Environment and Society

3b

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Reducing Pessimism's Sway in the Environmental Ethics Classroom

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[Edited and abridged for readability and for the purposes of this class. ~ Dr. Bradley H. Brewster]

While it is important that students in environmental ethics courses are made aware of the importance of aiming for greater theoretical precision in the arguments they advance, I want to suggest that environmental ethicists can make a more direct theoretical contribution to students' vocational training. This more direct theoretical contribution stems from the opportunity environmental ethicists have to teach students about change and to link those teachings about change with how environmental policy typically unfolds.

Pessimism in the Environmental Ethics Classroom

My motivation for outlining this role comes from my experiences with what I like to call the best kept dirty little secret of environmental ethics education—namely how pessimism has a tendency to creep into classroom debates and skew students' perceptions of change.

Students are often pulled into pessimism's web in our classrooms and are often unprepared to deal with the skewed view of change it engenders. In and of itself this ought to be a concern for teachers. It becomes even more of a concern if we assume that some of these same students will be taking on the monumental task of addressing environmental challenges in their chosen career paths. I do not mean to suggest that all of my students are pessimistic. In fact, some of my students are downright full of cheer and optimism! I also do not mean to suggest that all of my students will go on to work in environmentally-oriented career fields. Not only will some of my students be advertising executives, stockbrokers, doctors, and computer programmers, some of them also will be environmentally insensitive to boot! With that said, and even though what I have to say here is written with a heightened sensitivity towards those students that will work in environmentally-oriented career fields, pessimism stands as a problem many people face or will have to face as they strive to understand how their work is or is not "making a difference."

Over the last decade, I have noticed that some of my more "green" and activist-oriented students are indeed pessimistic about the state of the world. There surely are many reasons for this. It is possible that the presence of pessimism in college students may be a by-product of the political culture and social atmosphere of which the students are a part. Said differently, some of this pessimism may be context-driven. Regardless of locale, pessimism also tends to be a by-product of increased student awareness of the depth and breadth of environmental challenges that exist now and that are apt to exist and increase in the future if current challenges are not dealt with effectively. Call this form of pessimism *pessimism about the general state of the environment*. Another reason for this pessimism derives from how students view the possibility of change. Call this form of pessimism *pessimism about the possibility of changing the general state of the environment*. Of the two types of pessimism, the latter presents itself as the more pressing of the two because it undermines the ability to even think about doing something about the set of challenges that engender the former. Given this, the question then becomes not how to make students view the world with naive optimism, for doing this would be disingenuous and inaccurate. The question becomes how to encourage students to reconsider what it is they take change to be and why.

Pessimism and the Nature of Environmental Change

The rich environmental ethics literature that has developed over the past three decades is not short on radical philosophical proposals and philosophical justifications for revolutionary change. The radical and revolutionary edge that *some* social ecologists, deep ecologists, and advocates of ecotage, just to name a few likely candidates, bring to the field is a welcome component of the rich theoretical mixture that exists in the field. One thing that I find interesting about presenting these more radical and revolutionary types of environmental ethics in the classroom is that they tend to be the approaches to which students are most attracted. This may be the result of many factors, such as how I teach the material, the high levels of idealism students bring to the class, and the personality of the authors that often comes through in the their writing. I have a hunch, though, that it is also the result of students being attracted to the implicit message of these approaches—i.e., the range of problems that exist not only call for radical changes, but radical changes are the best method we have for dealing with these challenges. Put simply, these

approaches tend to encourage students to adopt radical perceptions of change.

Students who view change as a product of bold, sweeping, radical, and revolutionary proposals are often surprised to find out that change is difficult to engender. Faced with these difficulties and with the often slow rate and ineffectiveness of environmental proposals, it is to be expected that students become pessimistic. Let me be as clear as possible here. I have no problem with the fact that college campuses are breeding grounds for idealism. Student idealism should be encouraged, to an extent. But as an environmental educator, I do have a problem with highly-skilled young environmental practitioners that have not been prepared to deal with the reality that the process of change is a slow and extremely arduous one. Without this training, young, energetic, and skilled environmental practitioners are apt to be blindsided by this reality. Unequipped to deal with these realities, pessimism about one's role and effectiveness can creep into the picture causing, among other things, one to question the point of acting on behalf of the environment in the first place.

