Introducing a Policy Turn in *Environmental Philosophy*

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Indulge for a moment in a bit of reminiscence, a recollection of stories we were told in our philosophical infancy. Recall the story Plato told through the voice of Socrates, about the Thracian maidservant who "exercised her wit at the expense of Thales, when he was looking up to study the stars and tumbled down a well. She scoffed at him for being so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he could not see what lay at his feet."[1] Philosophers will always seem laughable, Plato told us, from the slavish perspective of non-philosophers.

Recall, too, the tale that Aristotle told about Thales:

> He was reproached for his poverty, which was supposed to show that philosophy was of no use. According to the story, he knew by his skill in the stars while it was yet winter that there would be a great harvest of olives in the coming year; so, having a little money, he gave deposits for the use of all the olive-presses in Chios and Miletus, which he hired at a low price because no one bid against him. When the harvest-time came, and many were wanted all at once and of a sudden, he let them out at any rate which he pleased, and made a quantity of money. Thus he showed the world that philosophers can easily be rich if they like, but that their ambition is of another sort.[2]

From Plato we learned that laughter directed at philosophers reveals only the laugher's own ignorance. From Aristotle we learned that philosophers are more than capable of having the last laugh, if such were our ambition. But our ambition is, generally, of another sort – philosophy is a higher calling, and the philosopher stoops to the level of practicality, if at all, only to make the point that concern for practical matters is no concern of philosophy and of no use to philosophers.

From the beginning philosophy has enjoyed, even cultivated, a reputation for practical irrelevance. Indeed, most contemporary philosophers, agreeing with Heidegger's criticism of the productivist metaphysics that dominates our era, follow in the footsteps of Thales and wend their way along the path of pure philosophy. At a time when the pressures of the entrepreneurial university bear down on upon us, increasing the demand for practical (that is, economically demonstrable) results, what could be more radical than simply following the native progression of our own thinking? Philosophy for philosophy's sake! And if a bone must be thrown to the public—or to the state legislature—one can turn to Hegel, and note that through the cunning of reason the single greatest way for philosophy to be relevant is for it to be allowed to single-mindedly pursue its own path. Applied philosophy leads only to shallow insights; only radical (that is, root) thinking goes to the heart of the matter, *Die Sache selbst*.

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[1] Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford in *Plato: the Collected Dialogues including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Fourteenth Printing, 1989) p. 879, 174a5-8.

[2] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, trans. B. Jowett in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: the Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI:2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, Fourth Printing, 1991), p. 1998, 1259a9-19.

Whatever their personal inclinations or professional areas of specialization, philosophers have not made the question of how to make philosophy relevant part of their philosophical research. While acknowledging the charms of pure philosophy, we believe this represents a serious failing – especially for environmental philosophers. To address this defect, with this issue *Environmental Philosophy* begins a regular feature that explores the theoretical and practical dimensions of the relationship between philosophy (and more broadly, the humanities) and society.

Three years ago we christened the philosophical project of examining how philosophy and the humanities contribute to societal decision making "humanities policy."[3] Since humanities policy is self-consciously based on an analogy with the field of science policy, a brief digression seems in order. Science policy examines the relation between the production of scientific knowledge and its use by society. Working from a distinction made by Harvard physicist Harvey Brooks in 1964, science policy examines both "science for policy" – how expert scientific knowledge affects society in terms of how this knowledge is taken up and used by societal decision makers – and policy for science – how societal attitudes toward and support for science affect the production of scientific knowledge. Ideally, decision makers would take the expert advice of scientists on questions such as the best scientific design of the Kyoto Treaty ("science for policy"). In order to keep the flow of scientific information coming, decision makers would support further scientific research (policy for science") on matters of public concern. In the case of climate change research, the U.S. government since 1990 has spent more than $30 billion.[4]

Since the end of World War II, during which scientists worked with the U.S. government to great effect, most notably in the development of the atomic bomb, America has presumed a symbiotic relationship, or even a contract, between science and society. In 1945 Vannevar Bush (no relation to the presidents) wrote *Science: the Endless Frontier*, which quickly became the founding document for the public funding of science in the U.S., leading to the creation of the U.S. National Science Foundation and other public science agencies. Bush, Director of the WWII Office of Scientific Research and Development and co-founder of Raytheon, claimed that fundamental scientific breakthroughs occur most often when scientists are funded and then left to pursue their creative impulses.

