Responding to the Global Ecological Challenge: The Persuasive Power of a Local Approach

Iris A. Burniece
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It is only the scholar who understands why the raw wilderness gives definition and meaning to the human enterprise.

-Aldo Leopold, The Land Ethic (1949)

I. Introduction: the Global Ecological Crisis

Climate change threatens to impact our planet in ways that will have far-reaching effects on both human populations and the ecological foundations humanity depends on for its survival. Numerous scientific reports, representative of the significant consensus on this issue, project increases in temperature, changes in precipitation, sea level rise, and increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Climate models have projected between a 2.5 and 10 degrees Fahrenheit rise in average global temperature by the end of the 21st century.¹ The U.S. is the leading perpetrator of anthropogenic climate change, both through its global influence and with its contribution of the second largest share of CO₂ emissions behind China, although the U.S.’s total emissions per capita is 19.18 in comparison to China’s 4.91.² Currently, the U.S. is encountering economic and social resistance to proposals designed to address climate change. Notwithstanding, the task of reforming environmental policy has proven to be rather complex. From a global perspective, this has been further complicated due to the abrasive relationship between the transboundary character of ecological problems and the inherent sovereignty of states. Perceiving the challenges to environmental reform in this way would seem to imply the

need for a small-scale approach, and I will assert that this needs to begin at the local 
level.

The urgency of the global ecological crisis further impresses the need for a new 
direction. Current governance structures need to be transformed in a way that will enable 
them to respond to the unique challenges posed by climate change, such as the 
disproportionate affects experienced by developing nations worldwide as well as the 
smaller scale consequences like agricultural run-off. On the international level, the UN 
strategy has focused on multilateral treaties; although, it has failed to produce any real 
affect due to institutional weaknesses. States pursuing their own variants of 
environmental reform have—at least in most cases, exhibited dreadfully low standards. 
Overall, existing governance structures on the national and international level have failed 
to respond adequately to the global ecological crisis and as a result, are losing the 
opportunity to lessen the severity of future impacts.

International political issues are not accustomed to revolutionary changes. 
Progress is usually made with incremental successes, all of which culminate into global 
reform. What aspects of our existing government structure and policies do we keep? In 
which areas will substantive transformations prove critical to the achievement of 
environmental reform? Must our actions be global or local in character? Most 
importantly, where should we begin to focus our efforts when both ecological systems 
and human communities are facing severe risk? Environmental political theory has begun 
to explore what sort of structural transformations need to occur in order for real progress 
to begin. My argument will focus on three political theories’ conceptions of ideal 
governance structures: ecocentrism, communitarianism, and cosmopolitanism.
Ecocentrism is an ecologically orientated political philosophy that stresses the *intrinsic value* of nature and the need for ecological knowledge to be incorporated into political deliberation. Communitarianism argues the importance of self-determination in local communities’ political decision-making processes by virtue of their particular cultures and shared meanings. Cosmopolitanism detaches itself from a particular sense of place and instead concerns itself with the whole of humanity, arguing that this perspective necessitates the need for an international governance structure capable of working towards and protecting each individual’s realization of their basic human rights. These theories will be explained in much greater depth throughout the paper in terms of their theoretical and practical implications.

To begin my conceptual analysis, I will propose a theoretical blend of ecocentrism and communitarianism, which I have termed eco-communitarianism. I will specify which elements of each theory would be encompassed within this theoretical blend, and note the distinctions between them. Then I will give a more detailed depiction of cosmopolitanism through an examination of their ideal political community. Following that, I will outline how these theoretical perspectives approach environmental reform, and the potential and existing strengths and weaknesses of each approach. In looking at their ideal decision-making structures, I will demonstrate how, politically speaking, eco-communitarianism engages individuals on a personal level in a way that global approaches cannot, because societal learning begins at the community level. In terms of environmental policy, it is much more holistic, because just as communities differ from one another, so do ecosystems—in what they are composed of, the interactions that take place within in them, and their various vulnerabilities and needs.
II. Towards an Ecocentric Communitarian Approach

Theoretical arguments have inherent strengths and weaknesses—ecocentrism and communitarianism are by no means exceptions to this rule. By blending these two theories, there is an opportunity to overcome some of those perceived theoretical weaknesses. The indeterminate aspects of ecocentric theory can glean a sense of cohesion and functionality from communitarian conceptions of how government institutions should be structured, specifically through the dispersion of sovereignty and the establishment of strong public spheres in the community (Sandel, 1996: 25-28). The failing of communitarianism lies in its inability to take into account the vulnerability of ecosystems within which human societies are situated. This threatens the long-term security of self-determining political communities in terms of environmental quality and works against the notion of strong local economies (Eckersley, 2006: 91-108).

Ecocentrism has never been formally embraced by communitarian theory; although, there have been arguments in support of communitarian ideals made by ecocentric theorists (Eckersley, 2006). In this section, I will outline the normative arguments put forth by ecocentrism and communitarianism that, in my opinion, offer the greatest opportunity for making these theories mutually reinforcing in their aims and potentially more successful if implemented. The potential for unifying these two theories is first and foremost built upon the ecocentric and communitarian emphasis on community, the inherent value of it as a societal unit, and the need for more inclusive community-based political participation and decision-making. I believe that the central focus on locality in these theories presents the most viable approach to addressing institutional ineffectiveness in the areas of environmental reform, and as an added bonus,
political efficacy. Threats to one’s own community are much more personal and can potentially have a much greater impact on social interactions, quality of living, and community structure. For this reason, it would be assumed that individuals would be much more active in their attempts to prevent unnecessary harm being done to the ecological conditions of one’s own community.

