Teaching Environmental Ethics

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Aldo Leopold reminds us in a striking and often-quoted passage that Odysseus, on his return to Ithaca, hanged twelve slave girls for disloyalty. His action, and its apparent acceptance by his Greek audience, can be traced to the belief that slaves were property and could be treated without concern for their status as moral beings. Slaves remained outside the moral circle and, therefore, no justification or argument had to be given for how they were treated. Despite the advances we have seen in expanding the moral circle to include all human beings, Leopold claims that we continue to view the environment largely in terms of property. Until we expand our moral consideration to include the natural world we will continue to do with it as we please.

In teaching environmental ethics I take Leopold's remarks as a starting point. The first and most fundamental step toward addressing our current environmental situation is to see the natural world in moral terms, and to translate this awareness into action in our personal and professional lives.[1] This ethical realignment is the first step in changing our conceptions of, and attitudes toward, the environment. It does so by making students aware of their interdependent relationship with the land; helping them to articulate and critically evaluate ethical positions that encompass natural systems; and by pointing out a range of actions consistent with these ethical positions. When a course of this nature is successful it facilitates and fosters the transition to a worldview wherein personal, political, scientific and economic choices are informed by an environmentally-sensitive ethic.

I. *Assumptions*

A course in environmental ethics operates on some assumptions that should be spelled out to those of us trained in the rigors of professional philosophy. The first assumption is that environmentalism—roughly defined here as the rubric of courses, professions, and attitudes that take the environment or natural world as their primary focus of concern—is interdisciplinary. Environmental policy decisions in government and industry

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are informed by the knowledge of biologists, ecologists, engineers, economists, and environmental philosophers, to name a few. The personal decisions we make whether to use cloth or plastic diapers, or to vote for or against a local incinerator project, are likewise informed by an array of specialties. There is an obvious role here for philosophy generally, and ethics specifically, in developing the tools of dialogue and inquiry that students will use to engage in the interdisciplinary dialogue necessary to resolve these issues. It is important, then, that students, especially those preparing to enter environmental fields, be made aware of this feature of environmentalism.

To effect this goal students should be given some breadth in their environmental courses: environmental engineers should take courses in ecology, economics, and ethics; biologists should know the engineering principles of waste-water treatment, etc. This interdisciplinary approach should be stressed in all of their environmental courses, including a course in environmental ethics. Students should realize that environmental ethical decisions are made within the complex systems of industry, government, society, and nature. Hence, ethical conclusions must co-exist with, and in some cases be shaped by, the data of ecology, public policy, engineering, and economics. Whenever possible, then, connections should be made between the conclusions drawn from environmental ethical analysis and their expected results in the larger picture.

A course in environmental ethics should have a historical component as well. Students should become aware of their historical and ethical heritage and of its impact on the environment. It is not enough to focus on contemporary moral theories as they apply to the environment. The history of Western ethics, and Western culture in general, largely excludes the natural world from moral consideration. Our ethical tradition—both Greek and Judeo-Christian—is rooted in metaphysical and spiritual hierarchies that sharply distinguish humans from non-humans. This tradition and its canon are well secured in our curricula, our belief systems, and our habits. Our conceptions of the natural world and our place in it, as well as our daily habits (what we eat, purchase, throw away, or do in our free time) can all be traced to beliefs that are drawn from and supported by this heritage. For example, Leopold's observation that the natural world is more likely to be seen as property rather than an interdependent ecosystem with moral status finds support in Genesis, and the writings of Francis Bacon, Descartes, and John Locke. Of course, not all of this heritage is negative. As we shall see below, an exploration of non-Western traditions, and of alternative voices within our own Western tradition, is crucial in developing informed environmental awareness.

Finally, a course in environmental ethics is a course in applied philosophy. This implies that conceptual analysis and theory evaluation have as their primary goal an appraisal of the fit between theory and practice. To

paraphrase Wittgenstein, we must analyze and evaluate moral theories not when they are at rest but when they are doing work. I take this to be a fundamental assumption about moral philosophy generally, but this approach seems especially appropriate for a course in environmental ethics. An environmental ethic is only as good as the moral principles and practices that arise from it. It follows, then, that a course in environmental ethics should analyze and evaluate the range of possible actions that follow from the various philosophical theories discussed in the course. Aristotle says, "The end of practical theory is not to study and know each thing, but rather to act on that knowledge. Hence it is not enough to know about virtue, but we must also try to possess and exercise it, or become good in any other way."[2] This is certainly a reasonable goal for an environmental ethics course.

Professional philosophers are now engaged in ethical analysis that leads directly or indirectly to action. Medical ethicists assist in the daily decision-making process of hospital staffs. Animal rights/liberationist philosophers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan call for the end of livestock farming and for us to become vegetarians. Environmentalists of all specialties are calling for changes in our behavior and attitudes toward the natural world. Fortunately we are in one of the few crises in recent times about which individuals can do something. Students want to know what they can do, and it is important that their instructors be able to point out a range of activities that follow directly or indirectly from various philosophical conclusions. They should not tell their students how to act, but only that action sometimes follows in light of conclusions drawn from moral theories. One of the roles of ethical theory is to help students deliberate about the best choices available to them in particular actions.[3]

II. *Pedagogy*

The course uses a three-step framework to achieve its goals: Awareness, Articulation, and Action. While the ideas expressed here are not new or specific to a course in environmental ethics, such an approach or one similar to it is essential in achieving these goals.[4] The first step, awareness, has two parts: awareness of the environment, and self-awareness. Environmental awareness helps students see the current state of the natural world and their impact on it. It shows them how all life is interconnected on the planet, and how those of us higher up on the food chain are interdependent with those organisms lower on the food chain. It shows them how their food is produced and how this production affects the land. In short, students are made aware of their connection to the natural world and to their natural place in it.

