

Pedagogy in Process: Reflections on Teaching Environmental Ethics in a Community with an Anti- Environmentalist Orientation

DAVID R. KELLER

When I arrived at Utah Valley State College (UVSC) in the fall of 1996 as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Environmental Ethics was in the course catalog but had not yet been taught. Since I had participated in the graduate Environmental Ethics Certificate Program at the University of Georgia (UGA), I gladly accepted the department chair's invitation to teach the course for the first time in UVSC's history. It seemed like an auspicious way to begin my nascent academic career.

On the first day of class, I went to the assigned room at the assigned time to find three students sitting in an otherwise empty room. Every time Environmental Ethics was offered at UGA, the enrollment cap was quickly reached, so I assumed I was in the wrong room. Turning from the six eyes fixed on me, I said, "Excuse me, I thought this was Keller's Environmental Ethics course." As I walked out, a student replied, "It is."

Shocked, and, needless to say, disappointed, I eventually got the course to carry by handing out several hundred fliers about the course in the long lines students form to register. In truth, most of the fifteen students I rounded up took the course because it was their only option, not because they were actually interested in the subject.

This unexpected lack of interest got me investigating how a course so well liked at one school could be so unpopular at another. I discovered that members of the Utah Valley community associate the term "environmental ethics" with "environ-

mentalism," and, further, consider "environmentalism" subversive to traditional conservative values and a threat to free market principles.

Why? Utahans tend to be wary of environmentalism because Utahans tend to be anti wilderness. Unlike the eastern and midwestern United States in which most land is privately held, a majority of the land in Utah is owned by the federal government. President Clinton's declaration of Grand Staircase National Monument in 1996 by executive fiat caused widespread outrage. At a panel discussion I organized in 1997 titled "What is the Value of Wilderness?," Louise Liston, Garfield County Commission Chairperson, quipped, "tourists

David R. Keller is Director of the Center for the Study of Ethics, Associate Professor of Philosophy, and Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Utah Valley State College. His first book, The Philosophy of Ecology: From Science to Synthesis, was co authored with ecologist Frank Golley. His work has also appeared in various journals including Teaching Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Ethics and the Environment, and Ecosystem Health.
<dauid_keller@comcast.net>
<http://davidkeller.us>

come to town with a pair of jeans and a twenty dollar bill, stay for a week, and change neither." For Liston, as well as most Utahans, wilderness condemns locals to rural poverty. Designating land as "wilderness" restricts economic growth to low paying service oriented jobs, instead of building an economy based on more lucrative natural resource extraction (logging, mining, drilling). Along this line of thinking, wilderness is bad for the economy, and, by extension, bad for human welfare. Hence, in Utah, anthropocentric axiology—which asserts that human beings are the sole locus of value and that non human nature has value only insofar as it has instrumental value for human ends—is wedded with *lassie faire* economics. Environmentalism, it is thought, is a form of anti humanism and socialism.

Consonant with this perception about the antagonism of environmentalism with free market capitalism, the first three students who enrolled in the class initially were expecting a semester length pep rally against the destruction of wilderness and the importance of protecting biodiversity—the exact same reason dozens of other potential students did not enroll.

So, during a long mountain bike ride, I turned my thoughts to how I could overcome the misperception that the academic study of environmental ethics (or environmental philosophy as it should properly be called) is synonymous with the political platform of *environmentalism*. Given the foregoing insights and experiences, I realized I needed to initiate a sort of "environmental philosophy public relations campaign" something I had not expected nor was prepared to do. Somehow I needed to convey the message that the study of environmental ethics is not a sustained attack of anthropocentrism and capitalism. Rather, I needed to show that the subject also involves the study of the human place in nature within a human oriented framework.

I decided to use my other courses, especially my packed general education courses, to make a sales pitch for upcoming sections of Environmental Ethics. I would emphasize the point that it was not a course in "environmentalism" and that the semester paper could be a defense of anthropocentrism and free market economics.

As I turned the bicycle crankset over and over again to get to the top of the interminable Wasatch Mountain grade, I also realized that many courses on Environmental Ethics probably presuppose a familiarity with the humanistic Occidental *Weltanschauung* and consequently are focused on non anthropocentric theories such as land ethics, biocentrism, animal rights, deep ecology, and eco-feminism. For UVSC, however I needed to bring the foundations of anthropocentrism to the fore. As I reached the summit, I realized that I needed to rework the syllabus.

The next day, sipping coffee at a local café and gazing at a grey sky, I turned to the task of rewriting the syllabus. The solution was to explain that environmental ethics deals with human choices about the environment, choices that might be entirely oriented to human ends. On this approach, one might hold that humans are disconnected or separate from nonhuman nature in some fundamental way, and that the use of nature for human benefit is morally justified. Since developing an environmental ethic in a semester paper would be a major requirement of the

course, it was important for me to make it clear that defending a human centered position was entirely feasible.

