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# The Ethicist Conception of Environmental Problems

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## ABSTRACT

Ethicist assumptions about the causes and solutions of environmental problems are widely held within environmental philosophy. It is typically assumed that an important cause of problems are the attitudes towards the natural environment held by individuals and that problems can be solved by getting people to adopt a more ethical orientation towards the environment. This article analyses and criticises these claims. Both the highly mediated nature of the relationship between individuals and the natural environment and the pervasive pressure on firms in market economies to reduce their costs provide reasons to question the ethicist assumptions.

## KEYWORDS

Ethicism, environmental ethics, environmental problems, solutions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A large part of the work done in environmental philosophy has been concerned with questions such as: What are our moral obligations in relation to the natural environment? Are they derived from our obligations to humans? If not, how are they to be understood? However, alongside and underlying these normative concerns can often be found two further claims: a claim about the cause of environmental problems and a claim about the solution of those problems. These claims are typically not developed in any great detail, but they are far-reaching ones. The first claim is that the general attitudes of individuals towards the environment are an important factor in the causation of environmental problems. These attitudes downplay or ignore the value of the natural environment and hence legitimate or justify the heedless exploitation of it. The second claim is that

getting people to adopt a more ethical orientation towards the environment will play an important part in solving environmental problems. Both of these claims can be characterised as ethicist ones, for the first locates the cause of problems in ethically inappropriate attitudes towards the natural environment, and the second maintains that problems can be solved by individuals coming to adopt ethically appropriate attitudes. This article casts doubt on both these claims.

The article begins by defending the view that a wide range of environmental philosophers,<sup>1</sup> who differ from each other in many respects, do make one or both of the ethicist claims. The defence focuses on two debates where the issue of causes and solutions has risen closer to the surface. The first debate is the early controversy about whether a new ethic is needed to deal with the environmental crisis. This argument often turned on the question of whether Judaeo-Christian attitudes to nature have been responsible for causing environmental problems. Those who thought that that tradition was to blame were amongst the keenest advocates of a new ethic. But all the participants in the debate shared the two assumptions that general attitudes towards nature (whether of Judaeo-Christian origin or not) were important in causing problems and that the key to the solution of problems lay in some sort of ethical change in individuals. The second debate, which provides evidence of philosophers making the second ethicist claim in particular, is the more recent discussion about the contribution environmental philosophy is making to the solution of ecological problems. Some hold that philosophy is already making an important contribution, while others are more sceptical. But again, what they all share is the assumption that the solution of problems rests on the adoption of more benign attitudes towards the environment. They simply differ over the current role of philosophy in promoting this change.

The remainder of the article is taken up with criticism of the two ethicist claims. In their most general form the two claims are loose ones, but the ethicists do offer some indications of how one might fill them out. I formulate one determinate version of the first claim and two determinate versions of the second claim and criticise these. In all three cases I treat the claims as claims about the causes and solutions of problems in modern societies. This focus on specific versions of the two claims does limit the scope of the critique, but without characterising the claims with some degree of specificity it is difficult to undertake any critical assessment at all. The main line of criticism is that the ethicists are making large empirical claims about the causes and solutions of environmental problems but they pay insufficient attention to the socio-economic context in which those problems arise and are dealt with. In effect, they abstract from many of the important features of the circumstances in which individuals choose and act. Attending to some of those features indicates the problematic nature of the two claims.

A subsidiary issue in the article is the value of environmental philosophy itself. As has just been noted, some of the evidence that philosophers make the

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second ethicist claim comes from the debate about the role of environmental philosophy in solving environmental problems. If the second ethicist claim is true it does open the way for the argument that philosophers, through debate and discussion, can contribute to the requisite change of attitudes. In this way the ethicist view of how to solve problems could provide a rationale for the work in normative theory. Conversely, the critique of the second claim will call that rationale into question.

## 2. THE ETHICIST CLAIMS

The question of whether a new ethic is needed to solve our ecological problems was one of the first issues addressed by practitioners in the emerging field of environmental philosophy. Aldo Leopold's early call for a new ethic had been published in 1949. Nearly twenty years later the historian Lynn White made a similar suggestion and founded this on a historical analysis of the attitudes that had caused the problems. Subsequently, when academic philosophers began to look at environmental issues, White's analysis was challenged in different ways by John Passmore and Robin Attfield. This led both of them to deny that a new ethic is necessary. My purpose, in looking at this debate again, is to identify the assumptions made about the general nature of the causes and solutions of environmental problems that are shared by all the protagonists.

In his famous essay, 'The Land Ethic', Aldo Leopold is chiefly concerned with the solution of environmental problems. He argues that to prevent further ecological destruction, a new ethic is needed. This is the land ethic and it is said to be an 'ecological necessity'.<sup>2</sup> The land ethic involves an expansion of the moral community. It 'simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or, collectively: the land.'<sup>3</sup> Gaining acceptance for this new ethic will rest upon a reconceptualisation of the land as a biotic pyramid, bound together by relations of dependency, co-operation and competition.<sup>4</sup>

Leopold assumes that the new ethic will be inculcated by education<sup>5</sup> and he thinks that the primary target for this educational effort should be private landowners. His reason for advocating this particular focus emerges from his criticisms of existing conservation policy, with its emphasis on action by government. For Leopold, the state is too unwieldy and too removed to ensure that appropriate conservation measures are applied. There is a need to change the attitudes of those who are more directly involved in managing the land. As he puts it, the current system of conservation:

tends to relegate to government many functions eventually too large, too complex, or too widely dispersed to be performed by government.

An ethical obligation on the part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these situations.<sup>6</sup>

Lynn White, in 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', also calls for a new set of values.<sup>7</sup> But his interest is more with the causes of environmental problems than with their solutions. He wants to identify the beliefs that have led to the current impasse. He sees the ecologic crisis as, in the first instance, a product of the marriage of science and technology in the mid-nineteenth century. It was this union that dramatically accelerated man's impact on the natural environment. But the roots of the crisis lie much deeper. Science and technology themselves have their origins in the Middle Ages<sup>8</sup> and were shaped and promoted by the dominant Christian assumptions of that time. Specifically, the development of science was encouraged by a version of natural theology according to which it was part of man's task to understand God's mind by understanding his creation; and technology was fostered by the beliefs that man is not part of nature and that God created nature for man to use as he chose.<sup>9</sup>

According to White these attitudes are themselves deeply embedded in Western culture and widely shared.

