

# A Theory of General Ethics

Human Relationships, Nature,  
and the Built Environment

Warwick Fox



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Environment

Warwick Fox

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But what would a “new ethics” involve, and how might it be arrived at?  
—John Rodman, “The Liberation of Nature?”



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## Preface and Acknowledgments

The ideas in this book have been developing over a considerable period—don't ask! I am sincerely grateful to many colleagues around the world whose thinking and support over the years have aided the development of my own thinking. Even so, contributions from others have generally been diffuse in the case of this book; they have constituted the general background upon which I have drawn in order to develop, and against which I have tested, the ideas presented here. That said, for specific kinds of help at specific times that have enabled me better to advance the ideas developed herein, I would particularly like to thank: Emily Brady, Merlin Donald, Uta Frith, George and Adrienne Green, Simon Hailwood, Daniel Povinelli, Doris Schroeder, Michael Tomasello, Jennifer Vonk, and Terry Williamson. Most of these people were generally unaware of how their particular questions, comments, e-mailed replies, or forwarded papers fed into the overall ideas developed here, and none of them is responsible for what I have made of their help, but they stand out in my mind along the path that has led to this book, and I am grateful to them for their help along the way.

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# I

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## General Ethics—and Its Problems



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## Introduction: The Idea of a General Ethics

We presently lack a *General Ethics*. I capitalize this term to mark it out as the name of a field of inquiry and to distinguish it from coincidental or haphazard references to “general ethics” or “ethics in general,” by which an author may well mean something much more limited.

It gets worse: we presently lack even the conception of a General Ethics—there is no such term, or equivalent to what I mean by it, in general usage. Yet we badly need such a conception, not to mention the reasoned content that would fill it out, namely, a truly *general* form of ethics, an ethics that would constitute the ethical equivalent of the physicists’ long sought Holy Grail of a “Theory of Everything.”

Of course, the physicists’ “Theory of Everything” is not literally a theory of *everything*. For starters, such a descriptive theory is never going to answer our normative ethical questions regarding the values we should live by—it might inform our answers, but it cannot, by itself, provide these answers any more than a normative ethical theory can provide a descriptive theory of nature. (A *descriptive* theory is a theory that describes how the world—or some aspect of it—*is*; what the world is *like*. In contrast, a *normative* theory is one that prescribes the norms or standards that we *ought* to strive to meet in our behavior or way of being.) Scientific theories and ethical theories operate at different levels of concern—one descriptive (and explanatory in that context), the other normative (and explanatory in that context)—and represent intellectual and cultural manifestations of the logical gap that exists between “is” and “ought.” What physicists actually mean by a “Theory of Everything” is not a theory of everything, period, but a theory that lies at the basis of all things *physical*: a unified (descriptive) theory that can satisfactorily account for the widest possible range of physical phenomena.

Physicists could therefore, perhaps more humbly, refer to their much-vaunted “Theory of Everything” as a *General Physics*. In a similarly qualified vein, what I mean by the term *General Ethics* can be thought of as a theory that lies at the basis of all things *ethical*: a unified (normative) theory that can satisfactorily account for the widest possible range of ethical concerns.

My aim in this book is to provide a General Ethics.

But first things first: so, in the next two sections of this chapter, I will first provide the background context against which we need to understand the concept of General Ethics and then explain more precisely what I mean by a General Ethics and why we need such an ethics. I will then proceed in the following chapter to provide examples of the formidable range of problems that any General Ethics must be able to address. By the end of these examples, we will see that to ask for a unified ethical approach that can satisfactorily address the full range of problems that any General Ethics must be able to address—even an ethical theory that is capable of (directly) addressing all these questions in the first place, regardless of its success in doing so—is a Big Ask. The rest of this book—from chapter 3 on—is then concerned with attempting to satisfy this Big Ask. It develops an approach to General Ethics that I refer to as the *theory of responsive cohesion*.

## The Background to General Ethics

Ethics is concerned, at its core, with the values we should live by. It is not centrally concerned with “values” in some vague, wishy-washy sense, such as whether I prefer my hair long or short or whether I prefer blue to green; rather, it is centrally concerned with the values that I (and you) *should* live by, with those values that we are, for various reasons, rationally obliged to respect. This central concern of ethics is therefore referred to by philosophers as *normative ethics* because it is concerned with the norms, or standards, that we ought to meet, or at least strive to meet, in our conduct.

