A DEEPER SHADE OF GREEN: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS ON CAMPUS

"A Deeper Shade of Green: Environmental Ethics on Campus", in *Greening of the Campus IV: Moving to the Mainstream*, selected proceedings, Robert Koester, ed., Ball State University, 2001, pp.16-21.

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> We classify ourselves into vocations, each of which either wields some particular tool, or sells it, or repairs it, or sharpens it, or dispenses advice on how to do so; by such division of labors we avoid responsibility for the misuse of any tool save our own. There is one vocation—philosophy—which knows that all men, by what they think about and wish for, in effect wield all tools. It knows that men thus determine, by their manner of thinking and wishing, whether it is worth while to wield any.
>
> Aldo Leopold

At a recent meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology the keynote speaker, the distinguished ecologist and President of the Royal Society, Sir Robert May, made two points that simultaneously warmed the heart of this environmental philosopher while at the same time disheartening the predominantly biologist-filled auditorium. First, he cogently pointed out that the strictly utilitarian arguments for the preservation of biodiversity—arguments which assert that biodiversity is important because it provides raw genetic information for such things as medicine, currently invaluable services such as pollination and decomposition, etc.—were, by themselves at least, theoretically if not practically doomed to failure given that their persuasiveness is contingent upon the continued necessity of the end they provide or upon the uniqueness of this means to those ends. He argued instead that a "moral or ethical" argument needs to be a component of any persuasive and long-lasting discussion of environmental and conservation issues. He also made it clear that in this arena, biologists, even those of the conservation bent, have no more place than anyone else who rawly asserts their vision of a preferred world. However, he concomitantly pointed out that there is a great need for these very same biologists to become more involved community members, as "citizen-scientists" so to speak. However, he again quickly warned, their scientific background gives them no special status in deciding the core questions of what their various communities ought to look like or what values nature ought to hold for us. What they could contribute, in May's, opinion was an expert voice with regard to what is scientifically feasible given the values that we do decide to hold.

Of course some of May's assertions could be challenged, but I am more interested in the subtext of what May claims than I am in the soundness of his arguments. Please notice: according to May at least, ultimately persuasive arguments are moral or ethical, and values and oughts lie at the very foundation of not only our environmental decision making but also our environmental thinking in general. "Values", "oughts", "ethics", "arguments", "morality", "foundations"...now you're talking my language. It is at this exact point where philosophy and environmental ethics become ultimately relevant, ultimately crucial.

Environmental Ethics: What is it?

Fundamentally, environmental ethics is a subdiscpline of philosophy which attempts to set and solve certain problems with regard to how humans ought to interact with regard to the human and non-human world. Along the way, certain key issues have become obvious: the nature of the value of the non-human world, the role that sciences like evolutionary and ecological theory play in ethics, the role that such things as wilderness or environmental activism play in our environmental problem solving, and a more systematic and rigorous discussion regarding how it is that the various disciplines fit together to address environmental issues.

Environmental ethics is not, however, merely another or overlapping environmental behavior science. It is, rather, notably different from other environmental studies areas in that it deals with those thorny but inevitable questions of "ought" and "should", questions that are not only skipped over in other areas but that are regarded by some as strictly taboo. Of course there is some talk of values, morals, and ethics in other areas of environmental studies. There is, for example, quite a bit of talk within such areas as environmental sociology, environmental education, and various natural resource disciplines (not to mention within governmental and non-governmental environmental agencies and groups) about what values people do hold, in trying to get a handle on exactly what America's environmental values are. Environmental ethicists, however, attempt to address the more complicated topic of which values we ought to hold, or they at least attempt to create a structure whereby such questions can sensibly and honestly be asked and answered.

The goal of the study of philosophy in general and environmental ethics in particular is to become adept at using the tools of rigorous and critical thought in order to make progress toward understanding and solving stubborn issues. As a subdiscipline of philosophy—a discipline that is arguably at its best when it is engages real world issues with the rigorous, analytic, and critical methodology it is recognized for—environmental ethics gives us the framework with which to begin to dissect and work through crucial and concrete environmental issues, issues both directly within environmental ethics as well as those typically understood as more immediately within traditional resource management. Apart from the central questions in environmental ethics mentioned above, the philosophical method also helps us to analyze such crucial conservation concepts as wilderness preservation, ecosystem management, or sustainability. As a discipline which specializes in conceptual and argument analysis, philosophy also provides the tools to carefully attend to and work through various arguments central to the broader environmental arena—arguments for or against environmental concern for example. I think that philosophy and environmental ethics accomplishes this task like no other discipline imaginable. As a biologist friend of mine once said (while excitedly bouncing upon and down) on a field trip, "there's nothing like watching a philosopher think on his feet, when his feet are on the ground".