Ecocentric and communitarian theories also share a critique of modern liberalism’s emphasis on the individual (Biro, 2005: 68-69; Eckersley, 2004: 104-105; Sandel, 1996:14). This atomism, as it is referred to in liberal critiques, devalues the role that community plays in individual identity formation, the establishment of personal values and beliefs, and the way one perceives the world (Eckersley, 2004: 190; Sandel 1996: 143-144; Callicott, 1989: 82-83). Atomism materializes at the community level in the form of alienation in the human relationships present at the local level of society, and the political process and nature descriptive of that community (Biro, 2005: 68-69; Sandel, 1996: 203-208). Liberalism’s atomistic approach to governance is directly linked to many other criticisms advanced by ecocentristis and communitarians, especially in evaluations of capitalist growth economies and the subsequent harm done to local markets. However, in order to avoid confounding these two theories I will now look at the distinct features of each theoretical perspective and their potential for convergence as an ecologically sound, locally orientated political philosophy.

2.1 Ecocentric Arguments

Ecocentrism has built its principal ideological foundation using the influences of such major works as Aldo Leopold’s The Land Ethic (1949), as well as Deep Ecology-- a
philosophical and ideological school of thought argued for most notably by Arne Naess, Bill Devall and George Sessions (1989). Ecocentrism is defined by the belief that ecosystems are the basis of all life conceived on the planet; therefore, ecosystems are limited by their own “integrity,” or ability to retain optimal levels of biodiversity and execute natural functions to balance input and output fluctuations (i.e. resource availability and/or excessive dominance by a few species)—an argument supported by ecology. The most important concept that has emerged from these theories to find a place in ecocentrism is the belief that human beings are inseparable from nature, instead of being superior to it and the inherent ability of ecosystems to self-regulate when unimpeded by aggressive human interference.

This idea of ecological embeddedness sprang from observations of natural processes and scientific research—nature is, in its most simple understanding, an interconnected web of parts and processes, which constitutes the biotic community. This ecosystem-based focus requires greater attention paid to our local communities, which could produce more ecologically sound practices with greater regulatory decision-making power in local and state politics. Local communities understand the unique needs of the ecosystem they belong to, because it constitutes the natural limitations set upon all life and they simply cannot exist apart from it. In this sense, ecosystems are intrinsically valuable in and of themselves, as are all of the constituent parts and processes that comprise them and the land upon which these natural processes take place. However, our current liberal state structure has perpetuated the trend of individuals experiencing a strong detachment from their local contexts, which deters the realization of this ethical perspective (Eckersley, 1992: 52-55). Detachment, in turn, furthers this sense of atomism
within communities and minimizes the perceived influence of individual actions to address and rehabilitate ecological degradation in one’s community.

Eckersley provides a critique of the atomistic nature of liberalism. She argues that the framework of negative rights has led individual self-interest and self-realization to prevail over communal or societal interests and obligations (2004:104-106). She explains that beyond liberalism’s inability to acknowledge the social nature of humans, this atomism “is also based on a denial of any non-instrumental dependency on ecosystems and the biological world in general.” (104-105) This grievous distance from the reality of the human/nature relationship makes the exploitation of social capital and nature’s resources appear legitimate, if not “natural”—it reinforces the socially constructed human/nature divide and effectively deepens this sense of alienation (Biro, 2005: 76-77).

The Dominant Worldview\(^3\) essentially reiterates the aforesaid belief, and is described in detail by Bill Devall and George Sessions in their philosophical explanation of Deep Ecology. Essentially, the “Dominant Worldview” explains the source of this alienation and our current ecological crisis, which has been perpetuated by a false sense of superiority and separateness from nature and further intensified by our drive for material wealth and control over nature’s wildness (1989: 42-48).

Ecocentric ethics are strongly founded upon a notion of community derived from our current understanding of ecology, and from this ecological starting point we can better understand our membership within a community as being inseparable from the natural conditions in which it is located. This understanding is a necessary precondition in effectively addressing the ecological crisis due to the institutional limitations in

\(^3\) The Dominant Worldview refers to the prevailing social paradigm of a nation or collective. The tenets put forth assume that societal structure is established and unlikely to change.
addressing the differential experiences of affected communities (Schlosberg, 2007: 58-64). Eckersley describes this inherent tie between the individual and community:

Without knowledge of and attachment to particular persons or particular places and species, it is hard to understand how one might be moved to defend the interests of persons, places, and species in general. Local social and ecological attachments provide the basis for sympathetic solidarity with others; they are ontologically prior to any ethical and political struggle for universal environmental justice. (2004: 190)

Individual identity formation and societal influence on individual values, beliefs, and perspectives are processes that occur at the community level, and they play a major role in human character development (Biro, 2005: 211-212). Ecocentrism builds on this argument to justify a much more complex and holistic understanding of community. Leopold puts it quite succinctly; “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.” (1949: 204)

Traditionally, humans have been viewed in relation to nature in a position of dominance over it; however, this implies that humanity could conceivably be separated from nature. Every member of the human species lives within some distinct ecosystem and as such they are members to that system. The human societies within these communities have always been of significant moral concern, yet vulnerability of ecosystems has rarely been represented in political deliberation. Ecosystems exhibit outstanding sophistication in their ability to regulate, recover, and flourish entirely on their own—human communities cannot do this without subsistence from their ecosystem.
(Eckersley, 1991: 60-61). Therefore, humans are incapable of considering themselves separately from their environment, or as Eckersley states, “one’s own individual or personal fate is intimately bound up with the fate of others.” (1991: 62)

