

The Public Turn in Philosophy

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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Over the last decade and a half, philosophy has come out of the academy and “gone public” in a way it has not done for many years. Both inside and outside the academy philosophers now commonly write about affairs of life and affairs of state. They serve on hospital advisory boards, staff national study commissions, and testify before Congress. Philosophers still teach in philosophy departments, but they also now teach in law schools, medical schools, and business schools. A philosophy class these days is as likely to be about nuclear deterrence as about the naturalistic fallacy.

The “public turn” hasn’t been welcomed by everyone. Some say it is pretentious and dilettantish for philosophers to believe they can say anything useful about public policy issues. Neither their training nor their experience suits them to make a contribution. They should do what they do best: cultivate the life of the mind in its reflection on fundamental intellectual puzzles raised by language, science, and culture. They should teach the philosophical classics and not mislead their students with glib and uninformed solutions to public problems.

Are these criticisms well founded? Does the “public turn” in philosophy add something valuable to public discussion about education, foreign policy, cultural progress, the family, the economy, the military? Does it illuminate public policy choices? Can it?

In what follows, two philosophers suggest answers to these questions. Robert K. Fullinwider, Research Associate at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, looks at the contribution philosophy can make

to the discussion of public affairs; Dan W. Brock, professor of philosophy at Brown University and staff philosopher in 1981-82 on the President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and

Biomedical and Behavioral Research, looks at some of the conflicts philosophers face when they leave the academy behind altogether and assume actual policy-making roles.

Philosophers in the Public Conversation

How can philosophers make their best contribution to the nation's discussion of public affairs?

Public conversation is generally jumbled, hasty, and confused. Public debates are shallow, sterile, perpetually deadlocked. Disputants talk past one another, and arguments turn on unclear, murky, equivocal, undefined terms. Straw men abound, unspoken assumptions and unrecognized commitments remain hidden, and exaggeration and hyperbole rule the day.

Philosophers are good at arguments. They can take them apart and put them back together again, forwards and backwards, upside down and downside up. This facility makes it easier to distinguish the real connections between ideas from the spurious ones, and this is indispensable to sorting out and clarifying public controversies. Deadlocks can be broken by showing the contending parties that they've framed the question in the wrong way, or that they are not even talking about the same thing, or that the dispute they thought was about ends is really about means; and so on.

The aim as I see it is to reformulate an argument in a controversy so that its exponent says, "Ah yes, *that's* what I meant!" And to reformulate the argument on the other side, too, in the same way. Then the controversialists will have half a chance to address each other's arguments instead of doing the usual song and dance.

The way to think about a public policy is to think about the public policy, not about metaphysics or moral philosophy.

Now, it should be noted that clarifying and sorting out arguments are not enterprises that philosophers are uniquely able to carry out. Other humanists, too, trained in history, literature, and the languages can assist public debate toward greater clarity and perspicuity.

Still, philosophical education seems an especially good training for producing all-purpose argument doctors. The strength of philosophical training lies in its subject matter: metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy. Studying them is good for the mind. This

is the way we used to justify teaching students Latin and geometry: they are good mental exercises. Metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy are even better. They produce a higher quality mental acuity and conceptual sophistication.

This distinctive training of philosophers is both their strength and their weakness as they make the "public turn." What philosophers need to bring to public policy issues is their mental agility; what they too often bring is their metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical baggage. The way to think about a public policy is to think

The real contribution the trained philosopher brings to public controversy is his nose for metaphysical baloney.

about the public policy, not about metaphysics or moral philosophy. Philosophers should leave behind the subjects of their philosophical training and bring only its product. "Applied philosophy" is a misnomer, because the phrase implies a subject matter and its application. The special subject matter of philosophy just gets in the way of making sense out of public policy issues.

Applied moral theory is an especial occupational hazard. The philosopher has a tool box filled with deontologies and consequentialisms, the principle of utility and the kingdom of ends, categorical imperatives, the highest good, and the logic of moral language. You got a problem? He's got a tool. Can't figure out what to do? It must be your old utility-based theory; replace it with the latest model deontology. But surely it doesn't matter what the base is. The rights, duties, and welfare that are relevant to moral and political decisions are not those abstractions at the *base* of some philosophical theory, but the substantial entitlements and values embedded in the law, institutions, culture, history, and material possibilities of our time and place.

There is obviously value in tidying up local areas of practice and reflection, and even in tying together broader areas of experience through common themes; but as we approach higher levels of generality, the practical use of such tidying drops off sharply. Moral theory has little practical relevance in the public turn. And

neither does the rest of the philosopher's baggage. The worst thing philosophers can do is bring their metaphysics, epistemology, and moral theories to the public conversation.

Now I want to argue that the *best* thing philosophers can do is bring their metaphysics, epistemology, and moral theories to the public conversation. I'm not taking back anything I've just said. The social value of the philosopher's metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical tools lies in their negative and destructive use.

The point is this. If all the philosophers disappeared from the face of the earth, metaphysics and moral theory would still abound. *Everybody* is a metaphysician and moral theorist—the preacher, the politician, the businessman, the terrorist, the economist, the lawyer—and all convinced of the direct practical import of their theories. Likewise, lift up almost any public policy rock and you'll see lots of crawly metaphysical and philosophical creatures scurrying about. The real

contribution the trained philosopher brings to public controversy is his nose for metaphysical baloney. But the point is not to set public policy on a *better* metaphysics or a *sounder* ethical theory. The point is to harass and harry every attempt to make public policy the front for some metaphysical program, or the realization of some moral theory.

