

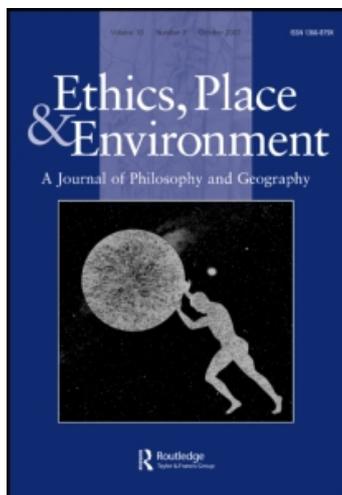
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### Book Reviews

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## Book Reviews

### **Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global**

Ursula K. Heise

*New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, 264 pp., cloth, \$99.00, paper, \$24.95*

The manner in which arguments are presented to, and appropriated within, our cultural imagination is arguably the crux of ethical arguments regarding how to right the course of environmentally malignant societies. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise stakes her claim with an ambitious argument situated wholly within this space between normative environmental arguments and our cultural imaginings of global ecological processes and local obligations.

Heise offers a fresh interdisciplinary perspective to support her argument that ecologically oriented thinking has yet to coherently respond to theoretical insights regarding how globalization increases connectedness the world over and fosters new cultural forms that are not anchored in place.

To motivate her argument, Heise carefully unsettles the narrative of North American environmentalism in which American's are imagined as a nomadic, highly mobile people, and wherein fostering a connection between individuals and their locales is critical to justifying and discharging environmental obligations. Two tenets of American environmental ideology find themselves squarely under Heise's critical gaze. The first is the shift from utopian ideals of the open frontier towards dystopian visions of 'population bombs' and apocalyptic outcomes due to the severed relationship between individuals and nature in industrial society. The second is the development of environmental philosophies that promote a 'sense of place' through attachments to the local, intimacy with the environment and ethical commitment. According to Heise, these two tenets of environmentalism not only conflict with one another at various points, they also forgo opportunities to link environmental problems that are global in nature to a 'sense of planet' that encourages an appropriately cosmopolitan ethic.

The main objective of Heise's work is to explore the conceptions of both environmental narratives and those social templates that have shaped perceptions of ecology in the West.

In this sense, the body of her work may be understood as an investigation of those metaphors and rhetorical devices that legitimate certain visions of ethical obligations and environmental ills. Her thesis is that the nature of these templates, given that

they are situated within certain cultural traditions, ultimately exert as much or more influence on environmental issues as scientific facts.

Heise defends her thesis by arguing that the questionable tenets underlying modern environmentalism should be tempered by an appreciation of how 'both local cultural and ecological systems are imbricated in global ones' (p. 59). This overlapping and layering of cultural narrative with social and scientific templates warrants caution, argues Heise, because of the ease with which their underlying metaphors may be employed, somewhat circuitously, as the foundations for ecological and ethical responsibility. Heise identifies the conflict between the ethic of proximity, implied in ideological commitments regarding one's 'sense of place', and the emergence of new cultural forms that are not anchored in place, as the main contours in her exploration of how different imaginings of globalization and personal obligation may interact. Her method of working towards a cosmopolitan ethic relies on novels, poetry and film that expose difficulties in the metaphors of the mainstream environmental imagination and in the rhetoric of sociological theories, particularly Ulrich Beck's risk society.

In terms of the mainstream environmental imagination that operates to encourage local attachments to place and to motivate 'local' ethical responses, the most incisive contribution of Heise's book is that her argument does not rehash what the science really 'means' in terms of moral obligations. Rather, she emphasizes that the integration of scientific images, theories of social and ecological relationships in disciplines such as anthropology and geography, and broader cultural imaginings operate in manifold directions and in a manner that makes universal applications of local ethical practices difficult to defend. Several of Heise's chosen examples make this connection in their ironic presentation of, for instance, the Amazon Rainforest through images generated solely through filming in Germany. Her chosen examples make accessible the difficulties of how local places and cultural imaginations compound straightforward linkages of place to planet.

In terms of the sociological theories that attempt accounts of how new forms of culture may emerge without ties to any particular place, Heise examines the representation of Beck's 'risk society' thesis in several novels regarding Chernobyl. Prior to investigating these novels however, Heise critically engages the 'risk society' thesis and its claims regarding how environmental risks reorganize traditional ideas of social status, the role of science in society and the types of social security necessary in the new global vision. Her treatment is fair and especially encouraging in the historical account she offers of how risk assessments have evolved over time in disciplines such as social psychology. Heise links the controversies in these arenas to broader concerns over the level of decision making that influences exposure to risk and the types of social institutions deemed acceptable. In this respect, Heise makes excellent use of a simple example from children's toys and the appearance of Hazardous Materials figurines alongside firefighters and police officers as the necessary keys to imagining a safe environment.

