
Beyond Slogans

Towards Ethics that Break Your Heart

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TO LIVE AND WORK AMONGST PEOPLE whose lives are shaped by sustainability and justice issues is a beautiful thing. This is something we have the deepest gratitude for! Permaculture is at the forefront of a suite of causes and movements that work towards solutions for the pressing issues of our time.

However, despite its claim that permaculture is based upon a foundation of ethics, “Care for Earth, care for people, & fair share” is not really an ethical framework. It’s more a slogan or an ethic—a broad, undefined field of intention.

Permaculture offers hope, networks, morale, techniques, identity, and imagined possibilities. These are vital. Permaculture and its practitioners would, no doubt, benefit if more attention were paid to the millennia of years of humanity’s attempts to come to grips with what it is to live an ethical life. Consequentialism, utilitarianism, Kantian duty ethics, Golden Rule, and Virtue ethics are some of the Western frameworks that can be used. These can be highly useful in coming to some clarity around ethical dilemmas that face us daily.

Having said that, we argue that there is a shadow to ethics. Throughout most of our lives, we experience being pressured into one set of values or another, by families, religion, social conditioning, and—now ever-present—algorithmized, vested-interest media. This moralizing and moral positioning comes with emotional payloads of confusion, shame, guilt, fear, punishment, and forms of social exclusion. The history of ethics can also be seen as one of social control.

Another shadow issue is that the Western ethical frameworks previously mentioned can be seen as rather male, abstract, and disembodied. An exception to this is Carol Gilligan’s *Ethics of Care* which focuses more on qualities of close relationships. From this emerges the intriguing question of what actually are the qualities of a caring relationship?

Traditionally, for many of us, and for some thousands of years, our social values have been human-centered with other species and ecosystems (and peoples) tragically relegated to being background settings and resources. Clearly any expression of permaculture ethics needs to move away from embedded colonial practices and from anthropocentric toward ecocentric worldviews.

At the time of writing, the authors have just returned from the high-energy European Permaculture Convergence in Ireland where we facilitated an experimental workshop ‘From Ethics to Ecopsychology.’ We are also currently designing project recommendations for an ambitious farm and land regeneration project in Australia. Common to both of these projects is our desire to explore and embody a

deepened co-being with rivers, mountains, soil, and nature in general. In the latter, we respectfully acknowledge and learn from Elders and Country.

Of course, we are not arguing that ethics are not important—far from it. We can gain a great deal from becoming clearer about the rights of people, beings, and systems. In the complex world of embodied practice, what are the rights of soil, people in less seen places, trees, invasive species, spiritual practices, and so on? And how do we care for these—especially if their desires, needs, and/or rights seem to conflict? If we become clearer about how we ethically evaluate our permaculture decisions and projects, we are less likely to become bogged down in the moral quagmires that not uncommonly beset and paralyze us.

This has to be said, however; many of the people currently in power in Western countries are not thinking about any

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of this. It’s not a part of their lexicon. Shaping the fates of others’ lives—they actually have contempt for “do-gooders.” Environmentalism is painted as “crazy,” radical, and anti-business. Social justice human rights are frequently framed as unrealistic, inefficient, and possibly unpatriotic. For so many people and beings, these are such cruel, heart-breaking times.

It’s time to become powerful again. Time to embrace and express our deepest love of/for life. Time to leave our Cartesian prisons. It’s time to ecopsychologically, respectfully re-join with the rest of life. △

In a former life, Charlie lectured in Ethics. Charlie & Bridget travel between Michigan US, UK/Europe, and Australia learning from projects, real-life global situations, offering workshops, consulting & contracting in the implementation of permaculture, sustainability, and regenerative projects. For more information, go to, www.gardenjujucollective.com, www.charliebrennan.info, and www.resilientspirals.com.

This is an edited version of a longer article.