

Anna L. Peterson

Being human: Ethics, environment, and our place in the world

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*Reviewed by Christopher J. Preston*

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According to Anna Peterson, every environmental ethic is a product of a particular conception of the human, on the one hand, and a conception of nature, on the other. In *Being Human: Ethics, Place, and Environment*, Peterson investigates a range of these conceptions to search for a more sensitive human “storied residence” in the world. As these new conceptions of self and nature emerge through what she calls an “ethical anthropology,” Peterson champions Christian theology as a discourse having already made some headway in this delicate revisioning process. Like Max Oeschlaeger, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Thomas Berry before her, Peterson believes that environmental ethics has much to learn from religion about how to make ethics practical. “Religious ethics, much more than most secular ones,” she claims, “are lived ethics” (20).

After an introductory chapter that sets up the power and promise of religious ethics, the book traces some of the religious and secular sources that have alleged human exceptionalism. Chapter One elegantly traces the sources of the Christian separation of humanity from nature through Genesis, St. Paul, Augustine, the Gnostics, the Albigensians, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Peterson connects these Christian ideas of separation to modernist thought in general. The following chapter articulates how the single most promising challenge to modernism’s belief in human exceptionalism, social constructionism, actually ends up unwittingly reinscribing some of the same human centeredness. Nature constructionists such as Bill Cronon are exposed for the anthropocentrism they unwittingly maintain. Poststructuralism is likewise chided for its view that “human signification creates the world, and any world outside of human signification is either meaningless or nonexistent” (58). Peterson suggests that a different kind of constructionism, one she labels a “constrained” or “chastened” constructionism, will be needed to sustain a viable environmental ethic.

The next four chapters comprise an ambitious survey of a wide range of religious, scientific, political, and philosophical ideas in order to identify the key components of the desired chastened constructionism. Buddhism and Taoism, a pair of Native American philosophies, feminist and ecofeminist ethics, and evolutionary and ecological theory are each discussed with an eye to a more ethically productive account of the human/nature relationship. Christian theology is temporarily set aside while Peterson identifies a number of promising accounts of being human. Throughout these four chapters, feminist ethics is characterized as favoring well alongside religious ethics for its proven ability to “profoundly and intentionally influence the ways people live and the shape of political institutions” (129). Peterson identifies four themes—relationship, context, narrativity, and the centrality of the concepts of personhood—common to

both of these favored practical approaches. The other chapters in this central section lead Peterson to conclude that the concept of personhood used in any future ethic must account for the facts that we are natural and cultural beings, that we are terrestrial, that we are embodied, and that we are relational.

Her ethical anthropology nearing completion, in the last two chapters Peterson turns to show how the themes she has identified can be loosely put together into a workable account of being human in a world that contains ecological constraints. This is done cautiously, without attempting to comprehensively synthesize or unify. Projects such as rethinking the relationship between difference and value, rethinking constructivism about nature, improving conceptions of Christian stewardship, accentuating the role of narrative in ethics, articulating an acceptable animism, and finding a role for utopian discourse in ethics are all briefly sketched. In the course of each sketch, Peterson introduces in a contemporary Christian theologian that has made some headway on this project. Philip Hefner, Sally McFague, Thomas Berry, and Shannon Jung are singled out for their contributions and the Christian theological work is set alongside the important contributions of environmental thinkers such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Donna Haraway, Holmes Rolston, Karen Warren, and Mary Midgely.

*Being Human* contains at least two projects of immense importance. The first is to explore how a chastened constructionism might do justice to both the cultural and natural contributions to the human place on this earth without overemphasizing or demeaning either. “In ethics, as in anthropology,” Peterson suggests, “we need to continue pressing for a non-reductive naturalism capable of taking seriously both the natural and cultural dimensions of our lives” (184). It is an important tenet of her view that “biology and culture help determine each other and neither one alone can determine what it means to be human” (196). The second project is to show how some of these challenges in environmental ethics are starting to be addressed in Christian theology. Given the potency of religious ethics in the practical arena, Peterson is keen to present this overlap as not just a happy coincidence but as an important indication of how to successfully instigate change. “Christianity,” she insists, “can play an important role in the construction of an alternative ethical anthropology” (186).

The biggest difficulty in reading this book is to have a clear enough idea of exactly how these two projects fit together. The challenge of creating a chastened constructivism in an account of the world is certainly a very real and pressing philosophical problem. But it is not at all obvious that this problem either needs or can accept a religious solution even if it is possible to find Christian theologians that have had something to say about it. Moreover, the way that Peterson introduces the theological responses, very quietly as additions to a penultimate chapter that can stand on its own without them, adds to the uncertainty about exactly how the two projects should engage with each other. A second factor that keeps the two discussions apart is the nature of the large central section of the book, the ethical anthropology itself. This section involves a very wide-ranging tour of a number of different conceptions of selfhood, nature, and ethics but it largely leaves out the important threads that might connect this tour to either the first two chapters that set up the problematics or the last two that bring together what has been learned. Though this tour is conducted with admirable efficiency, it is definitely an introductory tour for the first-timer and as such fails to do a thorough enough job of linking the problems to the suggested solutions.

Despite these reservations about how the book synthesizes into a whole, the fact that Peterson brings religious context to bear on these ethical and epistemological problematics is extremely important work in itself. The breadth of the book, while providing opportunities for the critic to find fault with it, is also one of its strengths.

Peterson is well aware that “this book describes many different natures: diverse human natures or ways of being human; different constructions of non-human nature; and the differences as well as the connections between human and the rest of nature” (213). Perhaps it is only by discussing how these natures interact to produce an ethic, and how religious ethics might play an important role in mediating these interactions, that environmental ethics can best hope to become practical.

**Christopher J Preston** is associate professor of philosophy and fellow at the Program on Ethics and Public Affairs at the University of Montana in Missoula. He is author of *Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston, III* (Trinity University Press, 2009) and *Grounding Knowledge: Environmental Philosophy, Epistemology, and Place* (University of Georgia, 2003). He recently edited *Engineering the Climate: The Ethics of Solar Radiation Management* (Lexington, 2012).