Why Environmental Philosophy isn't Philosophy

Robert Frodeman

> "(Which "camp" of philosophy could possibly be committed to less careful analysis, less thorough argumentation?)"
>
> Leiter, *The Future for Philosophy*

Environmental problems loom ever larger, yet environmental philosophy remains a philosophic and academic afterthought. Environmental philosophers would like this to change. We feel, justifiably, that many of the problems society faces (environmental or otherwise) are at root humanistic rather than scientific or technical in nature, a matter of outlook and values rather than technique and fact. My thesis is that our marginal existence derives in part from our uncritical acceptance of our being placed within the discipline of philosophy. I thereby propose that we stop being philosophers.

Before throwing this paper down in disgust, give yourself a few minutes to consider what it has meant to be a philosopher in the 20th and now into the 21st century. I don't believe that this role maps well onto what environmental philosophers are interested in. Put differently: I believe that the role of philosopher is ripe for change, and that environmental philosophy can lead the way toward a new, undisciplined notion of the philosophic life.

It is not so surprising that environmental philosophers think of themselves as philosophers: that's what our PhDs are usually in, and our work does, after all, consist of making ethical, epistemological, aesthetic, and metaphysical arguments concerning the natural world. But we have found it difficult gaining the respect of 'real' philosophers. Environmental philosophy is a step-child of the discipline, relegated to the category of 'applied philosophy' (see e.g., the Leiter Report) along with other marginalia such as bio, computer, and engineering ethics. Its high enrollments are welcomed by administrators; but only rarely do we find a correspondingly serious commitment of departmental or university resources. Environmental philosophy rides high in the saddle at only one program that offers the PhD: the University of North Texas Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies, where quite oddly 7 of its 10 members are environmental philosophers.

Take a moment to look through the nation's top philosophy departments. Leiter lists the top 5 as consisting of NYU, Rutgers, Princeton, Michigan, and Pittsburgh. Not one of these schools have an environmental philosopher as part of the regular faculty (Jamieson at NYU and Singer at Princeton are both designated as "affiliated staff"). Instead, with numbing regularity faculty profiles announce "Topics that are of special interest include definitions, truth, meaning, and perception." The lack of environmental philosophy is not

a matter of a simple lacunae, either. Philosophy exists at a level of abstraction and supposed rigor that precludes specifications such as environmental ethics.

True, there's recently been an "empirical" turn within philosophy, known as "experimental philosophy" or "X-Phi." Philosophers like Joshua Knobe at Chapel Hill do philosophy with clipboards and questionnaires, seeking data about people's intuitions concerning questions of moral intentions. Kwame Appiah recently authored a piece in the New York Times that described this movement, under the title of "The New New Philosophy." He describes it as paradigm-breaking: philosophers reading MRI brain scans to learn about how we puzzle out moral quandaries. He even cites the "Experimental Philosophy Anthem" that can be found on YouTube (you get to watch an armchair being burned). But note the directional flow. He describes the X-Phi Philosopher so: "The study was conducted by a philosopher, as a philosopher, in order to produce a piece of . . . philosophy" (ellipses in the original). Appiah ends by noting that "although experiments can illuminate philosophical arguments, they don't settle them… To sort things out, it seems, another powerful instrument is needed. Let's see — there's one in the corner, over there. The springs are sagging a bit, and the cushions are worn, but never mind. That armchair will do nicely." Is this what environmental philosophers seek through their work—to gain additional verification of their arguments for… philosophers?

My sense is that we want as much, or more, for our work to be relevant to those beyond philosophy: to scientists, engineers, policy-makers, the public and private sectors, the public in general. Alas, these groups are largely ignorant of our efforts. While occasionally making gestures in our direction, they seldom involve us on the project level. The reason is simple: except under duress, non-philosophers don't read philosophy papers.

If we want to influence their conversations we need to get involved with their work rather than ask them to read ours. How many of us—or our students—work on a weekly basis with scientists or policy-makers? Our signature distinction, between instrumental and intrinsic value, is far from well understood by others. But it will not be until we work with non-philosophers to show how it illuminates specific cases such as the development of the new management plan for Grand Canyon National Park.

