
Review

Environmental political theory

Steve Vanderheiden,
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The back cover of Steve Vanderheiden's *Environmental Political Theory* describes the book as an 'essential new textbook'. This is a fine description of the text and its function, yet one that risks underselling the book. *Environmental Political Theory* would indeed work well as a textbook in an environmental political theory or introduction to political theory course. But the book has another function. Insofar as its target is the field of environmental political theory, it also makes implicit arguments to political theorists more broadly about the foundational assumptions of that field.

Environmental Political Theory consists of eleven chapters: two introductory, eight which offer treatments of key concepts in political theory, and a brief conclusion. In the introductory chapter, Vanderheiden characterizes environmental political theory's *raison d'être*: 'the scope and scale of human-caused environmental change on the planet over the past half-century' (p. 1). The task of the book is to discuss how basic 'ideas about what matters in the organization of politics and society' (p. 2) must be revisited in light of such change.

Specifically, *Environmental Political Theory* is premised on the idea that environmental change has revealed a 'sustainability imperative' in light of which other basic ideals must be revisited. Chapter 1 argues that sustainability is an 'emergent and disruptive ideal' (p. 5), one that unavoidably challenges how political theorists have thought about fundamental political values and principles. If we refuse to restructure our 'most cherished and considered ideals' around sustainability, Vanderheiden avers, such ideals will 'fail to accommodate sustainability imperatives' and will suffer 'erosion and eventual irrelevance' (p. 11).

In chapter 2, Vanderheiden explores the implications of the sustainability imperative in greater detail. Here Vanderheiden suggests that environmental change constitutes, at heart, a crisis of scarcity, which requires that humans operate within the boundaries of ecological limits. As such, we must revisit 'existing social and political concepts and ideals to accommodate the facts of ecological limits' (p. 10). The bulk of *Environmental Political Theory*, then, consists of a reassessment



of eight central ideals that ‘now exist in some tension with the idea of ecological limits and its associated sustainability imperatives’ (p. 11).

After charting this course for *Environmental Political Theory*, the bulk of Vanderheiden’s book is made up of eight chapters, each of which focuses on one central ideal: freedom, democracy, progress, equality, agency and responsibility, community, sovereignty, and justice. In each of these chapters, Vanderheiden introduces an ideal, ties it to key canonical thinkers and/or traditions, describes the roles it has played in environmental thinking, and discusses how the concept might change in light of the sustainability imperative.

For example, chapter 3 revisits the ideal of freedom. Vanderheiden begins the chapter with a discussion of the myriad ways in which political theorists have understood freedom and neighboring concepts like liberty and liberalism. He then discusses a few of the most historically influential conceptions of freedom, taking care to point out that such conceptions are ‘multiple and even often opposed to one another’ (p. 27): social or welfare liberals understand freedom as a relief from want provided by an extensive welfare state, classical liberals or libertarians understand freedom along the lines of *laissez faire* economics. Political theorists have attempted to manage some of these ambiguities, Vanderheiden next suggests with a nod to Isaiah Berlin, by making additional differentiations, such as that between negative and positive liberty (p. 28). No text of this length would be able to cover eight central ideals from every conceivable angle—so while some readers’ most cherished conceptions of freedom (or democracy, or progress, etc.) may not be included here, the opening discussions of each chapter are sufficiently broad to serve as a useful introduction.

Having introduced the ideal, Vanderheiden provides a discussion of where we can locate the themes of freedom and environment in the history of political thought. Here, as in other chapters, the breadth of Vanderheiden’s discussion is impressive. For thinkers like Garrett Hardin, freedom is a vice to be blamed for overconsumption of the commons. For critics of Hardin like Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, freedom can be made compatible with sustainability through the proper use of incentive structures. For libertarians, from Friedrich Hayek to Ayn Rand, even the use of an incentive structure would constitute an overreach, such that even ‘restrictions on high-flow toilets or showerheads limit individual liberty’ (p. 36). The discussion continues as such, illustratively winding through the work of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, Julian Simon and John Dryzek, and beyond.

