Activist Philosophy of Technology and the Preservation of Biodiversity

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Elsewhere I have claimed that, though "in principle there may be a general framework for ethical sustainability…in practice there are only local democratic attempts to bring about some approximation of it" (Durbin 1997*a*, p. 264). This is in line with my general defense (Durbin 1997*b*, p. 3) of an activist philosophy of technology. Others have also recognized the need for philosophy – in this case environmental ethics – to get to work dealing with real-world environmental problems (Light and Katz 1996). And Andrew Light, one of the editors of that volume, has contributed practice-oriented essays to an important book on ecological restoration (Gobster and Hull 2000). The present paper has a very limited aim, to invite philosophers of technology to be more activist than some have been. But I make my case, such as it is, by looking at the related field of environmental philosophy.

In the paper, I mention only one aspect of environmentalism – forest protection – and I focus on only one country, Costa Rica. Maybe I need to say a word here about why I limit myself in this way.

Costa Rica still has, in spite of a high rate of deforestation, some of the most impressive rainforests in the world, with an amazing amount of biodiversity. Costa Rica also has an avowed philosophy of forest preservation and has made a commitment to contribute to a biological corridor that is supposed to stretch from Belize to the Panama Canal – a project that has been hailed as one of the premier biodiversity preservation efforts in the world (see Mittermeier et al. 2000, p. 99). Costa Rica's contribution to the Central American biodiversity corridor is supposed to depend on linking three types of terrain; primary forests, secondary forests, and newly designated protected areas, many of them in private hands, that have been turned to "productive" uses or reforested but can provide for the passage of forest-dependent species. Many people have praised the local democratic efforts that have been involved in Costa Rica's preservation efforts to date (see, Wallace 1992; van den Hombergh 1999). And others (e.g., Mittermeier et al., 2000) are confident that the same democratic forces can prevail in the future. But their confidence is often based on Costa Rica's commitment to a philosophy of sustainability.

In this paper, I contrast the rhetoric of sustainability – often voiced in the name of holistic or ecocentric approaches to environmental ethics or environmental philosophy more generally – with the real-world attempts in Costa Rica to preserve and expand biodiversity in the name of sustainability. (Costa Rica's politicians latched on to the word in 1985; see Wallace 1992, p. 154.)   In line with my earlier writings, I say that the ethical force of my argument is not dependent on abstract argumentation, but on the urgency of the need for democratic action to preserve biodiversity – or, at the very least, on responsibilities to undo damage that we humans have done (see my 1992, chapters 10 and 15).

At a philosophy conference, where this paper was first presented, I could not ignore the philosophical debates that have arisen among environmental ethicists in the past thirty years. Joseph DesJardins, in a standard textbook (1999, p. 23), sums up the history of environmental philosophy this way:

> [1] Many environmental issues easily fit within the categories of [pre-1970s] traditional ethics…using traditional concepts of responsibility, harm, rights, and duties…*Applied ethics* helps us...apply well-developed ethical theories to environmental issues...[However, 2] some environmental issues do not easily fit within the categories of traditional ethics...[For example], What responsibilities, if any, do present generations have to people living in the distant future?... *Ethical extensionism* represents this step beyond the more standard applied ethics model....[3] *Nonanthropocentric ethics* [goes still further and] defends ethical standing for nonhuman living beings... [4] Another important distinction developed out of the growing influence of the science of ecology... Ecological "wholes" [in this view] such as an ecosystem, a species, or a population are more valuable than any particular member of that whole. *Holism*...[thus became another dominant view] within environmental ethics.   [But, 5] some environmental philosophers believe that challenges such as nonanthropocentrism and holism stretch traditional ethical theories beyond the breaking point...*Environmental philosophy*...[goes further] including metaphysics,...epistemology,...aesthetics, as well as, ethics and social philosophy.