Of course you would expect a glowing evaluation of environmental ethics from an environmental ethicist (or the friend of one). But is there anyone else who believes environmental ethics to be critically relevant? Indeed, no less a figure than conservationist and environmental activist extraordinaire Dave Foreman, a man who in 1983 asserted a subsidiary role for philosophy and environmental ethics, who said that we should "let our actions set the finer points of our philosophy" ,who claimed that "too often, philosophers are rendered impotent by their inability to act without analyzing everything to absurd detail. To act, to trust your instincts, to go with the flow of natural forces, *is* an underlying philosophy. Talk is cheap. Action is dear", now asserts the primacy of environmental ethics. In 1991 Foreman listed four major forces that were changing the face of conservation, the very first one was "academic philosophy, environmental ethics".

Environmental Ethics: An Obscenely Brief History

In his legendary book, A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold once quipped that conservation and ecology were and would remain trivial until religion and philosophy heard about them. Like so many things that Leopold said, this 1949 prophesy has been fulfilled in many ways.

In 1971, environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott taught the very first course in environmental ethics at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The course was a follow up on Callicott's personal conservation commitment and a hunch that at the root of environmental thought lay a vast treasure trove of philosophically rich and innovative ideas and puzzles. In 1979 the very first journal, Environmental Ethics, was founded. However, from the perspective of philosophy, a discipline stretching back to 585 BCE, environmental ethics is still just an infant just learning to walk. Still, since those humble beginnings, a number of other journals in the field have popped up, thousands of papers have been published and presented, dozens of different textbooks are now used in university classrooms around the world, and environmental ethicists have been sought out by state, federal, and international government environmental agencies as well as a variety of non-governmental conservation organization in an advisory capacity. Many have recognized that the issues of environmental ethics lie at the very core of all our thoughts and decisions regarding the natural world. Perhaps one of the biggest problem we face today is that there aren't enough of us to go around.

Environmental Ethics: The Stevens Point Model

There is good news and not so good news. For the past three decades, while the subdiscpline of environmental ethics has grown at the professional level, while a few graduate programs have popped up in the U.S. and abroad, and while many universities now teach a course in environmental ethics (relatively quick progress in a field as established as philosophy to be sure), the field has enjoyed very limited success as a somewhat distinct field of study at the undergraduate level in any sort of programmatic way.

Appropriately perhaps, beginning in the year 2000, at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point we have attempted to remedy this shortcoming by initiating an original philosophy major with a concentration in environmental ethics (The details of the program can be seen in the departmental brochure or at our modest website). Essentially students take a few core classes specifically in environmental ethics, a core of philosophy classes which attempt to deliver the basics of the philosophical method and history while being rich enough to allow them to pursue graduate study in philosophy should they see fit, and chose from a host of environmentally orientated courses in many other disciplines all across campus. The program is intentionally and centrally interdisciplinary in the very broadest sense, and although it helps that we have an outstanding college of natural resources at UWSP to help fill out the curriculum, such a program could easily be duplicated on nearly any other campus that possessed even the slightest environmental emphasis. We deliberately pitch this major as a compliment to some other course of study, a second major, and we keep the credits low in order to make this an attractive option. While some of our students are solely philosophy/environmental ethics majors and have already gone on to pursue graduate work in the field (in the past couple of years we had sent 5 students to the best graduate programs in the country in environmental ethics, 4 of them fully funded), most are double-majors in such diverse areas as biology, forestry, communications, soils science, education, conservation biology, fisheries, and environmental education, among others. The philosophy department has benefited significantly from this new program not only by bringing in nearly 20 new majors in the very first year, but also by bringing a new freshness and relevancy to a program and discipline that can suffer from at least the perception of a lack of these things at times.

