

CHINNAGOUNDER'S CHALLENGE



THE QUESTION
OF ECOLOGICAL
CITIZENSHIP

DEANE CURTIN

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The Question of Ecological Citizenship

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To

Rita, Evan, and Ian,

who know this book by heart

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since at least the seventeenth century, philosophers have used the metaphor of lenses to describe how we know “the external world.” But, as anyone of a certain age knows, lenses can obscure as much as they reveal. Those designed to help you read this book may turn distant sites into a deep fog.

Imagine that our moral lenses have much the same effect. Suppose they make it possible for us to recognize the “fine print” of our own culture, but that they systematically obscure and distort the texts of distant cultures. There would then be two very different kinds of disputes, disputes *in* ethics and disputes *about* ethics. Disputes in ethics which might be called *in-context moral disputes* are “normal” in the sense that the parties all function within a common moral framework, or, at least, an overlapping set of frameworks. We feel “at home” in such disputes. When we disagree, we at least understand each other. *Out-of-context disputes* are disputes due to the fact that the parties’ moral frameworks do not neatly converge. We have the feeling that “these people” organize their moral lives differently. Their lives are foreign to us. These are “disputes,” if they can even be called that, in which we “talk past” one another.

One type of out-of-context dispute is particularly evident in cross-cultural disputes over “the environment,” where the size and texture of the moral domain is in question. The green revolution, for example, was the revolution in agricultural production that began in the late 1940s. It used new “miracle seeds” to achieve dramatic increases in agricultural production. One of its effects, however, was to displace traditional farm economies that had evolved over centuries producing local foods for local markets. The moral product of the Western Enlightenment, the revolution assumed that the boundaries of the moral coincide with the boundaries of the *human* community. In “target” countries, however, the domain of the moral is often far more extensive. It typically includes whole *ecological* communities.

In India, for example, one of the earliest sites for the green revolution, cows are indeed sacred, but so are many other animals, insects, and plants. The shift to a new mode of agricultural production meant heavy dependence upon pesticides and herbicides, chemicals invented

to eradicate the sacred. The rapid industrialization of agriculture was not simply a technological innovation, as it is often viewed from “our side,” but a fundamental challenge to the dimensions of local moral knowledge. What counts as having moral standing, and needs to be treated with respect, often fails to cross over from one moral domain to another. What appears from our side to be ethically neutral, a “technology transfer,” may have grave moral import on another side. It may threaten the fabric of the moral community.

A second issue at stake in moral boundary disputes is over moral personhood. The tradition of Western liberal individualism assumes that the moral person is defined prior to engagement in culture. One’s culture is an accidental trait that surrounds a core of essential traits, those one has *willed* oneself to be. In many non-Western cultures, however, one is a person to the extent one already has a place in the community.

To an outsider, for example, the ritual enacted daily at a Japanese train station may seem bizarre: a younger man bows to his superior; an older man bows in return. The younger man bows again, but more deeply. The older man bows again, but not as deeply. This spasm of mutual respect borders on the humorous to the outsider, but to the insider it is a ritual that sets the conditions of speech. Communication cannot occur until relative position is established.

It is typically a frustration to Americans who travel in Asia that they are treated, first, as a representative expression of their culture and only secondarily, if at all, as a unique individual. We feel that our moral identities have been effaced, that we have not been judged fairly, as a cultural free-agent. Sometimes our having been “misunderstood” causes us to imagine what it might be like to organize moral experience in a profoundly different way.

The distinction between in-context and out-of-context disputes, however, is probably too simple to take us very far without qualification. For example, it is not clear whether this distinction marks different kinds of disputes, or merely disputes that differ in degree of communication. In chapter 9, I will finally conclude that there are no truly intractable disputes in the sense that, in principle, they cannot be mediated. With sufficient training and sensitivity, we may become a “partial insider” to a profoundly different moral world. We might learn to translate from one world to another.