I have no intention of immersing myself in these debates; indeed, I think doing so would distract me from the important though small contribution I can make to a real-world problem such as protecting biodiversity in Costa Rica's (and Central America's) forests. One reader of this paper wondered what contribution I can make, precisely as a philosopher. With John Dewey,

I reject the implicit view that one can separate one's philosophical work form one's activism. In the work I do in Costa Rica (see below), all those I am involved with know that I am a philosopher, and that leads them to make certain assumptions about me. But I see my activism as an extension of my philosophical work: really one and the same thing.

That said, I do want, at least briefly, to consider one philosophical discussion.

I have chosen to pick on Larry Hickman, in his "Green Pragmatism" (1999, pp. 39-56), where he attempts to unmask ethical theories that, in spite of their seemingly-good aims, might in fact "block progress." (This is the crucial starting point for creative philosophical thinking in the view of American Pragmatists such as Dewey [1929; 1935; 1948] and George Herbert Mead [1934; 1964; see also Joas, 1985]). In that paper, Hickman self-consciously enters into the dialogue that constitutes academic environmental ethics today. I want to consider whether this is a wise move on his part, or whether I am wiser to stay out of such academic debates. *My thesis here is that the balance of an activist philosophy ought to tip away from academic debates and toward activist involvement.*

1.   HOW ACTIVISM FITS (OR DOESN'T) IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

To me, one of the more interesting contributions to the history of philosophy in the last several years is sociologist Randall Collins' *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (1998). Collins surveys philosophical schools and their network-structured debates worldwide from ancient Greece to the end of World War II. He ends this way: "We could trace the networks further, on into our own day...The trouble is that we don't know where to focus ...[;] we have no way of knowing who if anyone will be remembered as a major or a secondary figure" (p. 782). But many people involved in contemporary debates think they do know who the primary and secondary figures are. And that is certainly the case in the relatively small community of professed environmental ethicists – and Hickman has chosen to take on some of the biggest names. (Whether any of these philosophers, Hickman included, will be "remembered as a major or secondary figure" in the future is, of course, an open question.)

Though Collins' sociological approach obviously borrows in detailed ways from Mead's approach – Collins says that the "upshot of Mead's philosophy is that mind is no longer mysterious; it is an empirical process whose variations are explainable by the methods of sociological research" (p. 682) –

he dismisses both Mead and Dewey as inheritors of the idealist network that he says succeeded in establishing the modern university system throughout Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century. "In philosophy," Collins says, "Idealism remained the dominant position [in the USA] down to the 1930s. Pragmatism was regarded by professional philosophers as epistemologically unserious in its relativism and human-centrism. ... The next big wave in philosophy, the analytical-logicist style introduced in the 1930s, was to sweep all this away with uncompromising militancy" (p. 683).

About Dewey, Collins says that "his reputation faded in the long run; in his day he was the most publicly prominent American philosopher, [but this was] above all by legitimating scientific research and education through connecting it with the core political ideology" (p. 682).

For Collins, Dewey's and Mead's progressive politics was not a creative contribution to "serious" philosophical debate. Collins says (actually echoing Mead, but with a twist): "Thinking is a conversation with imaginary audiences. In the case of the creative intellectual, this is not just any imagined audience (like the Meadian 'generalized other' in the abstract sense). High degrees of intellectual creativity come from realistically invoking existing or prospective intellectual audiences, offering what the market place for ideas will find in demand" (p. 52).

Occasionally, Collins recognizes that the intellectual debate spills over into political action – one instance he cites is the "left Hegelians" in the mid-1800s, including Karl Marx – and his nineteenth-century focus on Idealism and the developing university system clearly suggests its conservative political bent. But for Collins' sociological purposes, it is the intellectual debates that count. If I have a criticism to make against him, it is that he misses the point of Mead and Dewey that, in the end, intellectual arguments are less "serious" than the social problems that, at root, motivated philosophers in the first place. (Dewey said, in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* [1948, pp. xi-xii], that this was true whether they recognized it or not – though he consciously *excluded* academic analytical philosophy in the twentieth century from this claim.)