This is a special negative role that the philosopher is well trained to serve. In fact, our profession began in this negative way. Long ago there was this presocratic Pat Robertson going on about how morality depends on religion and how he had direct knowledge from the gods, and Thales popped off, "You're all wet!" Unfortunately, this got garbled as, "All is water," and thus began a long tradition of metaphysical speculation. But the real beginning was negative, and from our beginning we should take our clue.

—Robert K. Fullinwider

Philosophers in the Halls of Policy

The public turn in philosophy has not only changed the content and focus of some philosophical work. It has also placed philosophers increasingly in new social roles that are less compatible with their traditional role as academic scholars engaged in critical analysis and development of arguments and assumptions. The general character of the shift I have in mind is from academic scholar to involved policymaking participant. Looked at this way, it is not just philosophy, but philosophers, who have gone public. This change in role has some deep-seated implications for philosophers that I believe have not been adequately recognized and discussed. The fundamental point is that the goals and constraints of the policymaking process are different from and in some important respects in sharp conflict with the goals and intellectual virtues of academic scholarly activity in general and philosophical activity in particular.

Truth is the central virtue of scholarly work. Scholars generally are taught to follow the arguments and evidence where they lead without regard for the social consequences of doing so. Philosophy in particular prides itself on questioning and critically evaluating what is otherwise taken for granted, whether because universally accepted or because an unrecognized assumption. Nothing is to be immune from question and criticism; everything is open to and must withstand critical scrutiny.

When philosophers move from academics, hoping that an occasional policymaker might read their scholarly journal articles, into roles in which they are more or less direct participants in policymaking processes, the scholarly virtue of an unconstrained search

for the truth—all assumptions open to question and follow the arguments wherever they lead—comes under a variety of related pressures. The first concern of those responsible for public policy is not truth, but is and ought to be the consequences of their actions for public policy and the persons those policies affect.

The end of a single-minded pursuit of knowledge is possible and defensible in the scholarly domain not only because of the value of knowledge, but also because the effects of the scholarly endeavor on the public are less direct, and mediated more by other institutions and events, than are those of the public policy process. It is the very impotence in terms of major, direct effects on people's lives of most academic scholarship that makes it morally acceptable not to worry much about the consequences of that scholarship. When philosophers become direct participants in the policymaking process, they must shift their primary commitment from knowledge and truth to the policy consequences of what they do. And if they are not prepared to do this, why did they enter the policy domain? What are they doing there?

Let me be more specific about some of the forms I have found this conflict between scholarly and policy goals and virtues to take in my own experience. In Washington, I worked on the professional staff of a presidential commission; though I had my own views about what the reports I was helping to draft should say, those views would have any effect only if I was able to persuade the other staff members and the commissioners of them. Thus, I found myself often looking to what the consequences on others would be of making a particular argument or taking a particular

position, instead of simply at whether I considered the argument or position to be sound. The goal then often became to persuade or even to manipulate others in order to reach a desired outcome instead of a common search for knowledge and truth.

Consider the issue of decisions to forgo life-sustaining treatment. I hold, with many other philosophers, that the difference between killing and allowing to die, as that difference is commonly understood, is not in itself of significant moral importance, and as well that stopping life-sustaining treatment is usually killing, though justified killing. Many of the commissioners held instead the more common view that killing is far more seriously wrong than allowing to die, and that stopping life-sustaining treatment is allowing the patient to die of his disease, not causing his death and killing. On the conclusion that stopping life-sustaining treatment at the request of a competent patient is morally permissible we agreed, but I believed that their reasoning for this conclusion was confused. My instincts as philosopher said: attack the confusion.

But what would be the consequences of convincing them that allowing to die is in itself no different morally from killing and/or that much stopping of life-support is killing? The likely result would be to throw into question their acceptance of the moral permissibility of stopping life-support. Should one then, could one respon-

sibly, attack what seemed the confusions in their position when the result of doing so might well be to lead them to an unwarranted and worse conclusion? Since the commission's report had the potential to have a significant impact on policy and practice, producing this shift in their views could have important adverse consequences in suffering and loss of self-determination for real people.

An important part of the policymaker's job is to "sell" a program, policy, or position to other participants in the political or policy process. As a result, the "packaging" of a policy proposal often determines its fate. The particular formulation and defense of a policy that is most likely to move it successfully through the policy arena may differ substantially from what a philosopher believes its correct formulation and defense to be. The easiest way to sell the public on patients' right to stop life-sustaining medical treatment is not to seek to convince it that this is simply a case of justified suicide or that what physicians do when they stop it is merely a case of justified killing. To cite one other example, philosophers who believe that infanticide can be morally permissible with newborns because newborns lack any right to life would have been ill-advised to appeal in the public policy arena to that view as the basis of an attack on the Reagan administration's so-called Baby Doe regulations.



PHILOSOPHY

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I believe this scholarly/policy conflict constitutes a less dramatic analogue of what Michael Walzer called the problem of dirty hands faced by politicians. Walzer argued, following Machiavelli, that success in political life sometimes requires violating the constraints of morality. We have good reason to want our representatives in political life to be good persons and so to have scruples against violating those constraints, but also to be willing to violate them when necessary to achieve important political goals and to know they are doing wrong when they do so.

Philosophers can view those among them who enter the world of policymaking as having dirtied their hands when they veer from the quest for truth with an eye on the consequences of what they say.

Likewise, philosophers come to the policy process with a commitment to knowledge and truth. That commitment is integral to the distinctive perspective philosophers bring to the policy process, to why there is any reason to want them there. Like politicians, however, we want philosophers sometimes to recognize that the consequences at stake in the policy process are sufficiently important to warrant their violating their scholarly commitment and to be prepared to do so by fudging on the truth. And finally, we want them to

recognize that according to the norms and virtues of the philosophical enterprise to which they remain committed, they act wrongly. Philosophers can view those among them who enter the world of policymaking as having dirtied their hands when they veer from the quest for truth with an eye on the consequences of what they say.