Furthermore, cultures can be highly diverse. Basic failures in communications may occur, not just in cases of great geographical distance, but between groups within a culture. Some feminists argue, for example, that women’s moral experience tends to be quite different

from men's experience. Recent events in the United States—the O. J. Simpson trial is the most celebrated case—have caused some to ask whether race tends to play an important role in the organization of moral experience.

It may even be that the failure of understanding does not go both ways. If we experience a culture as almost unspeakably foreign, this does not imply they lack the tools to understand us. On the one hand, for example, when a culture has been colonized, it may be intimately aware of the moral world of its colonizer. To colonize another culture, on the other hand, it may be necessary to distort it, to shape it to a particular moral agenda that is not its own.

Finally, as the globalization of capital occurs, geographically distant subcultures are trained to speak the language of capital without borders. Stock traders in New York and Hong Kong may have more in common with each other than with their geographically local culture.

The provisional distinction between two kinds of moral disputes is useful, however, if it allows me to focus on an unsettling possibility. It may be that certain systematic features of the ways we in the West, as products of the Enlightenment, tend to organize moral experience encourage us to believe we have understood profoundly different cultures when we do not. A consequence of this is that sometimes when we try to help profoundly different cultures, we fail.

Today, moral boundaries are not stable. The late twentieth century is marked by two powerful movements: the increasingly global reach of Western liberal individualism, and the resistance to this movement in traditional communities. Most of us are familiar by now with news of the eclipse of biological diversity. We are in the midst of only the sixth period of massive species extinction in all of biological history, occurring at a rate approaching 100 times what biologists consider normal. We hear less frequently about the parallel loss of human cultural and genetic diversity. Of the world's 6,000 linguistically different cultures, the great majority, some 4,000–5,000, are classified as indigenous. In terms of numbers, these cultures tend to be small, at most, 625 million people out of a world population of roughly 6 billion.

These cultures are often fragile. One-third of the original North American languages have been lost, two-thirds in Australia. Eighty-seven tribes disappeared in Brazil alone in the first half of this century (Durning 1992: 81–83). Yet most of the world's cultural and genetic diversity reside in these small, unique cultures. At a pace that only increases, these cultures face the tragic choice of living in a homogeneous global culture, or being eradicated altogether.

Although these kinds of disputes are particularly acute when in-

dustrialized first world cultures come into conflict with so-called fourth world, or indigenous, cultures, they also affect much larger population groups. These are often described as conflicts between the so-called first world and third world. Many of these cross-cultural disputes—international arguments over the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), biodiversity, third world population control, first world levels of consumption—usually hide deep conflicts over local definitions of *nature* and *culture*. Most of these disputes never get to the point of being genuine disagreements that can be subjected to mediation. They remain out-of-context.

Economic and military dominance means that we in the first world can insist on a mono-lingual moral world, but this invites both logical and moral difficulties. Logically, this begs the question by assuming that the moral language of liberal individualism is the language in which disputes about liberal individualism must be mediated. Morally, this claim to a monopoly on moral rationality *itself* risks something dear to our self-understanding: the understanding that we are a democratic culture. This book is about the meanings of freedom in the late twentieth century, and the consequent need to rethink familiar understandings of culture in relationship to nature.

Chapter 1 begins by asking whether the conceptual resources we have developed in the United States for speaking about the relationship of culture and nature can be exported. Not only are these uniquely American resources difficult to export, I find that social and environmental justice in one context may become injustice in another context. This “phase shift” in moral perception is a puzzle I return to frequently. How can a social system appear—perhaps *be*—just and nonviolent from within, yet unjust and violent when transported elsewhere? How can there be such a profound shift in moral perception from insider to outsider? I suggest that one sort of violence is easily recognized within the moral traditions of Western liberalism: individual violence. But other sorts of violence are exceedingly difficult to identify, given common liberal assumptions: institutional and systemic violence.