Freedom as an ideal, we eventually see, can indeed come into conflict with the sustainability imperative. If freedom is primarily about consumption, as political theorists have often suggested, then unreconstructed freedom will become increasingly untenable as resources grow ever scarcer. This brings us to the last function of each chapter: to point to ways in which the ideal in question might be reconceptualized in light of the sustainability imperative. We might, Vanderheiden



suggests, learn to measure freedom not in terms of quantities consumed but rather in terms of the preservation of life's quality more generally amidst conditions of scarcity.

I have walked through Vanderheiden's treatment of freedom in detail to demonstrate the kinds of useful discussions that unfold throughout chapters 3 to 10. The first sections of each chapter will be particularly useful to newer students of (environmental) political theory, whereas people who have devoted their lives to political theory will find the proposals about how we might rethink some of political theory's most central ideals in light of the sustainability imperative to be thought provoking. Across the chapters, while Vanderheiden offers a strong case for reevaluating our central ideals, the reader is often left wanting to hear more about how ideals like freedom might undergo useful and acceptable metamorphoses. In keeping with the democratic ideals discussed in chapter 4, however, the responsibility of reconstructing key ideals is shared by author and reader alike.

As readers more familiar with the fields of environmental political theory and environmental politics will recognize, *Environmental Political Theory* offers more than a general overview. By including only partial discussions of a few key debates, Vanderheiden also puts forward implicit claims about some of environmental political theory's foundational assumptions.

For example, we might think about debates surrounding idealism and materialism that animate the history of political thought and which we might want to revisit in light of concerns around sustainability. Vanderheiden rouses this debate by asking 'how ideas may be complicit in the environmental crisis or constructive in addressing it' (p. 5). Ideas are important, he argues, as they can 'orient us in the world and to each other, link causes and effects ... contribute to ocean pollution or climate change, or prevent our realization that we're doing so' (p. 2). Finally, ideas can 'bring recognition of these problems or inform constructive solutions to them' (pp. 2–3). Such sentiments are not controversial. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a materialist unwilling to concede that ideas have such powers.

Yet Vanderheiden goes further, suggesting that ideas necessarily come first. To this end, he writes that adaptation to environmental change occurs through peoples' 'ideas and ideals, and only then through their institutions, material relationships, and social practices' (p. 4). Here, Vanderheiden at least implies that environmental political theorists share a fundamental commitment to idealism, an implication that may concern thinkers who approach environmental concerns from Marxian or new materialist traditions.

Considering how Vanderheiden treats debates over scarcity and ecological limits highlights another implicit claim about environmental political theory. Vanderheiden is careful to offer a nuanced understanding of the uses and abuses of these concepts: we learn that Thomas Malthus, Garrett Hardin, Paul Ehrlich and others who once drew attention to scarcity and limits did so in a way that enabled a bleak



lifeboat ethics (pp. 16–17). Likewise we are rightly cautioned against those who flatly deny the very notion of ecological limits (p. 17), and we learn that international efforts to theorize sustainable development over and against lifeboat ethics put forward a much more just response to scarcity (pp. 17–19).

Yet precisely because Vanderheiden presents scarcity and limits *as ideas* rather than concrete, historically situated conditions, our understanding of scarcity remains rather immaterial throughout. Questions about scarcity—about whether scarcity is (as Malthus and Ehrlich would have had it) an unavoidable result of population growth or whether (as Marxian thinkers would suggest) scarcity only appears unavoidable if one views it through the lens of capitalism—are left unasked. This gives the impression that there is nothing to be done about scarcity beyond the management of expectations and ideals in its wake. While this may be true, the point here is that *Environmental Political Theory* does not make its reader aware of such debates, which are nonetheless present in environmental political theory and contemporary political discourse more generally.

Still, *Environmental Political Theory* is a valuable book. The questions it raises are well worth considering. The connections it makes between canonical sources in political theory and environmental concerns are sophisticated and expansive. And Vanderheiden's central goal of getting his reader to participate in the project of reconstructing political theory's most useful ideals around earthly concerns is of unquestionable importance.

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