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians.<sup>10</sup>

This is why he holds that any solutions to the ecologic crisis must rest on a widespread change in these basic, underlying beliefs. White's own suggestion is that we should replace the orthodox Christian view of nature with what he regards as the heretical view of St Francis. The chief element in the Franciscan view is a belief in 'the equality of all creatures, including man'.<sup>11</sup> White proposes Francis as 'a patron saint for ecologists'.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast with those, like White, who offer an unqualified condemnation of Western Christianity as the original source of the attitudes that have caused environmental problems, John Passmore, in his book, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, offers a more nuanced critique of the Christian tradition.<sup>13</sup> He suggests that the problematic attitudes to nature originated not in the Hebraic sources of Christian belief but in a Christianity that was influenced by Greek thought and by Stoicism in particular. It was the Stoics who held that everything was made for man. As Passmore puts it, 'If, then, one can speak of "Christian arrogance" in supposing that all things are made for men, it must be with the proviso that it is not Hebraic-Christian but Graeco-Christian "arrogance"'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while Passmore holds that the Stoic-Christian view can certainly encourage exploitative attitudes to nature, a further, crucial step was taken when this view was coupled with the Baconian-Cartesian belief that it is man's duty and within his capacity to make the world a better place.<sup>15</sup> It was this combination that 'can either provoke or be used to justify a scientific-technological revolution';<sup>16</sup> and it is this revolution that has been the direct cause of many of our environmental problems.

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Passmore also differs from White, and from Leopold, on the question of whether environmental problems are to be solved by the adoption of a new ethic. He is scornful of the claim that it will be possible to persuade people to accept values that have no connection with previously accepted ones.<sup>17</sup> But he also thinks that this is unnecessary. For he holds that there are at least two traditions within Western civilisation that encourage a more benign attitude to the natural environment.<sup>18</sup> The first of these is the Stewardship tradition – itself a minority tradition within Christianity – which sees man as ‘a farm-manager, actively responsible as God’s deputy for the care of the world’.<sup>19</sup> The second tradition holds that ‘man’s responsibility is to perfect nature by co-operating with it’.<sup>20</sup> This tradition has its roots in German Idealism. These traditions, perhaps with others, provide the basis for a more appropriate attitude to nature. So all that is necessary is to develop certain strains that are already present in Western thought. The solution of environmental problems will require individuals to adopt values that are new to them in the sense that they have not previously been committed to them. But these values will not be new to Western culture. What the West needs, he writes, ‘is not so much a “new ethic” as more general adherence to a perfectly familiar ethic’.<sup>21</sup>

On the further question of *whose* attitudes need to be changed, Passmore is closer to White than to Leopold in that he thinks that it is the attitudes of the large mass of people that need to change, rather than those of one particular group. But unlike White, he places this need for large-scale change in a specifically political context. He thinks that simply trying to persuade large numbers of people to act in a more environmentally benign way, while it may help, will not usually be enough. For example, having noted that inventing a device that will solve a pollution problem will not be sufficient, he adds that it will be necessary to persuade people to use it. But he then continues: ‘And in many instances something more will be required: to persuade the State to coerce its citizens into using it.’<sup>22</sup> He holds that in liberal democratic societies such action by the State will itself rest on prior persuasion. For the introduction of coercive environmental legislation will only come about as a result of democratic pressure and this pressure will only be generated when environmentalists have convinced large numbers of people of the merits of their case.<sup>23</sup> Thus, for Passmore it is important to change the attitudes of the large mass of people not so much because this will lead them to behave in more directly environmentally sensitive ways, but because it will cause them to put pressure on their political representatives, so that environmental legislation will be introduced. A widespread change of attitudes is important because of the change it will effect through the political system.

Robin Attfield, in his contribution to the ‘new ethic’ debate, disagrees with both White and Passmore about which attitudes are responsible for ecological problems. He absolves Christianity almost completely, in large part because he

thinks that the Stewardship tradition has been much more central to Christianity than Passmore allows. In his view 'the Judaeo-Christian tradition has historically stressed responsibility for nature and that not only in the interest of human beings.'<sup>24</sup> Instead, Attfield lays the blame on the belief in material progress that emerged from the Enlightenment.

Rather than the beliefs of Judaism and Christianity, the attitude in large measure responsible for environmental degradation in East and West has been the belief in perennial material progress inherited from the Enlightenment and the German metaphysicians, as modified in the West by the classical economists and sociologists, by liberal individualism and by social Darwinism, and in Eastern Europe by the unquestioned deference accorded to Marx and to Engels.<sup>25</sup>

It is because the Stewardship tradition has been so strong that there is no need to invent a new ethic in order to solve environmental problems. He holds that the idea of Stewardship, and related notions, 'may well be considered to offer materials from which an environmental ethic, equal to our current problems, can be elicited without the need for the introduction of a new ethic to govern our transactions with nature.'<sup>26</sup> So rather like Passmore, Attfield holds that the solution of environmental problems will involve a change in attitudes, but not the adoption of a new ethic. What is needed is a more widespread and sincere commitment to values already present in Western culture. As he puts it

[W]hat is required is not so much a replacement of moral traditions (if that were possible) or even their supplementation with new principles, as the more promising endeavour of developing in a more consistent manner themes to which at least lip-service has long been paid.<sup>27</sup>

Attfield appears to side with White and Passmore against Leopold in holding that the change of attitudes must be a widespread one. He does not directly address the question of whether this change of attitudes will achieve its effect by changing the way most people behave in their immediate interactions with the natural environment, or through the political system, as Passmore suggests. Some of his remarks imply that he would see both routes as important.<sup>28</sup>

In this debate about a new ethic White, Passmore and Attfield disagree about which attitudes are to blame. They also differ from each other, and from Leopold, about the attitudes that people must adopt in order to solve ecological problems. But for all their differences what they share is the view that certain general attitudes to nature play an important role in the causation of problems. These attitudes legitimate the heedless exploitation of nature and can be termed 'legitimizing attitudes'. The authors also hold that bringing it about that people adopt environmentally benign attitudes will play an important part in realising solutions. This is the common ground on which they fight out their differences.

It is the common commitment to the ethicist claims that is of interest here, rather than their differences over the content of the causally significant attitudes.

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Nevertheless, there are *other* differences between them, concerning the way in which attitudes exert their causal influence, that are relevant when it comes to characterising more specific versions of the ethicist claims. I will return to this issue shortly.

The new ethic debate is not the only argument that provides evidence of environmental philosophers who differ from each other in important respects sharing the ethicist assumptions. Three recent collections of papers have been largely devoted to a consideration of the role of environmental philosophy in solving environmental problems.<sup>29</sup> Several of the participants disagree about the role of philosophy, at least as currently constituted, but nevertheless share the ethicist view that solutions rest on a change of attitudes.

