

Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion 17(1982):421-423

Environmental Ethics. By K. S. SHRADER-FRECHETTE. Pacific Grove, Ca.: Boxwood Press, 1981. 358 pages. \$9.95 (paper).

Questions in environmental ethics run parallel to and often intersect basic issues in the dialogue between science and religion, and *Zygon* readers will welcome the appearance of this new anthology. All the main issues in this new field of ethics are covered here—the need for a new, environmental ethic, the rights of future generations, the rights of natural objects, the rights of animals, the right to a liveable environment, the environment versus the economy, the environment versus the poor, issues in population growth, pesticides, and nuclear power.

Kristin Shrader-Frechette has anthologized and introduced 25 selections, perhaps not always the best summaries that could have been chosen from the now rapidly growing literature, but they are good beginner's pieces. She herself writes about one-third of the pieces she anthologizes, and proves quite vigorous in the debate. Her selections from others are, on the whole, better at raising questions than at supplying plausible answers and sometimes better at ballooning problems than at supplying a careful analysis even of the problems. The selections are a bit miscellaneous, partly because the authors come from diverse fields, partly because they handle large and uncharted issues. She has some tendency to set up, in a first reading, an opponent on the other side, then to give us, in the second reading, "the truth" from Shrader-Frechette or her chosen spokesman. But the selections are provocative, organized around the right themes, and everything is easily readable.

A principle point that comes home on every page is how many value issues nowadays are intermixed through and through with scientific and technological matters, requiring great skill at both value judgments and scientific judgments, skill first at separating and then at mixing the two. Pro and con, the data and predictions are always being used in the service of a value judgment, and facts and forecasts often take on the color of a governing value set. One is always deciding whom to trust. A still deeper impression is how much in what

[*Zygon*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March 1982).]

© 1982 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. 0044-5614/82/1701-0011\$00.75

first seem to be plain, practical environmental matters turns out to touch faith axioms about the relationship of humans to the natural world. Beneath the ethics, there usually lie roots in religious and metaphysical questions.

In this review I will feature samples of theoretical issues involved, with lesser attention to the applied side, although in this anthology the latter side is perhaps better developed than the former.

In an opening account of "theoretical frameworks," Douglas H. Strong and Elizabeth S. Rosenfield ask, "Ethics or Expediency: An Environmental Question"? They believe that "the route to general acceptance of an environmental ethic will actually be by way of the much deplored concept of 'self-interest'" (p. 12). They have in mind self-interest on the part of the human group (which they do not distinguish well from individual human self-interest) and conclude that "an environmental ethic will simply add a duty not to cause harm to the land." Further, "this duty toward the land could in fact be considered as simply another duty toward society." In one sense, "the good of the earth will come first," but at bottom this is instrumental to human welfare (p. 13)! What really comes first is self-interested human society acting expediently. But the authors repent a bit from their anthropocentric self-interest in a last footnote. "An environmental ethic that is accepted and complied with because it appeals to one's self-interest is not, admittedly, on an altogether sound footing. Such a view continues in part the erroneous concept of one's separateness from nature. . . . Our hope is that ultimately people will recognize and accept the right of other species to exist simply for their own sake and not because people need them" (p. 15). Their position has a practical twist, but it can hardly be said to be theoretically clear.

Shrader-Frechette too has a way of softening what first look like hard answers. She believes that a primary (or biocentric) ethic, which recognizes intrinsic values in nature, combined with a secondary (or anthropocentric) ethic, which regards nature as instrumental to human interests, would be morally superior to a merely secondary ethic, provided that we can join the two. "What is clearly the case is that both a primary and a secondary type of environmental ethic would provide a greater protection to nature than would a secondary ethic alone" (p. 18). Nevertheless, she retreats both theoretically and practically to the old humanistic ethics. "What I have shown is that there is a strong rational foundation for using existing utilitarian and egalitarian theories to safeguard the environment. Utilitarian doctrines clearly protect the interests of future generations and egalitarian schemes prohibit any environmental hazards against which persons cannot be assured equal protection. . . . It is not clear that a new ethic is needed to protect purely human interests in the environment" (p. 23).

But that much is a foregone conclusion. Of course a humanistic ethic, suitably revised for application to ecological concerns, will protect *purely human interests*; that is its premise. The whole point of a newer ethic is to question whether there are not nonhuman integrities in nature that are also morally commendable. Shrader-Frechette then continues, "however, a 'new ethic' may be needed if there are purely environmental interests separate from, or not capable of being included under, ecosystemic factors affecting human interests" (p. 23). That amounts only to a definition of a new, naturalistic ethic.

Later, when Shrader-Frechette comes more directly to address the question whether natural objects have rights, she affirms that they do, or ought to, and we move to a deeper sort of environmental ethic. Here her argument is stimulating, although it does not advance much beyond that of Christopher

Stone, on whom she builds. She is not in this discussion as alert as one needs to be at separating out the relevant levels of environmental integrity—sentient animals, lower animals, plants, landforms, ecosystems, communities—and rather tends to lump everything together indiscriminately as “the environment,” or “natural objects,” and hence to speak too generically of the “rights of nature.”