What came to be known as the social contract between science and society turned on this bargain. Scientists are funded and left to pursue what Bush termed "basic" scientific research, creating a reservoir of knowledge that society can later draw upon and "apply" for its own purposes. Indeed, his coinage of the term "basic" in place of "pure" was a masterful rhetorical stroke, combining images of both science for its own sake and science as foundational to social action. The "central alchemy" of how the former translates into the latter was left as largely a matter of faith.[5] This fundamental faith in the symbiotic relationship between science and society has been enshrined within our nation's science policy for the last 60 years. As Scott Pelley's recent *60 Minutes* piece on the friction between NASA climatologist James Hansen and

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[3] See the humanities policywebsite, at http://humanitiespolicy.unt.edu/. A related effort, New Directions (http://www.ndsciencehumanitiespolicy.org/), was conceived as a *theoretical-practical* project of understanding and contributing to policy formation.

[4] See Robert Frodeman, "The Policy Turn in Environmental Philosophy," in *Environmental Ethics*, Spring 2006, Volume 28, Number 1, p. 10.

[5] See Gerald Holton "From the Endless Frontier to the Ideology of Limits," in *Limits of Scientific Inquiry*, Gerald Holton and Robert Morison, eds. (New York: WW Norton and Company), p.p. 227-242.

members of the Bush Administration demonstrates, we consider it newsworthy when scientists and decision makers conflict instead of cooperate.[6]

The present essay inaugurates a commitment to devote a small part of *Environmental Philosophy* to reflection on how we can better engage scientists and decisionmakers already involved in their own conversation about the environment. Now, treating the question of the relation between (environmental) philosophy and society as itself a philosophic question may seem odd. It could even provoke a chorus of nay-saying responses from purists who cut their teeth on stories told by Plato and Aristotle. Socrates, after all, was executed for engaging the citizens of Athens in philosophical conversation. For goodness' sake, have you all gone mad?! Aren't we in enough trouble already? Perhaps. Nonetheless, we offer a few reasons in favor of this new enterprise, as well as a brief description of some of the implications widening our conversation might entail, both for environmental philosophy and for environmental policy.

We begin by noting that humanities policy is a meta-philosophical or *theoretical* exercise. What we are describing here must not be placed under the rubric of applied philosophy. The failing of applied philosophy is that it assumes that the philosophical work has already been completed. In contrast, our claim is that some theoretical insights only manifest themselves via practice. This sees philosophy as consisting of an internal, dialectical relation between theory and practice. Put alternatively: in order to further advance in its theorizing philosophy needs to be taken into the field.[7]

Second, higher education today faces a number of pressures that could portend the end of what philosophers and academics have long considered their birthright. Budgetary pressures at both the local and federal level are encouraging both university administrators and legislatures to turn toward distance education, web-based course content, and the outsourcing of teaching beyond the borders of the individual university. Philosophy's 2500 year tradition of free thought may count for little with legislators who see an opportunity to save money by the further marginalization of a field with no practical use.

In response to such points, we outline three facets of humanities policy that could prove useful to all parties involved. The first aspect is the notion of "humanities for policy."[8] This is not only analogous to "science for policy," but actually stems from flaws inherent in the above-mentioned contract between science and society. One of the presumptions of that contract is that science will offer predictive certainty upon which to base public policy, thus clearing away the morass of political debates over values. This assumption has been roundly critiqued by many in the science policy research community. For example, in an article titled "How Science Makes Environmental Controversies Worse," Daniel Sarewitz argues the presumption of predictive certainty actually exacerbates political gridlock, as science often reveals a rich enough picture of nature to support competing policy options. In his words, there is an "excess of objectivity" that tends to "scientize" political controversies as participants argue over technical details rather than discussing their conflicting values positions. His conclusion is that "the values bases of disputes underlying environmental controversies must be fully articulated and adjudicated…before

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[6] Scott Pelley's piece, "Rewriting the Science," aired March 19, 2006 on *60 Minutes*. See: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/03/17/60minutes/main1415985.shtml for a transcript.

