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The Earth Charter and Environmental Ethics: Getting Started and Going Further



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I've noticed an uptick in talk about ethics lately. In times of extreme uncertainty and stress, this is what happens. It was no surprise, then, that there was a lot of talk about environmental ethics at the World Environmental Education Congress in 2024. Alarming, however, there was a shortage of ideas about how to bring them into practice. A notable exception was the presence of the Earth Charter.

If you are reading this, you are already a leader in shifting the practice of environmental ethics from philosophy departments, ethics boards, and professional codes and onto the streets where ethics meet action. As newcomers to the Earth Charter or as veteran Charter practitioners, you are critical to what counts, to what actually happens on the ground. Effectively, ethics are defined by their usage; ethics are what people do. And what you, as practitioners, do is profoundly important, every day.

So, I wonder: What more can we do to make ethics an everyday activity? [1]

Part of the answer will require some myth-busting. First, ethics should not just be the domain of heroes and saints, or even professors and professionals. This means that ethics must become part of normal behaviour for everyone. And second, ethics as an everyday activity isn't a totally alien idea. Everyone operates from within value systems, or stories, and makes value choices every day. While some of these are simple consumer preferences revolving around questions of taste, others

wrestle with profound decisions about what they should do when confronted with issues like climate change and biodiversity loss. Ethical thinking is a means for making this process more explicit. It is a process that enables groups and individuals to examine the cultural systems and stories that frame their choices—through analysis and practice.

Some readers might have taken notice of “practice” in the last paragraph and marked it as a departure from more traditional configurations of ethics based around rules, duties, and debate. True. Environmental ethics has been at the forefront of broadening conceptions of ethics. [There is a growing body of literature that emphasises contextual, process-oriented, place-based, and storied approaches to ethical reflection and action.](#) The field for deliberations—intellectual and physical—is expanding. This is encouraging, especially for us, who are often confronted with seemingly irresolvable quandaries. It seems impossible in our present world to consistently lead a good life, all the time.



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Ethics can be messy, confusing, and contradictory. However, looking at ethics in a more expansive way can often release us from the burden of attempting to come up with a single correct answer and offer us, instead, practical ways to move ethically-forward in life, one step at a time.

I was fortunate to have experienced this expansion on interest in ethics while attending an Earth Charter conference in Costa Rica, during January 2019. It became obvious that the Earth Charter is an incredibly useful entry into the thorny world of environmental ethics. As a gathering of ideas, it contains an array of starting points for imaginative educational practices. Indeed, the creative application of these starting points in the projects presented were as broad as the number of presenters. Indeed, the Earth Charter is both an instrument for getting started, but also as an agent for experimenting with practices linking environmental and social issues and discovering new possibilities. Moreover, the Earth Charter work is bolstered by a growing community of practitioners.

Mirian Vilela [2] and I have often discussed the Earth Charter and the broader evolution of environmental ethics. We agree that the Charter is a great starting point. After all, it is difficult to start with a blank slate; we can't begin with an absence of ideas. And the Charter has brought to light ideas about ethics that have long been suspended in a kind of educational quarantine.



We also agree that the next big challenge will be to take environmental ethics further, beyond the Earth Charter that has enlivened so many practitioners. Indeed, it could itself be seen as a stepping stone for entering the broader field of environmental ethics. After all, the gathered ideas in the Charter all come from somewhere, and some folks might want to enrich their own thinking through a better understanding of the reasoning and nuances of these sources.

Another tool to aid in this journey is our book titled *Environmental Ethics: A Sourcebook for Educators* (Jickling et al., 2021). This text acknowledges that teaching about ethics can be intimidating. However, it doesn't have to be this way, and ultimately, it must not. With this in mind, each chapter begins with accessible activities that provide learning experiences with manageable entry points into some aspect of environmental ethics. In many ways, it offers its own starting points. Then each chapter concludes with a summary of some of the theoretical background that supports those activities.

This book raises interesting questions that reflect emergent trends in environmental ethics. And these questions often frame the subject matter and activities for specific chapters. Collectively, they amount to a set of tentative inspirations to help educators expand the scope of their practices, reflect on their own conceptions of ethics, and make pedagogical decisions about content and practices. Above all, the questions are intended to prompt practical outcomes.

I will, for the balance of this article, explore some of these questions. Their importance will be discussed, and then I will add a few pedagogical queries that practitioners can ask of themselves. These concluding provocations, sometimes called "touchstones," [3] are intended to be revisited at intervals as reminders of possible teaching aims and as self-measures for gauging one's own pedagogical progress. Of course, they are just starting points, too, and you are encouraged to expand them, or even rewrite them to better reflect your educational aims.