The logic states that just as we can alter the workings of an ecosystem, so can ecosystems impact the structure of human societies. Ecology dictates that nature is undeniably a web of interconnected parts and processes constituting biotic community or ecosphere (Devall and Sessions, 1985: 85-87). An ecosystem’s dynamic functioning and ability to independently strive towards a natural equilibrium deserves recognition for its intrinsic value (Eckersley, 1991: 60-63). When a natural ecosystem is subjected to interference—human or otherwise—there is no guarantee that it will be able to restore itself to even a semblance of its former state; once the ‘wildness’ of a natural system is artificially manipulated, it is impossible for that system to return to its natural state. Leopold offers a lamentation of this, “The land recovers, but at some reduced level of complexity and with a reduced carrying capacity for people, plants, and animals.” (1949: 219) Therefore, any proposal of a transformation to the land or its ecological functioning requires inclusion into the political decision making process, and the process needs to take account of the interests of nonhuman species and the characteristics of the land in order to cultivate an ecological understanding.

Therefore, political decision making must acquire a new component of representation capable of listening to normative, social and scientific arguments regarding nature, distant others, and future generations (Schlosberg, 2005: 104-105). Political deliberation has privileged those capable of verbal participation in decision-making procedures at the cost of deprivation or degradation to those excluded, which
now must be restructured to account for the intricate nature of ecological impacts (Dobson, 2010: 753-754). We must accept that our traditional focus on communicative competence and tangible boundaries is arbitrary when weighing the moral considerability of competing claims (Eckersley, 2004: 119-138). Representation in the political process requires that we recognize the intrinsic value of nature, which necessitates an extension of our moral considerations and obligations as stewards of the environment. David Schlosberg notes, “This form of recognition of nature requires a move away from a solely individualistic notion of recognition to a broader, ecological one applicable to habitats and ecosystems: the recognition of the potential of a landscape or an ecological community to flourish.” (2005: 104-105)

Overall, any theoretical structure proposed to address the ecological crisis will have to first address the separation of humanity from the communities they belong to. By empowering human communities to overcome this sense of civic detachment, citizens may be more inclined to actively participate in the political deliberation process. Active citizenship increases the likelihood that individuals will gain local knowledge about one’s ecosystem and incorporate that understanding into the decision-making process, whether such knowledge is attained actively or passively (Eckersley, 2004: 112-114). The theoretical picture of ecocentrism I have just laid out is not a complete analysis of ecocentric arguments, which talk about the intrinsic value of the land and ecosystems in much more depth; however, the aspects we have put forth represent a very powerful beginning to ecologically sound decision-making. Communitarians currently do not advocate for recognition of the intrinsic value of ecosystems; in fact, ecological concerns currently do not have much of any mention in communitarian theory. Yet, this does not
prevent the compatibility of ecocentrism and communitarianism, it more so provides an opportunity to encompass ecologically sound practices within local communities without jeopardizing the communitarian goal of self-determination in local communities.

2.2 Communitarian Arguments

Communitarian theory seeks to restore self-government on a more localized scale. In line with ecocentric arguments, communitarianism is concerned with the alienation occurring under the atomistic structure of liberalism. In contrast, the focus is largely on how this atomism has disempowered local communities and individual self-efficacy (Sandel, 1996: 204). Michael Sandel explains, “…to be free is to share in governing a political community that controls its own fate. Self-government in this sense requires political communities that control their destinies, and citizens who identify sufficiently with those communities to think and act with a view to the common good.” (202) The strength of comparison for this communitarian belief with the ecocentric position I described stems from their shared desire to return autonomy to community decision-making in regards to concerns particular to that local context (Sandel, 1996: 205; Eckersley, 2004: 106-107).

Self-government cannot occur without citizen participation, and this requires that individuals identify with their community. Identification with a community presupposes an established identification of the self—for only then can an individual develop a true sense of membership within a community (Taylor, 1985: 209). Membership in a community obliges individuals to be active citizens when it comes to public political
deliberation concerning the common good. Alasdair MacIntyre refers to this as the 
process of becoming a “practical reasoner”:

Independent practical reasoners contribute to the formation and sustaining of their 
social relationships … and to learn how to become an independent practical 
reasoner is to learn how to cooperate with others in forming and sustaining those 
same relationships that make possible the achievement of common goods by 
independent practical reasoners. Such cooperative activities presuppose some 
degree of shared understanding of present and future possibilities. (1999:74)

Individual interests are not of primacy in cooperative societies and occasionally the best 
interest of society requires a contribution or sacrifice on behalf of the members, and the 
justification for it, Sandel argues, “…is not the abstract assurance that unknown others 
will gain more than I will lose, but the rather more compelling notion that by my efforts I 
contribute to the realization of a way of life in which I take pride and with which my 
identity is bound.” (1982: 143) Local communities provide the most particular and 
effective communities for political deliberation because of differences in local contexts, 
as MacIntyre stresses, “Different conditions pose different threats that in turn require 
different responses.” (1999: 143)

