

Ecology and Ideology

Question: If “deep ecology” or “environmentalism” is a world view, a form of life, how do we evaluate it? (Is it a world view? What would that mean?)

I. What is ideology?

Very roughly, an ideology consists of representations of social life and the broader world around us that undergird social practices.

The term ‘ideology’ has a *pejorative* and a *non-pejorative* sense:

pejorative sense: ideology distorts our beliefs and practical reasoning by masking our true interests. In Zizek’s sense, it mystifies the facts. (pp. 157, 167)

non-pejorative sense: ideology is inevitable. We enact good, just and helpful social structures too.

"hegemony": usually inarticulate beliefs, ideas, values, plus common practices, rituals, etc. These “beliefs” or “associations” include schemas and stereotypes.

"explicit ideology": an articulation of hegemony or “practical consciousness”, in e.g., a group’s philosophy, religion, morals, common sense.

Contrast two kinds of critique *evidential critique* and *critique of suspicion*. This distinction can be seen clearly when applied to religion. The evidential critique asks if there is good evidence that God exists. The critique of suspicion asks: what are the motives that lead to religious belief? And what function does it serve, i.e., what does it do for the individual or the community who subscribes to it? Philosophers of suspicion, e.g., Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, suspect that religious beliefs are sustained, not because there is good evidence for them, but because they satisfy some desires or serve some interests; moreover, we should question these desires and interests. Whose interests are really being served? Should we cater to these desires?

Marx, in particular, thought that religion was an ideology in the pejorative sense and called it "the *opium* of the people. Why? Because people in the grip of religious ideology come to believe, e.g., that their suffering in poverty is punishment for their sins, when in fact it is caused by class exploitation. They are suffering, but religion mystifies the cause of their suffering. As a result, they do not resist class exploitation and it continues. Religion, then, serves the interests of the dominant class.

Religion, insofar as it supports a broad range of social practices, is a kind of ideology. (This does not entail that there is anything wrong with it, as long as we use ‘ideology’ in the non-pejorative sense.) Note that the critique of suspicion, even if warranted, doesn’t necessarily show that religious beliefs are *false*. It may just show that holding such beliefs is contrary to one’s interests insofar as the ideology is mystifying, i.e., it blocks access to other true and important beliefs about one’s circumstances.

Questions:

1. Does every group have an ideology? How do we learn the ideology? How do we identify what it is?
2. Is it possible for individuals to "see through" the distortions of their group's ideology? How?
3. What determines the shape and content of a group's ideology? How do we change existing ideologies?
4. Is science ideological, or is it a route to undistorted understanding?

II. Environmentalism and Intrinsic Value

Is environmentalism/deep ecology an ideology?

“The ethics of respect for nature is made up of three basic elements: a belief system [e.g., the ‘biocentric outlook’], an ultimate moral attitude, and a set of rules of duty and standards of character.”¹

Environmentalist strategies of argument:

- *Affirm the intrinsic value of the environment, and endorse a moral view that requires us to maximize (consequentialists) or respect (deontologists) intrinsic value.*

¹ Paul W. Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” in *In Disputed Moral Issues*, ed. M. Timmons, Oxford 2007, p. 527.

² Thomas E. Hill, Jr. “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments.” In *In Disputed Moral Issues*, ed. M.

- *Connect the disposition to respect the environment with other human excellences or virtues (virtue theory):* “Rather than argue directly with destroyers of the environment who say, “Show me why what I am doing is *immoral*,” [instead] ask “What sort of person would want to do what they propose?”²

Sample argument:

1. If something has intrinsic worth, then we are morally obligated to protect it and further its good *for its own sake*.

2. The environment and living things within it have intrinsic worth.

⇒ This seems to follow from the “biocentric outlook” which emphasizes:

- Harmony [of humans] with Nature
- All nature has intrinsic worth/biospecies equality (see also argument below)
- Elegantly simple material needs (material goals serving the larger goal of self-realization)
- Earth supplies limited
- Appropriate technology, non-dominating science
- Doing with enough/recycling
- Minority tradition/bioregion

⇒ The claim that humans are superior to other living things is groundless (Taylor 2007).

- To judge the value of something, one must not evaluate its merits, but its *worth*.
- To evaluate the worth of something, one must consider it in its own terms.
- To evaluate living things in human terms does not establish their worth.
- Living things are not less worthy than humans, for each part of the ecosystem has its own good and its own worth. “We begin to look at other species as we look at ourselves, seeing them as beings which have a good they are striving to realize just as we have a good we are striving to realize. We accordingly develop the disposition to view the world from the standpoint of their good as well as from the standpoint of our own good.” (Taylor 2007, 531)

3. Therefore, we ought to protect and further the good of all living things *for their own sake*.

III. Ecology and Evidential Critique

Are the claims made by environmentalists true? Are they well-justified by research? (See Rob Johnston’s article.)

IV. Ecology and the Critique of Suspicion (Zizek)

- Although it is important to recognize the dangers of environmental degradation, ecology as a movement is based on a mystifying ideology that takes nature to be pure and valuable and human intervention into nature to be a source of harm.
- We will not be able to confront the serious threat of environmental damage by accepting “this New Age stuff” (161).
 - It provides us with easy ways out: Recycling becomes a way to expiate our guilt. (168) It promotes pseudo-activity (177).
 - It becomes conservative and resists valuable technological advances. (158, 162)
- It eschews politics, when politics is what we need most: ecology is a *political* problem not a *spiritual* one. (174)
- We should develop an aesthetic appreciation of trash, of things that are no longer functional. (163, 180)
- We should reject the quest for meaning and the temptation to make everything meaningful. (157, 182-3)

Question: Is environmentalism well-supported by the evidence (how effective is the evidential critique)? Is it a ideology in the pejorative sense? What is the best approach to environmental concerns?

Zizek, Slavoj. “Ecology.” In *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*. Edited by Astra Taylor. New Press, 2009.

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² Thomas E. Hill, Jr. “Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments.” In *Disputed Moral Issues*, ed. M. Timmons, Oxford 2007, p. 542.

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