Must environmental ethics be grounded in abstract principles?

This question goes to the heart of many traditional approaches to environmental ethics. Often, initial forays into this field were rooted in extensions of ethical frameworks based on abstract concepts such as "rights," being extended to "animal rights," or "maximizing good and minimizing pain" as deployed in the "animal liberation movement."

Early ecofeminists found rationalist approaches grounded in codes, fundamental principles, duties, and moral obligations to be inadequate. **They argued that no ethics framework could be complete without room for feelings, context, and first-person narrative—or storytelling.** And ethics were sometimes framed as "bioregional narratives."



Then, in this mix, was Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss [1988, 1999]. He pondered a radical break from ethics that were reliant on duties and the guilt that could arise from failing to meet expectations. He was doubtful about how willing people are to sacrifice their own interests out of a sense of duty to a larger purpose. For him, guilt was a poor motivator.

Næss's reaction was to look for new starting points. [For him, the key was to discover the world in ways that were positive and would generate action out of fondness and empathy.](#)

In another twist, Louise Profeit LeBlanc [1996] brings a Yukon-Canadian First Nations perspective to these discussions. For her, ethics are about what we do so that people will tell good stories about us after we are gone.

- Do you lean towards ethics as a code or set of rules to act upon? Or towards ethics as a process of thoughtful deliberation and debate? Or towards meaningful action?
- Where would you like to go in your own exploration of environmental ethics?
- What kind of stories would you like to leave behind?

Why don't people seem to care, part one?

Despite widespread concern about environmental issues and serious doubts

about whether we are on a path leading to sustainable societies, it often seems that collectively we are making very little progress. [But what holds us in this bubble of inertia?](#)

One way of looking at this is to recognize that the real authorities in our culture are assumptions embedded so deeply that they have become almost invisible. And it is these assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not, that shape our practices and the decisions that we make. This seems especially true for those working in modernist, globalized, westernized, Eurocentric, neo-liberal, colonial, Cartesian, and/or anthropocentric-oriented cultures.

When we think about environmental issues, we are also being constantly bombarded by the dominant imagery, assumptions, and cultural practices, and all alien thinking is bent back to the beliefs, values, and rationality of the status quo. They are often embedded in the words that we use, our metaphors, daily practices, and even what officially counts as knowledge and rationality. It isn't that people don't care; it seems that we can increasingly slip into conformism and a collective unconsciousness.

We find this in language that inherently sees the world as a human commodity. For example, flowers are for humans to enjoy rather than being respected for their intrinsic worth. Metaphors in advertising, and even school curricula, present the natural world as a playground or as a resource to be extracted. Or economies

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are assumed to be ever-growing entities. And, in educational practices, content is primarily abstracted from the real world and these abstractions are presented in classrooms. This is the way things have always been done, and to be “sensible” is to comply.

When we wonder why ethics isn’t an everyday activity for most of society, we need to consider that the cultural milieu is hostile to this task.

- How can we recognize culture-centred habits of language, metaphors, and practices and respond to the urges to conform to “business as usual”?
- Where was I able to disrupt everyday consumerist language and metaphors and replace them with ones that are more eco-friendly?
- How can I enable real world encounters with the more-than-human world? How can I make barriers between classroom learning and outside learning more permeable?

Why don’t people seem to care, part two?

The American conservationist Aldo Leopold (1966) laid out the groundwork for tackling this question long ago: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (p. 251). We need to pay attention to this.

Anthony Weston adds that Western cultures seem increasingly committed to disconnection from the rest of the world.

Indeed, citizens are often physically “protected” from the larger living world—barricaded by classrooms, climate-controlled homes, malls, and increasingly online shopping, computers, cell phones, and social media platforms. Consequently, they don’t feel themselves as part of larger living systems. For Weston, this insistent and felt disconnection “is not the root of the environmental crisis, but most fundamentally, is the very crisis itself” (2004, p. 33).

The threads running through these ideas are that feelings, emotions, and presence in the world are important, and these threads continue through to contemporary posthumanism. Conversations have swirled around words like: identification with others, empathy, care, proximity, and intimacy. [4]

Sadly, in “rationalist” cultures, concern about feelings is typically underrepresented or absent. It falls outside dominant norms, and there are always pressures to bend the will of imaginative educators back into the normative fold.