Ah, but such proposals fly smack into a swarm of prejudices: of our not being 'rigorous' enough, or that such work is just a matter of 'applying' concepts. (Evidently we philosophers can never have too much rigor.) This litany of charges badly misconceives both the political and theoretical challenges facing environmental philosophers—the logical and rhetorical difficulties of shaping arguments for an every changing audience and context. The irony here is that questions of environmental ethics were first and most vividly broached by scientists—Leopold and Carson—and politicians—Nelson and Nixon.

I'm far from the first to note these problems. Since the 1990s we have heard laments over the impotency of environmental ethics. Gene Hargrove, founder of *Environmental Ethics*, noted in a 1998 editorial, "Environmental Ethics at 20," that contrary to initial hopes and expectations, environmental ethics had remained a small and insular clan of philosophers engaged in theoretical debates.[1] In 2003 Hargrove raised this question again. In "What's Wrong? Who's to Blame?" He offered his own brief account on why environmental ethicists did not play a larger role in the decision making process. While the perspectives of environmental ethics had been integrated in environmental science courses, and helped to create a new field—conservation biology—no analogous penetration had occurred within the policy curriculum. On Hargrove's account, environmental ethics had been stopped cold by the philosophic presumptions of policy analysis, whose understanding of human motivation had been underwritten by economics. Viewing humans as *homo economicus* and assuming the dominion of subjective felt preferences had eliminated the need for ethical reflection.[2]

Hargrove's comments elicited two brief responses, printed in the same volume of *Environmental Ethics*. Jasper Johns emphasized that environmental ethics had neglected the importance of philosophic storytelling. Narrative constituted a different epistemology from philosophic argumentation, one which is much closer to peoples' natural ways of making sense of the world. And Ralph Brown advocated the development of a more applied and topically based environmental ethics.[3] Environmental philosophers should focus more on case studies and less on abstract theorizing.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact about this entire exchange is its occasional character. The debate—such as it was, consuming a total of 4 printed pages—was conducted in the margins of the leading journal in the field. That is, the question of the marginal status of environmental philosophy was not itself treated as a central topic for research for environmental philosophers.

Of course, we have all heard and in many cases voiced similar opinions and complaints. They are a commonplace among environmental philosophers, made over a beer, after we've read our papers and are done for the day. But the topic of the institutional status of environmental philosophy has not been considered philosophical enough to warrant being the subject of articles, conferences, and curricular and institutional reform. In this we are very much like the philosophic community generally, which for 60 years has ignored the philosophic dimensions of the institutional setting and structure of philosophy.

To be sure, for 15 years we have heard comments—most often from ecofeminists and environmental pragmatists—that we need to become more relevant. Bryan Norton is well known for advocating a policy-oriented approach, where we "think about environmentalism as a force in public policy first and to examine philosophical questions in passing." (Norton, it is worth noting, is located in a School of Public Policy rather than a philosophy department.) Norton also distinguishes between applied and practical philosophy—the former applies theoretical principles to problems, while the latter begins with real cases and seeks to insinuate philosophic insights into these cases in a spirit of amelioration and compromise. In a similar vein, Andrew Light and Eric Katz have called

for a pluralist and non-reductionist approach to environmental problems that would "identify practical strategies for bridging gaps between environmental theorists, policy analysts, activists, and the public."[4] And in 1994 Donald Van de Veer and Christine Pierce published *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book: Philosophy, Ecology, Economics*, with a second edition in 1997 and a third in 2003.[5]

But none of this seems to have moved the needle. The reason is that we are still trying to make better or different arguments, rather than focusing on the institutional situation of environmental philosophy.

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Who thinks about the institutional aspects of philosophy? One might think Brian Leiter. His *Philosophical Gourmet Report* has been ranking programs for 10 years, and his blog is perhaps the best known in the profession. Moreover, in 2006 he published an edited volume titled *The Future for Philosophy* which sought to lay out markers for what 21st century philosophy could and should be.

On the first page of the introduction of his book Leiter notes that philosophy has always been characterized by its insistent meta-philosophical questioning—posing questions about "what philosophy is, its proper concerns, methods, and limitations." Leiter notes, however, that in addition to being explicitly posed, answers to this question are also developed "by the *doing of* philosophy" (italics in the original). "In this volume… some of the very best and most influential contemporary philosophers… are *doing* philosophy of mind, language, and science, as well as ethics, epistemology, feminist philosophy, and the history of philosophy."

