

On Being Truly Ecological

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Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, *The Ecological Life: Discovering Citizenship and a Sense of Humanity*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer's *The Ecological Life: Discovering Citizenship and a Sense of Humanity* develops a passionate plea for us to re-examine what he calls "our ecological humanity." It is not that we must look at our humanity through the lens of ecology but, rather, that our humanity is fundamentally ecological at its core. Through an examination of the depths of our ecological natures, Bendik-Keymer argues for the development of an ecological sense of humanity that will allow and encourage us to become ecological citizens of the earth [p. 3]. This move toward ecologizing citizenship also leads him to an indictment of the anti-ecological nature of modern capitalism.

Organized as a series of imaginary lectures delivered over the course of ten weeks to an environmental ethics class at an American liberal arts college, Bendik-Keymer's approach allows him to argue persuasively but more casually than we might find in a traditionally structured philosophical work. He is careful to clarify technical terms and unpack common-sense ideas. The advantage of this approach is that the book will appeal to readers from many backgrounds with varying degrees of philosophical training.

In Lecture One, "Becoming a Citizen of Earth," Bendik-Keymer lays out the main point of the imaginary course: "Given a number of realizations about our sense of humanity, being humane includes being ecological and being ecological includes respecting life on Earth. *Respecting Life on Earth is part of being a true citizen in this world, what common humanity demands.*" [p. 4.] The next nine lectures examine our sense of humanity and the requirements of being an ecological citizen.

Notably, in Lecture Four, Bendik-Keymer argues that "our sense of humanity ought to commit us to respecting nonhuman life and its biotic conditions." [p. 64.] Here we are introduced to a new line of thinking, analogical extension, which will encourage us to further develop our ecological humanity. We are asked to abandon the traditional "P line of thinking" where we place all the emphasis on salient moral properties (Ps) in favor of an analogical mode of reasoning. Instead of focusing on sentience or whether something is, in Tom Regan's language, "an experiencing subject of a life," we are to extend our sense of humanity to other forms of life in an analogous fashion. Thus, "[a]s 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.] Although his examples of analogical extension are typically animals, it seems clear that we can engage in this sort of reasoning towards ecosystems as well. For example, we may note the resilience, integrity, health, dynamism, organization, and stability of ecosystems and relate these analogically back to us, thereby extending our humanity ecologically outward.

The remaining five lectures are equally provocative as Bendik-Keymer guides us through the application of his position. Here, he confronts many of the practical and theoretical challenges to institutionalizing in law, commerce, and the political life the ecological maturity and ecological idealism he has developed over the first five lectures. It is also in these later chapters that we see the critique of capitalism develop out of his understanding of ecological maturity. For example, his analysis of factory farming and the problem of moral cloaking is one of the clearest and most compelling explorations of the problems of factory farming in the current literature. He ties the issue into the problematic structure of capitalism when he says, “[m]oral invisibility is not, then, a matter of some constitutional blindness we have...[i]n fact, I suggest it is often an effect of capitalist excesses that overdrive productive areas of the economy to lose their rigor in respecting life” [p. 154]. Respecting life should be a feature of our socialized humanity. As we quantify the productivity of these living creatures, we only value them as things that can accumulate capital, and abstract the animal’s life into profit-making parts. It then becomes difficult for us to apply any pressure, because the animal has become “cloaked behind a vocabulary that erases its moral considerability” [p. 155]. We must learn to disentangle the animal’s being from behind “the apparatus of capitalist production” [p.155]. Through our analogical extension we ought to realize that the animal in the cage is not a fungible commodity, but a being worthy of moral consideration.

We can begin to do this by recognizing and dismantling the language and imagery of capitalism’s moral cloaking. The cellophane-wrapped Styrofoam trays of pork should be revealed for what they are: “part of a food processing chain that distances us from the actual conditions of food production...” [p. 155]. Exposing people to the truth widens the circle of respectful practices thus embracing our ecological idealism and allowing us the ability to fulfill our roles as ecological citizens.

Bendik-Keymer’s criticism of capitalism’s exploitation is compelling because he makes it clear we have a duty to fight the commodification of nature in order to uphold our obligations as ecological citizens. That being said, a little more science and a deeper utilization of some of the foundational theories in ecology would have effectively filled out his arguments and given the reader a better understanding of his meaning of the terms ecological maturity, ecological idealism, and ecological humanity. The lack of science notwithstanding, *The Ecological Life* is a moving and enormously valuable contribution to both environmental philosophy and environmental political theory. It is written with the kind of optimism about the future that we rarely see in environmental ethics literature. It is a re-vitalizing read and one that ought to be recommended to everyone interested in our economic, political, and ecological futures.