

The Self in Deep Ecology: A Response to Watson

Draft; do not cite

Final Version of Record: *Asian Philosophy* 30.1 (2020): 30-39

Available at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09552367.2020.1733215>

Abstract: Richard Watson maintains that deep ecology suffers from an internal contradiction and should therefore be rejected. Watson contends that deep ecology claims to be non-anthropocentric while at the same time is committed to setting humans apart from nature, which is inherently anthropocentric. I argue that Watson's objection arises out of a fundamental misunderstanding of how deep ecologists conceive of the 'Self.' Drawing on resources from Buddhism, I offer an understanding of the 'Self' that is fully consistent with deep ecology, and does not lead to the anthropocentric contradiction that Watson identifies. The paper will proceed as follows: First, I articulate Watson's objection, and briefly discuss the traditional deep ecology position. Next, I turn to a discussion of the 'Self' and show that there are conceptions of human nature that are not separate from 'Nature.' It will thus be shown that deep ecology is not inconsistent and need not be rejected.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Buddhism, Deep Ecology, Dogen

Richard Watson argues that because deep ecology¹ suffers from internal contradictions it should, therefore, be abandoned. On the one hand, Watson thinks that the deep ecologist is committed to setting humanity apart from nature, which he believes is anthropocentric. On the other hand, the deep ecologist claims to be non-anthropocentric. My purpose in this paper is to respond to Watson and show that deep ecology is not anthropocentric. Watson's objection arises out of an understanding of human nature, which is at worst flawed, and, at best, is not the position of the deep ecologist. Therefore, his objection is not sound, and deep ecology does not have to be abandoned.

¹ In this paper, I will use the terms 'deep ecology,' 'ecosophy,' 'ecophilosophy,' and their derivatives interchangeably.

In this paper, I will first articulate Watson's objection. Then I will briefly discuss the traditional deep ecologist position. After that, I turn to a discussion of the self – i.e., the notion of the self in deep ecology – that will show that human nature is not separate from 'Nature.' By examining the notion of 'self' it will be shown that deep ecology is not anthropocentric and Watson's objection fails. My purpose in this paper is not to lay out a specific environmental ethic; it is merely to show that deep ecology does not suffer from internal contradictions.

1. Watson's objection

In 'A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism,' Watson claims that deep ecology, which conceives of itself as paradigmatically anti-anthropocentric, '[suffer] from serious internal contradictions. [Watson thinks] they are so serious that the position must be abandoned' (Watson, 1983, p. 251). Both Watson and deep ecologists – e.g., Naess and Sessions – agree that humans are part of nature. Yet, according to Watson 'the entire tone of the [deep ecology] position ... is to set man apart from nature and above all other living species' (pp. 251-252).

Watson goes on to say that

[t]he posing of man against nature in any way is anthropocentric... Human ways – human culture – and human actions are as natural as are the ways in which other species of animals behave. But if we view the state of nature or Nature as being natural, undisturbed, and unperturbed only when human beings are *not* present, or only when human beings are curbing their natural behavior, then we are assuming that human beings are apart from, separate from, different from, removed from or above nature (p. 252)

The idea is that to be truly anti-anthropocentric, one must accept that hydrogen bombs are as natural as the work of any other animal or plant.

Especially with the impact we see from climate change, it is hard to deny that ‘civilized man wreaks ... havoc on the environment’ (p. 252). Watson maintains that the only justification for curbing human’s ‘natural’ tendencies of havoc wrecking is anthropocentric prudence.

Watson believes that human nature ‘has been to propagate and thrive at the expense of many other species and to the disruption – or, neutrally, to the change – of the planet’s ecology’ (p. 253). Watson claims that anti-anthropocentrism – i.e., deep ecology – is committed to the following view:

Human beings do alter things. They cause the extinction of many species, and they change the earth’s ecology. This is what humans do. *This is their destiny.*
... The human species should be allowed – if any species can be said to have a right – to live out its evolutionary potential, or its own destruction if that is the end result. It is nature’s way (p. 253).²

Here is where Watson finds the internal inconsistency in deep ecology. He believes deep ecology, at once, wants to prevent human destruction of the environment, and being anti-anthropocentric, deep ecology is committed to a ‘hands off’ to humanity approach – humans can do whatever they want.

2. Some points of clarification

Before continuing, I believe it is necessary to clarify a couple of points. The first point relates to the notion of ‘anthropocentric.’ The second point has to do with what is meant by

² Italics mine

‘natural’. By clarifying these two concepts, it will make the critique of Watson’s objection, and my response to it, clearer.

