
If human beings could responsibly create new habitats where other creatures would suffer less than they do now, would it be a good idea to do so, even if it meant eradicating wild places previously untouched by our activity? Joshua S. Duclos’s *Wilderness, Morality, and Value* investigates that question provocatively and thoughtfully, building on decades of philosophical analysis. The first three chapters offer a concise account of and intervention in many existing philosophical debates about whether the concept of ‘wilderness’ is useful, how non-human creatures and systems fit into existing ethical frameworks, and how environmental awareness should change philosophy. Duclos argues that wilderness is a definable and useful idea but that moral defenses of it generally tend to focus on aspects that are, at least in principle, replaceable.

He also notes that most discussions of wilderness ignore two important claims. First, wilderness causes pain. Every wild ecosystem of which we are aware ‘entails incalculable, unremitting suffering and early death for many millions of sentient beings’ (p. 23). The book appropriately treats this as a self-evident fact. Second, philosophers have thus far not reckoned with the idea that human beings could someday have the power to lessen that suffering: ‘In principle, there is no reason why we could not find a way to maintain healthy ecosystems while also increasing animal welfare through the elimination of disease, predation, and early death’ (p. 35).

The second claim requires more elucidation, and Duclos does so in conversation with the Breakthrough Institute, a think tank that focuses on how technological and economic progress can serve environmental goals. He summarizes their organizing principle this way: ‘Since we already live in a geologic epoch defined by human intervention, let us accept that the right kind of human intervention can help rather than harm the environment, and let us not shy away from using all the scientific and technological ingenuity we can muster to improve the human situation’ (p. 92). To my reading, Duclos does not explicitly endorse or reject this claim, but instead uses it to inform the philosophical problem at the heart of his book. If we become capable, should we also someday use technology to make wilderness areas less brutal, and therefore less wild?

Duclos argues that answering this question in the negative would require articulating a value of wilderness that cannot be replaced by something less wild. His own proposed answer reveals the particular interest that this journal’s readers might have in the book: the strongest defense of wilderness is an appeal to ‘a kind of religious or spiritual value’, a value which transcends the secular considerations.
of philosophers (p. 123). Drawing especially on the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Duclos argues that religious ideas can ‘suspend’ ethics, and so even if humans could one day be confident that our technology would alleviate rather than increase suffering, the sacred value of wilderness might still stop such intervention.

There is much to learn from this book. I particularly appreciated the clarity with which Duclos reviews philosophical discussions and takes strong positions of his own. Even when I disagreed with his conclusions and assumptions, I understood his justification and respect his precision. As someone deeply suspicious of the ecomodernist projects like the Breakthrough Institute, I learned a great deal from the way he took their ideas seriously and reflected on what is required to argue against them philosophically.

As someone disciplinarily based outside of the field of philosophy, my critique focuses on the boundaries Duclos sets for his analysis. At many points, he draws clear lines. Considering the possibility that his discussions are too abstract to be useful for environmentalist causes, he argues that environmental philosophy need not ‘be the servant of environmental activism, and to the extent that we have scholars asking hard questions rather than merely pushing political ends, the field is arguably moving in the right direction’ (p. 18). There is, he argues, a boundary between philosophy and activism; the former’s job is not necessarily to serve the latter.

Similarly, while Duclos accepts that the concept of wilderness does not make sense in many non-European cultures, and has historically been used to deny the agency of indigenous peoples, he moves past these critiques by delineating the boundaries of his discipline: ‘Even if the idea of wilderness and wilderness preservation is foreign to some indigenous people...it is unclear how that makes the idea philosophically problematic’ (p. 8). At other points, these boundaries are less clear, and some ideas from outside the discipline of philosophy are taken more seriously. Drawing on the Breakthrough Institute shows openness to non-philosophical environmental discourse. Similarly, the book’s conclusion that religious beliefs could suspend ethics powerfully suggests that there are limits to pure philosophy and that Duclos looks beyond it.

I do not always understand why some voices are included and others excluded. If a Christian’s belief that God’s creation matters can suspend philosophical ethics, why can’t an Indigenous community’s worldview that precludes a separate wilderness? If the Breakthrough Institute’s work can inform philosophical reflections on wilderness, why shouldn’t philosophers also draw on the ways that, say, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores indigenous connections between people and land in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013)? Or the reflections on the limits of wilderness by African American poets in *Black Nature* (Dungy 2009)? Or the broad range of perspectives from BIPOC authors in *The Colors of Nature* (Deming and Savoy 2011)?

None of this is meant to dismiss Duclos’s thoughtful book. To the contrary, I see this book’s central question as important enough to deserve more and wider consideration, with a much broader range of sources. *Wilderness, Morality, and Value* will help readers to think about what it means to live responsibly in the Anthropocene, and should be part of many broader and broadening conversations.
References


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