

## On Doing Helpful Philosophy

### Commentary on ‘Redefining Ecological Ethics: Science, Policy, and Philosophy at Cape Horn’

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In my opinion, the greatest scandal of philosophy is that, while all around us the world of nature perishes—and not the world of nature alone—philosophers continues to talk, sometimes cleverly and sometimes not, about the question of whether this world exists. ~ Karl R. Popper

Two comments made by colleagues in the past year continue to trouble me. First, while conducting an external review of a philosophy department at a different university, a non-philosopher on the committee innocently asked why the university had a philosophy department in the first place. After a bit of head scratching, a philosopher on the review committee answered that philosophy departments exist because no one could imagine a university without one. Resting the continuance of philosophy merely on a lack of imagination struck me as dangerous. Second, while visiting a campus (a campus without a philosophy department) for a series of invited talks to natural resource students and faculty, an ecologist colleague commented that he felt that philosophy and ethics are at the root of so much of conservation biology but philosophers are, tragically, so unhelpful. I responded that some of us are trying. To which he responded that it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between a philosopher who is trying to be helpful and a philosopher who is not. That stung, and rightly so. It occurred to me in a flash that perhaps philosophers are failing in the former instance because they are failing in the latter; failure to be helpful has lead to a failure to promote philosophy. One wonders whether, if some administrator declared the disbanding of a philosophy department on a campus, or if some public official proposed the elimination of philosophy departments in a state, anyone would come to our rescue? Who among our colleagues would stand up and defend us? Would there be public outcry, or public indifference?

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Of course, ‘being helpful’ or ‘doing philosophy that matters’ or ‘making a difference’ may only be a goal of some philosophers. However, it is a reasonable assumption that for environmental philosophers this is a goal. At the same time, gains within environmental philosophy over the past 30 years have been modest, at best. If these two assertions are true, then philosophers are trying, but failing. My own experience suggests that, while we certainly could be doing better, there are a number of shinning exceptions to this grim image of failure [1, 2].

At least two conditions need to obtain if indeed “philosophers [are] to become more relevant to scientists, engineers, policy makers, and the public” [1]. First, philosophers need to continue to convince ecologists (and others) of the relevance of philosophical and ethical discourse. The database of case studies proposed by Ben Minteer and Jim Collins (2005) is one possible way to accomplish this end. Making the decision to forego an American Philosophical Association meeting in favor of a carefully and helpfully constructed talk (perhaps even using power point!) at a meeting of the Ecological Society of America, The Society for Conservation Biology, or The Wildlife Society might be another. However, simply laying bare the philosophical and ethical dimensions of, or problems in, ecology or conservation biology is not, in and of itself, sufficient: many, though certainly not all, colleagues in ecology are already well aware of the major issues and problems in their respective fields. Relevance, helpfulness, and interdisciplinarity are not obtained merely by exposing the philosophical dimensions and dilemmas of a given discipline; that is, by working on some other discipline. It is, unfortunately, more difficult than that.

Second, environmental philosophers also have to decide to work with ecologists, to make conscious decisions to actually collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines, to use their skills as philosophers and strive to solve the problems they are so good at pointing out. Working with is hugely different than working on. Moreover, the challenge of this task should not be underestimated. For so many reasons, philosophers are often not particularly adept at (whether by nature or [lack of] nurture), nor interested in, collaborative efforts. And colleagues in other disciplines are often not familiar or comfortable with the way philosophers typically proceed. To actually work with someone from another discipline, then, would require a tremendous effort. Philosophers would have to have a willingness to meet colleagues in the ecological sciences more than half-way: to really learn something about ecology, to make an unusually humble effort to view the work of a philosopher as work in service of something else, to stretch outside of the typical academic boundaries of publication and presentation, to risk the ‘slings and arrows’ of philosophical colleagues who may wield the term “real” against them, to nurture relationships with collaborators in ecology as seriously as they nurture ideas and concepts, and to constantly and honestly self-reflect on the relevance and import of their work. However, the payoff for such an effort may be as enormous as are the risks and discomforts. What one may find is that interdisciplinary work is more than merely thinking about age-old philosophical problems through the lens of a new discipline, or more than simply adding philosophy to ecology. What one may find is that serious interdisciplinary work quickly becomes trans-disciplinary work; work

that transcends disciplines and seeks out new or emergent questions, work that allows one to grow as a philosopher in the truest sense of that label.

Though I am loath to use my own example, I have found that my intense collaboration with an animal ecologist over the past few years has radically changed the way I think of environmental ethics, philosophy of ecology, and the work of an academic philosopher in an imperiled world more generally. I have begun to think far more seriously about modes of communication: writing as much or more for non-philosophical and even popular audiences as I do for philosophical audiences, experimenting with different forms of writing and presentation, and beginning to work with more creatively oriented people to infuse environmental ethics and philosophy into film, radio, poetry, narrative, and even museum displays. I have enrolled in amazing classes in wildlife habitat ecology and conservation genetics to both properly understand and honor the work of colleagues with whom I hope to collaborate. I have tagged along on fieldwork: whether it is measuring balsam fir, checking wolf collar snares, or helping to necropsy a drowned wolf. At the same time I have agreed to work as an environmental philosopher within a department of fisheries and wildlife—only tangentially related to a philosophy department—and to knowingly embrace that awkward dance, that strange space between their world and mine (see [3–6] as samples).

Minteer and Collins [2], and Bob Frodeman [1] and the bold and progressive program at The University of North Texas provide inspiring examples of how environmental philosophy might be done differently and collaboratively. More importantly, however, they exist as proof that philosophy can be, and is being, done this way. When considering these examples—and those of other environmental philosophers who are working in similar ways (too often with their heads down)—it becomes self-evident that relevant, important, and helpful environmental philosophy cannot transpire if expressed merely as an obsession with inward-looking minutia.

There is, I fear, a genuine tragedy lurking here. It is increasingly clear that, at this time of moral crisis, the poison threatening the environment most is ultimately muddying thinking. Hence, the skills that philosophers wield and teach serve as a kind of critical antidote—the most important and powerful skills imaginable. However, at precisely this moment so much of what philosophers do (even environmental philosophers) turns inward and away from those problems. The goal of acquiring such formidable skills is not merely to be facile with those skills; it is to employ those skills responsibly in service of the world. When one engages in philosophy that is detached from the problems of the world what is one saying about the discipline of philosophy, or about the problems of that world? Are philosophers signaling that the world's problems are not of interest to them, or that the discipline is not capable of helping to solve those problems? And what does that say to our students? Are philosophers telling them that the goal of philosophical work is merely to be clever, but clever in an irrelevant and unhelpful manner? The wonderful thing, however, is that philosophers are talented and privileged enough to have a choice; though certainly a choice with difficulties and risks. We can decide to do sequestered philosophy; or we can decide to do helpful philosophy, philosophy that matters. Do we owe the world anything less?

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