Bryan Norton does not exaggerate much when he suggests that Baird Callicott's vision of philosophy, as expressed in his paper 'Environmental Philosophy is Environmental Activism' is a heroic one.<sup>30</sup> In the first paragraph Callicott mentions the death sentence passed on Socrates as evidence of the threat that philosophy can pose to established beliefs and practices. For him, philosophy appears to be 'the most potent force of social change imaginable'.<sup>31</sup>

Consistently with this view Callicott thinks that environmental philosophy is already playing a major role in solving environmental problems. It does so in virtue of the part it plays in deconstructing the dualistic–mechanistic worldview that is at the root of our present problems and in promoting a new ecological–organic worldview.<sup>32</sup> He refers to the change as a 'paradigm-shift' in our culture and it is clear that he envisages a change in the attitudes of the large mass of people.<sup>33</sup> The role of philosophy in bringing about this change is to provide the intellectual resources that are needed to make a persuasive case for the new worldview. These resources include a critique of the old attitudes and the development and articulation of the new ones.<sup>34</sup> Thus Callicott arrives at the view that

We speculative environmental philosophers are inescapably environmental activists...in thinking, talking and writing about environmental ethics, environmental philosophers already have their shoulders to the wheel, helping to reconfigure the prevailing cultural worldview and thus helping to push general practice in the direction of environmental responsibility.<sup>35</sup>

Other authors are more sceptical than Callicott about whether environmental philosophy, in its present form, is actually making a contribution to the solution of environmental problems. Alastair Gunn implies that environmental philosophers are sometimes motivated by a desire to 'make a difference'.<sup>36</sup> But in answer to the question posed in the title of his paper 'Can Environmental Ethics Save the World?' he suggests that, at least for the moment, it cannot. The reason is as follows:

Too much recent environmental philosophy has been marred by obscurantism, debates about the merits of high-level theories, and romantic and simplistic stere-



otypes of diverse cultures. A major shortcoming of some environmental ethics is that it is written abstractly, sometimes in language largely unintelligible to anyone but a handful of scholars.<sup>37</sup>

However, despite this negative assessment of the current contribution made by environmental philosophy, Gunn is insistent that it could play a role: 'philosophers *can* contribute to the development of an environmentally sustainable culture.'<sup>38</sup> He then outlines some of the contributions that an appropriately reconfigured environmental philosophy could make. They include: challenging 'the assumptions of those who profess to think that there is no environmental problem';<sup>39</sup> undermining bad arguments against environmentally sound action;<sup>40</sup> and 'clarifying and arguing for concepts and values that are central to an environmentally sustainable culture'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, philosophy can make a contribution to the solution of environmental problems because of the part it can play in persuading people to adopt environmentalist values.

There are some indications that Gunn thinks that this change of attitudes will be necessary both because it will lead individuals to behave in a more responsible fashion in their own direct interactions with the natural environment, and because it will cause them to push for political change.<sup>42</sup> In some places he implies that the change of attitudes (however it achieves the desired effect) will need to be a widespread one. He says that 'an environmental ethic will work if it is both widely accepted and integrated into everyday life.'<sup>43</sup> But he seems to put a greater emphasis on changing the views of one particular group in society, the environmental professionals. In discussing the potential role of philosophers he says

Most important...is education. In particular, we can expand our work with environmental professionals and lay people...As well as working on projects with environmental groups and professionals, philosophers should be pushing for ethics courses to be part of the education of environmental professionals such as engineers, planners, and architects.<sup>44</sup>

This suggestion, that educational efforts should be focused on the group of people most directly concerned with what happens to the natural environment, has parallels with Leopold's emphasis on educating landowners.

There are also similarities between Gunn's views and those of Eugene Hargrove, the editor of *Environmental Ethics*. Hargrove thinks that until now environmental philosophy has failed to make much of a contribution to the solution of environmental problems. In 1989 he noted that 'environmental ethics has as yet had little practical influence on environmental affairs and is unlikely to have much in the immediate future.'<sup>45</sup> Nearly five years later he found his earlier prediction to have been sound, writing 'it is still not having much impact for a field that has been in existence for nearly two decades.'<sup>46</sup> Like Gunn, Hargrove thinks that the problem is connected with the theoretical nature of

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environmental philosophy, which makes it difficult for those not trained in the field to understand. Along with Gunn he also holds that the problem can be remedied. But he thinks that because environmental ethics offers such a deep and wide-ranging challenge to existing philosophical assumptions it is ineradicably theoretical. He therefore offers a different sort of solution. Making environmental ethics more accessible is not an option. Rather, if it is to have an influence the intended audience needs to acquire a better grounding in philosophy. Hargrove, again like Gunn, thinks that the intended audience is not the public at large but a much smaller group, constituted of environmental professionals.<sup>47</sup> At present, this group has 'an abysmal knowledge of philosophy'<sup>48</sup> and they 'need to know enough about rights theory and value theory to be able to interact with professionals who deal with such issues'.<sup>49</sup> Since the problem is an urgent one 'they will have to be trained in environmental ethics as quickly as possible'.<sup>50</sup> The task for philosophers is to undertake this education. So where Gunn thinks it is the way in which environmental philosophy is presented that needs to be changed, Hargrove maintains that it is the audience that must be changed, by undergoing a crash course in philosophy. But if environmental philosophers can meet this challenge then they will be contributing directly to the solution of environmental problems.

In sum, Callicott, Gunn and Hargrove have different views of the role of environmental philosophy in solving environmental problems. Callicott has a positive assessment of the role philosophy is already playing, while the other two think that it is not contributing much at present, but that it could do so in the future if certain changes took place. Gunn and Hargrove, in turn, differ about the nature of the changes that are needed. However, underlying their disagreements all these authors share the assumption that in the solution of ecological problems a very important part will be played by persuading people to adopt a more ethical orientation towards the natural environment. It is because they agree that the solution of problems will have this general form that they agree that there is a potential role for philosophy to play. Their disagreements are simply about whether environmental philosophy, as currently constituted, is actually fulfilling this potential. As with the earlier debate about a new ethic, the debate about the role of philosophy is grounded in a common commitment to the ethicist claim about how problems are to be solved.

The two ethicist claims are independent of one another. One could endorse the first claim while rejecting the second. One might, for example, think that legitimating attitudes have played an important part in causing environmental problems but hold that because they are so deeply ingrained it is not possible to change those attitudes; some other way of solving the problem must be found. Conversely, one could make the second claim, but not the first. One might maintain that legitimating attitudes have not played any significant role in causing problems but that getting people to adopt environmentalist values will

play an important part in solving them. Nevertheless, we have seen that a number of environmental philosophers do make both claims.<sup>51</sup>

The claims are very wide in scope. They purport to tell us something about the causes and solutions of all environmental problems. It is also the case that they tend to be formulated very loosely. They could be filled out in various ways. In order to arrive at more determinate versions of these claims a number of questions would need to be answered. Four such questions will be mentioned here. The ethicists themselves offer some clues about how to answer some of these questions.