For Leiter, then, "doing philosophy" consists of constructing arguments—philosophers writing philosophy essays for other philosophers. There is no sign that he had considered that there might be other kinds or ways of "doing." (Leiter, author of a book on Nietzsche, might have thought to try 'philosophizing with a hammer.') After all, the future of philosophy might turn on something other than theoretical debates between philosophers. We might, for instance, raise questions of whether philosophers should be housed (or housed exclusively) in philosophy departments, or whether they might be scattered across campus; whether or to what degree they can find homes beyond academia; whether philosophy is a 'discipline' in the same sense as are other fields; and what public roles philosophy can take in these philosophical times. Of the thirteen chapters in *The Future for Philosophy*, not one raises any such question concerning the institutional future of philosophy.

Leiter's thinking about the institution of philosophy is thus remarkably unphilosophical. He does not even consider alternative methods of rating PhD programs. The *Philosophical Gourmet Report* prominently features a list of the philosophers whose opinions determined the results of the survey. 450 were canvassed; 270 replied. Care to guess the characteristics of the 450 who were asked to respond, out of the approximately 15,000 philosophers employed in the US? (Leiter offers no criteria.) It comes as no

surprise that Leiter's results have been "remarkably stable" over the years. But more to the point here: Leiter not only fails to consider what the rankings might look like if a random cross-section of employed philosophers were surveyed. He also gives no thought to how non-philosophers would rank departments, or if programs were evaluated according to citations outside philosophy journals, or by the amount of sponsored research.

I have argued elsewhere for a policy turn within environmental philosophy. By this I mean a focused and concerted turn outward, toward non-philosophers, training philosophers to be part of interdisciplinary teams working on projects with public agencies, policy makers, and the private sector. Rather than aspiring to become philosopher-kings, advising presidents, or philosopher-isolates, writing for an audience of only a few, we need a different model for the role of philosophers. Call it the philosopher-bureaucrat—philosophers placed within institutional structures that dominate life today. The local water board, the regional EPA office, the US Forest Service, the places where the decisions are made and policies set.

'Bureaucrat,' of course, is a disagreeable word. No one wants to be called a bureaucrat. The term does have the virtue of candor, however, in that we live in a bureaucratic age—and would want it no other way. Whatever their burdens, bureaucratic structures such as the Federal Aviation Administration, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency add much to our lives.

When I made similar comments two years ago at the ISEE/IAEP joint meeting in Colorado, Dale Jamieson demurred. In his opinion, if we wanted to gain more respect from our philosophical brethren, environmental philosophers needed to be 'twice as good': matching the philosophical skills of the top philosophers, while also mastering enough knowledge of environmental science or policy to be able to rigorously relate philosophic insights to our environmental problems.

This strikes me as an impossible standard. To reach anywhere near the top of any field today is more-than-full-time job. But even if such skills could be purchased by brilliance or sleepless nights it would be a mistake. In the epigram to this essay Brian Leiter gives voice to the assumption underlying philosophy (and indeed the entire knowledge industry). In an argument so obvious that it could be placed in a rhetorical parentheses, Leiter claims that we must aim for the highest pitch of philosophical rigor: "(Which "camp" of philosophy could possibly be committed to less careful analysis, less thorough argumentation?)" But analysis and argumentation are not paramount virtues. They constitute only one virtue among many, which should exist in balance with other virtues such as timeliness, cost, and pertinence to one's audience. As Aristotle notes, it is a sign of an educated person as to seek only as much clarity as a subject matter admits of. Rigor of argumentation should be subject to a mean.

Certainly our environmental problems require a modicum of philosophy—and a great more than they currently get. But at this point, 35 years in, rather than more argumentation, what environmental philosophers most need is skill in "translation."

Master the basic arguments, yes, but then learn how to insert the pertinent insight into a non-philosophical conversation in a powerful and brief (!) manner. We should make sure that our graduate students become adept with the basic concepts of environmental philosophy. But once they graduate, they should understand that their careers need not consist of 30 or 40 years of further sharpening of their philosophical razors. It is time to go abroad in the world and see what work can be done.

Let me, then, by way of conclusion, drop the mask—which fits badly in any case. Yes, I believe that environmental philosophers are philosophers. But I mean to draw a contrast between two very different conceptions of philosophy. This need not be an either-or proposition; there should be room for continued philosophical detail work as well as a new type of philosopher-bureaucrat. But to be candid, I do hope for an intellectual revolution giving birth to a new understanding of "philosophy" for the 21st century.