Chapter 2 opens by calling for an act of the moral imagination. Could it be that progressive forces working for social justice in the first world become regressive when applied to the social context of the third world? The British utilitarians are justly celebrated for their roles in challenging the authority of tradition (common law) and replacing

it with a critical conception of liberal equality based on statute law. John Stuart Mill's role in fostering equal rights for women, for example, has long been noted, and rightly so. While not disparaging Mill or his role in the development of Enlightenment thinking about equality, this picture of his legacy must be balanced against the fact that Mill and his father, James Mill, spent their entire working lives in the service of the East India Company. John Stuart Mill was groomed by his father to write the civil and legal correspondence with India, effectively functioning as the British governor of India until the day the British government instituted direct rule.

To understand the dilemmas that confront contemporary conceptions of freedom, we need to understand how British utilitarians reconciled their support for liberal democracy at home with their active support for colonialism in India, Ireland, and elsewhere. This dual legacy is not just historically significant. I find contemporary importance in the conception of "development" that follows from utilitarian definitions of culture and nature. In utilitarianism, we get an almost fully articulated version of the developmentalist project: development is the extension of a calculus of individual preference satisfactions from a moral/rational "center" to the periphery.

Chapter 3 examines the twentieth century causes of first world/third world conflict over definitions of culture and nature. I focus primarily on events since World War II, when the United States became interested in blunting the spreading influence of communism among third world peasants by transferring a free market model of development to the third world. The foremost vehicle for this transfer was the green revolution. Its intentions were not simply technological; its goals were couched in terms of world peace. I ask whether the green revolution has been the vehicle of peace. My conclusion is that its systemic violence encourages us to confuse peace with pacification.

In chapter 4, I move to the contemporary impact of development on the third world, considering the social and ethical issues that underlie the GATT and NAFTA free trade agreements on traditional communities. I also consider the defense against development arising from traditional farmers in India and from the descendants of Mayan people in southern Mexico. The GATT raises new issues concerning the access of first world companies, and third world economic elites, to biological and cultural diversity. Most of the world's biological and cultural diversity is found in third world rainforests. New forms of trans-national capitalism require access to this diversity. Protests to development from indigenous communities are not the last gasp of

a historically outmoded peasantry, as both Marxists and capitalists would have it, but voices from the cutting edge of global conflict over culture and nature.

Chapter 5 extends these arguments concretely to women's knowledge of their ecommunities. I ask, "In what sense is women's knowledge of their communities privileged?" I begin to develop an account of what it means to function within a practice. Those who function as insiders to the practice "know the rules." They possess expertise that demands recognition in authentic human development.

Having brought forward the types of situations I am concerned to understand in part 1, part 2 regards whether first world "radical" environmental philosophy advances our understanding of cross-cultural disputes over nature and culture. In chapters 6 through 8, I focus on two features of first world radical environmental philosophy. The first is the idea that environmental philosophy *is* the project of establishing a theory of intrinsic value, or inherent worth, for non-human entities. More generally, these views are examples of the idea that it is the job of philosophers to provide unified theories of universal moral considerability. I reject both these assumptions about the purpose of environmental philosophy, and contend that it is precisely these commitments which account for the failure of first world radical environmental philosophy to produce concrete results that can inform public policy debates. In chapter 8, I begin to consider explicitly pluralistic approaches to environmental ethics.

My second concern in these chapters is with the ways first world radical environmental philosophy treats the "Other," whether this means women, the third world, indigenous cultures, or the Orient. In many cases, I find that first world radical environmental philosophy projects the same prejudices onto the rest of the world as does liberal individualism. And it has done little to advance a global understanding of environmental conflict. Neither economic liberalism nor most versions of Western "radical" environmental ethics help us to set aside familiar, neocolonial prejudices about the ethics of nature and culture. We need to begin again.

Part 3 presents my constructive response to the issues raised in part 1, and an alternative to the positions examined in part 2. I argue for a form of pragmatic ecommunitarian pluralism: many communities, particularly those long established, already reveal a localized sense of community that is more-than-human. No philosophical demonstration will make this more real. The role of a public environmental philosophy is to facilitate nonviolent cross-community dis-

course through which goods internal to a community may be preserved or gradually transformed.

