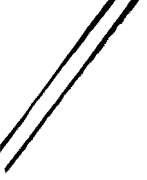**October 15-16, 1998**

13th Conference
on the
THE SMALL CITY AND
REGIONAL COMMUNITY

Theme: Work, Welfare and Poverty

University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
University Center

Edited by: Edward J. Miller and Robert P. Wolensky

THE INESCAPABILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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One does not have to search very hard to unearth examples of attempts to separate ethics from decisions of all sorts. The mantra "business is business" is perhaps the most popular of such assertions. Such a slogan is not insisting that business decisions should be made without considering the ethical component of the decision, but even more disturbing, it is insisting that business decisions have no ethical component in the first place. This half-joking comment that business ethics is an oxymoron is yet another chilling example.

This attempt to cut the ethical component out from the decision making of all sorts is found in the realm of environmental decision making as well. The claim is that action X is purely a matter of Y (insert for Y variable such things as economics, business, expediency, pragmatics, human concerns, biological sense, preservation of history, etc.) and not a matter of human impact on the non-human world. Such a move is just as troubling in the arena of environmental decision making as it is in other decision making realms. Upon reflection, such an assumption seems curious. It is built upon the notion that there are certain decisions regarding the environment that are devoid of ethical content or that lack an ethical component altogether.

As an environmental ethicist, such attempts to shove matters of ethics and environmental ethics aside with regard to policy decision making prompts my curiosity. I often hear assertions made to this end, but can such a thing so readily be done? I have immediate suspicions about the viability of the argument that ethical concern is not only a nuisance but something that either only comes into play after all other considerations have been made or something we can readily opt out of all together. I do not think that we would accept such a bifurcation between ethics and all other considerations in the human realm (and for good reason) and I wonder if we should accept it in the realm of ethical prescription writing outside of the human realm. Not only do I think that we should not, but I think that we cannot. I believe that environmental ethics is not only an important component in our decision making but that it is perhaps an inescapable component as well.

In order to establish the inescapability of environmental ethics I need to do a few things. First, I need to define what it is that I mean by "environmental ethics." Along the way, I need to define what it is that I mean by "ethics" also. It seems that a good portion of the insistence that ethical considerations are disposable stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of what ethics and environmental ethics are. Second, I need to move from those above notions of ethics and environmental ethics to the claim that they cannot be so easily escaped in our decision making procedures. And finally, I will make some concluding remarks regarding the advantage of being more inclusive with what we call "environmental ethics."

Two Senses of Ethics and Environmental Ethics

It is commonly assumed that when I say that something is an ethical action or decision, or when I say that so-and-so is an ethical person, that I am stamping said action or person as a right or good course of action and a right or good sort of person. Without a doubt, this is not only a popular conception of the terms "ethical" and "ethics," but a correct one as well. And it is easy to see why such pronouncements of good and bad, right and wrong, or commonly understood ethical pronouncements, are thought to be ethical since the goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness occur immediately. Such a definition of "ethics" is of course to be found in the American Heritage Dictionary. "Ethics" here is defined as "a set of principles of right conduct."

Such a definition of ethics allows people to view university courses in ethics as courses teaching right conduct and courses in environmental ethics as courses teaching right conduct with regard to human interactions with the non-human world. In other words, one could easily go from the premise that ethics concerns acquiring a set of right principles of conduct to the conclusion that university courses in ethics are tantamount to courses in manners, and that a course in environmental ethics is tantamount to a course in environmental manners. The problem is, this simply isn't true. Courses in ethics and environmental ethics are not merely (or at all) courses conveying principles of right conduct or manners.

This point became obvious to me and my colleagues in philosophy when a student caught cheating on a science exam at our university was required to take one of our courses in ethics as a portion of his punishment. We philosophers were, to say the least, uneasy with the idea that our courses in ethics were being thought of in such a fashion, especially since we ourselves did not view them as such. Upon reflection, I realize that there were two different conceptions of ethics at play here; the non-philosophers were employing the notion of "ethics" just mentioned, while we philosophers were employing another.

The American Heritage Dictionary also defines "ethics" as "a theory or a system of moral values." Here, "ethics" is used here as a descriptive, not an evaluative, term. Certain questions or positions are value questions or positions. Therefore, something can be a matter of ethics if it makes or assumes certain value assessments about those included in the matter at hand. And, if it makes the wrong value assessment, such systems of moral values can be judged bad or wrong on that basis. If it makes right ones then it is a good system or moral values. Hence, good and bad, right and wrong also come into play in such notions of ethics, but they do not apply just to the actions performed but rather to the merits of the value assumptions made by the actions performed.

There is a parallel here between ethics and taste. Many things can be a matter of taste or ethics, but that does not mean that since we are dealing with a matter of taste or ethics that we have taste or ethics.

I would guess that, in a way, we knew this all along. We know that people can have bad taste or bad ethics. Now we could not mean by such pronouncements that they have bad principles of aesthetic appreciation or right conduct since such a meaning of taste or ethics would reduce "bad taste" or "bad ethics" to the status of an oxymoron, while at the same time making "good taste" or "good ethics" a redundancy.