The first question is whether the ethicist claim about the causation of problems is primarily a claim about the role of legitimating attitudes that were held *in the past*, or whether it is a claim about attitudes that are held *now*. Much of the evidence that environmental thinkers make the first claim emerges from the debate about the historical provenance of legitimating attitudes, and there are grounds for treating the claim in the former way. The second question concerns the causal route by which legitimating attitudes have their effect on the natural environment. Do they do so fairly directly by, for example, shaping the way in which individuals interact with the natural environment, or is it by some more indirect route? If it is by a more indirect route then it might be the case that attitudes held in the past are a cause, through an intermediary, of present problems. As was seen earlier, White and Passmore both seem to endorse something like this last-mentioned possibility, when they suggest that damaging attitudes have had their effect by promoting the rise of science and technology and it is the combination of science and technology that has been the direct cause of environmental problems. On the other hand, Passmore also makes remarks that indicate that he thinks that presently held attitudes are responsible for causing current problems.<sup>52</sup>

The question of the directness of the causal route between attitudes and environmental consequences also arises in relation to the second claim. Leopold and Hargrove both imply that the adoption of an environmental ethic will be important because it affects how those who adopt the new attitudes will behave in their direct interactions with the natural environment. Passmore, in contrast, holds that the change will be important because it affects which policies individuals will support in the political arena. Gunn and Attfeld imply that both routes are significant.

The third question concerns the number of people whose attitudes are at issue. Most of those who endorse the first ethicist claim seem to assume that legitimating attitudes are widely held and this is why they have the effect they do. Similarly, with regard to the second claim Passmore is quite explicit that it is the attitudes of the large mass of people that need to be changed. There must be majority support for environmentally sound policies amongst the electorate. But Leopold, Gunn and Hargrove all put at least some emphasis on the idea that

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solutions will rest on changing the attitudes of a much smaller group within society.

The fourth and most difficult question concerns the term 'important' which appears in both claims. If it is said that legitimating attitudes play an *important* part in causing problems and that the adoption of environmentalist values will play an *important* part in solving problems, then both claims will remain significantly indeterminate unless that term is explicated. Any such explication will have to spell out relationship between the causal factors that have been identified as important and other contributory factors. Some of the authors do comment on this issue, but only in a general sort of way. The gist of their remarks is typically that ideas are important in comparison to more 'material' factors. White says 'What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them'<sup>53</sup> and 'What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship'.<sup>54</sup> Callicott interprets White as an opponent of materialist explanations and for this reason applauds White's essay as 'the seminal paper in environmental ethics'.<sup>55</sup> He goes on to characterise himself as 'a philosopher affirming the power of ideas'.<sup>56</sup> Attfield also tackles the issue in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*. In contrast to those who would cite population, affluence, technology, capitalism and growth as the main culprit he asserts that ideas are important in causing environmental problems.<sup>57</sup> He wants to ground this in a claim about the historical role of ideas in general. He suggests that the prevalence of certain beliefs and attitudes may be a pre-condition of material or efficient causes taking effect;<sup>58</sup> that ideas may play an indispensable role in historical developments;<sup>59</sup> and later on he insists that the significance of ideas should not be underplayed.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Attfield never ties these scattered remarks together in this work. It is not clear, for example, what might be meant by his suggestion that attitudes are *not* efficient causes. Indeed, the chief difficulty of interpreting the comments of all three authors is that their remarks remain at a high level of generality. They do not specify the content of either the position they wish to defend or of the 'materialism' they see themselves as opposed to. They thus fail to shed any light on how the ethicist claims about the importance of attitudes and changes of attitude might be explicated in a way that would render the claims more determinate.

Putting the fourth question on one side, the ethicists have offered some suggestions for filling out their two claims in several ways without, for the most part, developing the suggestions in any great detail. In what follows I have been partly guided by these suggestions in formulating somewhat more determinate versions of the claims. The criticisms that I offer have two aims. The first aim is to show that the ethicists' large empirical claims pay insufficient attention to the social context. If the ethicists wish to defend their claims then they will have to show that they are consistent with the circumstances that obtain in modern

societies. The second aim is to suggest that they will not be able to do this. I provide some grounds for thinking that the social context is such as to render their claims implausible. To go further than this and to supply something closer to a demonstration that the two claims are false would require more detailed empirical argument than is within the scope of this article.

### 3. CONSUMING THE ENVIRONMENT

The first ethicist claim is that legitimating attitudes play an important part in causing ecological problems. As has just been noted, formulated in this way the claim is a loose one and a number of more determinate variants are possible. In this section I shall focus on a version that assumes that the claim is about the role of attitudes, held currently by the majority of people, in causing present-day problems in modern societies. This still leaves the question of the route by which these attitudes cause problems unanswered. The ethicists themselves offer only a few clues. One possibility is that the legitimating attitudes affect what people do in their direct, daily interaction with the natural environment as they endeavour to meet their needs and satisfy their desires. White certainly suggests that in the medieval period legitimating attitudes had their impact in this way. He says that by destroying pagan animism, with its reverence for the natural world, Christianity made it possible for individuals to cut down trees, mine mountains and damn brooks 'in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.<sup>61</sup> However, when the ethicist claim is treated as a claim about how problems are caused now, in modern societies, it faces the obvious objection that in such societies most people are not directly involved in many of the interactions with the natural environment on which they depend. In these societies a person's direct involvement in such things as growing the food crops he eats, generating the electricity he uses, manufacturing the car he travels in or disposing of the wastes he produces, is typically small or non-existent. At most a person might be more directly involved in a few of the interactions with nature. Perhaps he works in the oil industry. But even then he may not have much influence on the way in which, say, oil extraction takes place and hence on the environmental harm that attends it. In any case, there will still be many other interactions with nature on which he depends and in which he has no direct involvement at all. If this is so then the claim that legitimating attitudes cause people to damage the natural environment in the course of their daily interactions with that environment is based on a false presupposition and should be discarded. Whatever the relationship in modern societies between individuals and the natural environment on which they depend, it is of a more mediated kind than this first version allows. It is only in circumstances where people are less fully integrated into modern societies that they are likely to meet their needs through more direct

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interactions with the natural environment. Of course, there are many people in the contemporary world who are in just such circumstances, but in this article the ethicist claims are not being treated as claims about these people.

If the ethicist is to claim that the legitimating attitudes possessed by the large mass of people in modern societies play an important role in causing environmental problems, then he needs to be able to point to some way in which the actions of these people do contribute to environmental damage. If that can be established the ethicist is then in a position to claim that their legitimating attitudes do play a role in causing people to perform those actions.

There is at least one way in which the actions of the large mass of people in modern societies do contribute to environmental damage. For although most people are not directly involved in the interactions with nature on which they depend, they do consume the products of those interactions and utilise the services that rest upon such interactions. Indeed, many of the mundane actions a person performs (turning on a heater, eating breakfast, driving to work) involve such consumption and utilisation. By consuming these products and services a person provides a signal to producers that they can expect demand for these products and services to continue. He thus contributes to the decision of the producers to produce in the future and in this way his consumptive actions do contribute to the future environmental harm that attends such production.