[7] Cf. Robert Frodeman, *Geo-Logic: Breaking Ground between Philosophy and the Earth Sciences* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 2003.

[8] Frodeman, et al., "Humanities Policy—and a Policy for the Humanities." *Issues in Science and Technology*, Fall 2003, p. 29-32.

science can play an effective role in resolving environmental problems."[9] Roger Pielke Jr. and Steve Rayner make a similar claim as they point out that "science is the trump card that we play in disputes about values."[10]

There is, then, within the policy studies community an implicit call for a *humanities* policy to serve as a natural complement of science policy. By engaging scientists and decision makers confronted with politicized and scientized environmental issues, philosophers can help articulate and assess the values that drive environmental debates. Philosophy and the humanities, with their explicit treatment of values – better said, meanings – can offer vital contributions to conversations in which moral, political, aesthetic, ontological, and theological claims are currently either treated as irrational preferences or argued through science.

In a previous edition of *Environmental Philosophy*, one of us (Briggle) applied the idea of humanities for policy in the context of a proposed wind farm.[11] There the notion of a Joint Values Finding commission was proposed as a way in which humanists could collaborate with stakeholders to clarify and evaluate aesthetic values. Briggle argued that these values actually drove the wind power debate, even while the Environmental Impact Statement process encouraged a proxy dispute about science and economics that exacerbated misunderstandings and political gridlock.

These reflections raise the second aspect of humanities policy, namely, "policy for the humanities." If philosophers and humanists are to contribute to conversations with scientists and decisionmakers, how must their education change in order to foster the development of these skills? For example, coursework in environmental philosophy might move to strike a balance between the conceptual richness of the canonical essays and the practical heuristic value of contemporary policy case studies. Or internships for philosophers with government agencies and interdisciplinary collaborations with scientists could be useful additions to traditional coursework. Indeed, developing an improved interdisciplinary pedagogy is a pressing issue for environmental philosophers eager to demonstrate the relevance of their work. Our hope is that *Environmental Philosophy* will become in part a forum for exchanging ideas on how best to educate future philosophers trained to engage decisionmakers and scientists.

Along with such curricular questions, another important matter is that of government support for the humanities. Within the U.S., less than 1% of the investment of public resources in knowledge is devoted to the fields comprising the humanities. The ratio of National Science Foundation (NSF) to National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding went from 5:1 in 1979 to 33:1 in 1997, and President Bush's fiscal year 2007 budget request for NSF totals $6 billion, compared to $141 million requested for NEH, a ratio of over 42:1.

The most prominent inclusion of the humanities in public policy matters comes from the field of bioethics. Most important are federal bioethics committees and the Ethical, Legal, and Societal Impacts (ELSI) research program as part of the now completed Human Genome Project. These endeavors have caused critics to raised criticisms about the humanities, which are often seen as simply irrelevant to the frantic pace of public policy in a high-tech world. At other times, the humanities are accused of playing an "alibi" function, providing a legitimizing cover to the

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[9] Daniel Sarewitz, "How Science Makes Environmental Controversies Worse," *Environmental Science and Policy*, 2004, vol. 7, no. 5, pp. 385-403, quote on p. 385.

[10] Roger Pielke, Jr. and Steve Rayner, "Editor's Introduction," *Environmental Science and Policy*, 2004, vol. 7, no. 5, pp. 355-356, quote on p. 355.

[11] Adam Briggle, "Visions of Nantucket: The Aesthetics and Policy of Wind Power," *Environmental Philosophy*, 2005, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 54-67.

inevitable dictates of the technological and market imperatives. Moreover, since philosophy and the humanities critically *assess* values (rather than just survey them), there is also the threat that humanists could seek to become philosopher kings, defining the ethically "correct" decision and usurping democratic powers. If decisionmakers often face what Sarewitz termed an excess of objectivity, they also confront an excess of subjectivity, insofar as our society tends to treat values as emotive preferences to be traded-off (opinion polls as a kind of market watch) but not critically examined and improved. Our societal failure to distinguish between the tolerance of diverse opinions and abject relativism invites caution as well as action: any endeavor that seeks to include philosophy (or philosophers as "experts") in environmental policy contexts will invite perceptions of moral authoritarianism. Care must be taken to craft a policy for the humanities that is sensitive to matters of social legitimacy and public inclusion.

