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Environmental Values: An Appreciation

BRYAN G. NORTON

Environmental Values

John O'Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light

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Perhaps fittingly, the professional career of Alan Holland – let us all hope his intellectual career will continue for years to come – is coming to a close with the publication of a co-authored book that may well be heralded as a new beginning for environmental philosophy. I am predicting that the recently published *Environment Values* will contribute greatly to the transition from the earliest stage – the meta-ethical stage – to a new era, one that will emphasise procedure and good decision processes, rather than abstract meta-ethical reasoning from definitive decision criterion resting upon radically new metaphysical ‘foundations’ in bio- or eco-centrism. It may be premature to predict the exact intellectual terrain of the incipient era in environmental philosophy.

To use a perhaps grandiose simile, the transition is like the ending of what is called the Modern Period in philosophy and physics – its origin marked in the work of Galileo and Descartes, its end marked by Nietzsche and Peirce – in philosophical history, more generally. Today, over a century after the *coup de grace* of modernism, as administered by Darwin and the discovery of the second law of thermodynamics in physics, most of us are still more comfortable calling our own period of transition ‘post-modern’. Similarly – and for parallel reasons – we might best call the current, transitional stage in environmental philosophy the ‘post-meta-ethical’ stage. I have recently suggested that what is needed in order to move into the next era, is a move away from ‘ideology’ and toward ‘adaptive ecosystem management’, a suggestion that is entirely consistent with the proposals in *Environmental Values*.¹ But the new book suggests a general direction forward that may be appealing to a broader audience than my specifically pragmatist version; it is also consistent with applications of Habermas’s work, and with the work of political scientists such as John Dryzek and Martin Hajer who also see democratic deliberation as the way forward in environmental ethics. However, when we come to describe the transition or pinpoint when the new era started to yield fruit, John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light (OHL) – I will argue – have written the epitaph for the first era of environmental ethics (1970–near present) by providing a concise and persuasive critique of the currently dominant approach in environmental ethics.

In the first part of the book, OHL criticise meta-ethical approaches to environmental ethics, first developed in the 1970s and still extant today, as too ‘thin’

in the sense that they contain only abstract speculation on the correct theory for environmental ethics. They show that utilitarian and consequentialist decision criteria claim both too much and too little, and that rights theory models provide partial criteria at most, setting the stage for proposing an elegant alternative. In its place, these authors offer a pluralist and procedural approach based on balancing multiple decision criteria and applying these multiple criteria within a well-functioning, democratic decision process.

OHL adopt an attitude 'skeptical of the attempt to understand ethical reflection in terms of moral obligations that are derived from sets of ethical primitives', and build this attitude into an epitaph of meta-ethical extensionism. They question the importance of 'decision points' at which individuals or groups must apply a definitive set of decision criteria in order to act morally. In place of discrete, one-time decision points – which seldom occur in environmental politics – and decisive criteria – which are always controversial in themselves – OHL shift attention to decision processes that 'can only be properly appraised in terms of historical patterns of choices through which the character of institutions is expressed and developed'.

Speaking more positively in Part 2, the authors move beyond abstract speculations that attribute human-independent (in one of many senses) value to natural entities or which entities have 'moral standing', and focus on how environments are 'lived from', 'lived in' and 'lived with', how, that is, people value their own environment within the natural world they inhabit. In the process, the authors propose a 'thick' vocabulary that reconnects value discourse with peoples' lives and their cultures by embedding their description of environmental values – and conflicts among them – in culturally and historically informed narratives. These narratives contribute to a productive decision process by helping participants to understand multiple values and to set priorities and help to formulate better questions, questions that will illuminate policy choices and allow communities to set reasonable priorities among competing interests. They have also provided a promising guide forward, a guide to more intellectual productivity in the philosophical analysis of practical environmental philosophy, and I think they are definitely on the right path.

Indeed, the path they describe is the one proposed by Aldo Leopold, who declared the purpose of his 'land ethic' was to 'reap from' the land 'a cultural harvest'. This process-oriented, pluralistic approach, which pays attention to natural history, cultural history and how they intertwine is described by Leopold in the 'Foreword' to his *A Sand County Almanac*:

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten. (Leopold, 1949, pp. viii-ix)

Leopold set out, he said, to 'weld' these three concepts. OHL, following a path perhaps originating more in what the authors call 'old world conservation',

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converge with Leopold's approach of welding ecology with cultural heritage to create an environmental ethic. With much the same program as Leopold, OHL treat valuation pluralistically, and emphasise that the decision-making process cannot be guided by a comprehensive and quantitative decision rule based on a single theoretical principle.

In this approach, theory gives way to narratives, narratives of how people live from, in and with the natural bounty expressive of a place. Multiple environmental values invoked in these narratives draw attention to important themes of a local culture, where it has been, and what might be its aspirations. From these narratives values and place identity eventually emerge. These narratives are intertwined with ongoing discussions of what to do, how to protect multiple values, and how to build deliberative processes that can be responsive to such narratives and to the multiple values they express.

The narrative approach eschews single-theory reductionism, concluding that 'there is no single value to which all others are reducible, or some value that trumps others' (p. xx). Pluralism and deliberative approaches to decision making go hand-in-hand. In any environmental dispute, there will be considerations of individual justice, concern for animals and other species, personal virtues and cultural and historical values to honour and none of these 'trump' the others. Ethical decision making becomes a matter of 'attending different reasons and framing judgments through the process of deliberation'.²

As I said in the introduction to this appreciation, we have before us, in *Environmental Values*, a crowning achievement and as a co-author Alan Holland can be proud to be closing his professional career in this way. As founding editor of this journal, Alan has had his perceptive intellectual finger on the pulse of the field for decades, and in this book he and his co-authors assess where we have been, and where we need to go if environmental philosophy is to have a greater impact on policy. With typical humility, however, the book does not claim dogmatically to finish this task, but only to 'begin a conversation'. That conversation, as begun in *Environmental Values*, is distinctive not in giving new answers to old questions, but in providing tentative and leading answers to a new set of questions. As we celebrate Alan's retirement as Editor, let us look forward to his continuing contribution to the intellectual conversation so well begun in *Environmental Values*.

NOTES

¹ See Norton, 2005, which argues in more detail – and a lot more words – for very similar conclusions about the future of environmental valuation studies.

² Note the similarity of this pluralistic view with the description of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's description of how decisions are made at law. See Holmes, 1943. Also see the discussion of this point in Menand (2004), especially Chapters Three and Nine.

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