If it is granted that the consumptive actions of the large mass of people do contribute to environmental damage in this way, the ethicist can then claim that people perform those actions, with their harmful consequences, because they possess legitimating attitudes. So on this version of the first ethicist claim, legitimating attitudes have their effect by causing people to engage in consumptive actions that, in turn, have the effect of causing producers to continue to produce in the future in ways that harm the environment. This version of the first ethicist claim is not one that is explicitly articulated by any of the environmental philosophers discussed earlier. But it is more plausible than the version that relied on the false assumption that in modern societies people satisfy most of their needs and desires through direct interactions with the natural environment. Nevertheless, it is open to criticism and the problem is again connected with the mediated relationship between individuals and the natural environment. It will be argued here that because of the highly mediated relation between the consumptive actions of agents and their harmful consequences, individuals are unlikely to see themselves as responsible for those consequences. If people do not see themselves as responsible for those consequences then there will not be much reason to think that their legitimating attitudes are doing much work in causing them to perform actions with those consequences.<sup>62</sup>

This argument owes something to Samuel Scheffler's contention that developments in modern society call into question our common-sense notion of normative responsibility.<sup>63</sup> Scheffler's view is that this notion of responsibility

is supported by a particular phenomenology of action in which 'acts have primacy over omissions, near effects have primacy over remoter effects, and individual effects have primacy over group effects.'<sup>64</sup> He argues that because of the increasingly complex and interdependent nature of modern societies, omissions are at least as morally significant in their consequences as action, remote effects as significant as near effects and group effects as significant as individual effects. But since our phenomenology of actions treats these effects as much *less* important, our ordinary sense of responsibility fails to encompass the full significance of our acts and omissions. Arguing along similar lines, I shall identify five features of the relationship between consumptive actions and environmental consequences typical of modern societies. Each of these will tend to weaken the agent's sense of responsibility for the environmental harms that are a consequence of those actions.

The first feature is that a person contributes to environmental damage through his consumptive actions only via the actions of other agents. It is other people who are actually engaged in the interactions with the environment that result in damage occurring. While his consumptive actions do contribute to the signals producers receive, and these signals are one factor that cause these producers to continue to act as they do, it is not he himself who performs the actions that damage the environment. Since our existing phenomenology of agency attributes more importance to consequences that flow directly from our actions than to consequences that arise only through the actions of other agents, his sense of responsibility for the environmental harms that result from his consumptive actions will be correspondingly reduced. If farmers pollute the land with the pesticides and fertilisers they use, that is not something for which the consumer is directly responsible. He just eats their produce. The fact that a person contributes to environmental damage only via the actions of others reflects one aspect of the highly differentiated nature of modern societies. As has already been noted, for any particular form of interaction with nature it will typically be the case that only a small proportion of people will be engaged in that activity. Most of the rest of us contribute to that activity only through our consumptive actions.

The second feature is that a person contributes to the signals received by those who engage directly in interactions with the environment only in conjunction with many others. Producers respond to the signals sent not by any one individual consumer but to the signals generated by the consumptive actions of very many consumers. Where there is sufficient consumption the producers are likely to continue to produce, perhaps in environmentally damaging ways. Where a person contributes to some effect with many others this will typically reduce his sense of responsibility for that effect. The larger the number of others involved the more his sense of responsibility will be reduced. By buying coffee a person contributes to the signals received by coffee producers, but only in combination with similar actions by many other coffee drinkers. His sense of responsibility

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for any environmental harm that attends coffee production is likely to be correspondingly diminished. The fact that a person contributes with many others to the signals received by producers reflects the point that in modern societies people are often embedded in very large markets, frequently extending across national boundaries, with huge numbers of individual consumers.<sup>65, 66</sup>

The third feature is that the environmental harm associated with production often occurs at a considerable spatial distance from the consumption of the product. This is likely to weaken the consumer's sense of responsibility for that harm. The existence of this spatial gap may be partly the result of natural factors. Production might take place next door to consumption, but it is possible for the dangerous by-products to be carried some distance by the sea or in the atmosphere, so that environmental harm manifests itself elsewhere. But the spatial gap can often be attributed to the geographical spread of markets. In modern societies the products a person consumes are not infrequently made in some other part of the world and the environmental harm associated with production is likely to be correspondingly distant.

If it were the case that the environmental harm that a person's consumptive actions contribute to is also temporally distant from him, it would tend to further diminish his sense of responsibility. It is clear that environmental damage may occur some time after the actions that give rise to it. This will be the case when there are threshold effects that only occur after a long build-up. However, it is not obvious that this type of temporal gap will be a distinctive feature of modern societies. Indeed, one of the characteristics of contemporary markets is the speed with which producers respond to signals from consumers and this is a feature that will tend to reduce the temporal gap between consumption and the environmental harm that it contributes to. So in arguing for a highly mediated relation between consumptive actions and environmental harm, I will not rely on the claim that the latter are temporally distant from the former.

In addition to the fact that environmental harms are often spatially distant it is also often the case – and this is the fourth feature – that those effects will be dispersed in space as well. When a person buys a new computer he contributes not just to the signals received by the producer of his computer but to the signals received by all computer producers (and by all the manufacturers of computer components). And these may be spread across the globe. So if there is some environmental harm associated with the production of computers it is very unlikely that there will be one place, even one distant place, where that harm occurs. This will tend to further diminish a person's sense of responsibility. A person is more likely to feel responsible for harms that are concentrated in one specific location than for an equivalent amount of harm that is widely dispersed. The fact that the effects of a consumptive action may be dispersed is a consequence of the way in which, in modern societies, production is often dispersed, sometimes across the globe. On occasion natural processes will counteract the effects of dispersal. The concentration of toxins higher up the food



chain is one example of this. On a global scale the formation of a hole in the ozone layer is another. Nevertheless, these cases seem to be more the exception than the rule.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, in addition to the effect of each of these four features in weakening an agent's sense of responsibility, several of them will do so indirectly by tending to increase the agent's ignorance of the consequences. If environmental harms only occur through the intervention of other agents, or if those harms are distant or dispersed in space, then a person will probably know less about those harms. The less he knows about the environmental consequences of his actions the less likely he is to feel responsible for them.<sup>68</sup> Of course, the same developments in communications and mass media that help make possible the emergence of global markets also make it easier for an agent to acquire information about the remote consequences of his actions. But typically it is only a few types of environmental harm that will be of interest to the media or the public at any one time. An agent will usually remain ignorant of most of the consequences of most of his consumptive actions. In any case the sheer range and extent of those consequences make it difficult even in principle for him to acquire knowledge of more than some of them.

Overall, the effect of living in modern complex societies, where a person's dependent relationship on the natural environment is often a mediated one and takes the form of consuming the goods and services produced by others, is to reduce his sense of responsibility for the environmentally harmful consequences of his consumptive actions. Not all the five features mentioned here will be present in all cases where his actions contribute to environmental harm and they will not always weaken his sense of responsibility. Nevertheless, several of them will often be present, and where they are they will tend to have that effect. In these cases it is unlikely that legitimating attitudes will play a role in causing the agent to perform those actions. He will not see himself as responsible for the harm that is caused by his actions and so the attitude that it is legitimate to cause such harm is not likely to play a big part in causing him to perform actions with those consequences.

