

Critical Book Review of a Contract with the Earth

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There are a large number of books and articles that look at environmental ethics. One of these books is A Contract with the Earth by Newt Gingrich and Terry L. Maple. In this book the concept of entrepreneurial environmentalism is developed. In this review it will be argued that entrepreneurial environmentalism can be understood using Sinclair/Kohlberg's concept of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics. It can be argued that entrepreneurial environmentalism is based on an instrumental-relativist orientation.

To begin this review it is necessary to look at the major ethical arguments that are being made by Gingrich and Maple in A Contract with the Earth. It can be argued that the book develops two concepts. The first is a contract with the Earth. The contract with the earth is a set of ten commandments for ethically balancing environmental and business interests (Gingrich and Maple 12-16).

The second concept is the concept of entrepreneurial environmentalism. Entrepreneurial environmentalism can be seen as the dominant ethical theory that informs the entire book. It can be seen as environmentalism driven by business and facilitated by the government. For example, the second commandment in the contract is to reward a new generation of environmental entrepreneurs. Within this commandment Gingrich and Maple argue that we need to,

focus and nurture environmental business, large and small, throughout the nation, to create and advance a multitude of renewable, sustainable, and restorative technologies (Gingrich and Maple 12).

In essence this is the core of entrepreneurial environmentalism. It suggests that ethical environmental decisions will be the result of giving businesses incentives to create green technologies. This means that environmental problems will be solved with technology. This technology will be developed by giving companies incentives to develop green technologies.

There is no suggestion that there is anything other than self-interest driving this form of environmental ethics.

The concept of entrepreneurial environmentalism can be understood using the framework of a cognitive-developmental approach to ethics. In “On the Uses of Psychological Theory and Research in the Process of Ethical Inquiry” Alan S. Waterman explains that the cognitive-developmental approach was first developed by Kohlberg. Kohlberg work was based on Piaget’s structural theories of moral development. Kohlberg developed three primary levels of cognitive moral development. Each of these levels was composed two stages. These six stages of development are all associated with particular principles of justice (Waterman 287). The argument that is being made is that the ethical decisions of individuals will be based on their level of cognitive development.

The cognitive-developmental approach that is developed by Glenn W. Sinclair is very similar to the one developed by Kohlberg. It can be used to see the low level of ethical development seen in entrepreneurial environmentalism. Entrepreneurial environmentalism can be seen as a stage two ethical level of development. This stage is known for the development of an instrumental-relativist orientation. According to Sinclair the right action at this stage is one that satisfies an individual’s needs and in some cases the needs of others. In this state human relations are understood in terms of the market place. Concepts of fairness, reciprocity and equal sharing are present but they are seen in a physically pragmatic way (Sinclair 6). This can be seen in many elements of the entrepreneurial environmentalism. It sees solving environmental problems as something that is in their best interest. They believe that they can solve environmental problems but making a deal with business. This deal makes it in the best interest of companies to develop green technologies. There is no suggestion of a deeper ethical framework for environmentalism or dealing with environmental problems.

In effect entrepreneurial environmentalism makes businesses into the solution to environmental problems. They are the ones that will develop green technologies if given the right incentives. According to Gingrich and Maple companies like EnergyXchange are burning trash to create electrical energy for homes and businesses in the Black Mountain Range (Gingrich and Maple 88). This demonstrates the low level of complexity in the concept of entrepreneurial environmentalism. It suggests that environmental problems can be solved by technological development alone. The marketplace will be used to encourage the development of these technologies. There are no suggestions of other ethical considerations beyond self-interest.

A more developed ethical approach is expressed in *Cowboy Values* by James P. Owen. The major argument made is that cowboys lived according to a code. According to Owen this Code of the West was an ethical system that developed in the American West before courts and laws were established. This code has less to do with rules than it has to do with character. It pushes for the development of character traits like honesty, loyalty and authenticity (Owen 22). The point of this code is that it determines what people should do in order to be ethical. It is based on ethical principles that go beyond mere self-interest. Actions are to be based on honesty, loyalty and authenticity instead of just what is in an individual's best interest.

Cowboy values can be seen as a direct response to the failure of other ethical systems. It is argued that the United States has become dominated by a culture and an ethical system that is materialistic, media-driven, celebrity and wealth. The result is corruption in both the private and public sector (Owen 2). Cowboy values can be seen as an alternative ethical system that would replace these values.

A Contract with the Earth demonstrates an ineffective ethical system for dealing with environmental health. It reminds me of an unfortunate experience I had volunteering at an animal shelter. Although the staff said they were there for the animals they were busy pursuing their own

interests. They were more concerned with improving their position in their organization at the expense of others. As a result the animals did not get the care they needed and the shelter was eventually closed. This demonstrates how relying on self-interest alone will fail in solving environmental problems.

Overall, A Contract with the Earth is not relevant to policy makers. The book provides several credible examples of environmental programs and activities from around the world that have successfully achieved some form for environmental leadership. Examples such as these are difficult to argue against. It is little more than an attempt to make businesses look more ethical. It does this by using a thinly veiled effort to make self-interested businesses into the solution for environmental problems. There is no deeper ethical system in place to promote the protection of the environment.

Works Cited

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