Self-awareness encourages students to examine their habits in relationship to the environment. How do they use water? What do they throw

away? How do they shop? What do they eat? How do they spend their free time? How do they treat the environment in their daily routines? These and other questions help students identify their habits and to connect them to the present condition of the environment. With the awareness of habits students begin to see the underlying, and sometimes unconscious, set of beliefs and values that shape and support their habits. Many of these beliefs are found in the Western canon of great books and include the following: that humans are superior to the rest of creation; that our moral obligations do not extend to the natural world; that nature is a machine, and science and technology our way of manipulating and controlling it; that the Earth has been given to us to populate and subdue; that land has value only if it is developed; and that economic well-being—seen largely in terms of consumption—is the greatest good. This heritage-habits connection is further reinforced by pointing out alternative traditions—Native American and Asian, for example—and alternative views in our own heritage, and by showing students how these beliefs generate a different set of habits.[5]

The second step, articulation, is a deeper process whereby one takes control of one's beliefs through the use of language. Here the instructor attempts to bring out and critically analyze students' beliefs. Once their thoughts become public, students can criticize, reject, or reinforce them. The process of articulation helps students recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their beliefs, and the beliefs of others. Stories, myths, and the writings of environmental thinkers across the disciplinary spectrum provide students with a new environmental vocabulary. This conceptual vocabulary assists them in framing, articulating, evaluating, and defending new ways of thinking. Articulation that is both critical and analytical makes it possible for students to validate current habits or to form new habits that are consistent with these new ways of thinking and speaking.

The third and final step is to consider the range of actions consistent with well-articulated beliefs. If students become aware of themselves and their environment, and learn to articulate new ways of thinking, their habits and actions are likely to be affected as well. Environmental issues are, at root, moral issues, and practical reasoning about moral issues typically ends in action. If students become critical of their environmental habits, and can philosophically articulate an alternative approach, then it seems to follow that a change of action is in order. For example, if a student critically examines and accepts Peter Singer's arguments about animal sentience and the pain and suffering promulgated on animals by a meat-centered diet, then logical and moral consistency requires that this student at least consider becoming a vegetarian. The instructor need only point out the range of actions available to the student. These might include the formulation and exercising of new personal habits, membership in environment groups, participation at the local or national level,

the education of parents, relatives, friends, and civic responsibility. By applying this three part approach, a course in environmental ethics can serve to empower students with personal responsibility for their beliefs, and with a range of activities consistent with these beliefs.

The approach outlined above is open to two sorts of criticisms. They come from both sides of the ideological spectrum, and have been used by critics of courses in applied ethics. They are the charges of advocacy and relativism. From the left, the charge of advocacy claims that philosophers in the classroom have as their primary goal the fostering of a background for understanding against which students can draw their own conclusions.[6] To advocate one position or another, on the issue of vegetarianism for example, undermines the instructor's task and interferes with student learning. The purpose, qua philosophy teacher, is to present the positions on both sides and to refuse to advocate one position or the other. From the right comes the charge that because instructors in applied ethics courses fail to advocate one view over another, moral relativism results.[7] Students are given an array of different philosophical perspectives from which to choose, but are not told what view to choose. They come to view moral values as relative to time, place, and situation, and conclude that any moral position is as good (or as bad) as any other. Obviously these charges are a matter of perspective: what one side calls advocacy the other calls indoctrination; what one side calls toleration, the other calls moral relativism. Nevertheless, these are serious challenges to the teaching enterprise generally and to the methodology suggested in this paper. They warrant a brief response.

The charge of moral relativism is not new. It has arisen in other historical periods when philosophers attempted to address specific questions of how people should act. The sophists of fifth century B.C. Athens were very much philosophers of the applied, practical sort. For a fee they would help educate the young of Athens, giving them philosophical tools to apply in their roles as members of the city-state. Sophists including Protagoras and Gorgias denied the existence of objective moral knowledge and subscribed to moral relativism. Most of us first learned of the sophists through Plato, one of their harshest critics. Plato rejected the position of moral relativism and held to the position that moral knowledge was possible and accessible, if only to the philosopher. In another period, the rise and fall of medieval casuistry—and its eventual replacement by contractarianism, utilitarianism, and Kantian formalism—can be seen as part of the historical debate between applied and theoretical philosophy.

The revival of applied ethics in the 1970s represents another swing of the pendulum. Moral philosophy in America during much of the twentieth century can be characterized as being in a kind of permanent analytical state. As students of this philosophical style, most of us remember the routine: students would engage in philosophical analysis of historically

important philosophical theories with little or no concern about the application of these theories to actual moral phenomena or to the solving of moral problems. They would read, for example, Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*, become conversant in its theoretical language, and, if possible, formulate criticisms.

The applied ethics movement is, among other things, a rejection of this style of doing philosophy. It seeks to apply the conceptual and theoretical tools of moral philosophy to the ethical issues of the day: medicine, law, social issues, and the environment. Applied ethicists are still sometimes criticized for being too soft on theoretical issues, for advocating one position over another, and for encouraging relativism. I hope that in the future moral philosophers will resist the temptation to divide moral philosophy into theoretical and applied, as if one could be engaged in one and not the other. I share with some of our Greek predecessors—specifically Aristotle—the view that moral philosophy is concerned generally with human experience and specifically with the question "How should one live?" Such concerns naturally balance one's theoretical work with the need to apply it and test it against common life.[8]

If history serves as a guide we ought not to be surprised that the enterprise of applied ethics is subject to charges of advocacy and relativism, and that critics of many ages call for a return to moral standards that are so obviously secure and certain as to make all debate pointless. Unfortunately, such certainty, even at its theoretical best, is not long sustained once it comes face to face with moral issues from everyday life, the very issues students are likely to encounter in an applied ethics course. The need for the constant interaction between theory and common life is the first sense in which a course in applied ethics can be said to advocate. David Hume was cognizant of the danger of separating theoretical enterprises from common life.

> Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company… . Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study, and became as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery. And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in and of their Reasoning, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation.[9]

Courses in applied ethics represent an approach that refuses to separate theory from practice lest moral philosophy becomes irrelevant at the one extreme or mere opinion at the other.

A corollary to this view is that the study of ethics is not only a theoretical enterprise, but a study that takes human action as its central focus. Any course in applied ethics takes students at some point to the realm of action. Even Kant's four examples to illustrate the categorical imperative

speak directly to the moral actions of suicide, of promising, of helping those in need, and of applying one's talents. It is not a radical position to hold that if a student reads Kant in a critical manner, and is persuaded by his arguments and his conclusions, then she will hold that it is wrong to kill oneself, to break promises, to not apply oneself, and to ignore the wretched. More importantly, and squarely in the realm of action, this same student ought to act in such ways that she not kill herself, keeps promises, applies herself, and helps the wretched. What is being advocated here is nothing more than the recognition that in moral philosophy the critical reflection of theories is more intimately connected to personal action than is the critical reflection of theories in the natural or social sciences. In short, ethics is an action-oriented enterprise.

This specific course does advocate the position that there is a need for an environmental ethic—a position based on an argument, hopefully valid, and with testable premises.[10] Students are free to consider the argument and to accept or reject its conclusion using arguments and premises of their own. In this respect, courses in environmental ethics are no different than courses in business or medical ethics. Both medicine and business are areas of ethical concern; both deal with complex moral issues in need of discussion and resolution; and both have access to ethical theories, both old and recent, to assist in analysis and decision-making. And just as there are those who think that any mention of an environmental crisis is a naive overreaction, there are those who believe that we ought not to play God in the realm of medicine or that the resolution of problems in business is a matter of prudence only. There is a strong presumption, however, that those who teach courses in applied ethics, as well as those who take such courses, believe that the issues being discussed warrant philosophical consideration. What is being advocated here is nothing more than an initial perspective or attitude toward the subject matter.

What clearly is not being advocated in this course is that students become environmentalists or activists, or that they commit themselves to the instructor's favorite environmental ethic. There is always the danger that an instructor's personal views will leak through and have a greater influence on students than might be intended, but if students want to know what their instructor thinks about a specific issue, both instructor and students ought to be able to distinguish between stating one's beliefs and advocating them. Students generally know when opinions are being pushed on them and their reaction is usually negative. Hence, the very type of advocacy about which critics worry most is the least effective in the long run.

Courses in applied ethics are at their best when they advocate the exploration of ideas, engagement with arguments and rival worldviews, and an attitude of understanding regarding the complexity of moral problems. Such advocacy can hardly be called indoctrination; it is instead a philosophical advocacy.

What about worries that courses in applied ethics produce moral relativism in our students? If my own experience is any indication, many college-age students are not only relativists when they reach the campus, but cynical subjectivists who claim that any value claim is true so long as it is held by at least one person, usually themselves. Perhaps they have misunderstood the liberal tradition to mean that the toleration of ideas implies that any idea is as good as any other; as opposed to Mill's idea that every idea has the right to be heard and debated in the public arena, if only to be rejected. Or perhaps students struggling with their own beliefs, and hoping to keep them hidden so as to avoid scrutiny and possible rejection, throw up relativism as a smoke screen.

Whatever the reasons, one of the goals of a good education is to demonstrate the falsity of the view that all moral positions are equal. Philosophy courses, and applied ethics courses specifically, take up the brunt of the work in this regard. Students are taught the rules of good reasoning, the anatomy of arguments, how to read complex texts; and then go on to consider various philosophical positions on the nature of morality. These lessons are intended to equip students with the tools to discriminate valid from invalid arguments, careful from sloppy reasoning, and moral positions that stand up to scrutiny from those that do not. For students competent in moral reasoning there is little danger in introducing them to texts that represent different cultural traditions (Native American *versus* European) or that reflect different theoretical approaches to similar problems (Aristotle *versus* Kant). Rather than encouraging pre-philosophical conceptions of relativism, texts representing different cultures and perspectives make students aware of the richness and diversity of approaches to the central problems of morality.

There is one sense that all the moral theories in the philosophical canon are relative: they are all robust, substantial, and powerful accounts of human action. Philosophical positions in ethics must withstand a good deal of scrutiny and criticism. To choose one of these theories to guide one's life, as opposed to a street ethic or a pre-reflective ethic, is to find oneself in good standing with other thinking human beings. A survey course in ethical theory or a course in applied ethics might suggest to students that among the theories offered—and only after they critically reflect upon them—any theory is as good as any other. They all have critics as well as defenders and adherents. It means that any one of the theories accords with at least some of our moral intuitions, and that any one of them can be used, with varying degrees of success, in the analysis of moral problems. Perhaps the term 'moral pluralism' can replace 'moral relativism' to indicate that there are a number of equally good ways to think about moral issues.[11]

Where theoretical approaches in ethics are likely to differ the most is in the different starting assumptions they make about human nature, the

natural world or the nature of the deity. Even these initial assumptions can be examined critically, but in the end students will be left to decide for themselves. If their philosophical training serves them well they will not conclude that with so many choices available it does not matter how one chooses. To convert to Buddhism, or even to call oneself an Aristotelian, is to adhere to certain fundamental positions that are not unimportant in shaping one's life. Students at this stage of philosophical development are likely to cringe at the memory of their pre-reflective, relativist days. And they will benefit from the work they have done in critically examining the positions before them and in choosing a philosophical position or committing to a worldview.

The so-called vices of advocacy and relativism, then, that are thought to run rampant in applied ethics courses are, and always have been, virtues when understood in their proper philosophical contexts. We turn now to course details.