The above reflections suggest the humanities are indeed relevant to matters of environmental policy and that efforts should be taken to make them even more so. These efforts can help decisionmakers, scientists, and the public. They can also expand opportunities for humanists to contribute to society. Yet talk of relevance and utility can be taken too far. Many humanists, we think, will rightly cringe at an *excessive* linkage between the world of environmental policy and environmentally-related humanistic reflection. The humanities at their best turn our attention toward beauty and excellence, thus lifting our gaze above matters of mere utility. The humanities involve education in and toward culture, where culture is understood as a cultivation of our capabilities and nobler natures. We do not suggest that the significance of great books or works of art only turns on their ability to demonstrate their relevance or utility to decision making.

Thus we propose a third facet of these efforts that could be called "policy humanism." Talk of using the humanities for policy formation has something of a positivistic ring. We thus want to emphasize that insights derived from humanistic reflection are often indirect, something other than "just the facts" – more of an art than a science, as much a matter of changing the atmosphere of a conversation as introducing a new propositional content. Policy humanism takes a long-term view of the engagement of the humanities with policy. Policy humanism is not about providing quick fixes to urgent needs. It is rather an invitation for reflection on the deeper meanings that are often lost in the details of environmental policy. Policy humanism is also a call to greater open-mindedness and a more civil discourse. These may be the most appropriate contributions in situations where the tragic limitations of politics distort or truncate the public sphere.

Policy humanism allows us to see the machinery of policy formation within the wider whole of public culture. Works such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden,* Ansel Adams' photographs, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring,* Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac,* and Jacques Cousteau's television series *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* contribute to the wider social context and have impacts that stretch across time. They serve an educational and consciousness transforming role. As Martin Heidegger argued, works of art disclose the world in a way that awakens us to truth. Individual policies do not operate in isolation from these wider cultural forces, although their contribution is often quite subterranean and indirect.

In conclusion: the notion of humanities policy involves a theoretical account of how we might integrate the humanities with issues of public policy via a practical engagement of scholars across the humanities in a conversation that simultaneously invites non-academics within and takes us beyond the walls of academe. With regard to environmental philosophy, such integration involves more than a simple "application" of philosophical methodology to

environmental issues (a procedure that is often all-too-limited in its applicability to a select few "experts" in the field). An environmentally focused humanities policy would involve, we suggest, (1) turning some of our attention toward actual policy issues and engaging those who formulate actual environmental policy (environmental philosophy for policy); (2) re-orienting our educational strategies to expose our students not only to the canonical literature of environmental philosophy, but also to current debates within science policy, as well as finding ways to facilitate their involvement with scientists and decisionmakers (policy for environmental philosophy); and (3) providing a bit of perspective, for ourselves, for our students, indeed for all of humanity, about our place in the world (what we have called "policy humanism," but in terms of the environment, what we feel would be appropriate to term, in the broadest sense, environmental philosophy).

In closing, we recall one more story from our philosophical youth, this one told to us by Heidegger, who heard it from Aristotle.[12] One day, some strangers came to visit Heraclitus and found him warming himself by the stove in his kitchen. They stood dumbstruck, flummoxed at the incongruity between their great expectations of their encounter with the famous thinker and the banality of the actual event. Their prejudices received another unexpected jolt when Heraclitus, seeing their consternation, bid them enter without fear, "For here, too, the gods are present." Engagement with the average everydayness of environmental policy does not rise to the level of our current expectations of philosophy . . . but here, too, the gods are present.

3282 words

[12] See Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1977), p.p. 233-34. The story appears in Aristotle's *Parts of Animals*, 645a17-21. Aristotle recounts the story as a defense of the idea that "every realm of nature is marvelous," even that of the lower animals.