This emphasis on community self-determination does not seek to usurp all state 
power; in fact, as MacIntyre asserts, “[t]here are numerous crucial needs of local 
communities that can only be met by making use of state resources and invoking the 
interventions of state agencies.” (1999: 142) After all, democracy is designed to represent 
the interests of its citizens and only with their tacit consent can a democratic government 
be seen as legitimate. Communitarianism argues that citizens should expect community
self-determination to be protected before the state can gain legitimacy, as Michael Walzer asserts, “democracy is characterized by a series of explicit efforts to create and sustain an active citizenry.” (1994: 54) This argument has been put forth within contemporary ecocentric theory as well, especially in Eckersley’s proposal of ecological democracy which “might ultimately serve to cast the state in a new role: that of an ecological steward and facilitator of transboundary democracy…” (2004: 3)

The ecosystem focus in ecocentric theory goes above and beyond current communitarian ideas about the concerns of the political community. MacIntyre goes into great depth about the need to represent the interests of non-human living beings in community politics yet he still does not go so far as to suggest the adoption of an ecosystems approach in communitarianism (1999: 123). Without recognizing the value of ecosystems, communitarianism’s exclusive concern for the common good of the living members of a community is hardly better than the liberal self-interest they condemn. The comparably more narrow boundaries of a communitarian political community do provide enough flexibility to potentially incorporate elements of environmental stewardship and representation of non-human needs and interests. Additionally, communitarians’ emphasis on particular contexts across cultures suggests an underlying argument for the significance of place—furthermore, it implies that there is a potential to cultivate a value for the ecosystems attached to those particular places (Eckersley, 2006: 95-97).

As I stated earlier, these arguments brought forth from each theoretical camp are not holistically representative of the extensive material that has come from theorists of ecocentric and communitarian thought. The most prominent differences between them are the orientation they have towards the environment and their proposed ideal spheres of
political deliberation in terms of views represented in the deliberation process. However, these differences do not necessarily imply incompatibility. The workings of such an approach will be further explained later in this paper.

III. The Cosmopolitan Community

Cosmopolitanism and eco-communitarianism argue one of the fundamental norms in need of re-conceptualization is the way we, the human species, think about community. Traditionally, community has been viewed from a relatively narrow scope and in almost entirely anthropocentric terms. Ecocentric and communitarian theoretical perspectives assert that the implications of such a narrow conception of community tend to result in a limited sense of responsibility. The conflict between eco-communitarianism and cosmopolitanism comes from the direction that the concept of community should first be stretched: to encompass all of humanity or reach out to one’s local human and ecological community. Cosmopolitanism argues that our concern should be directed towards vulnerable human populations by virtue of our shared humanity and the role the wealthy countries have played in disadvantaging poorer nations (Held, 1995: 104-107).

Cosmopolitanism does not disagree with the anthropocentric character of our conceptions of community. They insist the narrowness of our sense of belongingness in a community has generated a lack of concern for outsiders and the effects our actions have produced in other communities (Appiah, 2006: 152-153). As Andrew Linklater describes, “the legacy of geographical barriers to the development of a human community survives in persistent indifference to distant suffering.” (2006: 110)
David Held provides a very thorough argument for expanding our sense of community to include all of humanity; he argues that every human is equal in moral worth by virtue of our shared capacity for reason, and the right to life (2010: 40). It is through our ability to communicate with one another that we are able to apply our capacity for reason into a practice of participatory democratic decision-making that allows for recognition of all human persons, each comprising a basic unit of moral worth (2010: 45). Held concludes on this subject by asserting that if we can recognize the equal standing of others, we can then recognize their needs and interests. Then we can begin working towards securing the capacity of all individuals to enjoy the full extent of their human rights. Under a deliberative global governance structure, people would need to make decisions based on all known consequences and potential risks they would generate, which would require us to preserve the integrity of the environments in which human populations reside (2010: 50).

Now if we assume this proposed global governance structure would evolve to incorporate the scientific understandings we currently have of ecology and the current and projected effects of climate change, then it could reasonably be suggested that humans acting in accordance to a ‘no harm’ principle would significantly limit our impact on our own local environments and decrease the impact on distant environments. This could result in greener technologies, more fair trade, less resource use, etc. on an international level; however, it could also stop short of these ideal goals.

One area of concern is the short-termism of cosmopolitan’s attention paid to the environment with all of its limitations, especially in regards to finite resources, specifically, the various living and non-living elements comprising an ecosystem, or
more broadly, our biosphere. Very little mention is made of biodiversity as an area of concern; it is usually cited as supplemental evidence that some areas of the globe have more restricted access to the resources needed for a standard of living compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Appiah, 2006: 158-172; Held, 2010: 144; Caney, 2010: 55-56).

Proposals put forth by these theorists advocate strong long-term goals for environmental reform once a global governance system has been established, which would be based on sustainable practices through climate change management and wiser resource use. This top-down approach to global environmental reform elicits some apprehension in my view, because it is still built upon the traditional normative understanding of the environment as something we must control and as an asset we use, whether or not it is in a more wise form of practice. In sum, cosmopolitanism may be capable of producing more global human equality and greater awareness of the causes of environmental degradation; however, by maintaining a relationship of dominance over the environment, cosmopolitanism may never fully realize the intrinsic value of biodiversity and ecological integrity found in ecocentric theory.

**IV. Approaches to Environmental Reform**

Cosmopolitanism and ecocentric communitarianism both approach the global ecological crisis from the perspective that our current statist approach in international environmental discourse is not working and is unlikely to be able to accommodate substantial reform. In terms of institutional efforts in the international arena, economic interests have thwarted attempts at substantial progress in many of the industrialized
nations, with many nations that ratified and agreed to emissions reductions still failing to actually produce such results.\textsuperscript{4} This is likely influenced by the substantial costs associated with cutting emissions and adhering to an adaptation and mitigation strategy to aid vulnerable populations. Economic growth and stability arguments have traditionally thwarted agenda proposals that involve capital losses in the name of ecologically friendly reforms.