III. *Format*

The semester is divided into three parts, roughly along the lines of the methodology discussed above. The first part focuses on awareness. Students explore and discuss their habits as they relate to the environment. For example, students might be asked to keep a log of one day's activities in terms of their personal impact on the environment. Or they might be asked to defend their dietary habits. Are they meat eaters? If they are, do they kill their own food? Would it matter if they could not? Through these exercises and class discussions students make contact between their personal activities and the impact these activities have on their surroundings. Self-awareness and environmental awareness merge when statistics are provided having to do with topsoil loss, aquifer depletion, or the amount of energy used in an average shower. Such information gives quantitative value to students' habits and helps bring home the message that personal actions affect the planet, and that we are interdependent with our natural surroundings. Raising these habits to the conscious level and connecting them to the present condition of the planet is the first step in evaluating them.

To connect these habits to the deeper set of unconscious beliefs that represent our cultural values, students read and discuss selections from our Western heritage that represent both positive and negative attitudes toward the natural world. We likewise read selections from Asian and Native American cultures. Readings are divided into three categories: spiritual, philosophical/scientific, and economic. We begin with selections from the Bible, starting with Genesis. Students discuss the two creation stories (1.1-2.4 and 2.5-3.24) in terms of what they say about the relationship between humans and nature. How, for example, do students recon-

cile the command to subdue and have dominion over the Earth with the story of the garden and God's command to care for it as a steward would? In the first creation story humans are made in God's image; in the second we are formed out of the Earth. What is the significance or possible outcome of these two very different accounts of creation?

This material is compared and contrasted with selections from Mohawk and Navajo creation stories. Here students read about the relationship between people and animals, and of the inherent sacredness of Mother Earth. The Navajos teach that physical illness reflects a deeper, spiritual illness, and that spiritual illness is a clear indication that the sacred, living Earth is sick. The Navajo view of illness suggests to students that there are dangers and limitations associated with Western materialism and capitalism. It also speaks directly to the interconnectedness of all the Earth's inhabitants. Native American and Asian spiritual texts nearly always speak of clear and direct moral relationships to the natural world, a world where humans are equal members among many.

Once this Western/non-Western contrast is made, students are encouraged to look for positive environmental messages in Western texts that have either been ignored or underemphasized in the canon.[12] The purpose of this exercise is to make students aware of sources of environmental inspiration in their own tradition, since other traditions may seem foreign to them. An example of a Western spiritual text with environmental themes is the Book of Job. In the "Speech from the Whirlwind" the "Unnamed One" speaks with pride about the wonders of his creation, even in those places where "no man lives." The implication is made that God loves all of his creation equally and has no favorites. Other environmental themes include the limitations of human knowledge, the cultivation of a wisdom that finds comfort in being part of the natural world, and the naturalness of suffering. Job suffers, at least in part, because he is a member of the physical universe. Any attempt, then, to escape human suffering altogether—either through prayer and sacrifice or the wonders of technology—seems misconceived from the start. These themes can foster important environmental insights for students.[13]

This Western—Non-Western—Western pattern is used in the philosophical/scientific and economic segments as well. Western philosophical texts (Plato, Aquinas, Descartes, and Bacon for example) are shown to reflect a hierarchical and discriminatory attitude toward the natural world. The natural world is shown to be metaphysically inferior when compared to humans, angels, and God. This ontological deficiency leads naturally to a moral deficiency. The Great Chain of Being is unambiguous, and is perhaps best characterized by Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, a test for existence that only humans can pass. Those that fail the test are thought to be automatons only. Bacon tells us that the natural world is a God-given puzzle put here for our curiosity and amusement, and that

solving it requires a "diligent dissection and anatomy of the world." Already diminished in ethical and metaphysical terms, modern science treats nature as a machine to be disassembled, examined, and discarded. Biology—the science of life—still relies on the dissection of dead plants and animals.

Non-Western texts offer a very different perspective of the natural world. Navajos treat their mountains as sacred pharmacies where life-saving herbs are reverently gathered and consumed. Buddhists would never consider vivisecting a dog for mere medical curiosity. Western authors, including some Pre-Socratics, Theophrastus, Hippocrates, the Stoics, Hume, Voltaire, Darwin, Bentham, Whitehead, and Schweitzer offer various versions of ethical and metaphysical systems that are not structured in ways that can be used to discriminate against the natural world, or that exalt the world of humans at the expense of other living creatures.

The primary text in the economic section is John Locke's justification of private property (Chapter V, *Second Treatise of Government*). Locke's labor theory of property suggests that land has no value until it is improved by human labor. His argument assumes that our place in the Judeo-Christian hierarchy gives us a mandate to take what land we need out of the commons and to use it for our own needs. With the invention of money the proviso against waste and spoilage disappears, as does the natural limitation on human industriousness. In addition to fulfilling our needs, humans may now hoard monetary wealth. The inherent value of the land is further diminished when its value—already measured in human terms—is now identified merely with how much money it is worth. Locke's views unwittingly encourage consumption while seeing land merely as a resource for achieving material happiness. In conjunction with Locke students read Chapter Four ("Bounding the Land") from William Cronon's book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979). Cronon documents the loss of Native American lands to the first European settlers, many of whom used Locke's arguments as justification for displacing the original inhabitants.

Non-Western texts include the Buddhist doctrine of non-attachment, and the Native American belief in living off the land while living in harmony with it. Western texts include Mill's short discussion of a steady-state economy (*Principles of Political Economy*, Volume II, London: John W. Parker, 1857, pp. 320-26), Schumacher's "Buddhist Economics," and essays by Thoreau, Wendell Berry, and Gary Snyder. In these works the spiritual value of the land is considered, as well as good work: work that preserves the integrity of the land and the worker, and that leads to what Schumacher calls "optimal consumption" rather than "maximal consumption."

Lest these historical examples appear irrelevant to students, it is important to connect the attitudes expressed in the cited texts to our daily lives.

