Metaphysics of the Ecological Self

Abstract

The idea of the ecological self is prominent within deep ecology, as in the work of Arne Naess, Freya Mathews, and William Devall. On this view, to realize one’s true Self (which Naess capitalizes) is to recognize that we are all one with everything else that exists. However, nowadays most philosophers – and even most environmental philosophers – reject this neo-Spinozistic metaphysics. At the same time, several philosophers working squarely within the analytic tradition have revitalized some similar notions. For instance, Jonathan Schaffer writes in a 2010 article in Mind of the “Internal Relatedness of All Things” and Schaffer, Kit Fine, E. J. Lowe, and others have written extensively over the last fifteen years about monism and ontological dependence.

This paper is an attempt to fashion a metaphysical view of the ecological self which combines insights from both the deep ecological and contemporary analytic traditions. The result is a moderate view which rejects Naess’s and Schaffer’s claims that all things are internally related but still maintains that there are some internal dependence relations between humans and the non-human world. Ecology, after all, is the specific study of the interactions of organisms and facets of their environments, and thus to escalate the ecological self to a cosmic claim that all things are interrelated is excessive. Still, one can use this more metaphysically modest notion of the ecological self to ground certain normative claims about the kinds of connections that humans should have with each other and with the environment.