

Can Environmental Ethics ‘Solve’ Environmental Problems and Save the World? Yes, but First We Must Recognise the Essential Normative Nature of Environmental Problems

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ABSTRACT

What is the nature of environmental problems? This article attempts to illuminate this question by exploring the relationship between environmental ethics, environmental problems and their solution. It does this by examining and criticising the argument contained in a recent issue of *Environmental Values* asserting that environmental ethics does not have a role to play in solving environmental problems. The major point made in this rebuttal article is that environmental problems are essentially normative in nature. Therefore, normative discourse, and environmental ethics in particular, *do* have a crucial role to play in environmental thought and action. The discussion concludes with the judgment that a failure to recognise this essential contribution of normative discourse to environmentalism by committing a conservative empirical reductionism of environmental problems is detrimental to the necessary ethical and social change required to save the world.

KEY WORDS

Environmental problems, normative discourse, ethical change, social change

‘[Reflecting on Socrates’s death] ... it [philosophy] seems to be the most potent force of social change imaginable ... In thinking, talking, and writing about environmental ethics, environmental philosophers already have their shoulders to the wheel, helping to reconfigure the prevailing cultural worldview and thus helping to push general practice in the direction of environmental responsibility.’

J. Baird Callicott (1995: 19, 34)

‘... environmental ethics do not have a major contribution to make to the solution of environmental problems ... It is because the solution of environmental problems may not rest on ethical change. Thus the type of ethical argument and discussion that is characteristic of environmental ethics, and that could, perhaps, contribute to ethical change, has no obvious part to play.’

Barnabas Dickson (2000: 148,149)

1. INTRODUCTION

Barnabas Dickson’s recent contribution to *Environmental Values* (Dickson, 2000) focuses upon the ultimate issue for environmental ethics, environmental political theory, and environmental public policy-making and analysis: how to ‘save the world’,¹ or, as Dickson prefers to put it, how to ‘solve environmental problems’.² In order to pursue this profound environmental challenge facing all living beings, Dickson centres his discussion upon the possible relation between environmental ethics and environmental problems, and whether ethical inquiry can contribute to the latter’s solution. Although I have specific points of difference and major reservations about Dickson’s argument, I certainly acknowledge the fundamental philosophical and policy (and, therefore, practical) significance of Dickson’s chosen theme. Thus, I wish to commend his effort for drawing our attention to the study of the nature of environmental problems and how to remedy them.

However, I oppose Dickson’s conclusion that ‘environmental ethics do not have a major contribution to make to the solution of environmental problems’ and that ‘the solution of environmental problems may not rest on ethical change’ (Dickson, 2000: 148, 149). Instead, I contend that humanity will not be able to save the world from environmental catastrophe unless and until the normative³ (including environmental ethical) nature of environmental problems is recognised. Once this understanding of the value-based nature of environmental problems is achieved, I maintain, contrary to Dickson, that the reply to his inquiry into the possible significance of environmental ethics to solving (in all of its possible senses) environmental problems (and Gunn’s question about environmental ethics saving the world) is profoundly and necessarily in the affirmative. I believe environmental ethics *can* solve environmental problems and save the world but first the essential normative nature of environmental problems and their solution must be recognised. Environmental ethics as a normative philosophical inquiry about how humanity should ethically live on our finite planet *can* – and, I would add, *pace* Dickson, *must* – contribute to our comprehension of and effective response (‘solution?’) to the urgent environmental problems we confront at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴

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The aim of this essay, therefore, is to examine Dickson's analysis of the foundational environmental ethics/environmental problem relation. In doing so, I hope to articulate a rationally convincing view that will persuade readers of this journal to appreciate the fundamental role that environmental ethics *and* the requisite 'ethical [and social] change' of the dominant modern social values and institutions must play if our world is to be saved. Therefore, contrary to Dickson's negative conclusion, environmental ethics should be accorded importance in the study of environmental problems and their solution. Moreover, this importance lies in the key social betterment function of normative discourse within all of its various realms. In this instance, it is no hyperbole to say that the consequences involved in environmental questions and the debate over their nature and resolution could not be more profound (hence the superlative value of environmental ethics): the fate of our planet and all of its living inhabitants lies in the balance.