To highlight the idea that the Western tradition has been characterized by a pervasive anthropocentrism, and that in one sense the study of environmental ethics is simply an investigation of this aspect of Occidental culture, it occurred to me that a brief historical account was appropriate. The Genesis creation myth in which God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” and enjoined “let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth,” would provide a starting point recognizable to most students.

I planned to weave a historical narrative by pointing out that ancient Greeks shared the Hebrews’ human centered perspective. The polis, the political manifestation of rationality, separated “thenians from the chaos and barbarism beyond the city wall. Socrates, in fact, claimed that he had nothing to learn from the trees and open county outside the city. The idea of a human/nature divide persisted twenty centuries later when the French philosopher René Descartes asserted that his identity as a human being—the possession of an immaterial, eternal soul—had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with having a body.

The views of John Locke would also strike a familiar tone to the students’ ears, since Utah politicians, like Liston, repeat over and over again a Lockean mantra when arguing against wilderness preservation: nature has no value until humans utilize it and therefore should not be “locked away” as an elitist environmentalist playground. I also decided to have students read a selection from Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics* in which he argues that while we do not have *direct* moral duties to non human animals (since they lack rationality and hence are not ends in themselves), we nonetheless have *indirect* moral duties not to harm them. If one did get used to harming non rational animals, one would run the risk of harming rational beings. Finally, economist Julian Simon’s argument that scarcity of natural resources is a myth, since technology will always find a substitute, would carry credence in class.

Even if I succeeded in making the point that the study of environmental ethics is well within the purview of traditional Western culture, I still needed to make it apparent that the anthropocentric worldview is not the only alternative. I needed to point out that prior to Judeo Christian monotheism and Greek rationalism, our nomadic forebears probably did not see themselves as “apart from nature.” They were always *in* nature. There was no wild or wilderness from which they shrank.

With the advent of agriculture, linear furrows and regular inundations must have generated a sharp contrast from famine and flood. In a sense, humans became distanced from rough natural vicissitudes with the advent of a sedentary lifestyle. A constellation of historical factors—agricultural, political, philosophical, religious—converged to form the conception of human separateness from nature. The calling into question of this ontological divide provides the starting point for the alternative, non anthropocentric thinking. As such, I designed the syllabus to move from Thoreau and Muir

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through Leopold and Carson to Naess, Singer, Regan, Callicott, Rolston, Taylor, Warren, and others.

To cap the course, I decided to have the class read and discuss the subtly nuanced environmental philosophy of Frederick Ferré, inspired by Whiteheadian process metaphysics, which strikes a balance between anthropocentrism and non anthropocentrism. Following Whitehead, Ferré asserts that there are gradations of intrinsic value, depending on the intensity of subjective experience. In biological terms, this means that different life forms have different amounts of intrinsic value. Though all living things have intrinsic value, all things do not have *equal* intrinsic value because all living things do not have the same intensity of experience. Cats show a wider variety of preference than worms, and in this sense cats have greater intrinsic value. Similarly, humans show a wider range of preference than cats.

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For Ferré, intrinsic value implies extrinsic (instrumental) value: if organisms display preference, then there must be things which are preferred, namely, things which have instrumental value. Assuming that every organism is preferred in some way by some other organism, it is safe to say that all biota have both intrinsic and instrumental value. How are these different types of value to be compared and weighed? On one hand, the instrumental value of a clam for a clam digger might outweigh the intrinsic value of the clam itself; it is likely that the satisfaction the clam digger gets in finding, preparing and eating the clam is greater than the satisfaction of the clam's own languid subjectivity.

On the other hand, according to Ferré, organisms with relatively little intrinsic value ought not to be used indiscriminately by organisms with more well developed subjectivity. The instrumental value of something might be enormous to a multitude of low sentience selves, and subsequently trump the claims of a relatively few higher sentience selves. For example, the instrumental value of grass in a Great Plains ecosystem to all other biota might outweigh its instrumental value for organisms with greater intrinsic value which would gain a good deal of satisfaction from eating the grass, like cattle—and humans, from eating red meat. This means the value of a resource for spotted owls or desert tortoises might exceed the resource's value for human ends. The ecosphere is characterized by a discordance of conflicting values. Robins must eat worms and wolves must masticate elks.

If the students are still with me at this point, I argue, as the concluding foray of the course, that Ferré's nonegalitarian axiology of graded intrinsic and extrinsic values provides the framework for weighing and adjudicating the myriad conflicts of interest of ecological entities.

Over the next few years, my comments about the differences between environmental ethics and environmentalism in my general education courses, in addition to giving students the opportunity to write a paper on their own "environmental philosophy," resulted in changed public perception of the course. Not surprisingly, the majority of the papers are defenses of anthropocentrism. Surprisingly, and to my joy, many papers argue additionally that anthropocentrism properly embraces

environmentalism, as flourishing ecological systems benefit humans in the long run!

Apparently, students who have taken courses they find thought provoking spread the word to their friends and family. Happily, now, the course easily carries every time it is offered. Environmental Ethics is no longer a subversive subject at UVSC.

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