But, you may be wondering, how important is it that environmentally orientated students study environmental ethics, or that environmentally orientated universities include a program of environmental ethics in their courses of study? How much of a tragedy, one might ask, is this lack of undergraduate environmental ethics programs? Is your university missing out and are your students being neglected by not having a program in environmental ethics? This passage from our brochure indicates what we think;

"We are convinced that people with the ability to think critically and creatively (i.e., philosophically) about issues in their field are destined to become professionally successful. The environmental realm is no different. If we are going to be able to understand and address the environmental situation we face, we need passionate and experienced people, but most of all we need clear and careful thinkers. These people will become our leaders and it is our belief that we can train our students to become just such people."

The Necessity and Inescapability of Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is not only an important component in our decision making but perhaps an inescapable component as well. In order to gain some sort of leverage on those who would insist that matters of ethics and environmental ethics are disposable even a luxury, and hence that a program in environmental ethics is superfluous, it seems that we need to find some reason to assume that it is not, that it is instead indispensable or inescapable.

As citizens and natural resource professionals, our students, like we their professors, are and will be bombarded with endless questions regarding what should be done in various environmental settings. I would argue that at the foundation of every single one of these decisions lies questions of value and worth, or environmental ethics. For example, when I decide that it is okay to drain this wetland or develop this farm field, I am at the same time saying, whether I am aware of it or not, 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 given that one sense of the term "ethics" involves principles of right or proper conduct. In this sense of the term a so-called "ethical person" is a person who adheres to principles of right or proper conduct. Of course, this sense of ethics begs a larger question, namely, what is it that makes something an act of right or proper conduct? To answer: An act is an act of right or proper conduct if it correctly captures and respects the values that those involved in the decision actually possess. Hence, if we only consider human beings to be worthy of moral consideration because we assume that only human beings have direct moral, or intrinsic, value then we are ethical in one sense if our actions impacting the wetland, farm field, and human beings accurately reflects or is consistent with that value assumption. Of course, we could be wrong about our initial value assessment, we could mistakenly assume that only humans count when in fact the case can be made that certain nonhuman beings (the wetland frogs and birds) or environmental wholes (the wetland itself), also possess this same direct moral value. In this sense then, even though we are acting in a fashion consistent with our initial value assumption, since our initial value assumption is wrong, we are not acting ethically.

So, when we suggest that biodiversity is worth preserving in general, or that this animal or plant is worthy of further study and preservation (or when we assert the converse, that they are not worthy), or even when we act in such a fashion that presupposes these things, we are in the realm of environmental ethics. And the kicker is...we are always in this realm. When someone asks us to justify our beliefs or motivations for the desire to preserve biodiversity in general or this plant or that animal in particular, without some sort of grounding in environmental ethics, we run the risk of not only of looking foolish because we have nothing to say, but we also run the risk of not understanding fully the very essence of our concern and actions in the first place.

As another, and slightly different, example we could note how very value-laden something like the definition of environmental education is; how it presupposes environmental ethical discourse. Environmental education is defined as "That part of education which deals with ecologically related social issues in the environment and focuses on the development of responsible citizenship and actions to prevent or resolve those issues." But what in the world does it mean to "develop responsible citizenship" if it does not mean that there is a way that a so-deemed "responsible citizen" ought to behave. And what is the way that, or how do we decide how, a responsible citizen "ought to behave", or even what the correct moral course of action is? Again, we

cannot work through such questions outside of the realm of values and ought—they stalk us like Marley's ghost.

Hence our actions, all of them I would argue, necessarily have an ethical component whether we realize it or not because all of our actions can be measured by their adherence to certain value assumptions to begin with and secondly by the very nature of the assumptions about those value assumptions. Therefore, our decisions, all of our decisions, affecting the non-human world are environmental ethical decisions: environmental ethics is inescapable.

The Operational Level of Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics, like most all other environmental disciplines, strives to modify behavior, to bring human behavior more into line with what makes biological and ecological sense. As stated above, however, environmental ethics is unique because it is the only of these disciplines that deals systematically with the absolutely basic and fundamental question of what that behavior ought to be in the first place. Of course, from the perspective of the preservation of the health of the human and non-human landscape the answer seems obvious: we, each of us and collectively, need to do our own part to curb our consumptive practices, recycle what we do consume, avoid the use of polluting chemicals, replace fossil fuels with alternative earth-friendly technologies, etc. and we can resuscitate the environment. The problem is, obviously, very few of us actually do these things, most of us are indifferent. How is it, then, that we can facilitate such a change amidst a sea of indifference? Clearly, in a democratic society we do this via persuasion. But how can we come to the point of environmentally friendly "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon", to borrow from Garrett Hardin? How can we have more of us who do those things and fewer of those that don't? . All environmental disciplines which attempt some sort of environmental behavior modification seem to operate at different levels with regard to making "them's" into "us's". That is, we know that there are in fact various and divergent ways to induce someone to modify their behavior, some far more effective than others. I would suggest that environmental ethics operates at a much deeper level than other disciplines. Let me explain this somewhat brash declaration.