I partly wish I was making this scenario up for the sake of this discussion. Unfortunately the ideas I present here are the product of relationships I have with former students, one of whom I will refer to anonymously here as Mr. X. Mr. X recently officially chose to end his career in the environmental not-for-profit sector to pursue work in a non-environmentally oriented for-profit enterprise. While many considerations factored in his decision, he informed me that one reason he had to, in his words, "get out" was his increasing frustration over and inability to cope with slow rates of change.

If you are anything like me, you care about your students. Hearing my student's story frustrated and saddened me for a number of reasons, not the least of which was I felt partially responsible for not tempering some of the idealism often found in the environmental ethics proposals I teach with a frank discussion and consideration of how change typically unfolds in the United States and, for that matter, globally as well. I do not mean to suggest that had I taken one or two class periods to talk about change that Mr. X would still be working in an environmentally-oriented career field. I cannot be sure of this one way or the other. What I am sure of is that as an environmental educator I have

an opportunity to talk about change and deal with pessimism in the classes I teach. Doing this will not be a cure-all for pessimism, but awareness of the slowness of change and frank discussion of the sway of pessimism may work to lessen the temptation of students in the future to "get out" if changes are not seen overnight. Talking about these subjects may be out of character for some environmental ethicists who may be more comfortable talking about intrinsic value, biospherical egalitarianism, and the socially constructed nature of nature than about what it takes to be an environmental professional. But as it turns out, environmental ethicists may be especially well-equipped to incorporate discussions of pessimism and change in their courses and become *de facto* vocational trainers simply by tapping into pedagogical resources that already exist. The first step to dealing with pessimism in the classroom is getting as clear as possible about the challenge it presents.

Given the breadth and depth of environmental challenges, it is tempting for students and teachers to adopt the view that small individual actions will be unlikely to impact on the overall situation in any significant manner. Efforts to address environmental challenges individually seem to present us with a hopeless situation wherein little gets done and the systemic problems are left unaddressed. If anything that falls short of systemic change is likely to fail, what would seem to be needed would be some type of radical and revolutionary change in thinking and behavior. Unfortunately, revolutionary change also is unlikely primarily because of the systemic nature of environmental challenges. Put differently, it is unlikely that any silver-bullet solution exists that would be able to permeate all parts of a system filled with so many problems on so many levels. In the absence of a silver-bullet solution, addressing challenges once and for all vis-à-vis some radical systemic reorientation of thinking and practice is unlikely. If revolution is unlikely and if small individual actions are viewed as unviable options, it is to be expected that the pessimistic mood will find a place to take root, especially when it comes to how students view the possibility of change. Under the sway of the pessimistic mood, apathy and aloofness are apt to set in and the problems that exist today are likely to remain unaddressed, potentially becoming more serious and numerous. As problems increase in severity and number, it is entirely possible that the very hopelessness and inaction that contributed to the initial situation that produced hopelessness and inaction will also increase—

a vicious downward spiral if there ever was one. Put simply, pessimism has a tendency to reinforce itself.

Dealing with Pessimism in the Environmental Ethics Classroom

In any course that deals with environmental issues, it is apt not to take too long before students realize that human beings have faced great difficulty arriving at and implementing solutions to environmental challenges. I typically refer to what Zachary Smith (2000) has called the "environmental policy paradox" to illustrate this. In Smith's words, "The paradox of environmental policy is that we often understand what the best short- and long-term solutions to environmental problems are, yet the task of implementing these solutions is either left undone or is completed too late" (p. xi). That so many human beings tolerate this paradox year after year can be exasperating to students (I know it is to me!). Once the seed of this paradox is planted, a number of attitudes can be noticed in the classroom, including apathy, outrage, anger, hopelessness, and, of course, pessimism. These attitudes and feelings, following on the tendency of classroom dynamics to take on a life of their own, can snowball throughout a class if one does not have a methodology in place to address them. One's immediate reaction to what I am recounting here might be: "Well, if you just don't talk about the paradox of environmental policy, you won't have to deal with the pessimism that follows about the possibility of change." My response to this is simple: making this choice cheats students of what they enter into a college classroom for in the first place—namely, frank, honest, and critical discussions of pressing issues. Is there then a better way to deal with the sway of pessimism in the classroom?