Does this mean that philosophers should avoid the policy process like the plague? I believe not. Philosophers who are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to use their analytical and critical skills at influential points in the policymaking process can help in some small way to improve and illuminate thinking and practice in respects that offer real benefits to the broader public. I, at least, have found that a deeply satisfying aspect of my own experience in the policy and medical worlds. Nevertheless, I believe the scholarly/policy conflict that I have focused on here does suggest that philosophers' forays as direct participants into the world of policy should best be partial and temporary. The philosophical virtues and perspectives that enable philosophers to make a valuable, distinctive, and effective contribution to policy are probably best maintained if they retain a primary base within the world of academic scholarship.

—Dan W. Brock

The articles by Robert K. Fullinwider and Dan W. Brock are condensed and adapted from talks they gave at "The Public Turn in Philosophy," a conference celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, held at the University of Maryland, October 16-18, 1986. Papers from the conference will be published in *The Public Turn in Philosophy*, edited by Judith Lichtenberg and Henry Shue, in preparation.

Priorities for Preservation

The magnitude of the problem of disappearing species, viewed worldwide, dwarfs resources currently available to address it. By the end of the century, experts predict, one species will be lost every hour. Faced with shrinking budgets and accelerating extinction rates, environmental managers agonize over which species to save. Different criteria for placing value on species—ecological, economic, aesthetic, cultural—compete with one another, and controversy abounds. One proposal for sidestepping direct debates about the value of species is to adopt a system of triage, which takes its name from the French policy of sorting wartime casualties into three categories for medical treatment: those with superficial wounds that do not require immediate attention; those with wounds too serious to make treatment efficacious; and those in the middle range, having serious but treatable wounds.

Once the issue is formulated in this manner, it seems obvious that efforts toward species preservation are best concentrated in the third category. Scarce funds and energies should be targeted at saving those species that are both in need of saving and susceptible to being saved. But the most arresting formulation of an issue is not always the most illuminating one; it will be useful to stand back from the triage formulation, which casts the problem of setting priorities as one of sorting species into categories, and ask whether there are other, more fruitful ways to look at the problem.

What Is the Endangered Species Problem?

The endangered species problem is not a single problem. It is more accurately seen as four closely related problems: (1) what should be done when a species' population becomes so depleted as to threaten its continued existence; (2) what should be done to keep relatively healthy populations from declining and thereby falling into the threatened category; (3) how to avert, or at least slow, the predicted and potentially cataclysmic reduction of biological diversity over the next few decades; and (4) how to slow the trend toward conversion of natural systems to intense human use?

In the triage formulation the priorities problem is most naturally associated with question (1), because it considers threats to individual species. Once threatened, species require management initiatives designed to protect and nurture them, individually. But the goal of protecting biological diversity should not be reduced to the goal of protecting remnant populations of threatened species. If one thinks about the endangered species problem in this way, there is a ten-

dency to treat it as merely a problem of protecting genetic diversity, with each species regarded as a repository for a set of genes. Indeed, some preservationists speak as if the protection of species involved little more than preserving samples of seeds and germ plasm.

Biological diversity is a much broader concept than genetic diversity. Biological diversity is constituted not merely by the number of species, subspecies, and populations extant, but also by the varied associations in which they exist. A species existing in an ecosystem represents not a static but a changing pool of adaptations, a whole series of different genetic dynamics and varied evolutionary trajectories. Diversity of biological life is also a valuable aesthetic and cultural resource. To perceive biological diversity only in terms of a diverse gene pool is to ignore the whole range of aesthetic and cultural values dependent upon varied landscapes.

Loss of genetic diversity is a manifestation of the deeper problem of decreasing biological diversity. As natural habitats are altered, converted, and simplified, many species suffer a decline in their number of independent populations. Attempting to protect genetic diversity through the protection of a few remnant populations will result only in a continual scramble to save individual species. A broader approach, by recognizing the forces that bring species to a threatened stage, should keep more species from requiring individual attention. The triage formulation of the priorities issue would, in the process, be circumvented. Society would no longer face an interminable series of difficult choices among threatened species. Rather, the problem would be viewed holistically as one of halting the general tendency toward habitat destruction and loss of biological diversity.

Nature as Habitat vs. Nature as Warehouse

Viewed in its most general terms, the problem of endangered species raises questions about the sort of relationship modern technological societies can and should have with nature. Will we see ecosystems as human habitats, as associations on which human life depends? If so, we will see them as having a holistic integrity that must be protected. Or will we see natural objects as no more than commodities available for use in the production of goods and services? Nature is then seen as a warehouse of consumable supplies.

On the warehouse view, nature is seen as a self-replenishing supply of goods and services; humans assume they can go to it and find what they need when

they need it, drawing on its resources without fear of depletion. If the population of some species falls below a danger point, thereby threatening access to it as a commodity, then that species is "listed" for special concern; it is isolated from normal interaction with humans, saved for future consumption. It is never asked why human beings cannot normally cohabit with other species or why more and more species suffer precipitous declines in population.

The warehouse view is widely held these days. Nature is no longer seen as the human habitat. It is no longer seen as a producer, sustainer, giver of life. Nature can produce, but humanly manipulated monocultures do it more efficiently. Nature can provide an endless variety of genetic resources, but these can be better protected in gene banks. Nature can provide aesthetic experiences, but it's easier to get them in zoos. Humans are not seen as one species, like others, inescapably dependent on natural systems. Technology increasingly insulates humans from the ways in which they depend on nature. Nature becomes not a place to live, but a repository of raw materials to be extracted and used in technological forms of production.

