

# Normative Energy Ethics

## Lecture Series



October 11,  
2023  
17.00 CET

### On Energy Liberalism

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**Carl Mitcham**

This talk is different than others that I've listened to in the series. Ultimately I want to argue something quite expansive: that energy ethics must be completed by an energy political philosophy, and that reflection on this completion promotes a rethinking of philosophical anthropology. Put simply, I want to ask, what is the meaning of the simultaneous humanly engineered explosion of energy and inability or at least great difficulty in moderating or managing the consequences of that explosion. This is an ambitious proposal for which the present talk is no more than an inadequate beginning by way of preliminary exploration into five interrelated claims:

- One, following Aristotle, that ethics does indeed implicate politics and political philosophy;
- Two, referencing the Euro-American tradition from Machiavelli to Rawls, that liberalism is the default political theory of modernity;
- Three, as revealed by the fragility of the liberal order (domestically and internationally) in the United States, that there is a deep incoherence in liberalism;
- Four, as illustrated by cultural anthropologist Leslie White and chemical engineer A.R. Ubbelohde, that liberalism is the default political theory of an energy engineering modernity; and
- Five, that thinkers as different as Ivan Illich and Vaclav Smil have pointed toward alternatives to energy liberalism.

The case for each claim will be manifestly incomplete if not superficial. But as G.K. Chesterton once quipped, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly" — and I think this is not only worth doing but necessary to any serious pursuit of energy ethics discourse and practice. Finally, by way of appendix, I propose that one upshot of claim five is the complementing of my earlier proposal for a distinction between type I (pro) and type II (questioning) energy ethics with a type I vs type II energy politics. I note as well that the anthropological question remains to be considered.



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