pertaining to the environment— from the historical roots of the crisis to present-day policy issues. As instructive as each of his forays is, together they serve the more overriding goal of an ontological and epistemological critique: Morito's main target is Western ways of Being, and of Knowing, which he identifies as the source of our ecological malaise.

The contemporary Western worldview, which treats nature as little more than a resource or backdrop for human activity, is both corrupt and perilous. Morito argues nature is part of who we are, constituting our very essence. Being human is an evolutionary development, and our unique endowments are unintelligible outside of this development. Our capacity for rational thought, our compassion, our dreams etc., all spring from the exigencies of our ecologically specialized evolution. When we begin to understand our ecologically- embedded natures, ideas and practices that assume our distinctiveness appear foolish and foolhardy.

Throughout the work, he endeavors to unpack Western historically- and culturally-contingent assumptions, and expose many of the values that underpin them as misguided. In places, he draws upon examples from North American indigenous cultures to reveal another, more ecologically sound way of being human. This strategy would have been more effective had he employed it in a rigorous and thoroughly integrated way, rather than in an anecdotal, ancillary manner.

Provocatively and controversially Morito rejects the concept of "intrinsic value" of individual life. This stance distances him not only from mainstream Western thought, but also from many of his contemporaries within environmental philosophy. Considered by many to be the finest achievement of modernity, the extension of the concept of intrinsic values

to include nature within the moral sphere has been proposed as a means of redressing our ecological myopia. In Morito's view, this would simply perpetuate and extend individualistic, atomistic thinking.

Intrinsic value assumes that the individual is a unique, distinct repository of value, separate from her surroundings. Morito views this as encouraging us in binary, exclusionary, thinking rather than seeing ourselves as an inseparable part of a greater whole. He thinks the idea

that all life has intrinsic value becomes preposterous and "self-defeating" in its application: if all life has intrinsic value, then our very existence (which depends on the taking of life) would necessitate a breach of morality.

He maintains we must recognize that harm to an individual is sometimes necessary for the good of a species or ecosystem. For instance, he contends that not rescuing a beached whale, or allowing a caribou to drown may be important for the good of the herd or that of a predator.

Of course, the recognition that harm and death are integral parts of life is imminently sensible, but Morito may be underestimating the flexibility of a philosophy of intrinsic value to accommodate this. The ancient and illustrious Indian traditions of Jainism, Sankhya Yoga and Buddhism all espouse an individualistic metaphysic - without a defeatist attitude, and with

remarkable insights about human-nature harmony. While the critique of radical individualism is well- established within environmental philosophy (e.g. Deep Ecology), it may be that Morito overstates the perils of individualism, while minimizing its appeal and phenomenological force.

*Thinking Ecologically* offers a very comprehensive examination of current ideas in environmental thought. It is well-worth reading for its insights and for a glimpse into some of the issues we need to be grappling with as we re-evaluate what it means to be a moral self in the contemporary world. In one wonderful section, Morito dethrones rationality as the crown of human uniqueness, and reconfigures it as an emergent function. He explores the capacity for rational deliberation as a specialized tool for ecological attunement that emerged in a context of dependence upon the environment, and not as an endowment indicating separateness and

superiority over it. Insightfully, he asserts that values are the deeper, more primitive processes that precede and determine rational deliberation, and are the true source of human motivations.

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