

Book Reviews

Robert E. Goodin: *Green Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, 240 pp.

In his *Green Political Theory*, Robert E. Goodin sets out to do three things. First, he attempts to define the “core values” of the *greens* – parties and organizations that want the preservation of the natural environment to be the highest political priority. Rather than describing what green activists say and do, he reconstructs their programme with a view to making it coherent and true to its core values. Second, Goodin tries to persuade the reader of the merits of the green programme. He does not only identify its core values, but also identifies with them. Third, he proposes a conceptual framework for decomposing environmental thinking into constituent parts. His reconstruction of green theory suggests analytical tasks that any normative theory of environmental policy will have to undertake.

The last two purposes of Goodin’s argument have the greatest general interest. I do not think he fully succeeds in accomplishing what he wants on either score, but he comes close, and his book will give much inspiration and many clues to anyone interested in the normative problems of environmental policy. Its agenda of subjects can easily be expanded into a general set-up of environmental theory.

What analytical tasks, then, are in store for a normative theory of environmental policy? Goodin lists two, but I think there are three. In the first place, environmental policy – or, more precisely, proposals for such a policy – must be based on a theory of value that explains why the destruction of nature warrants moral and political concern. To provide such a theory is basically a philosophical task, but it is not just of philosophical interest. When it comes to practical decisions, it may make a considerable difference if, say, the environment should be preserved for its own sake or for the sake of human beings.

Basically, human activities that tend to destroy the natural environment can cause two kinds of concern. First, one may be concerned about what happens to the environment as such. Just as human beings are morally obligated not to treat one another in certain ways, they may also have moral duties that bear on their conduct towards nature. Second, the destruction of nature may cause concern because it threatens to undermine the life-conditions of human beings. The decay of the environment may make the earth a more inhospitable place to live – if not right away, then at least in a more or less distant future. This is a source of *secondary* reasons of environmental concern – reasons that derive from more fundamental worries about the prerequisites of human well-being. The exact contents of the reasons in question are open to different interpretations. If, in particular, well-being is broadly defined to include not only such things as physical health and a commodious living, but even the opportunity of experiencing untouched nature, the practical implications of primary and secondary reasons may be very much the same.

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Political proposals and programmes for environmental policy almost always cite human interests as the reason for concern. Thus, the Brundtland Commission asserts that “[t]he environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs, and attempts to define it in isolation from human

concerns have given the very word 'environment' a connotation of naïvety in some political circles". The overriding concern is development, which is "what we all do in attempting to improve our lot", and environmental concern is a question of seeing to it that development is "sustainable", in the sense people do not improve their lot by means that leave future people without an environment to support them. At the opposite end of the scale are some philosophers associated with the "deep ecology" perspective, who advocate the preservation of nature for its own sake, not its conservation as a basis of human life.

In between stand the green parties and movements. They espouse a theory of value that grounds environmental concern in considerations about the place of the environment in human life, but these considerations do not reduce nature to a means for the fulfilment of material wants. The green idea, as interpreted by Goodin, is that the natural environment should be preserved because people want to see their personal "plan and projects set in some larger context outside their own lives" (p. 38) – in the context of forces that operate "independently" of them and often "in spite of" them (p. 40). One may question whether this is really important to most people, but let us grant that for the moment and rather ask whether nature alone can provide the requisite context of our lives. What about history, including the immensely complex and uncoordinated process through which human beings have harnessed and transformed nature? The answer might be that history is, after all, less independent of human design than natural processes. 'People who live more in harmony with nature – in traditional English villages, rather than postmodern Los Angeles – are living more in a context that is outside of themselves, individually or even collectively" (p. 51). This brings back the question of how people really want to live their lives. Goodin stresses that the green theory "traces the value of nature to its value to human beings and the place it occupies in their lives" (pp. 42–43), but few outside the green movement crave for a context that is maximally independent of themselves. Goodin may, of course, recommend this for being especially valuable, but then his argument would have to engage more directly with basic philosophical issues.

A theory of value explains why environmental despoliation is a serious concern, but it does not in itself tell us what to do in particular cases where a choice must be made between specific policies. Here lies the second task of a normative theory of environmental policy. It should include general guidelines on how to deal with particular issues, preparing for what we may call environmental *casuistry* – the application of basic principles to concrete cases. Although the line that distinguishes basic matters from casuistry will not always be clear, there is a difference between value theory and applied ethics.

Someone might, to be sure, doubt whether problems of application should be a separate subject of environmental theory. They may question the importance of the second task for two, diametrically opposed reasons. On the one hand, problems of application will be trivial if the theory of value provides determinate guidelines on how specific issues should be handled. This will, in particular, be the case if one consideration is accorded absolute priority – if, say, the preservation of pristine nature (or what is left of it) is all-important. Assume, for example, that the green theory of value, as sketched above, is all there is to say about good and bad. Then all policies that have any risk of disrupting natural processes will be wrong, not just *prima facie* but all things considered. Practical principles deriving from such a theory will either apply or not apply to a given issue, and if they apply, they must be observed unconditionally.

On the other hand, one might think that casuistry falls outside the scope of normative theory because the problems of applying basic principles to concrete

environmental issues are so complex and variegated that next to nothing can be said about them in general terms. This does not imply, of course, that casuistry is unimportant, only that it does not allow of theoretical exploration. General guidelines cannot be had on this score because every problem is *sui generis*, to be dealt with on a purely individual basis.