Obama’s 2013 Inaugural Address marks one of the first serious indications of the U.S. working towards environmental policy reform, yet even such a brief, ambiguous mention gathered much criticism. Establishing a sense of responsibility and obligation for ecological problems has proven to be an arduous task in the current U.S. political climate. Pursuit of individual interests has been \textit{prima facie} in American politics since the signing of the declaration of independence and has only become more entrenched through the processes of globalization, the expansion of capitalism, and the growing sense of civic detachment in the citizenry. It would seem that denial of natural limits carries much more appeal than the recognition of such limits, which may have something to do with what that recognition entails.

So where do we go from here? I will outline each theoretical position on how the global ecological crisis would be approached and each perspective’s area of most concern. Cosmopolitanism offers a global approach to environmental reform that concentrates first and foremost on human needs and interests, specifically the ability for every person to enjoy the fullest extent of their human rights as outlined by the UN

Declaration of Human Rights. Eco-communitarianism proposes that reform should be approached at the local level, with the integrity of ecosystems as the primary goal.

4.1 Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitan assessments of the ecological crisis stress the global character of anthropogenic climate change and the impact it has had on common pool resources (Maltais, 2008). The ability of actions taken in one part of the world to affect the environmental conditions of distant places necessitates an international governance structure equipped with the authority to apply coercive force to states and multinational corporations (Held, 1995: 105-106). Unfortunately, the prevailing statist perspective in international political discourse has complicated efforts to make policy efforts like the Kyoto Protocol effective, enforceable, and feasible (Harris and Symons, 2010). Any viable international approach to addressing anthropogenic climate change will have to navigate through the complex terrain of sovereign rights and economic interests.

Cosmopolitan perspectives base their arguments for universal human rights on the notion that every human being is endowed with an equal moral worth and a right to a life, which rests on the assertion that a certain standard of living must be met and certain human capabilities realized. The method of achieving this is by recognizing each individual’s entitlements as a member of the human species and in so doing we acquire the obligation to respect those entitlements (Harris, 2010: 621-622; Smith, 2005: 18-19). The cosmopolitan notion of universal entitlements has encountered numerous criticisms on the grounds that it does not suit the pluralistic character of human society. Cosmopolitans reply to this critique with a logic that is shared by ecocentric and
communitarian theorists—namely, by highlighting the shared language of value and its ability to bridge pluralistic divides (Appiah, 2006: 26-31). Value learning is the way human society can cultivate a greater understanding of cultural differences and progress towards a shared set of basic values. Any cosmopolitan political order would account for pluralistic value differences by establishing a universal notion of entitlements that is built upon fundamental and widely shared values (Cottier, 2009: 670-675).

Cosmopolitans strive to rectify what they consider the primary areas of concern by actively promoting strong international governance, and the promotion of pro-poor development (Harris and Symons, 2010: 630). Adaptation and mitigation have been the main strategies employed by such institutions in drafting a proposal to address climate change, especially in poor developing countries. This requires funding from developed countries; however, such funding has failed to materialize due to the narrow scope of concern states have exhibited towards the needs of citizens in foreign nations. As Held argues, “It is no surprise then that national communities by no means make and determine decisions and policies exclusively for themselves, and that governments by no means determine what is right or appropriate exclusively for their own citizens.” (1995: 225)

So what does mitigation and adaptation entail in terms of the implementation of projects and policies? Mitigation would require states to commit to reducing their GHG emissions. This has been proposed in the form of carbon taxes or tradable permits. Adaptation would involve the provision of monetary aid to poorer nations to enhance their development capacity in a sustainable manner. State institutions receiving monetary aid would need to be designed to ensure some level of accountability, which would
require them to demonstrate that aid was used to reduce the vulnerability of at-risk populations. Enforcement of such arrangements is not possible under existing international institutions, which lacks the coercive power that is characteristic of state institutions (Maltais, 2008). The moral justification for the rich aiding the poor stems from the basic cosmopolitan principle—namely, every individual comprises equal moral worth. There is no justification for the poor and disadvantaged to be vulnerable and further impaired by climate change while the rich continue to prosper (Caney, 2010: 25-29).

Cultivating a sense of affectedness towards the world population requires that individual and state actors recognize the right of all members of the human species to flourish. Cosmopolitans recognize that a sense of moral obligation to one’s community and nation is a deontological prerequisite to adopting this sense of interconnectedness. Linklater agrees with this argument that an “approach to cosmopolitanism starts, then, with emotional dispositions not to harm at least a limited circle of others which first develop in family relations and are then extended to other members of society and possibly to all members of the human race.” (2006: 114) Only once we have enlarged the boundaries of our community of concern can international humanitarian efforts gain support from states and be seen as legitimate.

The methods employed by cosmopolitanism are characteristic of a top-down approach to reform. Creation of a rule-based multilateral order in international politics is essential to alleviating the suffering experienced by populations in developing countries. This can only come about through the creation of a global governance structure possessing the authority to hold states accountable for their environmentally harmful
practices and also compel states to compensate for past contributions to our current crisis. States must be willing to accept the legitimacy of international institutions in the role that they can play in mediating transboundary environmental disputes, as well as their ability to ensure adherence to multilateral treaties. States, in their current institutional capacity, do not have the means to address global problems (Held, 2010). States need to understand that a global governance structure is necessary for pursuing environmental justice on a global scale.