It is not necessary to undertake a metaphysical critique of the nature-as-warehouse approach. The triage formulation of the priorities problem is, in a practical sense, a test case for that approach. The triage formulation is intimately linked with the species-by-species approach to preservation, and the species-by-species ap-

proach is a natural outgrowth of the world view on which nature is seen as a warehouse of raw materials to be protected because they may prove useful in the technological production of commodities or for aesthetic "consumption." But the triage formulation fails. More and more species are threatened by habitat destruction caused by technological advances and by expanding human populations; smaller and smaller proportions of species that require protection will receive it. The triage formulation leads to insoluble problems. Resources are not available to protect, on an individual basis, all the species that will be threatened by a policy permitting wholesale conversion and alteration of natural systems. The world view that sees nature as a warehouse of commodities is simply not, in the long run, compatible with the goal of species preservation.

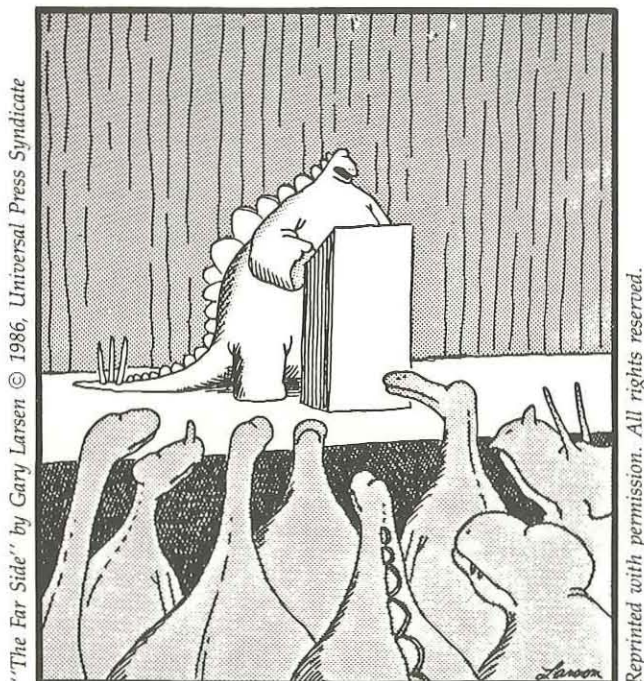
Habitat Protection

Instead of asking, "Which species should be saved?" we should ask instead, "How might agencies best spend the resources available to protect biological diversity?" Habitat or ecosystem protection provides a more promising approach to preserving species than activities designed to protect species individually.

The advantages of a holistic, ecosystem approach are numerous. Protection of large areas from human alteration serves as a reminder that human life grew out of and is sustained by the productive forces of nature. It treats species not as commodities held in waiting, ready at hand to provide goods and services as the need arises, but as having an independent existence of their own, drawing upon resources available in the natural communities to which they also contribute. Habitat protection provides opportunities for encountering species not only in zoos and botanical gardens, but in their natural settings, leaving room for unexpected encounters with other species that can jar the senses and the sensibilities.

Above all, the habitat protection approach has a reasonable chance of success. Funds and efforts expended to protect species by protecting ecosystems and habitats are far more likely to be successful in the long run. In isolation from their habitat, species require great amounts of care. Managers often lack the knowledge and resources necessary to provide substitutes for the services provided naturally in undisturbed ecosystems. The ecosystem approach protects species before they reach critical stages and require individual attention. Addressing the problem in less acute stages leads to more efficiency per dollar spent. Efforts of this sort address not just the problem of how to save species once they have become severely endangered. They address all four forms of the endangered species problem simultaneously, by keeping healthy populations from undergoing decline, by protecting biological diversity generally, and by placing limits on how natural systems are altered for human use.

It would appear, then, that when the question of priorities is posed as one of how best to expend funds



"The Far Side" by Gary Larsen © 1986, Universal Press Syndicate

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"The picture's pretty bleak, gentlemen. ... The world's climates are changing, the mammals are taking over, and we all have a brain about the size of a walnut."

and efforts, the answer is clear. They should be expended to protect as many and as varied types of natural systems as possible.

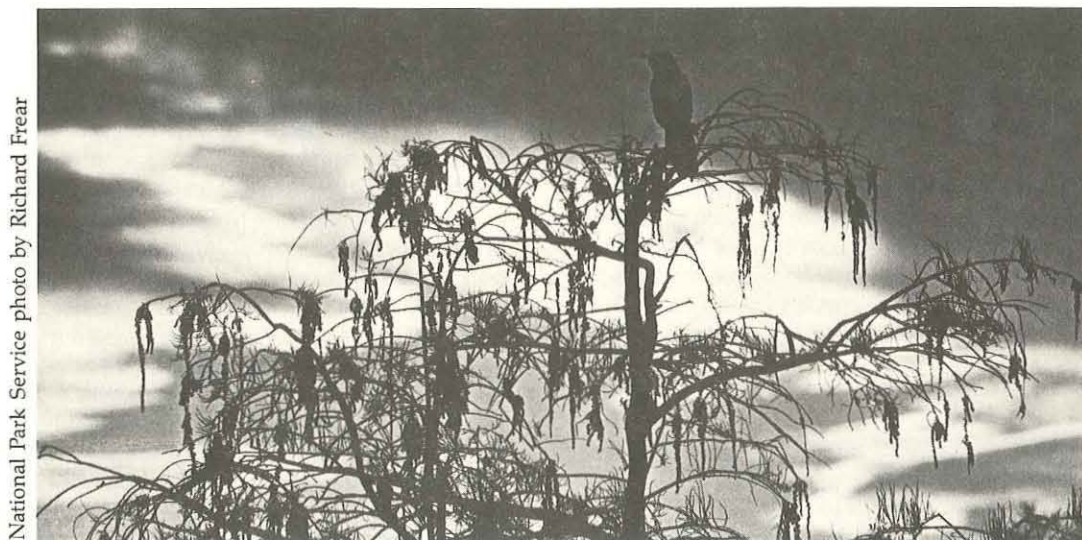
A Comprehensive Effort Outlined

A national effort is necessary to attack all four of the endangered species problems listed above in a coordinated manner. The central offensive in such a campaign should be the protection of habitat. Domestically, this would require development of a set of categories identifying types of habitats and ecosystems and efforts to ensure that several systems of each type in each geographical locale receive protection.