‘Anthropocentric’ can be construed in a number of different ways. Most crudely, anthropocentrism can be understood as the idea that all that matters are humans. Another way ‘anthropocentric’ can be understood is that all value is derivative of human values. A third way is the way that Watson seems to use the term. Watson claims that ‘[t]he posing of man against nature in any way is anthropocentric’ (p. 252). Since Watson’s objection is based on understanding anthropocentric in that way, I will be using his understanding for the purpose of this paper.

As to ‘Natural,’ Watson is using it in a very strict sense. Watson believes that human nature is natural because anything humans do cannot violate the laws of nature. Natural understood as not violating the laws of nature is what Holmes Rolston calls ‘following nature in the absolute sense’ (Rolston, 1988, p. 33). However, one can understand human nature as natural in an artificial sense: ‘Humans alter the course of spontaneous nature’ (p. 34). Both Watson and the deep ecologist believe that natural in the artificial sense is what is problematic.

Curbing the human destruction of the environment is the goal of both Watson and the deep ecologist. However, how that is to be done is where Watson and the deep ecologist diverge. Watson believes that anthropocentric prudence pushes one toward following nature in a relative, or artificial, sense. ‘All landscaping is artificial; on the other hand no landscaping violates the laws of nature. Some landscaping which blends with natural contours and uses native flora or introduce[s] plants compatible with it, is considered more natural’ (p. 35).

I contend that human nature for the deep ecologist may fit under any of these definitions of natural. However, a more Buddhist view of the self makes possible a deep ecological

understanding of ‘human nature’ that avoids the contradiction that Watson believes is inherent in deep ecology.

3. Deep ecology – abridged

Bill Devall and George Sessions, in ‘Deep Ecology,’ set forth eight basic principles of deep ecology.

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonymous: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher

standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.

8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 70).

It seems to me that too much focus has been placed on the ‘formal principles’ of deep ecology and that opens up deep ecology to Watson’s objections. However, the crux of deep ecology involves what Arne Naess calls self-realization. In fact, Deane Curtin states that ‘deep ecologists contend that the most urgent task of the ecophilosophy is the articulation of a new understanding of the self’ (Curtin 1994, p. 195).

First, however, it may be instructive to more clearly define ‘ecosophy.’ *Eco-* refers to the fact that one is dealing with ecology and the environment. ‘The ending *-sophy* stresses that what we modestly try to realize is wisdom rather than science or information. A philosophy, as articulated wisdom, has to be a synthesis of theory and practice’ (Naess, 1998, p. 137). Thus, ecosophy, or deep ecology, is ecological, or environmental, wisdom. As such, ecosophy seeks to be a synthesis of theory and practice.

Keeping in mind this ecosophic synthesis of theory and practice, I now turn to a discussion of self-realization. Naess claims that ‘[s]elf-realization in its absolute maximum is the mature experience of oneness in diversity’ (p. 139). Naess’ statement here highlights the theory side of ecosophy/deep ecology. As to the practice side, Naess maintains that there is a process by which one can widen identification and narrow alienation. According to Naess, the self – or rather, Self – is simply that with which one identifies. This ‘[i]dentification is a spontaneous non-rational, but not irrational, process through which *the interest or interests of another being*

are reacted to as our own interest or interests' (p. 139). Another way of thinking about self-realization is that, as Devall and Sessions state, 'we cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans from our family and friends to, eventually, our species' (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 67) and ultimately to the whole of nature.

4. Laying the groundwork and going deeper

To answer Watson's anthropocentric objection, one must realize that at the end of the day the formal principles of deep ecology are secondary. As was mentioned above, 'the most urgent task of ecophilosophy is the articulation of a new understanding of the self' (Curtin, 1994, p. 195). While developing a new understanding of any concept or idea has value in itself, there is a more fundamental motivation for the deep ecologist.

The autonomous mental substance of Descartes, which still permeates Western thinking, is alienated from nature. This conception encourages environmental degradation since damage to nature does not directly affect an immaterial self. Naess therefore advocates that the narrow, Cartesian self must be expanded to include identification with the whole of nature – nature as Self – thus, eliminating alienation, and with it the deep causes of our mistreatment of the environment (p. 195).

So, environmental degradation is bad, and most people would certainly agree that it is. But, the reason humans mistreat the environment, at least according to deep ecology, is due to a misunderstood sense of self. Therefore, in order to 'fix' how one treats the environment, one must alter one's notion of the self. Roughly then, an expanded view of the self is required in

order to solve environmental problems. Thought of this way, it appears that the deep ecologists are really just presupposing the conclusion in the premises – viz., that one should change one’s view of one’s ‘self.’ Moreover, it appears that the deep ecologists are claiming that from an ‘anthropocentric’ viewpoint, degradation of the environment is wrong. The only way one can stop environmental degradation is to have a more inclusive sense of self. Therefore, one should change one’s view of the self, so that environmental degradation will stop. Further, it can be noted that the manner in which Naess explains the expanded view of self seems to have an, arguably, anthropocentric – or perhaps anthropomorphic – tone.