2. THE PROBLEM

Hickman ends his "Green Pragmatism" article by saying that Dewey "regarded philosophy as an attempt to understand and ameliorate experience as we find it – to foster growth and the enrichment of the meanings of human experience" (1999, p. 55). This statement of the progressive political ideal

as central to pragmatic philosophy sets Dewey and Hickman apart from those, like Collins, who make intellectual debate central – including most contributors to academic debates in environmental ethics. (The obvious exception is those who have come, belatedly, to recognize the need for pragmatic environmental ethics; see, as just one example, Light and Katz [1996].) But Hickman's claim also leads to my problem here. Clearly there is an ongoing conversation in environmental ethics, and it cannot be ignored even by the most resolute pragmatist (or activist, in my version). So what should be the proper balance for a pragmatist who also claims to be an environmental ethicist? How much of his or her time (of *my* time, in particular) should be spent debating with other philosophers ("seriously"), and how much time should be spent on such truly serious social problems as the preservation of biodiversity worldwide?

3. MY ANSWER: A ROLE FOR PHILOSOPHERS IN SAVING THE RAINFOREST

For some years now I have been involved with efforts to save one of the most pristine tropical rainforests in Costa Rica, Corcovado National Park and its surrounding Golfo Dulce Forest Preserve. In June 2000, I participated in a conference in Costa Rica based on the assumption that the principles of the Earth Charter – or some similar holistic "integrity principles" – are necessary if we are to save Costa Rica's incredibly rich forests, indeed all of Central America's forests (see Mittermeier et al., 2000, chapter on "Mesoamerica"). My contribution to the proceedings ended up being entitled, "Can Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica Be Saved? How To Apply the Principles of the Earth Charter" (see Miller and Westra, forthcoming).

In that essay, I look at two threats to Corcovado – one a potential gold rush in the 1980's that would have directly damaged the park, the other a proposed wood chip mill that would have sat athwart the biological corridor linking Corcovado to another park whose destruction would turn Corcovado into an ecological island, destroying its incredible biodiversity – and I ask how Earth Charter-type principles impacted (or didn't impact) the actors in the two crusades that have (so far) saved the park. (The two stories can be seen in Wallace [1992, chapter 14]; van den Hombergh [1997].)

I was not personally involved in either of those crusades to save Corcovado. But since 1999 I have been taking students to experience Corcovado, and I have gotten involved in a number of ways in continuing the efforts to save the park and its buffer forest.

What I conclude in the Earth Charter paper is that highminded principles influenced only a small percentage of the actors involved – mainly leaders and agents of international environmental organizations (See Durbin 2002) that got involved. In my view, the environmental ethic that Mead and Dewey would have defended is one that says philosophers, if they get involved in such issues, can not afford to take too-theoretical a stance; they must get involved, on an equal footing with other activists, and they must work with (sometimes collectively against) people who do not share highminded views – indeed, they must often work with people who *oppose* highminded principles. And I ended that paper with what many would consider a platitude: As good as it may be to invoke lofty principles of the sort espoused in the Earth Charter, it is just as important to become political (progressive) activists. And it is never assured that the outcome of a particular struggle – say, to make a project "sustainable" (?) – will be what defenders of lofty principles hope for. High-sounding principles are good, and may even be necessary. But blood, sweat, and tears are also needed to get any worthwhile environmental goal accomplished.

One of the environmental philosophers addressed by Hickman in his "Green Pragmatism" article, J. Baird Callicott, was at the conference in Costa Rica. Another presenter was Eugene Hargrove, long-time editor of the journal, *Environmental Ethics*. What struck me most at that conference was the wall of incomprehension that grew higher every day between the environmental philosophers (mostly on the podium) and environmental activists (mostly in the audience). The activists tended to find the philosophical argumentation abstruse and obscure – and they didn't seem to see *any* possibility that the philosophers' articulations would help them at all in their efforts to save the rainforest or block any development projects that are unsustainable despite government and corporate protestations to the contrary.

4. HICKMAN AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHERS

Hickman might reply to my almost exclusively activist concern that philosophers cannot escape the need to combat particular approaches to environmental ethics that stand in the way of the progressive social melioration that he says is central to the philosophy of American Pragmatism. After all, Dewey was a lifelong enemy of reactionary religion, which he saw as both blocking progress and needing to be refuted. As a headnote to his most recent contribution to philosophy of technology, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture* (2001), Hickman quotes Dewey to this effect:

> An empirical philosophy is ... a kind of intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically (*Experience and Nature* 1925).