One suggestion might be to teach students about ethical systems and principles that call for radical changes. But these radical changes, because of the very fact that they are very unlikely, actually can reinforce the pessimism they are designed to address by contributing to a "what's the point of acting?" attitude. Despite the reinforcing tendency of pessimism, or perhaps in spite of it, we can choose to think differently about change and in the process come up with new ways to address and reduce the sway of pessimism in the classroom. I, for one, tend to concur with late David Brower that "we can no longer afford the luxury of pessimism" (Brower 2000:ix). Besides, as Brower reminds us, "Hope is more fun" (p. ix).

Despite the fact that the obvious alternative and answer to pessimism is optimism and hope, I am not so naive as to think that it is as easy as just asking students to decide to adopt the attitude of optimism, even though the American philosopher William James (1987) seemed to suggest just such a move when he wrote the following:

> What can be more base and unworthy than the pining, puling, mumping mood, no matter by what outward ills it may have been engendered? What is more jurious to others? What less helpful as a way out of the difficulty? It but fastens and perpetuates the trouble which occasioned it, and increases the total evil of the situation. At all costs, then, we ought to reduce the sway of that mood; we ought to scout it in ourselves and others, and never show it tolerance (p. 87).

What I have always found interesting about this passage is that James stops just short of ruling out pessimism completely. True, he does say we should "scout it in ourselves and others" and "never show it tolerance." But he also uses the phrase "reduce the sway of that mood" to characterize what should be our proper plan of attack against pessimism. James knew that individuals were complex, that each individual's "interior is a battle-ground for what he [or she] feels to be two deadly hostile selves, one actual, the other ideal" (p. 159). In a sense, environmental challenges present concerned citizens, including students, with a similar situation. The actual: the challenges facing living systems globally, the myriad causes of those challenges, and also the difficulties involved in addressing those challenges. The ideal: environments that have been made to function better because of our efforts.

In view of this recognition, reducing the sway of pessimism in the classroom begins with deemphasizing the false dualism of optimism and pessimism and tapping into the pedagogical resource that is the idea of *meliorism*, first introduced by James and then further elaborated by John Dewey. For what it is worth, I have had success incorporating this pedagogical resource into my environmental ethics classes. Based on several classes I have taught, I have found that both William James' and John Dewey's writings on the subject of meliorism work nicely in the classroom, with the edge probably going to James due to his more accessible prose style. Whether in the writings

of James or Dewey, teaching the doctrine of meliorism introduces students interested in confronting environmental challenges to the idea that the world is neither good nor bad in and of itself; it is only good or bad and only gets better or worse as a result of human intervention and action. Meliorism is not a cure-all for pessimism, but it does work against the sway of pessimism because it tends to undercut the defeatist, alarmist, and generally depressing appraisals of the future by encouraging us to invest in the possibility of possibility.