I think a better way of looking at the situation is as follows: The current idea of self – as an autonomous, self-interested ego – is flawed. Therefore, one should change one’s notion of the self. As a result, one’s relationship with nature will change. And, if the deep ecologist is correct, it will have a positive ecological impact. Here is the idea: one can take morality as primary, explanatorily at least. What I want to suggest is that ontology should be made primary. Thus, the contrast is does morality drive ontology – which is what I take to be Watson’s interpretation of deep ecology – or does ontology drive morality – which is what I take to actually be the deep ecological position.

With that in mind, consider, again the ‘self.’ Walpola Rahula explains that ‘Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of [a self].³ According to the teachings of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary false belief which has no corresponding reality’ (Rahula, 1974, p. 51). From the Buddhist perspective, besides being false and imaginary – which I will return to below – there is a further reason for rejecting a permanent,

³ Rahula perhaps, unintentionally, overstates the situation. Famously, Hume denies the existence of such a self. I leave that to the side, as it is not essential for the purposes of my argument. No doubt, Buddhism has a distinctive conception of the self.

autonomous ego. Such a conception of the self – call this the ‘traditional understanding’ – leads to suffering. The traditional understanding of the ego, Rahula explains, ‘produces harmful thoughts of “me” and “mine,” selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems’ (p. 51).

Perhaps something less theoretical will make this point clearer. Consider the following scenario:

GROCERY STORE: You are standing in line at the grocery store. You are in the express lane and three people in front of you all have five more items than they are supposed to. Further, two people try to pay with checks, and the lane is cash only. They both get in huge arguments with the cashier and one ends up paying with pennies and the other just abandons their items – which takes time to clear. In the end it takes you twenty minutes to buy a half gallon of milk.

The whole time you are in line, you are getting more and more upset, your blood pressure is rising and you just want to yell at someone. Suppose you do yell at someone; that just makes you angrier. Thus, a quick trip to the grocery store has led to you getting upset and ruining your whole evening because you continue to brood over the incident.

Your ruined evening, the unpleasantness of your anger, et cetera are a result from the people in front of you wasting ‘your’ time. ‘You’ had ‘important’ things to do. Your wants and desires are so much more important than other people’s lives. ‘You’ *hate* these people because ‘they’ have interfered with your television show, say. These negative results are actually the consequence of believing in the traditional notion of the self.

GROCERY STORE gets at the crux of the Buddhist position. Because there is a ‘you’ – i.e., a self – you crave things. Craving leads to suffering because you may not get those things you desire, or if you do get them, you are afraid you will lose them. In Buddhism, suffering is called *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is often translated as suffering, but it can better be translated as instability or unsettledness. Thus, *dukkha* follows directly from believing in an individual, and substantial, self.

Certainly, most everyone does believe in a self. It is a deeply rooted psychological belief, but that does not make it right. However, what we call the self has an essentially empty nature. Everything undergoes change: Dirt compresses into rock, wind and rain break down the rock and turn it into sand. The sand is taken up and turned into glass, say a bowl. The bowl is dropped and broken. The broken glass is recycled and turned into insulation. The insulation is put into a house. The house burns down, and the process just keeps going. The process of continual change has no real beginning and no real end. Nothing is lasting; everything is impermanent, including the self – at least according to the traditional teachings of Buddhism. People are born, grow and die. No one will deny that the molecules that make up ‘my’ body today are not the same as the molecules that made up my body when ‘I’ was three. Further, experiences today are just memories tomorrow. Impermanence is one aspect of what is called *sunyata* (emptiness) in Buddhism.

Another aspect of emptiness is that speaking of what something is only makes sense in relation to what it is not. A pencil with which I may write is only a pencil, at least in part, because it is not a pen or a crayon or a car. Further, emptiness can be seen in what makes something up. Consider, again, the pencil. The pencil is made of wood, which came from a mill. The mill got its wood from a logger, who chopped down a tree. The tree, in turn, came from a

seed, which was nurtured by the sun and rain. Thus, a particular pencil reflects all the things that led to the pencil's coming to be. If any of the myriad things that led to the pencil's coming to be were lacking, that particular pencil would not exist. In Buddhism, because of these and other reasons it is said that the pencil is empty and lacks an essential self – it does not exist from its own side, it dependently and radically contingently exists.