Nevertheless, as Arjen Wals said years ago, “what you can’t measure still exists” (1996). Taking this idea seriously will require reconnecting with those places that we can love and have faith in.

- Have I found myself marginalizing feelings and emotions in favour of prescribed learning outcomes that are more easily measured? What could I do differently?
- Did my students have an opportunity today to engage directly with a larger living world?



- How can I enable encounters with communities in the spaces that my students co-inhabit? And how can we ensure these encounters are acknowledged?

Where does the moral impulse arise?

If ethics are effectively what we do, then theorizing will be meaningless unless action is taken. This introduces the question: Where does the impulse to take action arise?

Concerns about this moral impulse have been around for some time. For example, Zigmunt Bauman (1993) argues that moral codes erode moral impulses by reducing our responsibilities to work out our own moral actions. [Arne Næss's \(1988\) alternative to duty-driven ethics entails being intimate in the world.](#) With this kind of positioning, we can develop a larger sense of Self to include relationships in the world. We and our places converge, and impulses to act will more naturally arise through intimacy, proximity, sensitivity, compassion, and identification with these places

- How can I nurture my own immersion in places? How can I enable my students to do the same?
- Can we, together, recognize that ever-growing intimacy and meaningful relationship building will take time?

Can ethics be joyful?

When Næss looked for a fresh starting place, not dependent upon duties, he drew upon Immanuel Kant's distinction between moral acts and beautiful acts. [For him, moral acts arising from duty and](#)



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[compelled by guilt often require sacrificing personal interests for some abstract greater good. Whereas doing something because of a positive inclination is a beautiful act.](#)

So, if we willingly act out self-identification and empathy for coinhabiting beings and places, we have taken a beautiful act. When contrasted with duty and guilt, this can indeed be joyous.

This is, of course, not a superficial joy that can be equated with self-interested happiness. [Rather, it is a more the profound joy arising from feeling that we are intrinsically inclined to act in our right way.](#)

- Can you imagine joy arising through the action of moral choices?
- How can I create conditions for spontaneous, joyful action to arise?

Can ethics arise through lived experience?

If ethics are what people do, can we then ask, does what we do also help shape our ethics? This line of questioning suggests that there is room—and indeed a need—for much more imaginative and experimental approaches.



Returning to Leopold, he provocatively wrote that, “nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written” (1966, p. 263). Ethics is a constantly evolving process where participants are engaged in the reworking of relationships between themselves and “the land.” He eschewed presumptions of a “true” or “final” ethic.

Similarly, Anthony Weston (1992, 1994) argues environmental ethics needs a long period of experimentation. [Our task is to create conceptual, experiential, and psychological space for our students—that is the freedom to move, think, and experiment in daily environmental practices.](#) And in these everyday activities, new environmental values can arise.

- What environmental practices are you trying?
- What are your students doing? Have you given them the freedom to experiment? To go beyond, even, your own best actions?

Educere

I hope this is not the end, but a beginning. Or, in the spirit of the Latin root for education, educere, it is an invitation to lead outwards and onwards. Engaging in ethics is daunting, yet I also hope that through an expanding collection of questions that you will find useful starting points. However, there are more questions to ask, and work to develop your own touchstones for practice. But hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up (Orr, 2011). The Earth Charter, alongside narratives in environmental ethics, are useful tools for getting this work done. But they are not the

final word in an evolving field. Keep going, and good luck!

Notes:

[1] In the spirit of not bogging this essay down with excessive referencing, I acknowledge that throughout this paper I have drawn from an earlier paper (Jickling, 2004) and our book (Jickling et al., 2021). I am also indebted to John Ralston Saul for inspiring the idea of “ethics as an everyday activity” (Saul, 2001).

[2] Mirian Vilela is the Executive Director of the Earth Charter International.

[3] Use of the term “touchstones” is derived from our work on Wild Pedagogies (Jickling et al., 2018).

[4] For starters, I am thinking about Karen Warren (1990), Val Plumwood (1993), Jim Cheney (1989), and Nel Noddings (2002). There have been many more through to this posthuman era with Rosi Braidotti (2019) and colleagues. A particularly exciting development is unfolding in Jan Zwicky’s Lyric philosophy (2015, 2019).



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Our book, *Environmental ethics: A sourcebook for educators*, is available in hard copy on Amazon, but also as an open-source text on both Google Books:

https://books.google.ca/books/about/Environmental_Ethics.html?id=CjtTEAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y

And Research Gate:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356830923_Environmental_Ethics_BOOK_1_71121_Nov_17_2021