Therefore, claiming that something is a matter of ethics is not necessarily claiming that it is a matter of right conduct, it might be more indirect than that. An ethical action or decision might more fundamentally involve making or assuming certain positions of value upon which those decisions are built just as a matter of taste might be a matter involving an aesthetic judgment about a work of art in general.

The Centrality of Ethics and Environmental Ethics in Decision Making

Now let us turn to an examination of policy decision making, especially with regard to how such policy impacts the non-human world.

In order to gain some sort of leverage on those who would insist that matters of ethics and environmental ethics are disposable, it seems that we need to find some reason to assume that they are not. Making them indisposable or inescapable would be a way to accomplish that.

Clearly, if policy decisions involved principles of right conduct they would be considered decisions of an ethical nature. And, it seems that many do. When I decide that it is okay to drain this wetland or develop this farm field, I am saying inadvertently that this is a right or good action. My allowing for it and sanctioning it assesses it as such. Clearly, the above actions are thought to be ethical in the first sense of the word "ethical." But in the second sense of the term it might be argued that they might be, but need *not* necessarily be, environmental ethical. I could

be making my decisions based solely on how such an action impacts a certain population of humans in my city or the city as a whole. My referent of goodness and rightness need only be humans or some subset thereof.

However, I would assert that such actions have another ethical component ("ethical" in the second sense), the environmental ethical component of which is not so easy to escape. I would claim that my above decision to drain a wetland or develop a farm field not only comes with an ethical (first sense) stamp of approval, but they also make certain value assessments about not only those directly benefiting or involved with my decision, but also about those explicitly left out of said decision or policy altogether. To assert that I am only going to consider the human impact of my action is either to insist that only humans are worthy of direct moral consideration, or to arbitrarily make up our minds that, in this decision, only humans count. Of course, as rational creatures, a component of which is the desire for consistency and non-arbitrariness, the second option is not appealing. However, the first option, that only humans have direct moral standing makes certain value judgments about humans and non-humans alike, and could, by virtue of our second definition of ethics, then, be considered a decision or action with an ethical component.

Hence, our policy decisions are ethical, either directly or indirectly, and environmental ethical, either directly or indirectly as well.

Of course, it would be an entirely different argument (and paper) to argue that the non-human world is worthy of direct moral standing. This is an argument I would be more than willing to make, and have made elsewhere. If I am correct—if animals, plants, and environmental wholes do possess a value in addition to their merely instrumental value as a means to some other end (what environmental philosophers often call "intrinsic value" that is) and if they do merit direct moral standing as a result—then not only would all our policy decisions that affected them be ethical and environmental ethical decisions (second sense), but those that failed to attribute to them their appropriate value would be wrong or bad policy decisions. However, even if I am wrong about the type of value non-humans possess, our policy decisions remain still *ethical* and environmental ethical in nature because they, either explicitly or implicitly, make value assessments about the environment. Therefore, our decisions, all of our decisions, effecting the non-human world are environmental ethical decisions. Environmental ethics is, then, inescapable.

Conclusion

Of course, there is a downside to this view that all decisions impacting the environment possess an environmental ethical component. If this is so then the Julian Simons or Rush Limbaughs of the world express an environmental ethic just as do the Aldo Leopolds and John Muirs, because each makes value assessments about the human and non-human worlds. In fact, now anyone expressing any old value assessment about the non-human world could be said to be expressing their environmental ethic. Admittedly, this might make some environmentalists and environmental philosophers bristle. There has been an attempt by environmental ethicists to deny environmental ethics to anyone that does not attribute intrinsic value and direct moral standing to the environment as a whole. However, this insistence not only rests on the first sense of ethics I discussed, and is therefore incomplete, but it allows those making arguably poor or bad decisions off the hook of environmental ethics altogether.

On the other hand, the advantage of insisting that most decisions, and surely those that impact on or make value assessments about the non-human world, are ethical in nature is to force all into the realm of ethical and environmental ethical decision making. I do not fear this. I see power in this. Once we cannot escape the charge of being involved in environmental ethics, and once the value assessments made by us can be exposed, we can begin to assess the merits and faults of our value assessments. However, by allowing those whose value

assessments we disagree with off the ethical hook, we lose this lever of ethical change by allowing for the playing of different games. But, when we insist that the game both of us are playing is the same, then we can have common ground for arguing about the rules of the game. Not until then can we admit that nearly all policy decisions are, at least in part, environmental ethical decisions, can we recognize and criticize the value assessments made. One cannot criticize the ethics of another if their actions or policies are without ethical content.

In sum, all, or nearly all, of our actions have either an obviously ethical component to them (i.e., they are right or wrong, good or bad), or they rest on certain value assessments about the world, another, perhaps no so obviously, ethical component to them (i.e., they make or imply certain value judgments about the world). Since, all of our policy decisions impact the human as well as the non-human realms (both a part of the environment), all of our policy decisions have an environmental ethical component as well. Such an argument serves to force ethical thought and decision making upon those who would try to divorce their decisions from ethics. However, as shown, we cannot merely opt out of taking into account the ethical component of our policy decisions. Such components exist and must be taken note of.