

Linklater somewhat overpraises the sophistication of Gunter's chain—it is, in the end, a pretty odd standard of length—but he is right to observe how much it remains with us. Penn Square in Philadelphia is 10 chains on a side; the streets of Salt Lake City are two chains wide; across the country, city blocks and suburban plats hide neat multiples of the old feudal measure. The abrupt right-angled jogs encountered on otherwise straight midwestern roads are a consequence of trying to fit a plane grid onto a curved surface.

The core of Linklater's book is a compelling account of the surveying of the Ohio Territory in the years after independence. The distribution of this rich tract of land among pioneers offers a model for the physical, legal, and economic development of American society. A subtheme on the consistently thwarted attempts, beginning with Thomas Jefferson's, to introduce metric measurements to the United States distracts more than it illuminates, but Linklater has nevertheless produced a charming introduction to a subject one would hardly have imagined could be so engaging.

—DAVID LINDLEY

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**SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM:**  
*The Limits of Philosophy and Science.*

By Robert Kirkman. Indiana Univ. Press.  
212 pp. \$19.95

From Rachel Carson on, the Green movement has been heavy with facts, often alarmist ones. To underpin that empirical evidence, some environmentalists have sketched a general philosophical foundation: a large view of nature and our place in it. Bjørn Lomborg's best-selling *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001) challenged the empirical basis of Green ideology. Now Kirkman offers a critical account of the philosophical foundations of the ideology.

A professor of science and technology at Michigan State University, Kirkman begins with the idea of nature, which in Cartesian metaphysics is matter, brute stuff in space, the cosmos as vast machine. Against this view stand organicism and holism, which see the universe and the life within it as a unified whole. After discussing Hegel and Kant, Kirkman concludes that speculative philosophy is a poor guide for environmental

thinking about nature. The meanings of *nature* are too varied and contradictory, and, adding to the ambiguity, *nature* and *environment* often are used interchangeably. Where some analysts might try to stipulate strict new meanings for these confusing terms, Kirkman, with commendable honesty, gives up on them altogether.

Kirkman is polite about every thinker he analyzes—too polite. He mentions, for example, the ecofeminists, who see the universe as a system of “weblike relations”—a feminine worldview, apparently—and find this idea useful in furthering both feminism and the Green cause. Kirkman doesn't explain why ecofeminism deserves even a mention. We may like both poetry and fine porcelain, but it does not follow that a plate with a poem on it is better than either alone. The same holds true of putting “eco-” in front of feminism, postcolonialism, Catholicism, socialism, or any other belief system.

Kirkman's bland agreeableness continues though chapters on environmentalism and value theory. Here he concludes that neither science nor philosophical speculation can give us a picture of the place of human beings in the universe, and hence neither can be used to establish value. Martin Heidegger makes an appearance, with his devotion to “dwelling poetically” on “the earth.” No mention of his connections to the Nazis, who were pioneers in many eco-friendly policies, including smoke-free restaurants.

Toward the end of the book, Kirkman notes that the managers of Tsavo National Park in Kenya decided to stop culling and let nature take its course with elephant populations. This “natural” process made for a catastrophic increase in elephant numbers followed by large-scale starvation, with the landscape denuded of vegetation in the process. The Tsavo incident is not analyzed, but it serves as a reminder of how much more engaging the book might have been had it examined environmentalism in terms of the results of applying abstractions—for instance, definitions of “natural.”

With its warnings of catastrophe and promises of salvation, Green thinking can resemble religion. Kirkman has made a start at debunking such pretensions, but a field so rife with moralizing nonsense needs a more robust

critique. Nevertheless, *Skeptical Environmentalism* confirms a long-standing suspicion of mine: No special philosophical principles undergird environmentalism beyond (1) the general biophilic and humanist idea that we should care for living things, particularly if

they are sentient and can feel pain; and (2) the principle that we ought to leave to our descendants a world that makes lives of fulfillment and pleasure possible. Not all good ideas are grand abstractions.

—DENIS DUTTON

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