



FROM THE EDITOR

What's Wrong? Who's to Blame?

In "The Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches from Here and There* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), Aldo Leopold wrote:

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial. (pp. 209–20)

Certainly, we in philosophy and religion have now heard of conservation (and the environment); however, there is a new problem: environmental ethicists, it is claimed, have made environmental philosophy too complicated (rather than too easy) for environmental policy people, and therefore have made it trivial.

In the introduction to *Environmental Pragmatism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), Andrew Light and Eric Katz write:

As environmental ethics approaches its third decade it is faced with a curious problem. On the one hand, the discipline has made significant progress in the analysis of the moral relationship between humanity and the non-human natural world. The field has produced a wide variety of positions and theories in an attempt to derive morally justifiable and adequate environmental policies. On the other hand, it is difficult to see what practical effect the field of environmental ethics has had on the formation of environmental policy. The intramural debates of environmental philosophers, although interesting, provocative and complex, seem to have no real impact on the deliberations of environmental scientists, activists and policy-makers. The ideas within environmental ethics are, apparently, inert—like Hume's *Treatise*, they fall deadborn from the press. (p. 1)

This type of criticism has become fairly common. In fact, I have frequently voiced versions of it myself. I have, nevertheless, begun to have doubts even about my own claims. Is it true that environmental philosophy has had no impact? If so, are philosophers really to blame? Finally, if not, what is the problem and how do we, or someone else, solve it?

In response to my own alarmism, some environmental ethicists have noted that considerable progress has been made in some areas, and I am willing, upon reflection, to agree. Environmental ethics has had a lot of impact on biology and on biologically related fields. Interaction regularly takes place with the Society for Ecological Restoration International, the Society for Conservation



Biology, and the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. In addition, graduate work in environmental ethics in biological science programs is not only accepted, but becoming common, and such study has gone from being regarded as an annoyance to an important element of biological training. A graduate of University of North Texas Environmental Science Program just wrote to me:

I received my doctoral degree in biology at UNT and I took a few environmental philosophy courses while I was there, including your environmental ethics course. Those courses have really proven to be invaluable to me in teaching my courses, directing my research and within my writing. I really did develop intellectually within those courses and they complement my scientific background very well.

It is true, nonetheless, that environmental ethics has had little impact on environmental policy professionals who do not have biological training. I am not persuaded, however, that philosophers are primarily to blame. Policy is under the sway of economics in ways that biology is not, and economics defines itself in many respects by distancing itself from philosophy and normative discourse. Milton Friedman, for example, begins his famous book, *Essays on Positive Economics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1953), by distinguishing between “what is” and “what ought to be” (between fact and value) and stating that economics achieves its stature as a science by ignoring “what ought to be.” People who believe that they have become scientific by rejecting talk about ethics and values are not likely to be willing to incorporate environmental ethics into their work, lest they undermine their scientific credentials. Moreover, given their simplistic positivistic views of normative discourse and their commitment to a “value-free world,” in which *subjective* usually means “biased,” they would have great difficulty doing so even if they were willing to try.

For environmental philosophy to have an impact on environmental policy, environmental ethics training has to be worked into graduate studies in economics and policy much as it has been in biological studies. Doing so, however, would be very painful since many of the presuppositions upon which economics and policy are based would be thrown into question.

Seen in this way, making environmental ethics easier, less complicated, does not seem to be an answer. The most important reason environmental philosophy has not had much, if any, impact on policy is not because philosophers have generated theories too complicated or trivial to be of value in policy, but rather because economics and policy as currently conceived are probably incompatible with virtually any theories environmental philosophers could provide. It is not that policy has never heard of us; rather, policy is actively trying not to hear of us—it wants to continue to do business as usual. For environmental ethics to become a part of environmental policy, colleges and universities need to require graduate students in policy to begin taking courses in environmental ethics. Only then can policy makers start up the road to reconciliation with ethics.