International institutions rely on the voluntary cooperation of states in the creation and implementation of multilateral treaties. States must be willing to accept the authority of the global governance structure and the legitimacy of the political order in general. Fostering acceptance for this type of international regime has been incomprehensible in the face of the pervasive global capitalist growth economy, which favors the competitive economic interests of states over state cooperation in a rule-based multilateral approach of adaptation and mitigation (Harris and Symons, 2010). It is for this reason that Eckersley argues that Cosmopolitan proposals for non-state governance—

…downplay the ways in which states themselves are responsible for actively orchestrating the new global neoliberal economic order; and consequently overestimate the possibilities of successful nonstate environmental regulation and stewardship occurring without the support of at least a critical mass of states. (2005, 171)

Prominent cosmopolitan theorists in the field reinforce this belief by arguing that the successful development of cosmopolitan institutions will require states to voluntarily relinquish a level of sovereignty in order to ensure enforceability of multilateral treaties
by international governance structures. There is also an underlying implication that states would be willing to arrange national priorities in favor of alleviation of global suffering over the pursuit of economic interests—a precondition that is further complicated by the noncompliance of major economic powers like the U.S.

Adoption of the ethical perspective that we are bound up in “communities of fate” and therefore have moral obligations to alleviate the suffering of disproportionately affected poorer nations is preceded by a sense of moral obligation and duty to assist members of our own local and national communities (Held, 1995: 228). This reasoning implies that the creation of an “interconnected self” is not likely to be cultivated without appealing to human emotions of shame and guilt (Linklater, 2006: 115-118). In contrast, an eco-communitarian perspective does not require the participation of the national political structure to begin developing the foundation for an ecologically informed democracy, and its primary focus on locality provides great potential for cultivating a wider scope of moral considerability.

4.2 Eco-communitarianism

Engaging citizens in reform efforts provides an ideal starting point in efforts to transform state political structures and is critical to the success of an eco-communitarian approach in addressing the ecological crisis. Such an approach requires the enhancement of democratic procedures at the local level by creating effective and accessible participatory and procedural mechanisms. Willingness to participate in the participatory process arises out of a concern for the preservation and integrity of ecosystems that make possible the existence of human communities.
Ecosystems vary significantly from place to place within the global ecological context, exhibiting extreme differences in their structural composition, complexity, and vulnerability. Human communities display the same inherent variability as ecosystems. It is the pluralistic nature of local communities that makes it a powerful site for fostering ecologically sound practices capable of surpassing standard regulatory frameworks. This is the rationale that John Dryzek employs when he argues, “Large bureaucracies operating according to standard procedures insensitive to local ecological contexts fail this test; bioregional authorities governed by citizens with a thorough knowledge of local circumstances are likely to do much better.” (2005: 235)

Cultivating a desire for ecologically responsible statehood in the citizenry requires institutional mechanisms to be put in place to allow for active and informed political participation at the community level. Moreover, these democratic procedures must adopt higher standards of legitimacy by actually responding to the needs and interests of local communities (Schlosberg, 2005: 109). There are many different components to this process considering the current level of civic detachment in U.S. politics. According to communitarian arguments, the conceptual normative framework capable of empowering the citizenry is the strengthening of civic society, which Sandel identifies:

Political community depends on the narratives by which people make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best, political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of the community, of its purposes and ends. (1996: 350)
Defenders of an ecocentric approach share this perspective, as Schlosberg asserts, “Central to these deliberative processes is a connection to community and place. Recognition of communities and the land itself is the basis of the process.” (2005: 111)

Ecological problems have been framed as global in effect, but the way these global problems are felt is through the particular, acute effects experienced in local communities from resource depletion, pollution, land degradation, etc. Addressing civic detachment in this specific context has led ecocentric theorists to stress the power of communitarian approaches, such as open political deliberation in public meetings or Internet-based public participation. Decision-making would need to respect the concerns and interests of citizens, which inevitably are grounded in a local knowledge of the ecosystem and community interpretations of what constitutes “the common good”. Local knowledge provides a delimiting force against the prevailing tendency to view environmental impact assessments in terms of pure economic feasibility (Devall and Sessions, 1985: 158-159). This knowledge needs to incorporate an understanding of the needs of non-human species, which is best done through an expanded notion of representation.

Representation of all those potentially affected by a proposed action needs to occur in the discussion of projects and policies that produce environmental risk. Potentially affected others that would be considered in deliberations include future generations, nonhuman species, and nonliving natural components descriptive of the land (Eckersley, 2004: 111-138). The importance of local knowledge in the deliberative procedure that involve representation of potentially affected others cannot be dismissed, because just as human rights infractions detriment the health of a community, so does natural processes such as stream bank erosion. Distress signals from nature are expressed
in the form of species extinction, soil degradation from overgrazing, or widespread fish
kills from pollution in lakes and streams, etc. Ecosystems inevitably experience a decline
in productivity and integrity, and local populations embedded in the ecosystem are most
likely to notice and respond, especially if it generates adverse effects in those
communities. “Listening” to these signs from nature and interpreting them through the
lens of ecology is essential to representing the needs and interests of nonhuman species
(Dobson, 2010).

