Environmentalists in both the theoretical and the practical community have begun to ask fundamental questions about the ongoing failure to stop ever-worsening environmental degradation and destruction. Some turn to critiques of modernity, questioning its underlying assumptions and values. Others find themselves searching outside the familiar top-down approach—reasoning from universal principles to specific practices—to embrace a local, place-based approach. Of course, ethical principles and placed-based ethics need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, looked at with insight and creativity, these two notions can and should be woven together.

However, many in environmental ethics do not embrace a place-based approach, preferring instead to continue housing the valuing of nature within larger and distant frameworks. But I, for one, perceive the necessity of freeing ethics from the grip of powerful others—governmental institutions as well as abstract philosophical ideas. I believe it is promising to let ethics spring from the “wilds” of the local.

With this ideal in mind, one soon realizes the necessity of understanding what place is and how to comprehend ethics at the place-based, local scale. Thus questions arise as we search for more appropriate solutions within our local places, including: How do we approach concepts of relativism that come to the fore as we seek to give place priority in ethics? How do we understand our individual relationships with place? And how do individualistic tendencies grow to be part of a relationship based on care and respect for “non-human” others within place? Moreover, how can we conceptualize an ecological ethics that springs forth and prospers within such local places?

These are the type of questions Mick Smith addresses in An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory. Smith’s theory is based on sensitivity to locality and context of place; he favors the development of an ethics that is “an-archic,” in the process of maintaining and facilitating difference in place. Of necessity, therefore, his theory is not meta-ethical but must be rooted in a kind of ethical practice—the social project of manifesting such an ethics on the ground within the local. Smith’s goal is to illustrate what radical environmentalism has to offer us as we struggle to transcend our current modus operandi.

Smith begins by critiquing modernist paradigms. His analysis is specifically aimed at ethical theories within philosophy and social sciences that have allowed right and wrong to be determined by those removed from place—bureaucrats, governments, and the legal system—and have confined ethics to an “abstract theoretical tool for passing judgment or evaluating actions at a distance, rather than embedded in an intimate relation to relevant others” (p. 15). He also critiques environmental theories for squeezing themselves into current modernist paradigms and debates, “thus becoming eviscerated and then absorbed in more palatable frameworks with which [they have] little in common” (p. 14). Smith further illustrates the irony of environmental ethics that attempt to challenge destructive practices, while tacitly accepting the conceptual framework upon which those very practices rest: “There are serious implications for theories that attempt to define solutions to a social crisis within philosophical frameworks that arise from and whether knowingly or unconsciously may support the very society we criticize” (p. 14). These are all valid critiques of contemporary environmental thought,
and I believe the lesson resulting from his analysis is the necessity to be highly reflexive of our thoughts and actions as we try to break free of modernity’s rational box.

Smith weaves together his theory on “ethics of place” by pulling various threads from different modes of thought. He starts by offering radical environmentalism as the foundation for his theory. Within this strain of thought Smith seeks to “reconstitute our ethical relations to natural others,” wanting “to produce a sensus communis that can be inclusive of humans and non-humans” (p. 216). Radical environmentalism also offers us space for an ethical antinomianism, a rejection of moral rules and structure in favor of moral action, where the free individual is responsible for creating his or her own space of ethical engagement with place.

Smith sees the appeal as well as the dangers of radical environmentalism. It brings with it a kind of “radical individualism that regards each of us unto ourselves; a view of liberty that easily verges on moral libertinism and a nihilistic conception of polities” (p. 21). But this seems an unavoidable direction when one starts looking to place and the bottom of bottom-up approaches. For this reason antinomianism is a concept that should be critiqued more closely as part of building new understandings of environmental theory. In chapter 7, “Thin Air and Silent Gravity: The Ecological Self and the Intangibility of the Ethical Subject,” Smith confronts the problematic individualism that concepts of antinomianism pose to ideas of care for others. He addresses this tension by re-conceptualizing individualism with ideas stemming from feminist theory. Smith asks, “how can individual autonomy be squared with concerns for others?” (p. 21). Here he looks to work from Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray to develop an ecological self—a self whose process of formation depends on the “recognition of and respect for the other” (p. 7)—and then links it to an environmental ethos to “re-envision as an expression of a heartfelt but uncodified modus vivendi” (p. 21). He also draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept that “becoming part of culture, becoming cultured, always requires an understanding that can only come from being open to difference. Self formation, becoming an individual, is inextricably caught up with the recognition of a respect for different others” (p. 217). Although these conceptions are focused on the relational self, Smith sees nothing from preventing the extension to be inclusive of nature’s expression. From this analysis, Smith offers us all a fuller comprehension of relational self within radical environmentalism, specifically when that relation is with “non-human others.”

Toward the end of the book Smith finally presents the heart of his theory. He again relies on feminist theory to lay the groundwork of conceptualizing an ecological ethics spatially, within place. He argues for conceptualizing a “spatial metaphorics” to grasp his theory of an “ethics of place.” This is the most novel part of his theory, which he has been building cautiously, brick by brick, throughout the book. I must admit that it became a bit frustrating as I read through three quarters of the book and still was not quite sure where his argument was going. It was well worth the effort, though. Aiding his spatial metaphorics, Smith expands upon feminist Luce Irigaray’s work on the notion of a space where others can express their difference; a space that allows escape from the pressure of an “economy of the Same.” Again Smith argues that although in most feminist theory this model does not explicitly delve into the creation of such a space for nature, it is easily extended to include it. I believe that feminism stands out as a field that environmentalism needs to embrace more actively in order to help define the ecological individual and his or her relationship
with non-human others in all their difference.

