

THEME 01

The Depth of Deep Ecology

DEEP ECOLOGY

CLIMATE CHANGE

CONSUMER PRACTICES

Climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly considered the core challenges of humanity in the 21st century. However, proposed solutions are manifold and designed from varying ecological paradigms that have different ideas about the way we relate to nature. Deep ecology, being one of the most radical of paradigms, might increasingly come to inform our thinking on sustainability and our relationship to nature.

Our observations

- Ecological awareness is becoming an increasingly important demarcation line in politics, besides traditional lines such as economic policy, the boundaries of the public and private sphere, or immigration. In the recent European elections, [green parties emerged as the big winners](#), while in the U.S. [bipartisan convergence on the issue of anthropogenic climate change](#) is materializing (of which the [Green New Deal](#) is currently the most radical solution proposed on the left). At the same time, the Chinese social contract is increasingly focused on [environmental objectives](#), and the top-down structure of China's leadership is expected to be relatively successful in establishing the required deep transitions needed in the [socio-technical](#) and [socio-economic](#) systems that underpin its economy.
- Natural ecosystems can be considered "complex systems": we have limited knowledge of the inner logic of these systems, i.e. of which effects result from which causes, and they have a high degree of [uncertainty](#) (as compared to risk), thus limiting the ability of actors to intervene and establish their preferred states and outcomes. [Complexity studies](#) in general study the relations and outcomes of systems that consist of many components that interact with and adapt to each other, on almost every scale: the universe, societies, the human brain, living cells. The central idea behind complex systems is that their outcomes are difficult to model because of the many and insecure dependencies, relationships and interactions between the parts that form the whole, rendering unstable equilibria and continuously changing outcomes.
- Environmental philosopher Hans Jonas has tried to establish a total "axiologization of being", meaning a philosophy in which all sorts of being are equally morally valuable. Given our unique capabilities, i.e. intelligence and technology, for disrupting natural ecosystems and their equilibria, humanity has an especially important [moral responsibility](#) to take care of all sorts of being: ourselves, others, as well as nature and the environment as a whole. In a similar sense, philosopher Peter Singer claims that animals should have moral rights as well, and dismisses the claim that human beings are superior to animals and other living beings and thus are morally more important as "[speciesism](#)": moral discrimination of other species.
- We have written before how a "[non-reductive](#)" [ontology and epistemology](#) is emerging, that aims to overcome the dualistic distinction in modern thinking between nature and culture, man and world, subject and object, that started with Descartes. As it's becoming increasingly clear that man is dependent upon nature for his [physical](#) and [mental](#) wellbeing, nature thus appears another one of the "[masters of suspicion](#)" that show that man is no independent, autonomous subject that relates in a rational and objective way to reality, but is deeply embedded in ecological structures (besides economic (Marx), vital (Darwin, Nietzsche), subconscious (Freud), power-related (Foucault) structures).
- The book [Silent Spring](#) (1962) by Rachel Carson is considered the book that propelled the deep ecology movement. The book documents the detrimental and unintended effects of the overuse of synthetic pesticides to kill mosquitoes, which also led to a mass extinction of birds in many regions in the U.S., hence the title *Silent Spring*, referring to the absence of chirping birds. Many more research has since then shown that synthetic pesticides, or "[biocides](#)" rarely limit their effects to the targeted organism, and Carson became an activist for environmental and wildlife perseverance and is devoted to preventing humans from interfering in the interrelated webs and symbiotic relations of natural ecosystems.

>> see next page



Connecting the dots

In recent years, it has become consensus that anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation is becoming one of the greatest challenges of humankind in the 21st century. Most agree that measures should be taken, but there is no consensus on how to address the problem. That is because most solutions are informed by different ecological paradigms and worldviews. We can discern a range of rationales, varying from more pragmatic to more ideologically driven, corresponding to the different solutions that actors have presented to address climate change.

The first is that failing to address climate change will be economically costly: climate change will disrupt value and transportation chains, extreme weather events will wreak havoc and certain areas will become uninhabitable (and some will benefit). Furthermore, being sustainable could also become a business opportunity, tapping into the greening of consumer preferences. A second rationale states in a similar sense that climate change will incur costs, but is also concerned with others sorts of harm, e.g. to our health and our wellbeing, and thus we should prevent further ecological degradation in order to protect human health and safety. A third, less pragmatic and more ideologically driven rationale is that we should not only have moral obligations towards other humans, but also to other living organisms, such as cows, horses, insects, or even plants, rivers, seas or whole ecosystems. True progress is a process that benefits all living beings in a sustainable way, as Jonas and Singer argue. Another rationale is that preventing climate change can be something of a [meaningful activity in itself](#), because nature has intrinsic value that human beings should recognize and honor. Lastly, the most ideological rationale states that man is part of a broader natural ecosystem and that we can only be fully human when we understand ourselves and act in correspondence to the internal logic and dynamics of nature. As such, protecting the environment is a goal in itself that man has to aspire to, despite his own preferences and benefits.