The notion of greater inclusivity in the political deliberation process through
representation of outside interests and concerns has not been widely embraced by
communitarian thinkers. Communitarianism’s reluctance to take into consideration the
ecological needs and vulnerability of nonhuman species threatens the institutional
strength of its proposed sociopolitical/ economic structures by potentially weakening the
ecological foundation that community is built upon. As Dryzek points out, “…the kinds
of values that can survive authentic democratic debate are those orientated to the interests
of the community as a whole… Foremost among such community interests is the
integrity of the ecological base upon which the community depends.” (2005: 234)

The lure of an eco-communitarian approach is that it works from the bottom-up,
with the aim to decentralize the nation-state’s sovereign power in environmental
regulation. This isn’t an effort to dissolve the legitimacy of the state. Rather, eco-
communitarianism employs the power of influence emanating from local communities
fighting for the right of self-determination to pursue more ecologically sound policies and
practices. The ecocentric aspect of this theoretical approach offers a grassroots appeal to
moral and ethical reasoning, and is reinforced by the communitarian goal of establishing self-determination in local governance.

Even without the support of local institutions, efforts can be made at the individual level to encourage fellow citizens to minimize their impact on ecological systems. This can be done by lessening consumption in a holistic way, specifically by buying from local farmers’ markets and local businesses, and investing in green technologies or energy efficient commodities. These small changes appear to carry very minimal influence in creating change at the macro level; however, as more people commit to making these changes in their consumer behavior, it becomes a powerful influence in the aggregate. This is especially effective in democratic states that must respond to the will of the citizenry in order to retain a sense of legitimacy. Individuals can also take direct action to influence institutional transformation. This can be done by a reformulation of the argument put forth by Schlosberg in his description of the how states would facilitate greater civic engagement in ecological affairs. I will provide a depiction of what this could look like.

Schlosberg has displayed a particular concern about the disconnect between corporate and/or state agencies and the populations potentially affected by actions taken by these agencies. Projects or policies that have created an environmental risk or harmful consequences have a paper trail documenting the agencies involved in the process. By utilizing and acting upon this information, individuals can contact state and/or economic actors in charge of environmental assessments, project proposals, decision-making, and implementation/construction and make a request to hold a public forum for concerned citizens potentially affected by these actions. Public forums would involve the full
sharing of information about the action being taken and provide an opportunity for meaningful deliberation of the potential impacts and risks that could be generated by the action. This public deliberation would need strong elements of inclusiveness and transparency in order for the process to be deemed legitimate. Justifying the involvement of the public to relevant agencies and actors, and members of the local community could prove to be one of the most powerful methods in bringing about the decentralization of environmental regulation and in minimizing the success of economic interests over ecological wellbeing (2005: 97-116).

V. Conclusion: The Power of Locality

The complexity of the global ecological crisis has prompted political theorists from various political ideological backgrounds to envisage a state structure capable of responding to the urgency of the situation. The presumption here is that neoliberal states and their capitalist growth economies are incapable of reconciling the tension between individual autonomy and the need for collective action. However, this has resulted in a tendency for environmental political theory to dismiss a statist approach—as cosmopolitanism argues for in their desire to place sovereign power in a global governance institution.

The biggest challenge cosmopolitans face in establishing a sovereign global political structure is obtaining the consent of states to recognize the legitimacy of this authority. Cosmopolitans want to end the era of centralized economic planning by state government; in fact, their disdain for states’ economic pursuit of capital gains resonates strongly with eco-communitarian arguments. However, cosmopolitans point to the need
to restrict state autonomy in economic policy and accept an international economic system of regulation, which is the opposite of eco-communitarianism’s decentralized approach. Restricting the emission of greenhouse gases would also fall under the jurisdiction of an international political structure.

The notion of a sovereign global governance structure with international regulatory powers has prompted skepticism in the international community—most notably the U.S.—to doubt the accountability of global governance structures, and its right to claim legitimate rule. Held recognizes this aspect of uncertainty in global governance, “[t]he international order is characterized both by the persistence of the sovereign states system and by the development of plural structures of power and authority, many of which have, at best, weak or obscure mechanisms of accountability.”

Therefore, the cosmopolitan goal of a sovereign global political power has been constrained by states’ apprehension in deciding whether or not to consent to regulation and restrictions imposed by an international order. This posture is likely a result of states’ desire to retain full autonomy over national affairs and partly a result of doubts concerning whether global political institutions have the ability to ensure accountability within their own structure.

State resistance to consent to a sovereign global power is more complex than mere issues of accountability and legitimacy. Though it is not generally expressed explicitly, states have demonstrated an unwillingness to take responsibility for the disproportionate costs borne upon poorer nations as a result of anthropogenic climate change. This poses the question—how do we extend our moral considerations to distant strangers? As stated previously, the ethical sequence put forth by cosmopolitans
acknowledges that we begin with developing a sense of responsibility at the local and state levels, and then we extend this sense of concern and responsibility to the global community.

In contrast, an eco-communitarian notion of the ideal state structure offers the potential to be ecologically sound in practice—and more importantly, attainable through incremental progress. Ecocentrism on its own has been criticized for the indeterminacy of its proposed state structure and deliberative procedures—especially when defining state-to-state and state-to-community relations. Communitarianism offers a much clearer perception of an ideal structure of political deliberation, but it lacks the ecological understanding present in ecocentric theory. By combining these two theories, they work to correct one another’s theoretical and structural weaknesses.