The conclusion of the work is perhaps its weakest point, as Heise does not delve explicitly into how we might move from her able critiques towards a new cosmopolitan ethic. Nonetheless, her diagnosis implies that the particular cosmology promoted in modern environmental thought preempts the emergence of a global citizenry. The upshot is that our emphasis on developing ethical attitudes that secure

local sustainability are in need of a more nuanced treatment if we are to respond ethically to global environmental issues in a grounded sense of place and planet. In this respect, Heise's rigorous critique of our contemporary milieu presents a critical step in moving past ideology and towards an ethic that appreciates its role in shaping globally connected processes. The interdisciplinary implications of Heise's work and the manner in which it engages theories of environmental ethics, social theory and normative scales of action make this book a must read for scholars interested in environmental thought writ large.

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**A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment**

Warwick Fox

*Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2006, x + 392 pp., cloth, \$68.00, paper, \$28.00*

Grand theorizing is nearly a lost art in moral philosophy. 'What does it all mean? How does it all fit together?' are questions rarely asked by the dominant analytic approaches to ethics whose intentions are best characterized as janitorial: they yield marvelous criticism but do more to tidy-up the perimeter of ethics than they do to give the subject a good airing. Happily, Warwick Fox's *Theory of General Ethics* takes up grand theory with the cheery gusto of a visiting mother-in-law on a spring-cleaning binge. Those of us given to analytics, however, will need to do some fresh tidying of our own before becoming convinced that a new era in philosophical ethics has indeed been swept in.

Fox thinks that moral philosophy is nowadays splintered between traditional 'interhuman' ethics which seeks to explicate our relations to each other but ignores the environment, and an environmental ethics which seeks to explicate humans' relationship to the natural environment but ignores the social. Worse still, the ethics attached to the human-constructed environment on which the fate of much of the 'green bits' of the earth depends, is still only in its nascent stage. A general theory, he argues, must find a coherent basis from which to address all three realms and he boldly lists 18 problems 'that any general ethics must be able to address' (p. 17).

Fox believes that the relation embodied in 'responsive cohesion' should serve as the foundational value common to all three realms (natural, interhuman and constructed). By responsive cohesion he means a relational quality in which people, other living things and man-made artifacts self-adjust harmoniously to existing situations. He contrasts responsive cohesion to two other states of affairs: 'discohesion' in which no discernible relationships exist, and 'fixed cohesion' in which relationships between things and states of affairs are either frozen or handed down by fiat. Of the three possible states of affairs, self-organizing responsive cohesion is clearly the superior one at all times.

A theory capable of becoming action guiding, Fox realizes, must do more than isolate a foundational value. It must also provide criteria for its implementation and this he does with his 'theory of contexts' and his 'multiple perspective account of moral agency' (p. 141). Regarding context, Fox observes that any action or any thing in the world can exhibit qualities of responsive cohesion internally among the parts of its own makeup as well as externally to other things in the world. Fox argues that external cohesion is always of greater significance than internal cohesion. Thus, an important measure of the right action is how well it responds to the context in which it is to reside. This theory also leads to an ordering of the three realms: the realm of the human-constructed environment must always take into consideration the interhuman, and the interhuman, in turn, must operate responsively to the natural environment, since the healthy condition of the natural environment is the basis, or precondition, for a thriving interhuman domain. What prevents this aspect of the theory from collapsing into the relentlessly agent-neutral stance of utilitarianism is the 'multiple perspective account of moral agency'. Fox argues that human limitation rules out true agent-neutrality. The agent-neutrality required by utilitarianism is a logical impossibility due to the inescapably asymmetric epistemic and motivational perspectives inhering in all moral agents. Guilt at understanding and preferring one's own interests and those of one's intimates to those of acquaintances and of distant beings is unnecessary. Naturally, this recognition doesn't allow us to completely ignore the claims of non-intimates, but what we actually owe them is much less than we would in utilitarianism. Fox fleshes-out this concept with a hierarchy of obligation that looks much like the slightly messy but well-meaning operations of any enlightened liberal-democratic state. After he elaborates on the logic of his hierarchy of obligation, he concludes by showing how the theory of responsive cohesion answers all 18 problems with which he began. Overall, the argument is well-structured, its presentation is non-technical enough for a non-specialist audience, and its delivery is admirably jargon-free.

So much for the grand theory, now for the analytic tidying. Obviously an agenda this ambitious will need much more vetting than a book review can provide, so I will concentrate on only two concerns with the book's argument which I feel best prepared to discuss: the logic behind the idea of responsive cohesion as the foundational value, and the theory of contexts needed to make the overall theory action-guiding. First (and more briefly): the idea that a relational quality—responsive cohesion—has the wherewithal to furnish the foundation for a general theory is not without its difficulties. While yes, in the absence of any relationship whatever (Fox's 'discohesion') ethics is impossible, and while paternalistic 'fixed cohesion' would be indistinguishable from coercion, thus leaving responsive cohesion as a necessary condition for ethics, it doesn't follow that a precondition for ethics becomes the foundational value itself. And then there's the issue of whether responsive cohesion is the right sort of relation to be called a value at all. Firstly, we might be forgiven for thinking that the point of ethics is to provide a corrective to the relentless struggle and reluctant cooperation found in nature's responsive cohesion. That the way nature does it is what ethics should have been aiming for all along is at least counterintuitive. Furthermore, it would be fundamentally misinterpreting Darwin to think that the responsive cohesion found in functioning ecosystems that serve as the model for Fox's concept allows for alternatives. The relational quality of