James invested in and was attracted to the doctrine of meliorism most likely because it encouraged a view of the world as containing multiple possibilities. One of these possibilities: things can get better. As the popular urbanist James Howard Kunstler (2001) poetically reminds us, however, "There are no guaranteed rescues from the blunders of history" (p. xiv). Meliorism takes this lack of guarantees seriously and offers itself as an alternative to the undesirable extreme positions of optimism and pessimism. To be excessively optimistic is to risk overlooking how ineffective human beings can be at changing undesirable circumstances. To be excessively pessimistic is to risk overlooking the possibility of change itself (McDermott 1986:118). Meliorism, because it accounts for both ends of the spectrum, may not only offer itself as a foil to classroom pessimism, it also may be the psychological disposition best suited to dealing with environmental challenges. It allows us to remain grounded and realistically cognizant of the depth and breadth of challenges and at the same time keep an eye on the future with the hope that we will have the wherewithal to come up with effective solutions to make things not perfect, but better. Meliorism, then, abandons the false dream of a sudden systemic overnight change to a perfect future in favor of an emphasis on making things better step-by-step. It encourages us, in the words of the environmental activist William Shutkin (2003), to be careful to not "let the perfect be the enemy of the better" in our efforts. The melioristic posture thus requires that we abandon some of the human hubris that often prevents us from acting unless we feel as if we will be able to solve all problems once and for all through our actions. Echoing Brower once more, allowing our desire for perfection to override our responsibility to begin to make things better is a luxury that many living systems cannot afford.

The doctrine of meliorism links up nicely with the project of reconstructing how we view problematic situations and with how we view the

possibility of coming up with solutions to those situations. John Dewey (1973) argued that a new understanding of progress and change was part of this with reconstruction when he wrote:

> Progress is not automatic, nor is it progress *en bloc*; it is cumulative, a step forward here, a bit of improvement there. It takes place day by day, and results from the ways in which individual persons deal with particular situations; it is step-by-step progress which comes by human efforts to repair here, to modify there, to make a minor replacement yonder. Progress is retail business, not wholesale. It is made piecemeal, not all at once. (p. 62)

If Dewey is on target, perhaps what was called *The Quiet Crisis* (1963) by Stuart Udall will be answered by a quiet revolution made up of a series of small reforms that are themselves made up of a series of small steps.

Admittedly, this amounts to a tacit endorsement of adopting an incremental understanding of change, which coincidentally runs counter to the methodology of some already working in environmentally-oriented career fields, such as landscape design and environmental planning, to name just two. Richard Forman (2002:86 & 105), for example, has argued that environmental professionals, in order to reach a "new level" and to become "emergent leaders," should embrace the need to be bold as a professional norm; anything less than this norm ought to be viewed critically and as falling short of what is needed. In Forman's words, "boldness is an alternative to tinkering or the status quo" (p. 86). One wonders, regardless of the role such a view might have in the historical heritage of the professions of design and planning, whether this is the correct view or, better yet, the correct norm to teach students interested in environmentally-oriented careers? Should environmental ethicists decry incrementalism as mere "tinkering"?

I will be the first to agree that there is intellectual value to be derived from understanding what it requires to have bold visions for the future. In terms of curriculum content, students should be made aware of the bold visionaries of the past. These figures have much to teach us about having a theoretical vision, no matter how impractical, against which actions can be judged. However, when it comes to understanding the public role students will

play in the future as economists, politicians, social workers, designers, architects, planners, and citizens, a reconsideration of this unbridled boldness and idealism is warranted. As it turns out, there is merit for doing the exact opposite of what Forman recommends—students should be learning the importance of adopting incrementalism as a norm.

Conclusion: Teaching Incrementalism and Meliorism

I want to conclude this paper by explaining exactly how I teach incrementalism in my classes and how I think that it, combined with a treatment of the subject of meliorism, can work to reduce the sway of pessimism in the classroom and beyond. In the end, I think it is reasonable to suggest that pessimism might have a more difficult time taking root in a classroom that not only calls the false dualism of optimism and pessimism about change to task, but that also takes time to nurture a more moderate view of change.

Perhaps the best way to nurture this more moderate view of change is to rely on what tends to happen in the world of environmental policy. While some environmental ethicists may ignore environmental policy in their courses, choosing instead to focus on a strictly philosophical approach to the subject, I typically complement my chosen texts in environmental ethics with at least one overview text of environmental policy so as to offer the students a view of environmental ethics that includes a consideration of how well philosophers do —or do not—account for developments on environmental policy. The text I have found to be the most accessible to a wide variety of students, some with an environmental background and some without any environmental background whatsoever, is *The Environmental Policy Paradox* by Zachary Smith (2000). Smith does two things well in this text that are especially useful for environmental ethicists looking to incorporate an element of policy into their courses. First, he does an excellent job explaining the basics of the policy-making process, the learning of which can be daunting for students more interested in philosophical arguments than layers of political bureaucracy (Smith 2000:42-76). Second, he does an excellent job of explaining the incremental nature of policy-making (pp. 51-56).