Since the time of the classical Greek philosophers, Western ethical thinking has essentially been concerned with what I will call *interhuman ethics*. It has focused exclusively, or at least overwhelmingly, upon humans and their relationships with each other—or, in a religious con-

text, also upon their relationship to a God in whose image they supposed themselves to have been made (which rendered God as a kind of Superperson and people as minigods). The guiding idea in the dominant Western secular and religious forms of interhuman ethics has been that the only values that we are rationally obliged to respect (in addition to those that might relate to God Himself [*sic*]) are those of respect for people (and, indeed, depending on the time and place with which we are concerned, not necessarily all people). The reasons given for the special value of (at least certain groups of) people relative to the rest of earthly creation have typically turned on the ideas that humans are uniquely rational or that humans are uniquely endowed with a soul—a special, inner aspect of themselves that could potentially join with God, the ultimate source of all goodness, when they died, and which thereby constituted living testimony to their potential goodness despite their “fallen” state.

Needless to say, the rest of the—nonrational, un-ensouled—world got pretty short shrift on the basis of these ideas. As John Passmore argues in his already classic study *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, the history of ideas reveals that these kinds of anthropocentric views have been employed, in varying forms, again and again to underpin the morally charged conclusion that humans are either exclusively or overwhelmingly valuable relative to all other earthly kinds and that these other earthly kinds are *therefore* ours to do with as we will. Indeed, as Passmore notes, throughout the history of Western philosophical thinking “It is constantly assumed that whatever else exists does so only for the sake of the rational.”<sup>1</sup> This sort of thinking has patently obnoxious upshots. To take just one kind of example, Passmore shows that “In so far as cruelty to animals was wrong, this was only because, so it was argued by Aquinas [C13th], by Kant [C18th], and by a multitude of lesser thinkers, it might induce a callousness towards *human* suffering. There was nothing wrong with cruelty to animals *in itself*.”<sup>2</sup> It seems almost inconceivable to us today that highly intelligent thinkers of any period could seriously maintain that nonhuman animals either were not capable of suffering (a view to which Descartes, “the father of modern philosophy,” was theoretically committed) or else that they could suffer but that this suffering was of no moral consequence in itself. Yet, up until at least Kant’s time, the most influential thinkers in the Western tradition thought precisely this.

As incredible as it might seem, Western ethics only really began to explore ethical questions that lay beyond the confines of interhuman ethics—or at least to do this in a concerted, ongoing fashion—as recently as the 1970s. This was when some—a very few—philosophers began to advance serious arguments for the moral status not just of humans but of all sentient beings, that is, entities that have the capacity to feel, entities that it would be *like something* to be, or, in other words, entities that could be described as *beings* as opposed to “merely” (i.e., nonsentient) *living things*. The implications of these arguments were that moral agents had various obligations in respect of all sentient beings (or, in some versions, some more specialized subset of sentient beings, but a subset that nevertheless ran well beyond humans alone). Other philosophers began to go further and develop arguments to the effect that all living things, whether sentient or not, were deserving of at least some degree of moral consideration; there were “in principle” reasons why it was wrong, say, to wantonly destroy living things such as trees. Yet other philosophers began to go further still: not only did they want to overcome what they saw as the highly anthropocentric bias of traditional Western ethics—an aim they shared with both the animal welfare and life-based approaches—but they also wanted to overcome what they saw as a wrongheaded *individualistic* focus in ethics, which applied to both the animal welfare and the standard life-based approaches just as much as it did to interhuman ethics. They wanted, in other words, to develop a *holistic* approach to ethics, specifically, an ethics that proceeded from a primary focus on complex, ecosystemic assemblages of individual living things and that endorsed the overarching value of ecological integrity.

The intellectual explosion that emerged in ethics in the last quarter of the twentieth century marked the end of the roughly two-and-a-half thousand years of essentially purely anthropocentric ethics in the Western philosophical tradition. And, as is often the way with intellectual explosions, once the stranglehold of the reigning orthodoxy had begun to be loosened, new thinkers very quickly rushed out into the “fresh air” to explore and map out the most obvious intellectual possibilities that suddenly seemed to be available—much as organisms can rapidly colonize new ecological niches following recovery from a catastrophic event. Thus, in relatively short order, the ethical landscape was mapped

out beyond its familiar anthropocentric borders to include approaches that could be described as *pathocentric* (i.e., centered on the capacity to suffer), *biocentric*, and *ecocentric*—the animal welfare, life-based, and ecological integrity approaches respectively. (Note that I refer to the first of these newer approaches as *pathocentric* rather than *zoocentric*, i.e., animal centered. This is because the leading animal welfare ethicists accept that not all animals can suffer [e.g., sponges and corals], and their approaches focus on those animals that *can* suffer as opposed to focusing on all entities that are formally classified as animals. These approaches are, after all, animal-*welfare*-oriented approaches, not just animal-oriented approaches.) The discovery of this new ethical landscape represented the ethical equivalent of people having believed for thousands of years that they lived at the center of the universe and then in relatively short order finding that their inquiries were necessitating the contemplation of a massively greater range of possibilities: perhaps we just live on a planet in a sun-centered solar system; perhaps our solar system is just one of countless others in a galaxy of stars; ditto our galaxy relative to other galaxies in the universe; and, perhaps, even ditto the universe itself!