2. DICKSON'S PRESENTATION AND THE NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Dickson's discussion is devoted to challenging the ethical – and, by implication, the general normative – conception of environmental problems and its corresponding definition of the solutions to such problems, and, thereby, devaluing the work of environmental ethicists. (Dickson, 2000: 127–8, 147–9). In his Introduction (Dickson, 2000: 127–9), he attempts to analyse normative environmental claims into two standard morally obligatory (revealingly, he omits any statement about values or prescriptions) and underlying empirical claims: those about the causes of environmental problems, and those about the solution to such problems (Dickson, 2000: 127–8).⁵ Here, I argue, Dickson's implied understanding of the nature of normative discourse as a whole, and environmental ethics in particular, is misleading and detracts from the rational persuasiveness of his argument. I contend that regarding the alleged empirical aspects of environmental ethical discourse he erroneously reduces environmental ethical propositions to claims about the '... general *attitudes* of individuals towards the environment [that] are an important factor in the causation of environmental problems (Dickson, 2000: 127, my emphasis).⁶

Dickson's confusion between values and attitudes may be seen in its clearest manifestation, where he asserts that the environmental ethicists under examination (Leopold, White, and Passmore) '... share the ethicist view that solutions rest on a change of attitude' (2000: 133). On the contrary, environmental ethicists distinctively, *as environmental ethicists*, argue for a change in values (as Gunn and Callicott prescribe) through rational dialogue, not a change of attitudes, let alone, particular attitudes about social causation: Dickson seems to ignore this

profound difference. Here (and throughout his discussion) Dickson implicitly denies the quintessential value assessment and prescriptive nature of normative discourse; alas, this is an error common in our scientific and value-noncognitivist modern culture, sceptical of the rationality of normative discourse.

What is definitive about normative discourse is not the unavoidable and implied empirical component to value claims (obvious since normative discourse is about human actions in the world: the 'ought implies can' principle is an important empirical constraint upon normative prescriptions and judgments), but the value aspect of this discourse is definitely *not* about people's attitudes, existing preferences, feelings or 'senses' (a prominent term in Dickson's purportedly empirical analysis of modern '*normative responsibility*' [2000: 139–42, my emphasis]; an especially odd term to use and concept to analyse with Dickson's non-normative empirical approach).

Now, metaethical battles over the epistemological status of ethical claims are many decades old and still raging, but they are absent from Dickson's account as he appears to presuppose an empirical reductionism of the heart of normative discourse in a question-begging manner. Ethics, as cognitivists would argue, is essentially not about attitudes, senses or causes; the empirical sciences, in their empirical descriptions and causal explanations, address these empirical issues. If Dickson's subject is truly to be the valuable and needed theme of: '*The Ethicist Conception of Environmental Problems*', then a correct understanding of the normative nature, including prescriptive, assessment and obligatory claims, of ethics and environmental problems is necessary in distinction to 'the scientific conception of environmental problems'. It is concerning the latter that there is a consensus and no shortage of analyses by the many environmental scientists working within several scientific disciplines. This misunderstanding of the normative nature of ethics weakens Dickson's discussion.

The empirical *feasibility* of the ethical assessments and prescriptions for value and social changes made by environmental ethicists is an important but different mode of discourse, though one may consider it a constituent portion of ethical discourse that consists of dual components: theoretical normative and scientific discourse, with the latter including feasibility, or the practical application or implementation phase of our chosen values. Causal analysis is epistemologically different from normative analysis to an ethical cognitivist. While the precise nature of rational normative discourse is a major issue of controversy in metanormative theory (especially in metaethics), students of first-order environmental ethics, I contend, maintain the belief in the rationality of the discourse they are engaging in. This omission and the resulting confusion about the nature of environmental ethical discourse leads fundamentally, I believe, to Dickson's flawed conclusion denying the value of this discourse's contribution to the solution of environmental problems because he misunderstands what environmental ethics is (and what virtually all environmental ethicists consider to be their subject matter). This leads to an inadequate

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understanding of the normative component to environmental problems and their solution. I fear that Dickson's discussion of environmental ethics and its possible contribution to the solutions of environmental problems sets up a straw man, erroneously rejecting of the central place of environmental ethics, ethical and social change in addressing successfully the urgent environmental challenges facing humanity and all living creatures on Earth in the twenty-first century. I conclude that one cannot have it both ways: be only scientific and causal in intention, and yet aspire to characterise and assess normative environmental ethical inquiry without being vulnerable to the charge of misrepresenting one's subject.⁷

In discussing philosophy's role in achieving solutions to problems, and environmental ethicists' specific recommendations for solving environmental problems, Dickson refers to Aldo Leopold and his prescription for a new ethic which Dickson calls 'ethical change' (2000: 128–9). Clearly, one main objective of all ethicists, including environmental ethicists, is to assess the dominant social values, institutions, and practices that are currently in force. Then, from these assessments, to make prescriptions for improvements where the need for such changes is deemed rationally warranted.