This last rationale forms the core of the “deep ecology” paradigm, which envisions a whole new understanding of nature, our relationship to nature, as well as our practices in science, religion, and philosophy. The “depth” of deep ecology can be described with three core principles: i) nature has intrinsic value, is a goal in itself and should be given the space to blossom, realize its own internal growth and goals, ii) man is part of nature and has no special place in the cosmos, but is a member of its ecosystems and dependent on them for his own flourishing, and iii) nature is a complex system and man his little knowledge and skill to determine and coordinate its workings. As such, deep ecology’s critique of the first two rationales

is that they are actually too shallow: they adopt a utilitarian and anthropocentric attitude to nature, in which nature is not a goal in itself. Furthermore, the third rationale is insufficient as it still conceives of nature from a materialist and consumer- or human-oriented point of view that does not take into account that man is actually a part of and dependent upon nature for his own flourishing, and leaves no room for nature’s own goals and flourishing. The fourth rationale is criticized because it conceives of nature as too simple a system, one that, theoretically, can be subjected to human will and wants. Given nature’s subtle balances and the fine-grained attunement of members of an ecosystem, human intervention will very likely result in damage to its inner workings and balance. Furthermore, it is still too rationalistic, as it cannot address the question why nature has intrinsic value, and only by digging deeper into the fundamental relationship of man and nature, our [“Cartesian relationship to nature”](#), can we know how to deal with ecological degradation and sustainability.

As such, deep ecology ties in with the emerging paradigm of “trans-humanism”, in which man is no longer seen as the independent, autonomous subject that relates in a rational and objective way to reality. Instead, he is part of a larger whole (ontology), and his flourishing depends on living nature and natural ecosystems. Furthermore, man does not have the skills and knowledge to intervene in natural ecosystems, which are highly complex and have a high degree of uncertainty (epistemology). The understanding of complex systems requires a holistic point of view; seeing how order and stable patterns emerge in these systems, e.g. collective human behavior, diseases, coherent human thought (such as philosophy), or even the remarkable stability and order in the observable universe. Furthermore, it ties in with a more deontological ethics that brings rights and obligations to all beings irrespective of their own wants and preferences (ethics). Instead, a kind of [practical wisdom is required](#), green virtues so to speak, to establish a proper disposition towards nature that is both non-reductive as well as axiologically responsible with respect to nature (e.g. [sustainable simple living](#) (e.g. “consuminderen”), or combatting [climate fatalism](#)). Politically, this may require a stronger top-down approach to enforce the rules and meta-rules for sustainable socio-economic and socio-technical systems. As a result, societies could see increased limitations to their liberal way of life (i.e. doing what one wants, consuming what one prefers), in order to fight climate change. In this case, [China’s vision of progress](#) could increasingly come to be considered the most responsible or the best.

Implications

- Adopting a deep ecology worldview and ethics means that many more things and activities might become “ecologically stigmatized”. We have written before that the recent rise of people adopting a [vegan lifestyle](#) is underpinned by a new sustainable consciousness and willingness to take care of the environment. In a similar sense, we can “deconstruct” other emerging consumer practices from such a socio-environmental perspective, such as local holidays or “[staycations](#)” to [avoid traveling by plane](#), [local food production](#) to [reduce agriculture’s ecological footprint](#), or buying second-hand clothing to evade the wasteful business of “[fast fashion](#)”. More radical imperatives could include a stigma on having children (seen as the proximate cause of pollution and consumption), physical activity (which requires food and thus energy), or people being excluded from certain ecosystems if their [sustainability credit score](#) is too low.
- Climate change and sustainability could contribute to politics and international relations again becoming increasingly ideologically driven at the [End of the End of History](#). However, because it is a common, non-human threat, climate change is a force that transcends the [traditional division lines](#) in (geo)politics between friend and foe, as defined by Carl Schmitt, and might be the first common cause to finally unify humankind. As such, we could also see new alliances between countries, such as the League of Sinking Nations, the Deep Ecology United Nations, as well as coalitions concerned with specific sustainability issues (such as India’s [International Solar Alliance](#)).