Then, in his acknowledgment (p. ix), Hickman says this book is "an attempt to rethink and refine some of the central arguments" of his earlier *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (1990).   I take that to mean that *Philosophical Tools* (2001) continues the effort to "divest ourselves of old intellectual habits" that impede the process of social amelioration that Dewey invites philosophers to share in.

At the end of the earlier *Pragmatic Technology*, Hickman discusses responsibility, and he has this to say:

> There was also a sense of urgency in Dewey's critique of technology. Failure to be responsible sets in motion trends and even events that are increasingly difficult to divert or overcome. I think that Dewey would have argued that the destruction of the tropical rainforests, the desertification of vast areas of Africa, and the destruction of the environment due to acid rain and other industrial pollutants are not technological failures ... :   they are instead problems that are consequent upon the failure to sharpen and use the technological tools required for intelligent social planning (p. 203).

Here Hickman clearly shares with Dewey a sense of the urgency of the social problems his philosophy-as-technology needs to address – and with me a sense of the urgency of environmental problems, including the destruction of tropical rainforests. What he objects to is people (including philosophers) who fail "to sharpen and use the technological tools required for intelligent social planning" – and, I would add, intelligent social action.

If we apply this to his "Green Pragmatism" opponents, Michael Zimmerman (see his 1988 – Hickman's source – but also his 1994 and 1999) and Holmes Rolston III (Hickman refers to Rolston [1986] but see also Rolston [1999]), Hickman *might* seem to be saying that their "idealism" would prevent them (and others) from involving themselves in intelligent environmental activism. As I noted earlier, activists in the audience at the 2000 "integrity" conference in Costa Rica found academic contributions abstruse and unhelpful – including those of two other leading environmental ethicists, J. Baird

Callicott (see his 1994 and 1999*a*) and Eugene Hargrove, long-time editor of the leading journal, *Environmental Ethics*.

My reaction to Callicott and Rolston and Zimmerman would be this. I would invite them to get more involved in environmental activism and less involved in academic philosophizing, rather than accuse them of idealism. (I don't deny Hickman's charge; some of their writings may have an excessively idealistic slant.) Indeed, it seems to me that the environmental ethicists at that 2000 conference in Costa Rica, including its organizers, were not progress-blocking reactionaries in spite of their lofty appeals to Earth Charter and other "integrity" principles. Even Hickman's two target "idealists," Zimmerman (1999) and Rolston (1999), rather than being opposed to progressive solutions for environmental problems, would actually endorse them. (Since I first wrote this, I have been reminded, rather sharply, that I should also have referenced, as other examples, Callicott [1999*b*]; and Hargrove [1994].)

5. CONCLUSION

I began this paper by saying I wanted it to be an invitation to philosophers of technology to be more activist and less theoretical – as I think John Dewey and, even more so, G. H. Mead were (on Mead, see Feffer [1993]). Arriving at this concluding point, I realize that, in my attempt, I may have done a disservice to my friend and fellow Pragmatist, Larry Hickman. Following Dewey, he has been a career-long advocate of both-and rather than either-or philosophizing. In this case, he has been a theoretician and an activist, as well as a philosopher of technology and an environmental philosopher. But I hope Hickman will forgive me for making my point by picking on one aspect of "Green Pragmatism" (1999). Whether or not he would agree with my thesis, that a both-and balance ought to favor activism over theorizing in environmental philosophizing, I am sure that his both-and philosophizing would (and does) include activism as a part of the philosopher's role.

I may not, here, have proved my thesis that, in environmentalism, activism ought to weigh more heavily than theorizing. But I hope that, at least, I have shown that, *for me*, activism is more than important for philosophy of technology: in some cases, it is *urgent*. So in the end I am just calling for similar commitments from other philosophers of technology (and environmental philosophers) on the issues they feel are important.

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