Do they believe that only humans have souls or minds? How do they act when they are held captive by an economic desire: do they work hard so that they can purchase the good in question or do they practice non-attachment and try to forget about the desire? How many would rather go shopping or watch TV than go for a hike in the woods? Why is dissection still a principle mode of discovery in biology classes? What values are reflected in the fact that most science curricula in the United States treat biology as a first course in science and progress to ever more abstract sciences? They could, after all, just as easily start with physics and end with ecology. (Some school districts in New York State are doing just that.) Even if they have never read Aristotle or Genesis or Locke, students belong to a culture that places these works among its great books. The ideas expressed in these texts work their way into the language, customs and beliefs of the culture. Delving into our historical past, then, is not an abstract enterprise.

The first part of the course seeks to raise awareness of the deeply rooted connection between students' habits and a set of beliefs that are at best ambiguous in their conclusions about how to treat the environment. It is not a rejection of our Western heritage but a reappraisal of it.

The second, and longest, part of the course focuses on recent philosophical attempts to construct an environmental ethic. This segment has two purposes. The most obvious is to consider the various approaches available for developing an environmental ethic. If the underlying assumption of the course is that we need to enlarge the moral circle to include the environment, it is only natural to look at the various options in philosophical ethics. The second purpose is to assist students in the process of analyzing and articulating concepts and theories that bridge the value gap between persons and nature. Having become aware of their habits and heritage, students now face the more difficult task of articulating an environmental ethic.

Relying on the traditional philosophical tools of analysis and evaluation, students examine and criticize theoretical approaches to establishing an environmental ethic. They consider the extensionist theories of Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and Robin Attfield; the legal arguments of Christopher Stone; the aesthetic approach of Lilly-Marlene Russow and Robert Elliot; and the biocentric theories of Aldo Leopold, J. Baird Callicott, Holmes Rolston, and Paul Taylor.[14] There are, of course, other theorists doing work in environmental ethics and the choice of what theories to use is a matter of preference. The purpose is to give students the lay of the land, and to give them some choices in formulating an environmental ethic of their own.

This section of the course is run like any course in applied ethics. After beginning with a lecture or two on the process and purpose of ethical theorizing, as well as with some background material on the traditional

theories of utilitarianism, formalism, moral sentiments, and virtue ethics, students examine such concepts as sentience, inherent worth, sympathy, intrinsic value, speciesism, the land ethic, flourishing, teleology, and biocentrism. They consider the problems of extending a sentience- or rights-based environmental ethic to trees and rivers, and of the apparent loss of individual rights in a biocentric theory. They confront the argument made by many of these authors that human beings are not superior, either morally or metaphysically, to other living beings. Finally, these theoretical alternatives are tested in terms of their ability to provide reasonable and practical solutions to current environmental problems. Singer's arguments lead to the end of modern livestock agriculture; Regan's to the end of livestock agriculture, hunting, trapping, and animal testing; Leopold's (perhaps) to the end of rainforest destruction. Are these outcomes possible or reasonable? Are they the sort of outcomes we would expect and accept from an environmental ethic? In short, students consider the various philosophical options for constructing an environmental ethic. The aim of this section is the articulation both of the arguments that lead to the construction of an environmental ethic, and of the values, virtues and principles used in constructing one.

The final part of the course focuses on the outcomes of embracing one or another environmental ethic. Assuming that students have engaged in critical and analytical investigation of the ethical theories presented, and have accepted the premises and conclusions of one or another of these theories, it is now time to explore the range of actions that follow from them. Readings are selected from science, economics, public policy, as well as from various environmental groups. James Lovelock's Gaia theory is discussed, as is Herman Daly's views on steady-state economics. Both works are interpreted as approaches that view the Earth in ethical terms: as literally having a life of its own, and as being more than natural resources for human beings. Mark Sagoff's approach to public policy is discussed as are the recommendations and proposed solutions of various environmental and regulatory groups. Students also consider the types of environmental positions held, for example, by The Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and Earth First! How much activism is morally required? Does such activism sometimes lead to immoral results? Finally, students discuss and consider how their personal environmental ethic will affect the range of choices available to them in their personal lives and in their future professional lives. Will they become vegetarians or otherwise greatly reduce their consumption of meat? Will they change their buying habits, their driving habits, or their home habits? How will an environmental ethic affect the type of job they pursue or the company they work for?[15]

It is important here to demonstrate that moral theories are not mere abstractions. They *are* abstractions, but their conclusions—assuming we

accept them—exert a considerable force on our decisions and actions. Whether the influence is in the formulation of moral principles or in the development of an ecological conscience, an environmental ethic expands the moral circle. This expansion will affect the range of actions students have previously considered morally acceptable or morally neutral. Cutting down a tree on one's property is normally considered a morally neutral act, all things considered. But if students are persuaded by the arguments of Robin Attfield, then the decision to cut a tree down should not be a mere whim; hence, they are now in the midst of an ethical decision. Even a dead tree may have value if it "preserves the stability, integrity, and beauty" of the biocommunity around one's home. A follower of Leopold's land ethic suddenly has an expanded set of moral values and principles. This segment of the course makes it clear that ethical principles have consequences, and gives students some practice in identifying these consequences. The course, then, concludes like any course in applied ethics: with the application of theory to practice.[16]

IV. *Course Details*

A fourteen week semester is divided roughly along the following lines: two or three weeks on awareness (heritage texts); eight or nine weeks on articulation (environmental theory texts); and two or three weeks on action. On a three day schedule the first two days of every week are devoted to lecture and discussion of the primary texts (heritage, theory, action). The third day is devoted to current issues. On this day students discuss and debate solutions to specific issues: solid waste, nuclear power, groundwater pollution, etc. Where relevant, they draw on the philosophical material presented earlier in the week or semester. Outside speakers are also brought in at this time. They can include faculty members from other departments (biology, ecology, economics, etc.), or representatives from local agricultural or business concerns. Outside speakers help make the connection between the sometimes abstract and abstruse philosophical material and the daily decisions made by scientists, economists, farmers, and business people. Outside speakers also help cut down on the exaggerations and prejudices sometimes expressed in the view that farmers and people in industry or government are black-hatted bad guys. A committed dairy farmer will make a persuasive defense against the accusations of animal rights activists; a manager in a Fortune 500 company who is committed to a life-cycle management approach can refute the often-heard charge that all big business is anti-environment. Students learn quickly that the issues are not easily characterized, let alone resolved. They also appreciate a weekly "real-life" break.