It is the same for people. One is conceived at a specific time. One eats particular food, has particular experiences, mental states, et cetera. All of these things make up what one is. There is no thing that is one of these or separate from these that can rightly be understood as the individual self or ego. Curtin maintains that what has just been said is exactly a point to which Zen master Dogen continually returns. 'Dogen makes a Humean point: careful examination does not reveal a "singular," Cartesian self, but "innumerable beings" present to multiple spheres in which beings exist in relation to other beings' (Curtin, 1994, p. 200).

Again, the conclusion that Buddhism draws from these considerations is that one is mistaken when one postulates a unique, individual, autonomous ego. Now, there is a real reason for the deep ecologist to articulate a new understanding of the self, which is non-question-begging – viz., that the traditional notion of 'self' is flawed.

Using more technical jargon, consider the notion of *paticca samuppada*, dependent co-origination. Dependent co-origination is simply the idea that one cannot isolate a separate self. All phenomena are dependent on other phenomena for their coming into existence and their ceasing to exist. Importantly though, for Buddhism, and I would say deep ecology, all that has been said, thus far, has to be realized in practice. One must see that all phenomena, including one's self, is impermanent (*anicca*). One must realize that all things are empty of essential self

(*anatta*). One must realize that by not having understood *anatta* and *anicca*, one is in fact suffering (*dukkha*) – or is subject to a life of dissatisfaction and dis-ease.

One must always keep in mind that, for Buddhism and deep ecology, when it comes down to it, experience is what ultimately matters. For now, though, I will continue with theory. Curtin emphasizes the relational notion of self in Dogen, which can be instructive for the overall project and its relevance to deep ecology. Dogen goes beyond Naess' expanding circles of identification. 'Dogen challenges us to take [the] final step toward nondualism. For Dogen, the self goes out to realize with what he calls "the myriad things". But the myriad things *also come forth to realize us*' (Curtin, 1996, p. 245). Curtin calls the interaction between the self and the myriad things co-realization with all things. The idea of the myriad things coming forth to realize us is simply an extension of dependent co-origination.

Through co-realization, or so the thought goes, not only is the self nondualistic, but it is also nonmonistic. All phenomena are empty of essential self and impermanent, and interdependent, hence nondual. There is no sharp distinction between this and that. However, the fact that there are various phenomena – for example 'me' holding a pencil – is a given. Thus, reality is not totally monistic. Consider that a top's spinning and a top's standing on its tip are co-realized. They are entirely dependent, and one cannot exist without the other – the top spinning, just is the top standing on its tip, and vice versa. At the same time, they are in some sense distinct states of affairs.⁴ It is not the case that everything is one whole; it is simply that everything is related and there is no clear distinction between phenomena. His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains that

⁴ My thanks to Mylan Engel for this helpful analogy of the top. However, he offered it as a counterexample to the point I am trying to make, but I think it actually illustrates it nicely.

[b]ecause phenomena possess the characteristics of existing and occurring and are dependent on other factors – causes, conditions, and so forth – they are, therefore devoid of an independent nature. Consequently, they have the nature of being dependent. The very fact that they have this nature of dependence – being dependent on other factors – is an indication that they lack an independent status ... Therefore, an understanding of emptiness does not contradict the conventional reality of phenomena (Gyatso, 1995, p. 45).

What the Dalai Lama is underscoring is an extremely important point and returns to the idea of ‘natural’ and ‘human nature.’ Phenomenal reality, as one normally thinks about it, is not denied. A tree is still a tree; a pencil is still a pencil. The natural sciences can, and should, continue as they have. The point of an ‘empty self’ is an ontological one and quasi-ethical.⁵ If one’s actions come from a deluded sense of a permanent self, it can be said that one is not acting naturally – or, perhaps, authentically.

The relational aspect of phenomena is the basis on which all phenomena derive value.⁶ Two things should be said here. First, value here is not moral value, per se – though it is not not moral value. The intrinsic or inherent value of all phenomena is ontological – for lack of a better term. All phenomena are valuable simply by being; this is taken as axiomatic for deep ecology. Further, since all phenomena are interdependent, value is also interdependent.

Second, it is not the case that value is made or created, or is, in some sense, distinguishable from being. The ontological value of being simply *is*. To speak of value,

⁵ To be clear it is ethical but in a broader way than is sometimes typical—incorporating normative, deontic, axiological and ontological aspects. Certainly, a discussion of value can be instructive and interesting, but at this point is not directly relevant to my overall thesis.

⁶ ‘Derive’ may not be exactly the right term, though I cannot think of a better one.

independent of being is a nominal distinction, but that is not to say there is no value. Value is part of being, or rather, being is value and value is being.