Organizations like the Nature Conservancy and other private ecosystem protection groups have already done much to identify areas where more protection is necessary and have efforts under way to provide it.

the core of a national program of species preservation. The emphasis of the Office of Endangered Species should therefore shift considerably, with less effort expended in listing species and no assumption made that every endangered species be given special protection. Indeed, the listing process might be phased out. This may imply abandoning some species now identified as endangered and allowing events to take their course. But more species will be saved by efforts directed at habitat protection than by efforts to identify, list, and develop recovery programs for each individual endangered species. Scaling down the listing process would, presumably, free resources for a coordinated campaign to protect habitats.

Since the bulk of threatened species are found in other parts of the world, especially in the tropics, a complete endangered species protection policy must



National Park Service photo by Richard Frear

The Florida Everglades

Federal and state governments should cooperate by offering financial assistance, by helping to coordinate ongoing efforts, and above all, by limiting the use of publicly owned lands that are appropriate for habitat protection. Private owners of lands requiring protection could be compensated with other less sensitive and perhaps more economically productive public lands in a program of land trading.

Within this general context, efforts to protect remnant species would retain some considerable place: many species are already too threatened to survive merely through habitat protection and, despite our best efforts to protect their habitats, others are likely to become threatened in the future. When there are recognized reasons for treating a particular species as having special economic, cultural, aesthetic, or ecological value, there are special reasons to protect it, which may justify protection and recovery programs.

But it is a mistake to think of an office devoted to listing and protecting already endangered species as

address the problem globally. Obviously, the U.S. government cannot act unilaterally within the boundaries of another nation. But supported by funds and efforts by the United States, programs of international cooperation could make a tremendous difference in setting aside preserves of undisturbed habitat throughout the world.

It may be protested that the task set is too large, that it would cost too much in lost developmental opportunities. But I believe that, compared to the benefits (considered in the broadest terms over the longest run), a comprehensive policy to protect biological diversity may represent a remarkable bargain for the human species.

—Bryan G. Norton

Bryan G. Norton is professor of philosophy at New College of the University of South Florida. This article is excerpted and adapted from his forthcoming book, *Why Save Natural Variety?* (Princeton University Press, 1987).

Ethics, Agriculture, and the Environment

In a course I have designed on the relationship between agriculture, natural resources, and the environment, I begin by asking the students about their career plans. Are they going into agriculture? Many are: some are studying food processing and packaging; others, pesticide and fertilizer technology; others, commodity trading, storage, and distribution. Some students may be entering areas of innovative agricultural production, e.g., gene transfer, tissue culture, growth hormone research, protoplast fusion, and somatic embryogenesis. Other students may be studying the information or software side of agriculture, e.g., local area network (LAN) design, monitoring and control technologies, satellite base communications, remote sensing, spreadsheet programs, and database management.

I then ask whether any of the students are going into *farming*. For some students, this can be an unsettling, even mystifying, question. What has farming got to do with agriculture? As agriculture becomes more and more an industry, farming is becoming more and more an avocation. My students tend to think of farming as a tough row to hoe to earn a living.

The figures tell the story. From 1980 to 1985, net farm income averaged about \$25 billion per year; government payments, however, account for much of this. (In 1983 alone the government spent \$28 billion on farm price supports and related activities.) Unlike farming, agriculture as a whole remains profitable. Today, on average, only 26 cents of each dollar Americans spend for food reaches the farmer—who passes it along to pay for interest, fertilizer, seed, gasoline, and so on. The other 74 cents go to those who transport, process, and sell it to consumers in finished form.

The distinction between farming and agriculture may be understood historically. Many years ago, farmers grew their own seed; they planted hay to feed the animals which then produced and spread manure and helped to harvest the crops. Biologists Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin observe that this has changed: "Now farmers buy their seed from Pioneer Hybrid Seed Company, their 'mules' from the Ford Motor Company, the 'hay' to feed these 'mules' from Exxon, and the 'manure' from Union Carbide."

One might think of farming, then, as a part of a larger industrial scheme: the farmer purchases materials that are already highly researched and developed, e.g., seed, pesticides, and fertilizer; processes them; and sells the product to transporters and manufacturers who process it still more; until it finally turns up on

the supermarket shelves as Hamburger Helper and Captain Crunch. The profits remain with those who come after the farmer in the manufacturing process or they flow through farmers to their suppliers and creditors. As little as 10 percent of the value added in agriculture is added on the farm.

The distinction between farming and agriculture provides a useful point of departure for a discussion of the ethical and conceptual, in other words, the philosophical, issues arising in the production and distribution of food and fiber.

Production vs. Productivity

The distinction between *production* and farm *productivity* helps put agricultural problems in the context of natural resources policy. Production consists in the total amount (sometimes measured in terms of the current market value) of the commodities produced by a farmer. Productivity, in contrast, refers to a ratio between economic output and input—e.g., the number of bushels of wheat a farmer grows for a given investment in seed, fertilizer, irrigation, labor, and so on.