This argument casts doubt on one version of the first ethicist claim. It has done so not by questioning whether individuals possess legitimating attitudes, or by denying that individuals perform actions with environmentally harmful consequences. Rather, it has been contended that, because of the mediated relation between the actions and the consequences in modern societies, there is little reason to think that legitimating attitudes play much part in causing those actions. If the ethicists wished to challenge this conclusion they would need to show that despite the mediated relationship between consumptive actions and environmental consequences, there are grounds for thinking that legitimating attitudes play an important part in causing people to perform those actions. As it is, they barely address the question of the causal route by which legitimating attitudes lead to environmental damage. Far less do they provide any evidence to support a particular account of that route.

#### 4. SOLVING PROBLEMS

The second ethicist claim is that the solution of environmental problems rests on the adoption of a more ethical orientation towards the environment. One possible version of this claim corresponds to the version of the first claim that was discussed in the previous section. According to this version of the second claim, which can be termed the eco-consumerist version, one can solve problems by persuading large numbers of people to adopt environmentalist values. These people would then tend to choose goods and services that had been produced in ways that did not damage the environment and this, in turn, would provide an incentive for producers to avoid harming the environment. This view of how to solve problems does have some popularity within the environmental movement. However, the criticisms that were made of the corresponding version of the first ethicist claim are also relevant to the assessment of eco-consumerism. The highly mediated relation between consumptive actions and environmental improvements makes it unlikely that enough people can be persuaded to express environmental values through their consumption in a sufficiently consistent and thoroughgoing way to have a significant impact on environmental problems. In any case, the thinkers discussed earlier advocate not eco-consumerism, but two other versions of the second ethicist claim and it is these that will be considered here. Both of these versions involve an implicit acknowledgement of some of the complexities of modern societies. But this acknowledgement is only a partial one and they ignore the possibility that there may exist systematic pressures against protecting the environment.

The first version recognises the highly differentiated nature of modern societies. It holds that a relatively small group of people in society play a particularly important role in determining the nature of our interactions with the natural environment, and hence in determining whether environmental damage occurs. These are people who, in the course of their work, take decisions that shape the way in which the environment is used. They can be termed key environmental agents. According to this version it is the key environmental agents who must be persuaded to adopt the new environmental values. Once this has happened they will no longer take decisions that allow environmental harm to occur. Elements of this position are found in Leopold, Gunn and Hargrove.

One of the apparent attractions of this view is that it implies that our persuasive efforts can be focused on a group that is both small and easily identifiable. If there were such a group, it would make the task of bringing about a change of values more manageable than it might otherwise be. But it can be objected that the people who make important decisions affecting the environment do not constitute a neatly circumscribed group. The fact that Leopold holds that it is landowners who must be re-educated, while Gunn mentions planners, engineers and architects, indicates that the group may be larger and more diverse than either of them assume. Indeed, almost all human productive activities have the potential to damage the environment and many managers working in many

different sectors are likely to be making decisions that have a significant impact on the natural environment. There may be no easy way of singling them out. So the task of persuading them to adopt new values may be more difficult than the proponents of this version of the second ethicist claim assume. This is not a fatal objection but it may weaken the appeal of this version.

The more powerful objection is that in modern societies most organisations that are engaged in significant interactions with nature and who face choices about whether or not to take action to conserve the environment, are under pressure to keep costs down. This is true of both private firms, where it is a consequence of the pursuit of profit in competitive markets, and state agencies. The pressure is not omnipresent, but it is common and it is often strong. Since the environmentally sound option will typically cost more than the non-environmental option, the pressure will frequently translate into pressure to choose the non-environmental option.<sup>69</sup>

For a key environmental agent this pressure is likely to manifest itself in the array of costs and benefits (in the widest sense) that are associated with the different courses of action open to her.<sup>70</sup> The pressure will not have its impact simply by *constraining* the choices open to agents. It will also entail that positive incentives are associated with particular courses of action. For example, choosing the cheaper, non-environmental option is likely to do more to secure her job and to increase her chances of advancement. This in turn will promote her ability to fulfil commitments and pursue other interests outside work. Less tangible rewards may also be affected, such as the self-respect that comes from a successful career. Consistently choosing the more expensive, environmental option is likely to have the opposite consequences, threatening her job, her income and her self-esteem.

If a key environmental agent is faced with this array of costs and benefits it will probably be difficult to get her to adopt and then act on environmental values. There are a number of reasons why this could be so. It may be that she recognises that too much of what she regards as important is bound up with acting in ways contrary to those values for her to endorse them. Or perhaps she can be persuaded to adopt the new values, but she does not then act in accordance with them. This, in turn, may be because she thinks that the obligations created by these new values are rationally outweighed by other considerations, such as her duties to her dependants. Or it might be that she would act on the new values were it not that she believes that the number of other agents who will do likewise is too low to bring about a significant improvement in the environment.

But even in cases where the agent is persuaded of the new values and does act in accordance with them, it may not ensure that the environmental option will be consistently chosen in the long term. For the same pressure to reduce costs that shape the benefits and costs associated with choosing the various options will also shape the choices facing her superiors. So if she acts on the new values she may find herself shifted sideways into another post or out of a job altogether. Or

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perhaps, aware of these likely outcomes, she resigns to take up a different, less environmentally harmful occupation. In all these cases her post is likely to be filled by someone who is prepared to choose the non-environmental option.

The objection to the ethicist claim that one can solve problems by persuading key environmental agents to adopt environmental values is that this pervasive pressure to reduce costs is likely to provide a major stumbling block in the way of the ethicist solution.<sup>71</sup> It is not being argued that there are no cases where a key environmental agent is persuaded to adopt environmentalist values, remains in her job, and acts according to those values. Rather the suggestion is that the systematic and powerful nature of this pressure in modern societies makes this unlikely except in a small number of cases. The ethicist remedy would only be likely to work if key environmental agents did not frequently face a persistent, powerful pressure to choose the non-environmental option.

These criticisms of the first version of the second ethicist claim cast some doubt on the explanation given by Gunn and Hargrove, who defend this version, of why environmental ethics has not had much impact in solving environmental problems. They explain its failure to have had much influence until now in terms of certain specific features of environmental ethics and its prospective audience. Gunn holds that, as currently practised, environmental ethics is too obscure and Hargrove maintains that the audience lacks a grasp of basic philosophical concepts. Both authors think that these defects can be remedied. However, the argument just advanced suggests that the failure to contribute to the solution of ecological problems is due not to any contingent and remediable features of environmental ethics and its audience, but to the more basic fact that the pressure to reduce costs will typically translate into pressure on key environmental agents to choose the non-environmental option. It is this that makes it difficult to solve environmental problems by persuading them to adopt environmentalist values. Making environmental ethics more accessible or teaching these agents more philosophy would not weaken this pressure.