Regarding texts, handouts of reading materials are used during the first and third parts of the semester; an anthology of philosophical and ethical

material for the second part; and an environmental reader, and a book of environmental debates for the Friday discussions. Films are shown periodically during the semester.

The course is writing-intensive. Students keep an informal journal that includes their own reflections on the material, as well as responses to specific questions. The journal requirement fosters awareness. Students might be asked to give their views of hunting or their impressions of various advertisements that play on environmental themes. Generally the questions follow the issues being discussed in class or that are in the news. Students are encouraged to use their journals to draft letters to the university's president or to their political representatives addressing environmental concerns. Poetry is also welcome in the journal as students are encouraged to explore various writing techniques and styles. Two analysis papers focusing primarily on the ethical theory section of the course are also assigned. The emphasis of these papers is on the articulation and defense of philosophical positions. These papers are intended to be more formal than the journals and require careful analysis of selected material and the defense of students' views.

There is also a project requirement. Students work individually or in teams to identify an environmental problem, and to formulate a solution to this problem. These projects focus on campus or local issues. Past projects include the formation of a university committee devoted to addressing environmental issues on campus, large-scale composting of university food waste, analysis of the university's portfolio and investment recommendations, following the community's water cycle, and a local version of *Fifty Things You Can Do To Save The Planet*. These projects foster environmental action and help students realize that environmental change often comes up against political and technical resistance, or just plain apathy. Students discuss their projects at different times throughout the semester, including a final presentation. Their final project reports are printed up and made available to the university and local communities. This process empowers and inspires students, and integrates their classroom experience with their development as community members.

V. *Problems*

Courses of this kind raise unique problems and issues. The fit between practice and theory is not always a good one and students will often become frustrated with what they perceive as extremist theoretical conclusions that appear to have little or no application in practice. This problem is especially true when authors like Singer, Regan, and Attfield are considered. As mentioned above, Singer concludes that we must all become vegetarians, and Regan believes that the rights of animals entail the abolition of livestock agriculture, animal testing, and hunting. Part of

the problem lies in the extremeness of these conclusions, and it is a challenge in getting students to see that ethical arguments and conclusions are applicable to their daily concerns.[17] It is important that the instructor make such conclusions seem both realistic and possible.

As with any applied ethics course the problem of translating beliefs into action is a difficult one. Students will often assent to the premises of an argument but be unable to change their habits to conform with the conclusion of the argument. They need to understand that moral consistency requires that their new beliefs find reflection in their actions, and that such reflection—though often difficult—is possible, and ultimately habitual. The obligations posed by an environmental ethic are new to all of us, and perhaps the best we can do as instructors is to make the point with analogies, or to discuss our personal choices and how they reflect a commitment to an environmental ethic.

A more pleasant outcome of this course is that students often request information beyond the purview of the course. I have frequent requests for vegetarian cookbooks and information about jobs in environmental professions. It is important to have some of this material on hand or at least know where to point the student. In addition, it helps to know what environmental courses colleagues in other departments are offering as well as environmental courses in neighboring universities.

There is finally what I call the "hypocrite syndrome." There is a degree to which the instructor of this course must be sensitized to and aware of the issues being discussed. We need not be a role-model—though we often become one by default—but our actions around campus or around town ought to reflect our commitment to the environment. Students cannot help but ask us about our beliefs and activities, and I am not convinced that they should not do so in a course of this nature. This feature of the course is sure to make many instructors uncomfortable, but it is the price we pay for integrating ethical theory and ethical practice. Of course even if we are vegetarians or ride bikes instead of driving, there are times when we give in to temptations or fail for some other reason to live up to our principles. But there are important differences between not being a moral perfectionist and being a hypocrite. A hypocrite knowingly says (believes) one thing and does another. This behavior should be sharply distinguished from knowingly saying (believing) one thing and trying one's hardest to act in accordance with this belief. Life intrudes, weakness and laziness get the best of us, old habits come creeping back, or our values undergo revision. Students should know the differences between hypocrisy and imperfection, not only to protect us from their wrath and unfair accusations, but also to help them reconcile their own personal clashes between principles and actions.

The re-emergence of applied ethics is a welcome trend in the history of late twentieth century philosophy. It once again makes philosophy rele-

vant and accessible to the rest of the educated world lacking in the training of the professional philosopher. More importantly it puts philosophy to work on the problems confronting the modern world, including environmental problems. Some like to refer to applied philosophy as a fad, obviously hoping that it will soon pass so we can get back to the business of doing real philosophy. But philosophy has passed this way before in the works of Aristotle, Hellenistic philosophers, medieval casuists, and Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, to name a few; and I would claim that it was during these periods that philosophy has done some of its best work. Fad or not, we are presently encountering serious environmental problems that call for solutions. It seems only appropriate that we put our philosophical training, and the rich heritage of Western philosophy, to work on these solutions both in and out of the classroom.

Notes

For their thoughtful suggestions, special thanks to James Heinegg, Maria Vitek, Arnold Wilson, an anonymous referee, Michael Whitney, and audience members at various presentations of this paper. Thanks also to many of my students, whose constructive criticisms over the years have helped shape this course.

1. In teaching this course I assume that there are serious environmental problems, including ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect, topsoil loss, air and water pollution, loss of species, and the proliferation of solid waste. We might speak of similar, though perhaps less drastic, problems in medicine or business. I am not uncomfortable in making known the details of these problems, or in suggesting an enlargement of the moral circle as a possible solution to them. This aspect of the course is well within the purview of applied ethics.

2. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179a33-b4.

3. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112a1-1113a3.

4. I would assert that any course in applied ethics or contemporary moral issues employs something like this three-part approach. A course in medical ethics, for example, first makes students aware of the issues and their pre-philosophical views about them. It then presents various theories and concepts to help students begin articulating philosophical reasons for their beliefs. Presumably a course of this nature will also discuss what each of us would do in a medical dilemma, and how our acceptance of a theory's conclusions would influence our actions. Likewise a contemporary moral issues course, even if it begins with philosophical theories, will apply these theoretical conclusions to contemporary moral life.

5. One might think that courses in environmental ethics self-select students who are already environmentally aware. This is only sometimes the case. Many students take the course because they are curious or because it is recommended by their adviser or their friends or because it is perceived as politically correct. Secondly, the level of awareness varies greatly across students. More importantly, the type of awareness advocated here is intended to go beyond the media-fostered awareness of pollution or rainforest destruction. This course attempts to foster a philosophical awareness wherein students make a connection not only to what they know about the environment, but to what they know about themselves and about the connection between self and nature.

6. See, for example, Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, *The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education* (Hastings-on-Hudson: The Hastings Center, 1979).

7. See William Bennett's "Getting Ethics," *Commentary*, vol. 70 (1980), pp. 62-65; and "The Shattered Humanities," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 1982, p. 10. Since the early seventies, when applied philosophy began a comeback, there has been continued debate about the instructor's role in applied philosophy courses, and concern about the impact of such courses on the moral development of students.

8. See *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094b21, 1095a5, 1098b9, and 1103b27) for examples of this convergence methodology.

9. "Of Essay Writing," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), pp. 534-35.

10. I outline this argument in some detail on the first day of class. It makes use of empirical data regarding environmental degradation around the world, historical claims about the moral development of Western civilization, and a prediction that environmental change via politics or economics will commence in earnest only after the adoption of an environmental ethic. I support this claim with various analogical arguments.

11. I distinguish my use of 'moral pluralism' from its use by Christopher Stone, who uses it to characterize the view that our moral life may require us to choose from rival, incommensurable moral views.

> The Moral Pluralist holds that a public representative, a senator, for example, might rightly embrace utilitarianism when it comes to legislating a rule for social conduct (say, in deciding what sort of toxic waste program to establish). Yet, this same representative need not be principally utilitarian, nor even a consequentialist of any style, in arranging his personal affairs among kin or friends, or deciding whether it is right to poke out the eyes of pigeons. (*Earth and Other Ethics: The Case For Moral Pluralism* [New York: Harper Collins Pub., 1988], p. 118.)

In teaching a course in moral philosophy one need only make the case that there are a number of rival moral theories to choose from, each of them having withstood philosophical analysis and criticism. It is a separate question whether students can pick and choose from rival theories as the situation arises. For criticism of Stone's position see J. Baird Callicott's "The Case Against Moral Pluralism," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 12 (1990), pp. 99-124.

12. This is not to imply that biblical writers, or representatives of the canon generally, were environmentalists. Nevertheless, the selections chosen do suggest alternative perspectives, some of which closely resemble current theories and perspectives regarding the natural world.

13. It is important not to misconstrue the purpose of this multi-cultural enterprise. It is intended only as a method for increasing student awareness of the connection between habits, beliefs, and heritage; the existence of alternative (non-Western) ways of seeing the world; and of the existence of texts in our own tradition that serve to raise environmental awareness and to ground environmental habits. The more difficult task of formulating, analyzing, and defending an environmental ethic comes in the second half of the course.

14. There are a number of places to find the works of these writers, but the text I use, though it is quickly becoming dated, is *People, Penguins, and Plastic Trees*, Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce, eds. (Wadsworth Publishing Company,

1986).The journal *Environmental Ethics* is an excellent source of theoretical material.

15. This somewhat detailed discussion of action is predicated on the assumption that students will choose an environmental ethic from among the various choices or opt for a kind of moral pluralism suggested by Christopher Stone (see footnote 11). Anecdotal evidence from my classes suggests that this assumption is generally correct. It does not follow, however, that students must choose an environmental ethic, nor that every student does.

16. Though each section of the course is devoted to a specific pedagogical purpose (awareness, articulation, action), all three activities occur throughout the semester.

17. The serious incongruity between meta-ethical theory and what Hume calls common life makes the application of these theories a challenge to anyone teaching a course in applied ethics. Anyone who has tried to apply the categorical imperative or Bentham's felicific calculus to a contemporary moral problem is aware of the challenge. Perhaps the renewed interest in virtue ethics will decrease the distance between ethical theories and ethical practice.

Appendix

Here are the texts I currently use:

People, Penguins, and Plastic Trees. Edited by Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Peirce. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986.

Environment. A Dushkin Annual Edition Volume. Dushkin Publishing Company, 1990. An alternative to this single volume is the annual *State of the World*, published by the Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D.C.

Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Environmental Issues. Edited by Theodore D. Goldfarb. Dushkin Publishing Company, 1989.

In addition to the texts, I use a number of handouts:

A good single source for material that captures both our Western disregard for the natural world, specifically animals, and alternative views which argue for the moral treatment of animals is *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Tom Regan and Peter Singer, eds., New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1976.

A terrific source for nature writing is *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*, Robert Finch and John Elder, eds., New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990.

The traditional place to begin the historical analysis of our environmental crisis is Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" *Science* 155 (1967): 1207. It is reprinted in many places.

Critics of White's approach include Robin Attfield's *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974).

For Native American material, I use the creation story of the Mohawks, and an article by Trebbe Johnson: "The Four Sacred Mountains of the Navajos," *Parabola* (Winter 1988), 41-47.