A hundred years ago, when farmers grew their own seed, produced their own fertilizer, etc., there was little need to distinguish between these two concepts. Nowadays, the distinction is far more significant. Some theorists argue that farmers should emphasize their productivity—they must improve at least their short-term productivity to survive—by increasing their efficiency and bringing down their costs. Other analysts contend that long-term sustainable farm production is more important than immediate gains in productivity, even if that requires farmers to invest, e.g., in water conservation and erosion control.

Controversy thus surrounds productivity and efficiency as goals of farming and of farm policy. Critics contend that the emphasis on efficiency represents a "hair of the dog that bit you" approach to farm management. As farming has become more and more efficient—and farming may be our most efficient industry—the prices paid for farm products have come down to the costs, or have even fallen below the costs, of producing them. Greater efficiency does not necessarily translate into greater profitability for farmers.

It seems, then, that while concepts such as efficiency and productivity may be useful tools for analyzing farm problems, these concepts do not necessarily suggest useful or advisable goals for farm management or

farm policy. What are the alternatives? Are there viable concepts, values, and goals to which we can turn to find alternatives to the efficiency-productivity model—alternatives to the “hair of the dog” approach in agriculture?

Let us look in particular at the problems of erosion, water depletion, and vanishing farmland.

Erosion and Water Resource Depletion

Everyone knows that erosion exists. There is more disagreement on whether erosion is a *problem*. We have a vast surplus capacity for agricultural production. We also can use many substitutes, e.g., hybrid crops and fertilizers, which make up for poor soil. If it is cheaper to use fertilizer, hybrids, etc., than to prevent erosion, why is erosion control appropriate? It is expensive to “save” the soil; if cheaper ways exist to maintain agricultural productivity, why worry about erosion?

One may answer that even if soil is not now a scarce commodity, prudence demands we conserve it nevertheless. Advocates of this position advance the “you never know” argument; in other words, they talk about risk. But the risks are conjectural; indeed, agricultural economists who study erosion tend to dismiss them. Erosion control is expensive and may involve other environmental insults such as those resulting from the increased herbicide use that accompanies no-till agriculture. Does the conjectural risk that erosion may someday limit productivity justify the costly methods of controlling it?

One might also contend that erosion represents a kind of violence or an insult to the land and is therefore morally and aesthetically repugnant even if, from a strictly economic point of view, we can get away with it. We may find it reasonable that a nation that respects its natural heritage should try to limit the degree of erosion by investing in public programs of soil conservation.

One might also contend that erosion represents a kind of violence or an insult to the land and is therefore morally and aesthetically repugnant even if, from a strictly economic point of view, we can get away with it.

The depletion of water resources raises some of the same sorts of issues as the erosion of soil. If we follow an economic analysis, we find, once again, that technological “inputs” may substitute for scarce resources and that, therefore, even as aquifers are depleted, agricultural productivity might nevertheless continue to increase. A large literature recommends a policy instituting transferable property rights to water resources. As one economist argues: “At higher prices people tend to consume less of a commodity and

search for alternative means of achieving their desired ends. Water is no exception.”

One might emphasize ethical notions like responsibility and sustainability, however, rather than economic goals like efficiency and productivity, as reasons to conserve scarce resources. Certain needs, e.g., for a supply of safe and plentiful drinking water, should take priority over other interests, regardless of willingness to pay. Thus municipal drinking water needs might take precedence over recreational uses of water (e.g., swimming pools). What priority might be

Why preserve agricultural land against its conversion to residential and commercial purposes? The “scarcity” response—you never know when you will need to grow food on that land—once again seems rather conjectural...

given to farm usage? Some land would be unsuitable for farming (owing to a dry climate) except for extensive irrigation. There are large agricultural surpluses. How do factors such as these affect the priority of agricultural uses of groundwater?

What shall we say about our obligations to conserve water and other resources for future generations? Here we confront our ignorance about what these future people will be like, what they will want, and what sorts of technologies they might have to assist them. One may approach this problem by searching for a social “discount” rate adequate to estimate the very conjectural interests of these hypothetical people. Or one might approach the problem in a less theoretical way by asking not what choices these people might make themselves but what choices they would respect us for making, as it were, on their behalf.

Vanishing Farmland

Why preserve agricultural land against its conversion to residential and commercial purposes? The “scarcity” response—you never know when you will need to grow food on that land—once again seems rather conjectural, given the surpluses that plague and are likely to continue to plague the agricultural economy. Towns and counties that employ zoning and other techniques to prevent farmers from selling to developers *may* do so because of an altruistic concern with the national capacity to feed future generations and the rest of the world. It is more likely, however, they act to protect their own amenities and to keep out congestion and “sprawl.” Accordingly, we may do well to consider amenity as a reason to protect agricultural land. But what do we mean by “amenity” values?

Are they like ordinary consumer wants and preferences, which compete, say, with other wants and preferences? If we think of “amenity” values as con-

sumer preferences of this sort, we might conclude they are arbitrary from an ethical point of view, or at least that they are no different from an aesthetic or ethical perspective than the wants with which they compete. On this basis, we might leave the disposition of agricultural land to market forces, which will then determine whether a particular area is worth more planted in potatoes or paved over for a parking lot.

On the other hand, we might think of "amenity" values as primarily public or community goals and thus as logically different from the consumer and other preferences of individuals. To understand this, imagine an individual who may not venture into rural areas except, say, to visit an inn or restaurant, and thus who has little personal interest in the protection of farms and farmland. He or she may belong to the majority of Americans who believes, nevertheless, that we are better (i.e., morally—not necessarily economically "better off") as a national community if we have relatively more family farms and relatively fewer stretches of hideous suburban sprawl.