It should come as no surprise if the problems of application turn out to be neither trivial nor inaccessible to theoretical inquiry. First, environmental issues are apt to evoke discordant considerations. In this area, as in most others, plural and conflicting values enter the picture. Thus, the idea that pristine nature must be preserved at all costs is most implausible. Other concerns, like the fulfilment of human needs and the improvement of prosperity, are relevant as well. Goodin would be hard put (and unlikely) to claim that nature's independence is the sole prerequisite of rewarding human lives. The green theory of value is, at most, a partial theory of the good. It is bound to come up against competing considerations, and we need to know how different factors can be balanced to reach overall conclusions about right and wrong.

Second, the moral conflicts of environmental policy are likely to have common features that allow of theoretical investigation. I believe, in particular, that many share the following characteristic: we must choose whether or not to implement a policy that opens the prospect of economic growth and at the same time creates a risk of serious environmental damage. This raises at least two general questions. First, how should environmental concerns be balanced against the aim of improving material prosperity? Second, how are we to choose between actions when we do not know for certain what their outcomes will be? These questions need not – and should not – be dealt with from case to case. Their resolution inevitably involves theoretical assumptions about value comparisons and rational choice under ignorance.

Goodin has very little to say about casuistry. His comments on the trade-off between prosperity and environmental preservation tend to dismiss the conflict as a false one. This smacks of wishful thinking, and, anyway, Goodin forgets that the choice of public policy is mostly made under greater or lesser ignorance about both the environmental and economic effects of alternative courses of action. Goodin, who elsewhere has written extensively on problems of ignorance, suddenly demands certainty. He will not concede that environmental protection may retard economic development before he has clear evidence that the two concerns are in conflict. "We must demand to see the details of the economic model on the basis of which we are being told that environmental despoliation will yield economic dividends. We must make sure that the model works – that it is a good representation of the real economy" (p. 104). The problem is only that no economic argument, however much one attends to its details, is certain to capture the workings of the real economy. This goes, of course, for the arguments of those who warn of environmental destruction as well. Thus, ample uncertainty surrounds the prediction that global warming is underway because the burning of fossil fuels produces carbon dioxide that concentrates in the atmosphere to create a greenhouse effect. Goodin knows this, of course, but the need for a theory of casuistry to guide action on the basis of imperfect knowledge still escapes him.

The green theory of value is not to any appreciable extent reflected in official policy; it remains a theory of opposition. This is why it must be supplemented with a theory of agency, which is to tell people what they ought to do in the endeavour to impart green values on public policy. This is, in general, the third task of a normative theory of environmental policy. It calls for strategic calculations that are most immediately relevant in the national context, where they turn things like the

choice between various forms of political organization and different styles of communication. But questions of agency can also be raised with respect to processes that take place at the international level. Indeed, as solutions to environmental problems are increasingly worked out through negotiations between states, there is a growing need for better ideas about international agency.

Goodin criticizes green activists for their preoccupation with symbols and personal life-styles, and their failure to see that a theory of agency should be independent of and subsidiary to the theory of value. It should, quite simply, be "a theory about how best to pursue the Good and the valuable, according to a distinctively green analysis of what is good and valuable" (p. 16). This is correct, and the argument should be taken to heart by all political activists. The instrumental point of view must have pride of place when it comes to translating values into practice. This is not to say that everything goes. There are good reasons to write off certain strategies, like coercion and manipulation, whatever their expediency in particular circumstances. Apart from this, however, the crucial question is how one can best win support for one's position, and unconventional ideas are not necessarily served by unconventional modes of communication.

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Flemming Mikkelsen: *Arbejdskonflikter i Skandinavien 1848-1980*. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1992, 500 pp.

Historians and political scientists have for some time studied industrial relations and industrial conflict in the Scandinavian countries. As a key to understanding both social change and social order, Mikkelsen attempts to bring together an historical/narrative tradition of industrial conflict with a more theoretical tradition.

The book, which is identical to his Ph.D. thesis, uses Charles Tilly's mobilization theory as the general theoretical framework (e.g. *From Mobilization to Revolution*, London 1978). It covers industrial conflicts in Denmark, Sweden and Norway over a time-span of nearly one and a half centuries. The emphasis is nevertheless on the period between the turn of the 20th century and the outbreak of the Second World War.

Mikkelsen defines industrial conflict as a form of collective action, or, more precisely, strategic interaction between groups defending their interests. When analyzed over a long time-span it becomes clear that structural features play an important role in both restricting and enabling collective action. By using comparative studies this becomes apparent. In the case of Denmark, the early but slower rate of industrialization leads to a more decentralized production in smaller plants. This explains some of the differences in the volume of industrial conflict between the countries, for example, why strikes in Denmark tend to be both shorter and more limited than those in Sweden.

Mikkelsen's analysis builds on an impressive compilation of both quantitative and qualitative data relating to industrial conflict in the three countries. In the period prior to 1900, the official registration of conflicts was often inaccurate, and thereby requiring reconstruction on the basis of several sources. The quality of the data improves with the onset of the 20th century. The founding of trade union and employer confederations in all the three countries at the end of the 19th century, and major conflicts in both Denmark and Sweden, are factors which promoted a more serious treatment of statistics on conflicts in the three countries.