Our individual and collective ideas about how it is that we ought to treat something, here the environment, do not just simply fall from the sky. Assumed facts about the world inform and inspire our actions. As rational creatures, a component of which is a commitment to consistency, our actions only make sense within certain contexts or by appealing to certain facts of the matter. For example, if we believed that a certain level of cognitive sophistication was a necessary component for being allowed to vote, and if we believed that someone or some group lacked that component, then we would think that they ought not be allowed to vote. However—and here's the beauty of this sort of approach—assumed fact regarding the world change, and our sense of value and prescription for action change in kind. Hence, if through some process of discovery we came to believe that our erstwhile not-cognitively-sophisticated-enough individual or group <u>was</u> indeed cognitively sophisticated enough to vote, then we could no longer appeal to the fact that they were not to justify our actions, and hence our actions would inevitably change...eventually. But what does any of this have to do with environmental thought and ethics? Simple, we are inspired to act and we justify our actions with regard to the environment, by appealing to certain assumed facts about the world—or certain and specific conceptual models of nature. In short, we treat nature like a machine with the obvious resulting environmental problems, because our currently dominant, but fading, conceptual models tells us that it is but a machine. If, however, there was something that informed us otherwise, some scientific paradigm that portrayed nature in a different light, as a systematic, integrated, and organic whole, then our previous treatment of nature would be at odds with our new beliefs about the world, and our actions would change...again, eventually. As Baird Callicott has put it,

> "In a democracy we can hope to translate environmental ethics into public policy only if the public acquires ecological attitudes and values.... When we—we the people, not just we the

environmentalists—come to see nature as a systematic whole and ourselves as thoroughly embedded in it, a part of nature, not set apart from it, then what is called the "public will" necessary for mutual coercion mutually agreed upon may materialize."

This is what environmental ethics does, the level at which it operates: it exposes and facilitates this epistemological and metaphysical transition, it sheds light on what values and prescriptions for actions are those that are in fact consistent with our dawning ecological, systems worldview. This, in my view, is a far more profound and long-lasting approach to coercion, primarily because it is a bottom-up (or inward-out) as opposed to top-down method, the former self-reinforcing while the later requires constant pressure and seems so susceptible to misfire and backlash. Along the way of course, environmental ethics instills a methodology and rigor of thought that allows its devotees to become sharply critical thinkers and problem solvers, a skill not only needed in the environmental arena but in any and all areas of public life.

Conclusion

Are university campuses that are interested in being environmentally relevant that do not offer courses or a program in environmental ethics negligent, are they ripping off their students? If I am correct: if the essential value questions that environmental ethics attempts to set and solve are inescapable; if these are also questions that lie at the very core of all natural resource decisions; and if the public is growing increasingly aware of this dimension of resource issues and demanding and hence expecting the same of their resource professionals; and if and to the degree that decisions involving natural resources are important, even crucial, then any program of study which focused primarily on these issues, which attempted to aid students—students who will become citizens, resource professionals, and ultimately those who make these critical decisions—would seem to be not only important, perhaps even crucial, but also absolutely indispensable. Of course I am by no means suggesting that other disciplines do not address these root issues in some fashion. Likewise, I am not claiming that all students who study environmental ethics will become somehow perfectly philosophically adept. I am simply asserting that this is a discipline that focuses solely on the understanding and clarification of the deepest issues central to environmental thought and resource management. Along the way, hopefully, here is also a discipline that rewards our shared human curiosity and helps to infuse a desperately needed sense of intellectual honesty and humility into our environmental debates. So, if our institutions of higher learning are indeed interested in all shades of green, in equipping students with a thoroughly critical, creative, and constructive mind (especially as it applies to environmental issues), then it would seem obvious that a serious study of environmental ethics is unquestionably crucial. Without it all else remains ungrounded and vulnerable without it students run the risk of deficiency in their ability to ask and answer various fundamental questions, questions that will inevitably be asked of them. In my mind at least the lack of environmental ethics courses and programs is indeed a "sin of omission".