Wildlife and Pesticides

A similar controversy arises over the use of pesticides that may harm wildlife and the environment. While no convincing epidemiological or other evidence linked the pesticide DDT, for example, to human disorders, a preponderance of evidence tied the organochloride to mortality in wildlife populations. Many of the affected wildlife species, for example pelicans, are "useless" in the sense that they serve no economic purpose. Why then should we forgo the many advantages of an inexpensive and effective pesticide like DDT—just to save some birds like pelicans?

William Baxter has written a book directly on this question—although he confuses pelicans with penguins. He writes that he has "no interest in preserving penguins for their own sake." We should protect

penguins, he argues, only insofar as "people enjoy seeing them walk about and . . . the well-being of people would be less impaired by halting the use of DDT than by giving up penguins."

Baxter's economic model cannot account in any straightforward way for the panoply of legislation that protects wildlife and wilderness from exploitation—laws that express a public sense of responsibility, empathy, and love for our national heritage. These statutes, insofar as they do not permit cost-benefit balancing, suggest that we are concerned with vindicating our values and character as a nation and not simply with satisfying our "wants" and "preferences" as individuals. These public values arise from a respect for our surroundings and for ourselves—a sense of dignity inconsistent with the view that we are only self-seeking consumers bent on maximizing "satisfactions."

Public policy for protecting wildlife, like policy for protecting open land, soil, and water, may be justified in either of two ways. We may agree, on the one hand, with Julian Simon, who writes that "the only meaningful measure of scarcity in peacetime is the cost of the good in question." In that event, we are likely to think that an efficient market or, failing that, cost-benefit analysis provides the best way of making "trade-offs" among agricultural and environmental resources.

On the other hand, we may blame the agricultural crisis—e.g., huge surpluses and low prices—and the related problems of environmental deterioration "on our extreme dedication to the goal of maximizing agricultural productivity and wealth." Donald Worster continues: "Almost everything we have celebrated as our success in farming has been defined in terms of those ends. It has now, however, become clear that our ends have been our undoing."

Disagreements about agricultural programs, then, may stem from these two opposing conceptions of public policy. We may do better to recognize the



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legitimacy of both: the importance of markets in allocating resources efficiently and the importance of regulation in expressing the ideals we stand for as a national community.

There is one factor, however, which we should take into account in weighing the pursuit of efficiency and wealth against the protection of environmental and cultural values and amenities. Surplus, not scarcity, is and is likely to remain the scourge of agriculture. Biotechnology, for example, promises greatly to expand our capacity to produce agricultural commodities at low cost. We may look upon environmental protection, then, not only as a "merit" or as an ethical good, but also as an economically justified policy, even when it preserves "useless" species and other resources we may never need to use or consume.

The reason is this: Governmental protection may constrain or limit production, for example, by preventing farmers from depleting aquifers, injuring wildlife, eroding soil, and the like. Environmental protection,

then, may offer a politically palatable way to take resources out of production and thus to limit otherwise runaway surpluses. Thus environmental protection, for this as well as other reasons, seems consistent with an efficient and sustainable agricultural economy. In that sense, our concern as citizens with environmental protection need not compete with but may serve our interest as consumers in inexpensive and plentiful crops.

—Mark Sagoff

Mark Sagoff is research associate at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy. Sources quoted in this article are: Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 211; William Baxter, *People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 5; Julian Simon, "Resources, Population, and the Environment: An Oversupply of False, Bad News," *Science*, June 27, 1980, p. 1, 432; and Donald Worster, "Good Farming and the Public Good," in *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*, edited by Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Coleman (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 32.

Sex, Character, Politics, and the Press

When, after secretly staking out his townhouse for a weekend, the *Miami Herald* revealed that Gary Hart had spent at least much of that time with a young woman, many ordinary people found themselves facing a difficult question.

Who's sleazier—Hart or the *Herald*?

After weeks of further revelations, ruminations, and reflections, some of us have reached a conclusion. The press deserves the prize.

The question is harder than this glib answer suggests. Indeed, the events of the last few weeks demonstrate what a tangle of difficult issues is raised when public figures cavort and journalists report. Is a candidate's sexual behavior relevant to his fitness for the presidency? How does sexual conduct compare with other so-called character issues? Is the issue one of morality or judgment? Does the distinction matter? Even if sex is relevant, does it follow that, as far as press coverage is concerned, all's fair? What role should the press play in deciding what subjects are appropriate for coverage?

Let's begin with what seems to be the pivotal question: is sexual behavior relevant to a person's fitness for political leadership? The question is pivotal because vindication of the press in the Hart incident requires the assumption that sex is relevant.

Surely how we conduct ourselves sexually reveals something about our moral standing as human

beings—about our character. People who use other people sexually, who lead on potential sexual partners, or who deceive those with whom they purport to have an exclusive relationship are morally blameworthy. (We don't know, of course, whether Gary Hart is guilty of any of these things.) Just how harshly we judge such offenses depends on a variety of additional factors: what precautions the person takes against hurting people, how he responds when he does, how continuous the sexual failings are with the rest of his behavior.

This last question is especially important. Sexual behavior is often discontinuous with the rest of personality; sexually, people often behave "out of character." That is because of the special status of sex, the unique place it occupies in our society and our psyches. Our sexual self is powerful, often shadowy and hidden—even from ourselves. Undoubtedly this is partly a social fact about how we as a society treat sexual matters and partly an inescapable psychic truth about human beings. In any case, we cannot draw easy conclusions about character, much less leadership ability, from sexual behavior alone. People who are otherwise above suspicion can behave in strange and not altogether admirable ways sexually.