Environmental philosophy should explicitly challenge the current, failed, and curiously ahistorical notion of philosophy that has dominated the academy for the last 100 years. Surely it is strange that the same poeple who pay homage to our philosophical ancestors—Socrates, Descartes, Leibniz, Nietzsche, William James—fail to recognize that if a young version of any of these thinkers showed up for a job interview today they would be dismissed out of hand. None of these people were specialists—people who Nietzsche dismissed as "dwellers in nooks and crannies." None of them spent the majority of their time reading and writing for a philosophical audience. And I think it is quite unlikely that they would unquestioningly adapt to the times and start reading the *Philosophical Quarterly* or *Nous*.

How did we get to this point? A few turning points can be identified. Kant was a harbinger. In the *Groundwork* he sought to apply Adam Smith to philosophy:

> All industries, crafts, and arts have gained by the division of labor, viz., one man does not do everything, but each confines himself to a certain kind of work that is distinguished from all other kinds by the treatment it requires, so that the work may be done with the highest perfection and the greatest ease. Where work is not so distinguished and divided, where everyone is a jack of all trades, there industry remains sunk in the greatest barbarism. Whether or not pure philosophy in all its parts requires its own special man might well be in itself a subject worthy of consideration. Would not the whole of this learned industry be better off if those who are accustomed, as the public taste demands, to purvey a mixture of the empirical and the rational in all sorts of proportions unknown even to themselves and who style themselves independent thinkers, while giving the name of hair-splitters to those who apply themselves to the purely rational part, were to be given warning about pursuing simultaneously two jobs?[8]

Post-Civil War higher education saw Kant's program institutionalized via two developments—the creation of the undergraduate major, and the founding of the research

university. The major and the elective system were created at Harvard in 1869, placing knowledge within disciplines and emphasizing specialization. In contrast with the college, within the university it was possible for anyone to pursue a course of study in any field. The research university was inaugurated with the founding of Johns Hopkins in 1876. Rather than the collegiate focus on the preservation and integration of perennial truths, the research university defined the professor's work in terms of the endless pursuit of new knowledge.

Some philosophers protested this redefinition of philosophy in terms of specialization and expertise, but they were quickly overwhelmed. Philosophy became another regional ontology, with its own areas of recondite research in principle no different from any other discipline. In *Time in the Ditch* John McCumber adds another layer to the institutional history of philosophy. In the 1950s and 1960s three factors came together: the arrival within the US of analytic philosophy, the rise of McCarthyite persecution of academics, and a demographic boom and bust within the philosophy market. Analytic philosophy matched up well with the specialist-oriented research agenda of the research university. According to McCumber's research, McCarthy and his surrogates red-baited philosophers at a higher percentage than any other field within the academy. And finally, the bust of the academic job market in the late 60s meant that the inward-looking, scientistic orientation of analytic philosophy dominated philosophy departments for a much longer time than they would have otherwise.

There are some signs that this view of philosophy is finally being challenged. At my own institutional home, the Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies at the University of North Texas, our dean tells all who will hear that 'this is not your father's philosophy department.' The difference is not limited to our focus on environmental philosophy. The entire department participates in the de-disciplining of philosophy—for instance, by hiring and tenuring ecologists within the department, by giving greater credit within tenure and promotion cases to publishing outside rather than within philosophy, and by projects like UNT's field station in environmental philosophy at Cape Horn, Chile.

These efforts portend a view of 21st century philosophy as fundamental rather than regional ontology, as an inter- and transdisciplinary activity rather than one among other disciplines. These are possibilities that I hope that find welcoming soil in other locations: philosophy gone wild, or perhaps better said, feral.

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[1] Hargrove, Eugene C., "After Twenty Years." *Environmental Ethics* 20(1998):338-39.
[2] Ibid.
[3] See *Environmental Ethics* 20(1998):
[4] Andrew Light and Eric Katz, eds., *Environmental pragmatism* (New York: Routledge), 1996, p. 5.
[5] Donald VanDeVeer, Christine Pierce, eds., *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book: Philosophy, Ecology, Economics*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth), third edition, 2003.