There is another version of the second ethicist claim that appears to avoid some of these difficulties. It holds that environmental problems can be solved, in the first instance, by the state adopting appropriate policies. The aim of these policies will be to change the circumstances in which corporate agencies, such as private firms, engage in interactions with the natural environment, so that it becomes rational for them to choose the environmental option. The state has a variety of tools it can use to alter the framework within which private firms make decisions. It can ban certain activities; it can regulate others so that they have to conform to certain standards; or it can provide economic incentives for the preferred option and penalties for the less favoured options.

What makes this version a version of the ethicist claim is the account that is given of how the state will come to adopt environmental policies of this sort. It is maintained that, at least in liberal democracies, the state will change its policies when a sufficiently large proportion of the electorate support this change and that

this will come about when they have been persuaded to adopt a more ethical orientation towards the environment. This version, therefore, combines a claim about the importance of politically imposed solutions to environmental problems with an ethicist view of how state policy towards the environment is determined. While it allows for the use of economic tools, such as environmental taxes, in solving problems, the justification for their use is not that they will promote Pareto efficiency, but that they will help to realise environmentalist values. Of the authors considered earlier, Passmore is the clearest exponent of the electoralist version of the second ethicist claim.

This version has the advantage over the earlier version that it goes some way towards recognising the nature and magnitude of what is needed to solve environmental problems. Instead of putting all the emphasis on bringing about an ethical change in key environmental agents, it proposes that significant alterations must be made to the regulatory framework faced by the organisations in which those agents work. Once those alterations are in place it will then be in the corporate interest to choose the environmental option. The non-environmental option will have become illegal, or too expensive, or undesirable in some other way. Key environmental agents will no longer be required to act against the perceived interests of the firms they work for, possibly at large cost to themselves. Instead, in the changed regulatory circumstances, the choice of the environmental option by a key agent is more likely to coincide with the pursuit of her other goals such as success in her career. Nor will she face the possibility that the choice of the environmental option will be a vain gesture because so few others will follow her lead. Moreover, while the electoralist version does, like the key environmental agents version, rely on an ethical change amongst individuals leading to changed behaviour, the costs and risks associated with the required behaviour (casting one's vote in the appropriate way) are likely to be much less than those associated with the behaviour required of a much smaller group of people in the key environmental agents version.<sup>72</sup> By distributing the responsibility for solving environmental problems more widely, it lessens the burdens on each individual.

Nevertheless, despite these apparent advantages over the key environmental agents version, it does not follow that the electoralist version sets out an effective way of solving environmental problems. For it has not been shown that the proposed mechanism is sufficiently robust to resist the pressures against choosing the environmental option. There are at least two ways in which this pressure could undermine the electoralist solution. First, if the state proposes legislation that will force private firms and other agencies to choose the more costly environmental option it will come under significant pressure from those firms to weaken and dilute the regulation. Firms are likely to claim that their own viability is threatened. No doubt some of these threats will be spurious, but there is little reason to think that they all will be. Expensive environmental measures will eat into a firm's profitability. Most governments in liberal democracies accept

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responsibility for the overall functioning of the economy and are likely to be sensitive to such threats. There will therefore be a tendency for them to make concessions for the sake of maintaining the viability of firms in a competitive market. Second, if the electorate are persuaded that environmental legislation will threaten jobs and prosperity they may become reluctant to endorse and act on an environmental ethic. This may be particularly so if the threats appear to be direct and immediate, while the benefits of environmental regulation, because of the mediated relationship with the environment, seem more distant.

It is not being argued here that the pervasive pressure to reduce costs demonstrates that both the electoralist and the key environmental agents solutions are unworkable. That is an empirical question and there is evidence that the electorate can be persuaded to go some way towards adopting environmental values and that modern states are able to impose some constraints on firms in order to achieve environmental ends. Rather, the point is that the ethicists themselves rarely acknowledge that there might be this sort of barrier to implementing ethicist solutions. Passmore, for example, having outlined the electoralist account simply remarks that the assumptions on which it is based 'are not, in a democracy, absurd'.<sup>73</sup> Taken literally, this might be true, but it is not the same as providing empirical support for the account in the light of potential objections to its feasibility. Unless this issue is addressed we do not have good reason to think that the ethicist solutions can work, and some grounds for remaining sceptical. While the advocates of both of the versions of the second ethicist claim go some way towards acknowledging the complexity of modern societies, they still see changes in individual attitudes towards the environment as constituting the crucial causal nexus. They ignore the possibility that systematic pressures generated within society could, directly or indirectly, undermine this approach to solving environmental problems.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Together, the two ethicist claims offer a simple account of the causes and solutions of environmental problems. What happens to the natural environment is, at root, a reflection of the general attitudes towards the environment held by individuals. If problems arise it is because people have ethically misguided attitudes towards the natural environment and problems are to be solved by getting people to appreciate the ethical significance of the natural world.

The criticisms made here of some specific versions of the ethicist claims suggest that this simple picture may not be true of modern, complex societies. It has been argued that the relationship between individuals and the natural environment is typically a highly mediated one. Although people are as dependent as they have ever been on that environment, in modern societies their needs and desires are often satisfied via complex socio-economic systems, spread over

vast geographical areas and involving many different agents. People are unlikely to feel as responsible for the environmental harm that occurs in the course of satisfying their desires and needs as they would if they were more directly involved in exploiting the environment. This mediation creates a disjunction between their attitudes to the environment and the consequences of their consumptive actions. Although environmental damage has occurred, it may not be because people have the wrong attitudes. Moreover, there are certain systematic features of modern market economies that cast doubt on the feasibility of ethicist solutions to environmental problems. In particular, the pressure to reduce costs frequently translates into a pressure against choosing to protect the environment.

This discussion has identified certain large, characteristic features of modern societies. But questions about the exact nature and significance of these features are empirical ones and in this article these issues have not been pursued far. Most notably, not very much has been said about the origins, nature and precise impact of the pressure to reduce costs. A more detailed examination would need to investigate these issues much more carefully. It would be necessary to address questions such as whether the opportunities to profit from environmental protection provide a significant counterweight to the pressures against choosing the environmental option, or whether the exploitation of such opportunities simply leads to the redistribution of environmental harm to other media, other communities or other countries. It follows from the empirical nature of the objections to the ethicist account that it is open to the ethicists to mount an empirically based defence of their view. And since only specific versions of their claims have been considered here, it is also open to them to develop other, less vulnerable versions.

Nevertheless, even if the precise weight of the criticisms advanced here remain in doubt, what has been established is that if the ethicists are to defend their claims about the causes and solutions of environmental problems in modern societies, they need to engage much more closely with empirical questions about the nature of such societies. In particular, they need to consider both the systematic pressure against environmental solutions and the underlying dynamics of the socio-economic systems that give rise to that pressure. As it is, they tend to proceed as if such pressures did not exist. They offer us a pared down vision of environmental problems that highlights individuals and their attitudes on the one hand, and the natural environment on the other. Much of the intervening social context is lost from view. The counter-claim here has been that the social systems in which people live, work and interact with the natural environment have a central importance in structuring those interactions. This is something that any account of causes and solutions must acknowledge.