It is difficult to think of other aspects of personal conduct comparable to sex in this way. Examples presented in recent public opinion polls ("Which would you find

more disturbing in a candidate: adultery or . . . ?") are heavy use of alcohol or drugs and cheating on one's income tax, behavior that may at first sight seem to be in the same boat with sex. Although not obviously political, they tell us something about a person's character. Yet the first indicates something about a person's general reliability and competence; the second tells us about his sense of civic obligation. (The public wisely deemed both more important than adultery.) Both are clearly relevant to a person's fitness to lead in a way sexual conduct is not.

For purposes of judging the qualities of leadership, the only aspect of private behavior that seems com-

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parable to sexual habits is everyday sensitivity and decency: a set of traits we typically invoke when we call or refuse to call someone a "nice guy." There can be no question that whether a person generally treats others around him with respect and compassion reveals something important about his character. Just as clearly, alas, these traits bear little on a person's leadership qualities. It's one of life's poetic injustices that although nice guys don't always finish last, those who finish first, and should, aren't always nice guys. And this suggests perhaps the strongest evidence for the gap between sexual conduct and the virtues of leadership—call it the argument from history. Let us theorize and moralize till we turn blue, it is an undeniable fact that a catalogue of the world's most important and capable leaders—throughout history as well as in America's recent past—would include a startling proportion of adulterers and philanderers, from virtually all the English prime ministers to FDR, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King. What else can we conclude from a hard-headed look at history but that, despite our best hopes and most noble ideals, a statesman might not be someone you would want for your friend?

This discrepancy points to the confusion lurking in all the Hart-inspired talk about character. There's character and character. Our ideal of a good person involves one set of traits, our expectations of a good leader or a good president involve a quite different set. Being a nice guy, sexually or otherwise, is far down on the list and may sometimes even get in the way of other traits we value much more in the political realm.

So sexual behavior is not, I conclude, relevant to one's fitness for political office. Part of me is sad to have to conclude this, for it would be nice if all the virtues went

together, if those with sufficient drive and fortitude and whatever else it takes to lead millions were also always good mommies or daddies and faithful spouses. But it just ain't so.

Some of Hart's critics and the press's defenders will agree. At this point the terms of the debate shift: it's not Hart's morals that are in question, we are told, but his judgment. Certainly his taunt to journalists to follow him was not smart. But beyond that? If it wasn't the dalliances themselves that disqualified him, it was instead, these critics say, his lack of discretion and his failure to see that "womanizing" had become an issue in his campaign requiring careful attention to appearances.

But there is something deeply wrong with this argument. At least one president, we hear, had his many women in the White House. Was that discreet? Discreet enough, apparently, because in those days reporters did not mention such things even when they knew them; it was not considered appropriate or relevant. But now, it will be said, it is thought appropriate or relevant, and Hart knew this. The standards of discretion and thus of judgment have changed.

But although this answer has some plausibility, it assigns ultimate responsibility in the wrong place. If Hart's judgment is poor, that is because the press has introduced a change in the rules; if sexual behavior and leadership ability have no connection, it has changed them for the worse. Perhaps not seeing that the rules have changed is poor judgment. But what sort of judgment is at issue here? Is it the intelligence and discernment necessary for negotiating with the Soviets or forging trade policy with Japan? Or is it merely image management—the ability to manipulate the press by acceding to its own manipulations? We ought to know better, after the last six years, than to set much store by that.

What can journalists say in defense of the new rules? One argument is that the public wants to know about the private lives of candidates and that journalists are

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just carrying out the public's will. But there is no evidence that people are more interested in these matters than they ever were. And even if they were, that does not amount to a license to snoop. What the public would like to know and what it has a right to know are two different things.

The more common defense of the press is slightly different: not that the public necessarily wants to know this or that but that the job of reporters is, simply, to

publish the news and leave it up to the public to decide what is important and relevant. People may not have a right to know what goes on in the politician's bedroom, it may be said, but they have a right to vote on the basis of any damn thing they please.

So they do—legally, at least. No one can jail you for voting on the basis of shoe size. Morally, however, things are otherwise. We have a duty to do our best to purge our decisions of obvious irrationalities and irrelevancies. And—more to the present point—that goes for journalists too. Since the press cannot cover everything, it must choose, select, decide, edit, omit, emphasize. Every single day journalists are confronted with the question "What is important?"; every single day they must take responsibility for the answers they give. The idea that "the news" is something out there waiting to be appropriated like apples on the supermarket shelf is blind to the crucial processes of decision and selection that are behind the morning paper and the nightly newscast. And it is blind to the inescapable fact that the relationship between the public's opinions, demands, and expectations of politicians and what the press covers is not a one-way street. It is not so much that the press covers the private lives of politicians because that is now an "issue" as that the press has *made* it an issue by covering it.

After the spectacle at which reporters asked Gary Hart whether he had ever committed adultery, Craig

Whitney, Washington bureau chief of the *New York Times*, defended the press by asserting that "There's no question that should be regarded as out of bounds. Let's ask about it, whatever it is, and then determine whether it's news." How naive can you get? Which of the following answers to the question "Have you ever committed adultery?" would the press *not* consider news: (a) Yes; (b) No; (c) It's none of your business? In such matters, you don't "determine whether it's news" after you get the answer; you determine that it will be news *in the very act of asking the question*. That fact has as much to do with people's natural curiosity and the love of gossip as with anything. But to acknowledge this does not let the press off the hook.

It is the failure by the press to admit its own crucial and determinative role in the political process that is revealed as the gravest lapse in the Hart incident. Whether one thinks the lapse is one of "ethics" or "judgment" depends on whether one thinks that journalists understand their power but refuse, for their own reasons, to acknowledge it, or that they are simply ignorant of the nature of their business. Either way, the lapse is inexcusable.

—Judith Lichtenberg

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