Even so, this relative explosion of ethical interest beyond the long-standing traditional confines of human-centered ethical thinking was nevertheless very late in coming, and the stranglehold of the anthropocentric ethical orthodoxy did not make it easy for the pioneers in this area. Indeed, those philosophers who initiated these developments can tell you that many of their mainstream colleagues at the time engaged in the philosophically time-honored put-down of declaring that what they were doing was not “real philosophy” (in which case, God save us from “real philosophy”). Now all that nonsense has largely (but, alas, not completely) passed; these new forms of ethical thinking represent normal and often very popular parts of philosophical conferences; a variety of journals are either devoted to or at least publish papers that explore the issues raised by these new areas; and students vote with their feet to do courses in these areas.

But lest this paints too rosy a picture of the present state of things, it also needs to be said that although the newer forms of ethics have now been granted a legitimate seat at the philosophical table, as it were, it remains the case that the majority of ethicists and ethics courses still

ignore these new approaches even if they no longer actively disparage them. It is incredible to me that, in the early twenty-first century, I can pick up brand new books that purport to offer overviews of “ethics” only to find that they often simply omit any reference to, let alone contain detailed discussion of, the newer, nonanthropocentric forms of ethics. For many ethicists and their students, “ethics” still means “interhuman ethics”—and it means “interhuman ethics” so obviously in their view that they don’t even call it “interhuman ethics”—or some such term; rather, they just call what they are doing “ethics,” period. Thus, if you enroll in an “ethics” course at most institutions (or even if you enroll in a “bioethics” course), you are almost certainly likely to find yourself doing a course that is restricted to interhuman ethics (or, in the case of “bioethics,” to interhuman biomedical ethics). In order to do a course that embraces the newer and larger domains of ethics that I have referred to, you generally need to enroll in a course that *sounds* more restricted than the above courses but is not, such as “environmental ethics.” It is strange to think that philosophers schooled in the Anglo-American tradition, who generally pride themselves on using language clearly and precisely, still continue to use such outdated, imprecise, and, frankly, misleading titles for their ethics courses.

### The Conception of General Ethics and Why We Need Such an Ethics

Sympathetic yet tough-minded philosophers generally consider that the further you want to go along the anthropocentric-pathocentric-biocentric-ecocentric path, the more difficult it is to sustain any kind of rigorous argument for your approach. The suspicion arose early on—and lingers—that some of the “further-out” of these approaches were fueled more by intuition and passion than by rationality and logic. However, the countersuspicion also arose—and lingers—that, as we have only recently begun to explore some of the “further-out” of these approaches, there may exist some arguments for these approaches that are much stronger than those that have been developed so far—and we won’t know if we don’t try to develop them.

So, does the term *General Ethics* just refer to a form of ethics that embraces the wide range of increasingly accepted concerns that have now been introduced to ethical discussion; that attempts to sort the

stronger arguments for these concerns from the weaker ones; and that, where possible, attempts to explore and develop yet stronger arguments across this broad range of concerns? In a (loud) word: *no!* General Ethics embraces considerably more than the concerns that I have mentioned so far in association with the newer, nonanthropocentric forms of ethics. Let me explain. The approaches that I have referred to—animal welfare approaches, life-based approaches, and ecological integrity approaches—are generally collectively referred to as *environmental ethics*. Thus, we have the older forms of interhuman ethics and the newer forms of environmental ethics. But what further forms of ethics could there be? If (for us) a basic way of dividing the world up is between humans and everything else (i.e., “the environment”), then surely interhuman ethics taken together with environmental ethics just about wraps things up in terms of the possible range of ethical concerns, doesn’t it? What else is there besides humans on the one hand and everything else on the other hand? What else *could* we give ethical attention to?

The problem lies in the fact that either the term *environmental ethics*, as it has been used to date at least, is a misnomer or else the field of inquiry it describes does not live up to its own name. The reason is this: when we look around the world—our “environment”—we see people, other animals, trees and plants, rain clouds (evidence of ecospherical hydrological cycles) and so on, but we also see buildings, roads, cars, and so on. The world around us—our “environment”—consists not only of a self-organizing, natural environment but also of an intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment (as well as all manner of combinations of these two kinds of environments). Indeed, many of us in the modern world seem to have even more day-to-day contact with intentionally organized, human-constructed environments than self-organizing, natural environments. And yet, as we have seen from my brief review of the main approaches to environmental ethics, this new field of inquiry has to date been overwhelmingly concerned with the natural environment (or various members or aspects of it)—sentient beings, living things, ecological integrity—and has had next to nothing to say about the intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment.<sup>3</sup> (I will just refer to the intentionally organized, artificial, built, or constructed environment as the *human-constructed environment* for now—although I will identify this realm in a more formal way and give