A final point can be made about the value of philosophical work in environmental ethics. The preceding section suggested that environmental

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ethics does not have a major contribution to make to the solution of environmental problems. This is not due to the abstract nature of environmental ethics and nor is it caused by the difficulties of communication between academic philosophers and others. It is because the solution of environmental problems may not rest on ethical change. Thus the type of ethical argument and discussion that is characteristic of environmental ethics and that could, perhaps, contribute to ethical change, has no obvious part to play. That does not mean that environmental ethics has no value. Only that whatever value it has does not lie in the heroic role that Callicott would assign to it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am using the term 'environmental philosopher' in a broad sense to include writers such as Aldo Leopold and Lynn White who were not professional philosophers.

<sup>2</sup> Leopold 1949/1989: 203.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214–18.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 207 and 208–9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>7</sup> White 1967.

<sup>8</sup> 'both our technological and our scientific movements got their start, acquired their character, and achieved world dominance in the Middle Ages' (White 1967: 1204–5).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1206.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1206.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1207.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1206.

<sup>13</sup> Passmore 1974, Chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> See his remarks in *ibid.*, pp. 56 and 111.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. See p. 97 for similar remarks about solving conservation problems.

<sup>23</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 96–7.

<sup>24</sup> Attfield, 1991, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Attfield, 1991, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>29</sup> Ferré and Hartel, 1994; Marietta and Embree, 1995; Light and Katz, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Norton 1996: 111.

<sup>31</sup> Callicott 1995:19.



<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 30. As this indicates, Callicott would also seem to accept the first ethicist claim that general attitudes to nature play an important part in causing environmental problems.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 27. Even when (on p. 24) he expresses some doubts about whether it will be possible to convert enough people to this new worldview, his response is not to suggest that environmentalists should concentrate on persuading fewer people, but rather that they may have to work at generating changes *within* worldviews.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 31–2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 33–4.

<sup>36</sup> Gunn 1994: 206.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 211 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>42</sup> For example: 'It can also be pointed out that acting ethically is not just a matter of private behaviour change. At Peter Singer ... points out, the ethical vegetarian does not merely stop eating animal products; he or she should be endeavouring to create a movement, urging supermarkets and restaurants to cater to vegetarians, lobbying government, and so on.' Ibid., pp. 212–13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> Hargrove 1989: 4.

<sup>46</sup> Hargrove 1993: 292.

<sup>47</sup> It should be acknowledged that there are some indications of a contrary view in Hargrove. In the same article as the one in which he advocates focusing on environmental professionals, he also writes that 'Without some sort of protomoral change at the intuitive level throughout human society, it would be impossible for an ethicist to articulate an acceptable view of any kind.' (Hargrove 1994: 249)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>51</sup> I have suggested that the first claim is a claim about the role of *attitudes* in causing problems, and that the second claim is a claim about the role of a *change in attitudes* in bringing about solutions. It would be possible to reformulate the first claim as a claim about the causal effect of a change of attitudes. One could hold that the adoption of legitimating attitudes played an important part in bringing about environmental problems. The two claims would then have the same form. But in the context of the present discussion these different ways of formulating the claims are of little significance.

<sup>52</sup> For example, he cites 'the belief that nature exists to serve us' as a causal factor responsible for current pollution problems (Passmore 1974: 71).

<sup>53</sup> White 1967: 1205.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 1206.

<sup>55</sup> Callicott 1995: 30.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Attfield 1991: 8–17.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 8–9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

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<sup>61</sup> White 1967:1205.

<sup>62</sup> I am granting that consumptive actions are a causally significant factor in bringing it about that producers exploit their environment in ways that damage that environment. This concession could be challenged. It could be argued that although past consumption plays a part in causing producers to produce in the future, it is not a significant factor in causing them to produce *in environmentally harmful ways*. However, this is not the line of criticism adopted here. Rather, I argue that even if the concession about the causal significance of consumptive actions is granted, we still have reason for doubting that legitimating attitudes contribute to the performance of those actions.

<sup>63</sup> Scheffler 1995.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>65</sup> These first two points are a refinement of Scheffler's single point that a person's sense of responsibility is reduced when an outcome is the joint result of the actions of a number of people. I am arguing that there are (at least) two different ways in which outcomes can be the joint result of the actions of a number of people and each, on its own, can contribute to a weakened sense of responsibility.

<sup>66</sup> Derek Parfit is also interested in the way in which, in modern societies, a person often produces significant effects only in combination with many others (Parfit, 1984, Part One). But Parfit's general concern is different from mine. He wants to elaborate the correct criterion of right action in these new, complex circumstances, a criterion that might involve revisions to our common-sense morality. My concern, following Scheffler, is to suggest how these complexities may undermine a sense of responsibility, at least in the environmental sphere. If this line of argument is sound, and could be generalised, it might cast doubt on the viability of Parfit's proposed revisions. Attfield also argues for a wider sense of responsibility (Attfield, 1987, Chapters 6–8) and some environmental groups appear to do the same. But again, what is at issue is the feasibility of this project.

<sup>67</sup> The point that environmental harm may be dispersed – as distinct from spatially distant – and that this will lessen a person's sense of responsibility, is not a point made by Scheffler.

<sup>68</sup> Scheffler suggests that ignorance, rather than being a distinct cause of a weakened sense of responsibility actually offers the explanation of why spatial and temporal distance will have that effect (*Ibid.*, p. 228). In contrast I have assumed that spatial distance will itself reduce one's sense of responsibility, even if one has full knowledge of the consequences and how one's actions produced it. But the difference between my position and Scheffler's is, perhaps, a fine one, and not easy to adjudicate.

<sup>69</sup> This is a large empirical claim and there are counter-instances. Civil nuclear power would seem to be both more costly and more environmentally damaging than the alternatives. Nevertheless, all that is suggested here is that in most cases the environmental option is the more costly. The role of empirical claims in this argument is discussed briefly in the final section of the article. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.

<sup>70</sup> The use of the feminine gender here is not intended to imply that all key environmental agents are women, just as the use of the masculine gender in the previous section was not intended to imply that all consumers are men.

<sup>71</sup> Of course, if there are cases where the environmental option is cheaper then it is likely to be adopted. But in these cases it is the pressure to reduce costs that itself favours that option and there will be no need for an ethical change on the part of key environmental

agents. Substantial argument is needed to show that the situation is such that a change of values is both achievable and will play an important part in solving the problem.

<sup>72</sup> There are arguments that point in the other direction. As was seen earlier, when Leopold advocates solving problems through the education of landowners, he contrasts this favourably with passing responsibility to the government. His view is that the tasks of conservation are 'too large, too complex or too widely dispersed to be performed by government.' (Leopold 1949/1989: 214).

<sup>73</sup> Passmore 1974: 97.

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