Shrader-Frechette is opposed to the “cowboy ethic,” a name she gives, rather oversimplly, to what is usually called the dominion thesis—the view, jointly held by most utilitarians and in the Judeo-Christian West, that humans have a right and duty to use the earth ever more masterfully as a resource. She is not really against a sort of dominion, however, for she goes on to advocate the spaceship earth model as a dominant metaphor. Humans are the earth pilots attending to the welfare of their ship. This metaphor is deservedly provocative, an especially good one for rejecting Garrett Hardin’s lifeboat ethics. Here she is a most effective critic of Hardin. But as a master metaphor, the spaceship earth is not organic enough for a self-composing ecosystem, for what I might call an ecosymphony. In using it, all talk of moral concern for nature can vanish; we are only concerned about keeping in shape this ship upon which we ride. We want a balanced energy budget and good conservation. The limitations to the spaceship metaphor are its mechanical and instrumental connotations, which Shrader-Frechette only partly recognizes (p. 46-47). The form of earth’s carriage is more that of a womb than that of a spaceship.

Walter C. Wagner believes that we have no obligations to future generations, none at least for posterity’s sake, but nevertheless we ourselves now will be “more dynamic, self-actualizing, mentally healthy, goal-directed, organized and integrated people” with a “futurity concern” (p. 66). So we provide for the future disguisedly to help ourselves, an answer he finds “frustratingly inadequate” (p. 62). Amen! This sounds like advising parents to have children instrumentally for the parents’ own self-actualizing. There is truth here but it could much better have been called a need for self-transcending concern. A clearer analysis would recognize the classical moral paradox, rather than naively trying to regard everything as sublimated egoism. The point Wagner misses is that what counts as our self-interest is reconsidered in switching from present gratification to futurity concern. It is a different form of self-actualization to move from consumption now to conservation for progeny. One generation’s self-love is not so much actualized as is one generation’s self-love deployed over a wider reference class. In so doing it is transformed quite as much as it matures.

At this point we can look back and see that Strong, Rosenfield, and even Shrader-Frechette cannot get this adequately conceptualized. When our humanistic self-interest moves out into deeper environmental concerns, it is fulfilled if you like, but only to become transformed into a very different sort of self-interest, one that takes its bearings from the community, both that of the surrounding biosphere and the intergenerational past, present, and future. The metamorphosed self-realization may not be pure altruism but neither is it the old self-love. Such interactions are the thorniest issues in environmental ethics, ones that make it an exciting new field, and they have yet to be adequately analyzed.

There are a number of now classical articles here—Peter Singer’s provocative advocacy of animal liberation from the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Fox’s careful reply, Garrett Hardin’s influential “Tragedy of the Commons,” Daniel Callahan’s thoughtful “Ethics and Population Limitation,”

and William Blackstone's groundbreaking "Ecology and Rights." I need not comment on these, as they have been much discussed elsewhere. But it is quite useful to have them gathered here. A rewarding surprise, for this reader at least, was an excellent and meaty article by Richard B. Stewart on "Paradoxes of Liberty, Integrity, and Fraternity," originally in *Environmental Law*. Though needlessly tough here and there, this analysis gives much revealing insight into the value tradeoffs which we meet in environmental conflicts, often unprecedented and not fully recognized for what they are. A result is that environmental decisions are likely to prove more bitter than we suspect. Not only do the contesting parties want different things; we as a nation want contradictory things unawares.

E. C. Pasour, Jr., in an article on "Austerity, Waste, and Need," still trusts heavily in the invisible hand of the market as the most effective regulator of resources. In free-market pricing no "tragedy of the commons" can happen. He thinks that moral appeals for less consumptive lifestyles (as made here by Andrew Larkin) are likely to be ineffective and counterproductive, since they slow down resource development. He also celebrates our personal freedom in deciding to buy how much of what we need. "The question of what goods and services each of us consumes is a matter that must be answered by each of us as individuals" (p. 168). For an economist, he seems unusually blind to the fact that in an advertising age people's tastes in consumption are manufactured, quite as much as the goods that are supplied to them, for example, in fashions. Larkin, however, clearly sees this point (p. 214). Nor does Pasour notice how market pricing of scarce but necessary goods (as with heat and energy) favors the rich and hurts the poor.

An especially strong point which Shrader-Frechette makes repeatedly in several contexts is that a straightforward utilitarian ethic, especially one that is hung onto dollars, is unreliable. One cannot just maximize the good, balancing benefits against cost, damage, or risk. One has to consider the equity with which goods and losses are distributed, whether risks and losses are voluntary or involuntary, and whether the goods produced are trivial, optional, or essential. She is especially effective here in her analyses of the uses of pesticides and of nuclear power.

Despite the large volume of environmental literature, good texts and readers are still too scarce. That is to be lamented in a field which has both high theoretical interest and practical urgency. Shrader-Frechette's contribution is, at present, one of the best available. It has already been used with good success at my own university.

HOLMES ROLSTON, III
Professor of Philosophy
Colorado State University