self-organizing responsive cohesion in the world of living things is all there is and all there ever could be. We humans tend to see nature as both beautiful and beneficial but these judgments are committing categorical mistakes when we try to apply them from an agent neutral point of view for we are admiring nature for something it can't help *but* be. There is no sense in which nature prefers or aspires to the complex ecosystems we regard as beautiful, preferable and ethical. This is like deciding that gravity, which is also a relation between things, is a foundational value. No options to gravity exist either and while it would certainly be impossible to imagine the world without it, it doesn't follow that we can, must or need to cultivate it. [Fox himself even finds gravitational pull an attractive analogy when he mentions the 'dance of mutual accommodation' between the earth and the moon (p. 173).] Self-organizing responsiveness is as ubiquitous on our lively planet as is gravity, but substantive differences exist between the two that deserve to be pointed out. Gravity appears to operate in only one way, while we can observe a multitude of ways that living things adjust to one another. Some of these ways we can reliably judge to be of greater value than others whereas all instances of gravitational pull pretty much look alike. Even so, we could legitimately demand to know what value there is in variety and what we should use as the basis for judgments of its merit. Fox would have it that increases or decreases in responsive cohesion would form this basis, but two much more likely candidates are beauty and beneficence. That is to say, we ultimately judge states of affairs in the world to be preferred due either to our perception of their ultimate benefit to us and other beings with which we can sympathize, or else due to some appraisal of their beauty. Observations of the responsive cohesion exhibited in a given state of affairs, while not irrelevant, may only be one aspect of the information used to make such judgments. Thus, while the relational quality of responsive cohesion has some advantages over such more obviously mechanical relations as gravity, the fact that this relational quality, unlike individual beings, is indestructible as long as any life exists makes elevating it to the status of a value still tough sledding. Fox attempts to rescue responsive cohesion from ubiquity by having it that there can be more or less of it in individual states of affairs, and that more is always preferred to less. There is probably more of it in a square meter of the Amazon than a similar patch of the Sonoran desert or the Midwestern prairie, but does that automatically give the Amazon a leg-up? I'm not yet convinced.

My concern with possible inadequacies in Fox's theory of contexts requires more exposition. Fox argues that to deny the priority of external cohesion to internal cohesion 'would amount to a state of permanent revolution on the largest contextual scale, for one would always be tearing apart and reconstructing the whole so as to be responsively cohesive with any newly ill-fitting part—and then doing the same for any even newer ill-fitting part, and so on', which, he thinks, is the same thing as a state of dis-cohesion (p. 172). Deference to the larger picture may initially seem like a reasonable-enough principle but in actuality it assumes too much. Due to the same human limitation that informs Fox's multiple perspective account of moral agency, we can never take in all possible repercussions of our proposed actions. We must choose what we allow to be the relevant context and what will be ignored. This necessary choosing makes 'the context' irreducibly normative. Context doesn't just exist: it is decided upon. To decide upon what is to be allowed to be considered

the relevant context is to have already done much of the ethical heavy-lifting well before we decide what to do about, with or to it. To take a contemporary example: many western observers worry over the destruction of the traditional urban fabric wrought by China's headlong dash into modernization. But for the Chinese, these traditional urban forms, however quaint, are simply not the relevant context. The twenty-first century is the relevant context. Are the concerned westerners engaging in the most noxious forms of paternalism in wanting the Chinese to maintain their traditions, or are the Chinese overlooking the obvious? Ultimately, no non-normative basis exists from which to answer such questions. If normative decisions must go into determining what counts for the relevant context before we ever even get to the decision over whether a proposed intervention is justifiable or not, then on what basis are we making *those* judgments? Now, certainly, Fox might be able to argue that responsive cohesion could assist in determining the relevant context too but I fear that his solution is subject to a spiral. In the situation in China, responsive cohesion might well provide reasons for a more sensitive urban renewal, but one could easily imagine Chinese planners asking if the needs of millions of poorly housed citizens don't constitute an even more important context. This contextual one-upmanship has no logical end to it and so yet another normative decision at a further remove of abstraction must be made regarding when to pull the plug on these spiraling considerations. Thus, my concern is that the theory of contexts needed to make the general theory action-guiding will not work since it assumes and requires an objectivity about context that doesn't exist.

Even though Fox presents his argument as *the* solution to the problem of constructing an adequately capacious ethical theory to enclose all three disparate realms, we don't necessarily have to take this ambitious work in the same way. These concerns, especially the difficulties with the theory of context, prevent me from concluding that he has ironed-out all the kinks in contemporary moral philosophy in one tract. I would be just as happy, however, if it more modestly initiates new and fruitful conversations and a bit more responsive cohesion within moral philosophy itself.

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