It may be objected that the way I am interpreting value is extremely vague and ‘continental’ – in a derogatory sense. However, that is not my intention. My discussion of value can be seen as a natural outcome of the relational, and interdependent, notion of self. If one wishes to speak of value at all and claim that human beings have inherent value, then due to the interdependence of all phenomena all phenomena must have inherent value based on the relational aspect of being.

The implications of what has been said is that talk of normative duties, rights and so forth can be laid aside. Since human nature is not privileged – indeed human nature is not even distinct from Nature – it cannot be said that deep ecology is anthropocentric. Deep ecology puts no restrictions or prescriptions on human action; hence, it is non-anthropocentric in precisely Watson’s sense. However, what has been explained thus far is just theory. There is a practice side as well. Interdependence, impermanence, et cetera must be realized. Further, it must, and can only be, realized in relation with and to the environment – with and to all phenomena – i.e., co-realized.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche explains that ‘[a]t first we must gain the intellectual understanding ... To begin to do this, we need the two kinds of knowledge gained from learning and reflection. After obtaining that, we can directly experience [co-realization]’ (Nyima, 1996, p. 59). However, one might wonder how what has been said relates to an environmental *ethic*. Ideally, one would be, for lack of a better term, ‘enlightened’ and act ‘appropriately.’⁷ Yet, not

⁷ Here, one needs to be careful with moral sounding language; as an ‘enlightened’ being one would simply act, and those actions would be neither good nor bad, they would simply be. Yet,

everyone is enlightened. Therefore, ethics is necessary in a pragmatic sense. Environmental ethics – by that I mean pre- and proscriptions, duties, obligation and so forth to, or regarding the environment – would be an aspect of what Tibetan Buddhism calls *lo-jong*. *Lo-jong* ‘[m]eans mind training, or thought transformation. These practices ... are so called because they aim at nothing short of bringing about a radical transformation in our thinking, and through it, our way of life’ (Gyatso, 1995, p. 59).

Before concluding, there are a couple of points I would like to make. First, it may be objected that I have gone beyond deep ecology and have misrepresented the position. However, I do not believe I have done so. Devall and Sessions are quite clear that one is ‘encouraged to elaborate [one’s] own version of deep ecology, clarify key concepts’ (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 70). All I have done is to clarify the key concepts – the notion of the self in particular. Further, Naess states that ‘I call my philosophy “Ecosophy T,” using the character *T* to emphasize that other people in the movement would, if motivated to formulate their world view and general value priorities, arrive at different ecosophies’ (Naess, 1998, p. 137).

5. Conclusion

Watson objects to deep ecology on the grounds that it is inconsistent. Watson believes it is inconsistent because, while claiming to be non-anthropocentric, deep ecology ‘interferes’ with human nature. By interfering with human nature, the deep ecologist is setting human nature apart and is, thereby, anthropocentric.

in some sense they would be ‘the right action,’ since the action would come from the true nature of being, co-realized in/with the world, and not skewed by a deluded sense of self.

Drawing on Buddhism, it has been shown that the ‘Cartesian self’ is a flawed conception, or at least not the notion of self that the deep ecologist holds. The deep ecologist claims that the Cartesian self is flawed, and a new understanding should be adopted. As a result of the new view of self, one’s conception of human nature is also changed. Human nature, for the deep ecologist, is not posed against nature – as Watson claims – but instead is interrelated with nature and cannot be pulled apart from nature.

When one, through experience, realizes the interdependence of phenomena, one will act in an ‘ethically appropriate,’ or even an ‘ethically exemplary,’ manner toward nature. It is not that human’s ‘natural’ tendencies are curbed because of prudence; abuse of the environment will cease when one realizes the fundamental interdependence of all things.

Finally, in regards to formal principles and definite actions one should take, these are mind-training devices. Normative duties and so forth help one to realize the expanded view of self and are part of the co-realization process. Further, until one has come to an ‘enlightened’ view of nature, one in a sense imitates the actions of those who have truly realized the expanded view of self. Because the formal principles are mind trainings, the principles of deep ecology are not anthropocentric either. They do not set human nature apart, but rather serve a heuristic purpose; they are used to bring one to an expanded view of self.

In conclusion, Watson’s objection to deep ecology is unsound. Deep ecology is not anthropocentric, or need not be anthropocentric. At worst, one might claim that the deep ecologists have not been clear. Since a fuller understanding of the self, from a deep ecological perspective, highlights the fact that there is no distinction between human nature and Nature, deep ecology is not inconsistent in claiming to be non-anthropocentric. Thus, deep ecology does not have to be abandoned, as Watson claims.

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