The concept of “space” as a setting of self-realization, care, and respect for difference is linked to the concept of “place” as a domain of local, concrete natural and cultural setting. Smith maintains that realizing this ethics of “letting others be” can only be done at the scale of place. Moreover, the priority of practice over theory—action over structure—emerges here because an “ethics of place” depends on developing a practical sense of what is “significant and fitting” within one’s place. This can be accomplished only through a sensitivity of the changes within one’s surrounding environment requiring an openness to difference, spatially and temporally. “As is appropriate for an ethics of place, a spatial metaphorics... helps us get a feeling for the meaning of this ethics” (p. 218). Therefore, at a spatial level, an ethics of place that requires “letting others be” can be imagined as “giving others room to develop and not shaping their existence solely for our own instrumental ends” (p. 219). Thus an “ethics of place” would “not seek to colonize or appropriate nature, to reduce it into the economy of ‘Same’, but to sustain its excess... that never surfeited sea... of radical difference” (p. 218). He further explains: “Put more bluntly, an ethics relation entails respecting and perhaps even facilitating the ability of others to maintain their differences and create their own space for development” (p. 219). An “evil” then, according to Smith, is the obstruction of allowing others, both inside and outside the human community, the space to be.

Radical environmentalism is where Smith bases his “ethics of place.” But to successfully weave in concepts of the essence of nature, he draws upon deep ecology. Smith certainly values the strides Arne Naess and deep ecology have made for arguing that “culture is not the only medium of our existence [nor] the only thing that is constitutive of [our] discourse” (p. 128). Put more plainly, “nature is never simply a social product” (p. 129). This, of course, most of us can agree on. However, Smith is critical of deep ecology for its “knee-jerk” response to relativism by avoiding the argument entirely and miring itself in replacing social laws with purely natural laws. Here the book makes a fascinating and important contribution because Smith introduces an alternative to the intrinsic/social valuing of nature debate—an alternative that pulls the residence of values from both the social and natural realm and lays them within place.

Smith is very deliberate and detailed in how he addresses the relativistic approach of constructivism. Smith’s “ethics of place” holds that each place forms its own subtle differences of evaluations in its meanings, traditions, and practices and is thus based on a kind of relativism. However, this is “not a relativism where ‘anything goes’ and it certainly does make claims about what counts as good and evil” (p. 219). He cautiously lays out the spectrum of constructivism’s ideas. As he has throughout the book, Smith gleans important insights from a particular approach without chucking the whole idea. He is able to achieve this because of the effort he makes to analyze where the ideas originate, how they compare to one another, and how they can actually be quite useful in radical ecology’s search for answers. A subtle but powerful distinction he makes is that the constructivist argument should be seen as an epistemological rather than an ontological argument. Referring to the writer George Sessions, Smith says that Sessions is right insofar as constructivists do indeed tend to emphasize the claims-making activity itself as a locus of study, but wrong insofar as constructivists... are not professing to tell us the truth... Sessions mistakes constructivism’s methodological (and epistemological)
presuppositions, which regard our knowledge of reality as inherently culturally bound, with an ontological position that claims that nature in general is nothing more than a social category, that is, that the truth of nature lies in what people decide to say about it. (p. 120)

Smith’s hope is that if we are much more cautious and deliberate with the topology of social constructivism, we will be able to appreciate and take advantage of its capacity to break down existing ideological frameworks and to build new, more fluid structures.

Ultimately, though, Smith wants us to look at the constructivism argument not in terms of its ontological or epistemological aspects but in a spatial context of place. He wants to develop a “spatial metaphors” that makes us ask where the values are produced. Along the constructivist/naturalist spectrum (which includes some deep ecologists), each one has its own space where location and production of values occurs: Constructivist values reside in culture; Marxist values reside in the economy; naturalist values reside in nature. Smith concludes that the disagreement, then, is actually based on the location of values production. Therefore, Smith understands trees to have what he calls “constitutive value.” This is not the same as intrinsic value, nor is it based on any use or exchange values; constitutive value is based on our relationship with nature within a particular place. “Nature’s value does not reside within trees, waterfalls, badgers, or bats but are [sic] constitutive of the ethical attempt to recognize such things for what and who they are” (p. 129).

“The ability of thought to transcend the circumstances in which it finds itself, its urge to create ‘other Worlds,’ is surely one source of our present environmental problems. It is also the wellspring of a hope that we might overcome such problems” (p.1). Surely today we need a new theoretical story to offer us alternatives for reconstructing our moral and social principles based upon an ecological ethic (as opposed to ethics based on utilitarian and deontological ideology).

There is potentially a wide and captive audience for this new story—those interested in bringing an ecological ethics to the decision-making table and looking to place as the medium and messenger of that ethics. An Ethics of Place stretches across various modes of thought within philosophy and social theory, gleaning from them concepts to build an “ethics of place.” It succeeds in carefully and intricately weaving together concepts from feminism, deep ecology, and post-modernism. It finally offers the reader the beginnings of a theoretical and practical approach to reconnecting moral and physical spaces through the development of relationship with nature in place. Reading this book should motivate environmentalists to further pursue feminist theories on “ethics of care” and “letting others be” and to revisit the constructivist concept of relativism as it pertains to understanding valuing nature in place. Also, coming away from this book one will be unable to stop trying to visualize this place—a place where our individual ecological ethics might develop free of modernist frameworks, and where non-human others are free to express their essential being.

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