Transforming the government structure of state institutions offers a viable alternative to the status quo or a global governance structure equipped with legitimate force. The idea of “greening” democratic institutions is still a theoretical work-in-progress, but the advantage is that it doesn’t require the complete abandonment or substantial override of our current notion of state sovereignty. In fact, it doesn’t require established preconditions at all—the transformation begins at the local level with individuals and collectives. Therefore, the justification for emphasizing local communities as the foundation for approaching the ecological challenge is due to the accessibility of communities and the appeal to the individual experience.

A sense of membership within a community allows for an understanding of what is in the interests of that local context and what actions serve to promote the common good of that community. This is due to the societal learning that occurs within the
community, which has the potential to produce a basic level of knowledge of one’s own local context. As Walzer argues:

Societies are necessarily particular because they have members and memories, members with memories not only of their own but also of their common life. Humanity, by contrast, has members but no memory, and so it has no history and no culture, no customary practices, no familiar life-ways, no festivals, no shared understanding of social goods. (1994: 8)

Applying local knowledge to inform decision-making procedures in the community could reinforce an individual’s sense of membership in—and belonging to their particular locality (Sandel, 1996: 201-203). Solidifying such an idea could serve to strengthen social solidarity and thereby foster a sense of responsibility towards the community and all the constituent parts of its ecological foundations.

Engaging in discussions with members of one’s community is critical to nourishing a sense of obligation to protect ecosystem integrity. If the majority of community members could embrace such a sense of obligation, it may be possible to influence community recognition of nature as being intrinsically valuable. Collective concern for ecosystem integrity could inspire surrounding communities to adopt the same ecologically sound practices. The power of societal influence in creating change is not to be underestimated, to quote Leopold, “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.” (1949: 209-210) Recognition of nature’s intrinsic value is essential in formulating a realistic understanding of global ecological limits.
Eco-communitarianism agrees with the cosmopolitan assertion that the U.S. and other powerful industrialized nations have an obligation to redress the disproportionate harm inflicted upon poorer developing nations by virtue of their historic contribution to atmospheric CO$_2$ concentrations. However, I am greatly concerned about the ecological impacts associated with a humanitarian campaign of global development as asserted by cosmopolitanism. The global economic structure is remarkably fragile at the moment, and the costs associated with a cosmopolitan program of adaptation and mitigation entail substantial costs. Another result of this so-called global recession is that states are considerably less likely to consider transforming economic self-interest into voluntary compliance, which would constitute considerable restrictions on state autonomy in economic policy. These factors, along with the other arguments made throughout this paper seem to imply that the establishment of a sovereign global governmental structure is unlikely to occur in the near future. The urgency of the global ecological crisis necessitates a more immediate response.

The impetus for advancing the theoretical approach eco-communitarianism is due to the beliefs I hold concerning global ecological limits. For centuries, the human species has been primarily concerned with the flourishing of its own species. Even as human populations continue to grow at exponential rates, this central focus has not shifted. It is widely accepted that human populations have a negative impact on ecosystem integrity and natural resource supply. So it follows that exponential growth in the human population equates with increasing rates of environmental degradation. This logic has been confirmed extensively by scientific research.
The complete dismissal of scientific research in the formulation of state policies concerning environmental regulations and restrictions is baffling in my opinion. Evidence of the global ecological crisis can be seen worldwide. For example, the Amazon Rainforest accounts for 20% of the world’s oxygen production, and in the past 40 years roughly 20% has been cleared for purposes of human development.\(^5\) Generally speaking, projections have been frighteningly accurate in predicting future impacts, and these are given even less consideration than observable facts in the decision-making processes. One projection is that by 2025, it is estimated that the world population will be using 70% of the world’s total accessible freshwater supplies.\(^6\) The wealth of knowledge that can be gained from these observations and projections strikes fear and despair into the hearts of those with ecological sentiments, yet not everyone who hears the science considers it of importance. It may be asked, how does an awareness of global ecological limits pertain to the theoretical approaches outlined in this paper? It comes down to a matter of conflicting priorities and how choosing one option allows for the other to be exposed to continuously increasing risk.

The evolution of the human species and the subsequent evolution of human society have been remarkable indeed. The wealth of knowledge that humanity has attained is awe-inspiring when taken from a broad view. The question becomes: is human progress the ultimate, singular goal? Or should human stability and sustainability be our primary goal while we address the severe, penetrating ecological degradation human progress has inflicted on the natural order of the world? Change—natural and artificial,

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micro and macro, human and non-human—is inevitable. However, is it not conceivable that human progress has caused so many changes to the natural order in such a short period of time that it should be called into question and addressed? This paper argues that it should. A vast scientific consensus argues that it should. If ecosystems could speak, I am almost certain they too would argue that it should—but that is not the purpose of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how to begin addressing the problem, not that there is one—that shall be assumed.

The ethical imperative presented by the global ecological challenge poses the question of where do we focus our attention first? If one ascribes to a scientific understanding of global ecological limits, then it seems that the government should focus on reforming environmental policy first and foremost. The continued suffering of disadvantaged human population is undoubtedly unjust—but the same can be said of the unimpeded degradation of ecosystem integrity and continued exploitation of natural resources. This paper admittedly pursues environmental justice before social justice. Ecological integrity is the best means to providing substantial social justice—it creates enhanced resource security, more climate stability, and ecosystems that have a revitalized ability to self-regulate. The longer we postpone taking steps towards addressing climate change, the greater the severity of future ecological issues. It is absolutely essential that individuals and communities begin to take steps towards assuming the role of ecological stewards. Humanity must adopt an understanding that our interests are not the only morally relevant consideration—ecological integrity is at stake, and the human species cannot exist without it.
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