Starting from the premise first intimated in chapter 5 concerning the authority of insiders to a practice, I argue in chapter 9 for the authority of local communities to maintain traditional relationships to place, and for the local expertise that is assumed by such relationships. This obviously raises the question of how to mediate conflicts among communities, particularly when we live in a deeply pluralistic world. Instead of assuming that serious moral conflicts are always due to ill will (that is, that they are cases of conscious, in-context individual violence), I start by asking how moral communication goes wrong. I draw a distinction between what it means to function within a practice (in a larger sense, a community) according to the goods internal to that practice, and what it means to operate according to a set of external goods.

I propose that all genuine development begins with what Michael Walzer calls a “thick” description of a culture; it must begin from a cognitive sympathy for the internal goods that constitute the community. Talk of utilities, or, to refer to the other great Western moral tradition, talk of individual rights, only comes later, when thick descriptions have “thinned out” in the process of cross-cultural moral communication. True human development is not just the abstract guarantee of rights, nor is it reducible to the satisfaction of individual preferences. It is the actual ability to function within an ecocommunity in such a way that one can participate in defining, achieving, and transforming the internal goods of one’s practice.

The final chapter begins with the story of Chinnagounder, a man who has witnessed more than one hundred years of change in India. His story challenges us to look back at contemporary American culture from its borders, asking how we can draw out aspects of American traditions that will give new meaning to freedom, and to the reconciliation of culture with nature. The debate about “the environment” becomes a question of the character appropriate to ecological citizenship.

It is emphatically not my purpose to essentialize the first world and blame it for all the problems suffered by the third world. There is violence within all communities. Some third world countries were never colonized by the first world. Third world governments and communities perpetuate violence against themselves. Nevertheless, this is a book written primarily for a first world audience in the hope of

mediating differences in moral vision. My concern is not to admonish, but to understand. The principal conceptual tools I bring to this task are not intended to lay blame with intentional (individual) violence. They expose categorical features of our worldview that make it difficult to perceive certain sorts of violence.

This is a book written by a philosopher for a broad audience. I hope that my professional colleagues will find the book valuable. However, the kinds of questions I engage require that I write for a more inclusive audience. I am concerned not only with philosophical theories, but with the impact that philosophies have had on people's lives and on the fate of nature. This is a work of public philosophy. Readers with little patience for philosophical debates might focus on parts 1 and 3. The chapters in part 2 begin and end with summaries that should be sufficient to a bridge between earlier and later chapters.

I have benefited immeasurably from several professional relationships during the time I was writing this book. Concerned Philosophers for Peace (CPP) provided me with the opportunity to present versions of chapters 3 and 9. My friend and colleague Duane Cady encouraged my participation in CPP as a friendly place to try out the ideas. He was right. Rick Werner and Jim Sterba were particularly insightful in commenting on chapter 9, which I regard as the key philosophical chapter. Bob Litke and I worked together on a collection of essays on institutional violence. Readers will have no difficulty in recognizing the impact my work with Bob has had on this book. Some of what we wrote together for the introduction to the anthology has found its way into this book's definitions of violence in chapter 1. Joe Kunkel deserves recognition as the principal force behind CPP for as long as I have been involved.

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Chapter 4: "Gandhian Legacies: Indigenous Resistance to Development in India and Mexico," in *Mahatma Gandhi: 125 Years*, ed. Manmohan Choudhuri and Ramjee Singh (Varanasi, India: Gandhian Institute of Studies, 1995), 24–34. (To commemorate the 125th anniversary of Gandhi's birth.)

Chapter 5: "Women's Knowledge as Expert Knowledge: Indian Women and Ecodevelopment," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

Chapter 7: "Dogen, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1994): 195–213, and "A State of Mind Like Water: Ecosophy T and the Buddhist Traditions," *Inquiry*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1996): 239–53 (special issue in honor of Arne Naess).

Chapter 8: "Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care," *Hypatia*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1991): 60–74.

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