Borrowing from James E. Anderson (1984: 9), Smith outlines the four elements of policy incrementalism as:

1. Only some of the possible alternatives for dealing with a problem are considered by the decision maker. Either by virtue of limitations, ability, time, or because of the desire to achieve a consensus, a comprehensive evaluation of all alternatives is not undertaken.
2. The alternatives considered and the option ultimately selected will differ only slightly or incrementally from existing policy.
3. Only a limited number of consequences for each alternative are evaluated.
4. The problem being evaluated is continually redefined with adjustments being made to make the problem more manageable. (Smith 2000:51)

The four elements of incrementalism theory—the limiting of possibilities, the reality that evolutions of/in policy are slight at best, the consideration of only a limited number of consequences, and strategies based on problem management—are easily incorporated into an environmental ethics course. This is especially so if that course contains not only attention to strictly theoretical disputes, but also to how philosophy might or might not be able to contribute to more effective environmental decision-making vis-à-vis improved methodologies and procedures. With this awareness of policy, students used to reading environmental ethicists who often call for radical changes are asked by me to analyze conceptions of change found in the environmental ethics literature alongside the reality of how changes in environmental policy tend to unfold. By making students aware of the incremental nature of policy change, new avenues of discussion are opened. Furthermore, with this information, students begin to recognize that change is taking place, even when it seems as if nothing is being done.

The time sacrificed preparing these lectures and the readings left off the syllabus to make space for these subjects, not to mention the class periods needed to teach the subjects of meliorism and policy making incrementalism, may seem to be too high a price to pay for some environmental ethicists. The payoffs, however, are significant. For one, treating these subjects opens up new avenues of discussion. If policy is made on an incremental basis, and if change happens most often as a result of small changes to the system that compile over time, should our theoretical approaches be sensitive to this? Or

do environmental ethicists still have an obligation to think about radical ideals and revolutionary absolutes? Can they do both? If it is recognized that radical and revolutionary approaches often contribute to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness due largely to the fact that such proposals rarely get off the ground, do environmental ethicists have an obligation to temper their teaching of such approaches with suggestions as to what philosophy might do to improve the procedural apparatuses within which policy unfolds? These and other meta-questions arise when meliorism and incrementalism are admitted as subjects in courses in environmental ethics. While these are valuable additions to any class in environmental ethics, the biggest payoff received for teaching students to adopt more moderate views of change and for reducing the sway of pessimism in the classroom may be related to something that happens outside of the classroom.

One of the interesting things about the subjects of meliorism and incrementalism is that they provide insights useful in a wide range of contexts. Students that want to end up working in some aspect of policy obviously stand to benefit from awareness of this subject matter. Not only will they be more effective at maneuvering the policy process, they also will hopefully be better equipped to deal with and reduce the sway of pessimism in their careers. Students that go on to work in non-governmental environmentally oriented enterprises may find themselves even more prone to the sway of pessimism because the change that they are working toward—and for—may not have the procedural and institutional support found in governmental enterprises. For this reason, the potential lessons learned about change and pessimism in a course on environmental ethics may be even more important for these future environmental professionals and activists. In the end, whether it is at the grassroots level or at the level of governmental policy-making, honing our views of change and encouraging our students to do likewise may contribute in some small manner to sustaining careers and efforts aimed at addressing environmental challenges by reducing the sway of pessimism and the tendency it has to undermine those very efforts. As I have argued elsewhere (Sheppard 2003), this will be the result of being able to appreciate the small successes enjoyed along the way toward larger longer-term goals. Valuing progress as such, no matter how small that progress might be, can steady and sustain our drive toward satisfying these longer-term goals.