For Eastern material, I give a brief lecture on the principles of Buddhism and use as a practical application E. F. Schumacher's "Buddhist Economics" from *Small is Beautiful*, New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

J. S. Mill's brief remarks on the steady-state can be found in *Principles of Political Economy*, Volume II, London: John W. Parker, 1857, pp. 320-26.

In conjunction with a handout from Locke's "On Property," I use Chapter Four ("Bounding the Land") from William Cronon's book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1979. See also Alexis DeTocqueville's "Fortnight in the Wilderness," in *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America*, George Wilson Pierson, ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, pp. 229-82.

I refer to a number of selections from the Bible, including material from Genesis, Isaiah, Job, and the gospel of Matthew. Stephen Mitchell's translation of The Book of Job (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) is excellent.

Recent attempts at a philosophical grounding of an environmental ethic are Paul Taylor's *Respect for Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1986), J. Baird Callicott's *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), and Holmes Rolston III's *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Temple University Press, 1989) and *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989). See also Eugene Hargrove's *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989).

James Lovelock's *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988) has a good introduction to the Gaia theory.

Herman Daly's theory of steady-state economics can be found in his *Steady-State Economics* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1977) and his anthology *Economics, Ecology, Ethics: Essays Toward a Steady-State Economy* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1973). See also Herman Daly's and John Cobb's *For The Common Good* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

Mark Sagoff's *The Economy of Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.)

Here are some other books and magazines you may find helpful in your course:

The Home Planet (Kevin W. Kelly, ed., New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1988). This is a meditative book filled with photographs of the Earth from space with accompanying quotations from the men and women who have been there.

Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruhac's *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children* (Golden Colorado: Fulcrum Inc., 1988).

Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989). A book that brings home the damage we are doing to the planet and offers advice on how to re-order our lives.

Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966). An inspirational and powerful book that outlines an environmental ethic.

Fifty Simple Things You Can Do To Save the Earth (Berkeley, CA: Earthworks Press, 1989).

A number of books by Rene Dubos: *So Human an Animal, A God Within, The Wooing of Earth*. Most of his books are published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

A number of books by Wendell Berry: *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Sierra Books), *The Gift of Good Land, Recollected Essays, Home Economics, What Are People For?* Most of his books are published by North Point Press, San Francisco.

A number of books by Barry Commoner, including *The Closing Circle* and *Making Peace with the Planet.*

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962).

The Wilderness World of John Muir (Edwin Teale, ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976).

Darwin: A Norton Critical Edition (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1979).

Our Common Future: The World Commission On Environment and Development (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Wes Jackson's *New Roots for Agriculture, Meeting the Expectations of the Land* and *Altars of Unhewn Stone* (All published by North Point Press in San Francisco).

Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

Robert Cahn's *Footprints on the Planet* (New York: Universe Books, 1978).

Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

The journal *Environmental Ethics* is a rich source of material.

ORGANIZATIONS

The Wilderness Society
1400 Eye Street
Washington, D.C. 20005

Natural Resources Defense Council
Membership Department
122 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10164

The Nature Conservancy
1815 North Lynn Street
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 841-5300

National Audubon Society
Membership Data Center
P.O. Box 2666
Boulder, CO 80322
1-800-274-4201

World Watch
P.O. Box 6991
Syracuse, NY 13217-9942

Environmental Defense Fund
1616 P Street
Washington, D.C. 20077-6048

For a source of environmentally sound products see:

Seventh Generation, 1-800-456-1198, Colchester, VT 05446-1672.

PROJECT IDEAS

CAMPUS PROJECTS

- Use of recycled paper (photocopy, napkins, bathroom tissue, etc.)
- Formation of a university environmental committee
- Examination of university portfolio
- Vegetarian meals on meal plan
- Large composting project
- Campus-wide recycling
- Greek house recycling
- Energy efficient lighting
- Water-saving devices
- Formation of a campus green party
- Energy audit of the campus
- Canvas bags at book store
- Environmental awareness of student body and/or faculty
- Creation of an Environmental Studies program
- Environmental campus newsletter
- Environmental lobbying network for hometown issues

LOCAL PROJECTS

- Measuring air quality in town
- Measuring water quality in town
- Environmental awareness of local residents

OTHERS

Agriculture

- 1991 Farm Bill
- Making Maple Syrup
- Animal Rights
- Low Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA)
- The Economics of Farming
- Perennial Agriculture
- Organic Gardening Handbook
- BST (Bovine Growth Hormone)
- Western Water Rights Issues
- Irrigation/Aquifer Depletion
- Amish Farming
- Dairy Farming
- Topsoil Erosion
- Aquaculture
- Hydroponics

Technology

- Diapers
- Incineration
- Recycling technology
- Nuclear Energy
- Solar Energy
- Wind Energy
- Hydro Energy
- Geo-Thermal Energy
- Mass Transit
- Bicycles
- Automotive Industry
- Energy Efficiency Technology
- Water Efficiency Technology

POLITICAL

Clean Air Act
Endangered Species Act
Superfund
Alaskan Oil Drilling
Green Party

ECOLOGY

Conservation *vs.* Preservation
Greenhouse Effect
Acid Rain
Current Gaia Theory Research

ECONOMIC

Steady-State Economics
Swapping Debt for Land
Effect of Environmental Degradation on GNP
Green Products
Second Home Development

SOCIAL

Hydro-Quebec Project
Cancer Belts in America
Nuclear Pollution
Eastern Europe
Hawaii Geothermal Project
Child-Bearing Women and the Workplace
Population Control
Radical Environmentalists

STATE/LOCAL

History of Adirondack Park
Superfund Site
Local Landfill Dispute
Health of Local Environment

NATURE

Hunting
Favorite Animal/Plant
Wetlands
Rainforests

MISCELLANEOUS

New Age Religion
Investigation into the effectiveness of environmental organizations

William Vitek, Center for Liberal Studies, Clarkson University, Potsdam, New York 13699, USA