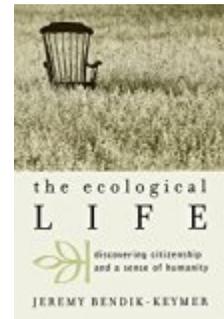


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. *The Ecological Life: Discovering Citizenship and a Sense of Humanity*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 231 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-3448-3.

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## Philosophy for the Moral, Ecological Citizen of the Earth

In *The Ecological Life*, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer presents in the form of lectures to an undergraduate class in an American liberal arts college an argument justifying the need to develop a greener philosophy and practice. As a moral philosopher, he constructs a convincing argument that we must and can “discover” a cosmopolitan citizenship that respects and nurtures a healthier human society in relation to a more fully appreciated and understood earth. By thinking through our connections to the earth, to our own history, and to our natural history, he thereby does a service to those of us who have for decades pled for a more ecological imagination and have presented our pleas in verse, paintings, essays, songs, and prayers.

Here I must confess that I am not trained as a moral philosopher, as he is, but have come to my passion for “unity with nature”[1] by following the lead of such guides as Martin Buber, Robert Armstrong, Gregory Bateson, Mary Midgley, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Temple Grandin.[2] The advantage to me and to general readers like myself is that Bendik-Keymer consistently clarifies technical terms, or unpacks common-sense terms like “citizen” and “justice,” by going to etymological roots. And in responding to questions from his imagined class, he expands on phrases familiar to logicians (“argument from justice,” *modus tollens*) or to critical theory (“agency”). In this he is teaching his students (and us readers) how to think deliberately and how to work through apparent inconsistencies in our own minds or through dilemmas of feeling and thought in our jour-

ney toward developing a “green” maturity and an ecological idealism.

Bendik-Keymer leads his imagined philosophy students into discussions of “moral attitude” and “justice,” soft ideas in need of explanation and bolstering given the objectivist, bottom-line bias of so much of our modern life. He develops an argument that joins self-interest and informed prudence to the acquisition of an ecological orientation. He is clearing away philosophical stumbling blocks to a more mature mentality prepared to grasp the world’s richness and our own agency freshly and more creatively.

In Lecture Four, “Rooted in Our Humanity,” Bendik-Keymer sets out to “define what a sense of humanity is” and to assert that it is “possible to have respect for non-human life flow from our sense of humanity,” our innate integrity and identity (p. 85). Grounding this respect in human mentality, he risks the charge of anthropomorphism, the putatively inappropriate projection of human feelings into nonhumans, a sticking point for many scientific ecologists. Their problem is in what he names as “P line of thinking,” his coinage for the habit of fixing on “salient properties [’Ps]” to ground moral respect.” Is an animal “sentient (feeling)” – or “an experiencing subject of life (awareness)?” (pp. 73-74). In short, need we honor a snake or a gorilla or a dead person, he asks? He offers examples from laboratory animal experiments and from rituals of respect for the dead. The animals may lack awareness, the dead, sentience; and thus: “they are with-

out moral standing” in conventional moral philosophy (p. 74); “May God us keep/ From Single vision & Newton’s sleep!”[3]

In contrast to such “P line of thinking,” Bendik-Keymer offers us an alternative source of thinking and feeling in “analogical extension” (pp. 76-78) and “analogical implication” (pp. 78-80). By this he means that we may imagine the life that a gorilla lives, not ignoring its differences, and still honor its life as like that in ourselves which is similarly alive, sentient, and different: “As the gorilla is like us in having an integrity that comes with normal body functioning, so we can respect him like we respect each other, in light of our bodily integrity” (p. 77).

This sort of horizontal kinship with other living creatures—and forests, even mountains—is what poets and prophets regularly honor and draw upon. As human beings we naturally look around and adjust, indeed learn, from living with others and in place. Not only shamans but parents and children learn by looking sideways. This sort of analogical extension and implication justifies the epiphany Aldo Leopold experienced when he looked into the eye of an old wolf he had shot “in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes.”[4] And it is like the syllogism implicit in the biblical assertion, “All flesh is grass” (Isaiah 40:60). Such “syllogisms in grass” (“Grass dies; Men die; Men are grass”) are the very stuff of which natural history is made, claims Gregory Bateson in *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*.<sup>[5]</sup>

Bendik-Keymer follows with chapters which develop the logic of his position: “Relationships between Humans and Lands,” “Being True to Ourselves,” “Maturity’s Idealism,” “A Circle of Life,” “Thoughts and Laws of Earth,” and “The Sky inside the City.” It is in these succeeding chapters that he confronts the often overwhelmingly practical challenges to institutionalizing in law, commerce, and political life the mature idealism he has sketched for his students. And he clarifies for himself and them the tension between the holistic vision of deep ecology and the temptation of a kind of siren song of misanthropy that runs through some expressions of that vision (p. 87). Yoking theory and everyday life, he develops the con-

cept of sacred space, a concept grounded in the non-theoretical phenomena of Australian aboriginal internalization of landforms, of Boy Scout initiations into love for the earth, in Shinto shrines, and in urban gardens—“Sacred places meet a drive inside human spirit to be connected with the places we inhabit” (p. 94).

In his “Being True to Ourselves” lecture Bendik-Keymer invokes the nascent greenness of our human selves, with anecdotes about gardening, tree houses, retreats and the like. We are social beings. We can, as Aldo Leopold urged, “think like a mountain” (p. 125). And we can laugh at ourselves, and at nature (p. 128). “It is in our common sense to identify with nature,” he posits, and calls upon his favorite “integrationist” writers and artists—Norman Maclean, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Thoreau—as his mentors in pursuing such a path (pp. 198-199).

There is much to ponder in Bendik-Keymer’s thesis and application, but also much to take to heart. Although I was put off a bit by the conceit of his pretending to lecture to a pretend class at the opening of each chapter, it does allow him to show himself as a thinker and caring cosmopolitan as well as a mentor in the rhetoric and dialectics of philosophical discourse. Notes

[1]. The phrase “unity with nature” borrows from the Quaker publication *EarthLight*, which was published until 2005 by its Friends In Unity With Nature Committee.

[2]. See “Afterword: Toward a Unity with Nature” by Dave Aftandilian and myself in the forthcoming *What Are the Animals To Us? Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature, and Art* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

[3]. William Blake, quoted in *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*, ed. Robert Bly (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), p. 29.

[4]. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), pp. 138-139.

[5]. Gregory Bateson, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 26-27.

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