The following statement by Dickson about Leopold is significant: 'Leopold assumes that the new ethic will be *inculcated* by education ...' (2000: 129, my emphasis). This last phrase is important. Dickson goes on to discuss his interpretation of Leopold's beliefs about ethical change and the implied process of social 'inculcation'. Once again, Dickson's understanding of normative discourse and its rationality detract from his argument here. Environmental ethicists, like all ethicists, make value assessments and prescriptions, and provide rational defences for them with the aim of accomplishing rational persuasiveness and adoption for their arguments. Such persuasiveness should be based on the adduced reasoned evidence, thereby rationally producing the prescribed changes in human thought and action. Ideally, this process includes the rational normative dialogue with the important give-and-take of criticism and response, not 'inculcation'. The ordinary meaning of the word, 'inculcation' is not part of the philosophical process of rational persuasiveness based on reason-giving, criticism, and evidence provision and assessment. This use of 'inculcation' here implies the whole panoply of modern society's uniquely powerful and non-rational means to get its citizens to hold certain beliefs bringing to mind the infamously extreme 'thought control' of George Orwell, in the institutions of education and mass media. Sociologists term these social institutions 'socialising agents', accomplishing the socialisation (or 'inculcation') process for children that continues into adulthood.

Such modern 'inculcation' is a far cry from what ethical philosophers, including environmental ethicists, intend by the rational critical process for the claims in their field. (If Dickson's interpretation of Leopold's view here were correct, then Leopold's position could be faulted from an environmental ethical

standpoint; and, if that were the case, then Leopold's work would not truly represent, as Dickson maintains, this mode of ethical discourse.)

The nature and achievement of environmental education is a very challenging subject within environmental ethics, and environmentalism in general. Many environmental ethicists hold that radical social changes must occur if environmental disaster is to be averted and our world saved, but how do we get citizens to be environmentally informed so that they will properly prioritise and adopt environmental values? This is a vital contemporary question for environmental education and mass communication students to pursue. In modern industrial societies, life's meaning is preoccupied by ecologically damaging material consumption requiring the radical value and social changes Callicott speaks about. Nonetheless, the specific *ethical* assessment of *why* the consumer society is undesirable from an environmental ethical viewpoint is a different subject and realm of discourse. *How to implement prescribed value and social institutional changes in the existing modern social order needs to be distinguished from how to demonstrate rationally that such value and social changes are ethically required, and why.* The first question is an empirical problem of feasibility, administration, and the creation of new social institutions (including, perhaps, 'social inculcation' if one chooses this method of social change, as Dickson says of Leopold). Dickson does not discuss this method's superiority to alternative instruments of social change, such as participatory democracy, or community discussion and debate.

The second question is a normative problem; for example: 'Should our society, and if so, why, have a new Land Ethic, as Leopold prescribes?' It requires appropriate normative argument in its defence if it is to be rationally persuasive. Adequate discussion of the normative merits of Leopold's prescription of a new Land Ethic involving changes in social values and structure requires distinctively normative discourse (including ethics, politics and possibly aesthetics). Regrettably, I must conclude that Dickson's inadequate appreciation of this point decreases the persuasiveness of his position.

The heart of Dickson's essay is the critique of environmental ethics' value as he conceives it. After briefly reviewing the works of several environmental ethicists – Leopold, White, Passmore, Callicott, Gunn and Hargrove (Dickson, 2000: 129–36) – Dickson concludes that these environmental philosophers, taken as illustrative of the whole subfield of environmental ethics, '... purport to tell us something about the causes and solutions of all environmental problems' (2000: 136).⁸ Furthermore, Dickson goes on to accuse these philosophers of making claims that are 'very wide in scope' and 'formulated very loosely' (2000: 136). Unfortunately, this is a sweeping charge that could not be defended adequately in the space provided. It would take much more extensive textual analyses and arguments than Dickson provides (devoting a mere seven pages to six theorists!) to defend persuasively his criticisms of imprecision for all six of these environmental ethicists' many works.

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Dickson distils the purported environmental ethical content of these environmental philosophers to their views on the 'causes and solutions of *all* environmental problems' in a very brief discussion where he supplies brief summaries of each ethicist's view (see 2000: 129–36). He repeatedly discusses these ethicists' positions on the necessary 'changes of attitude', but only once does he mention their views on values (and in this one exception, already cited earlier [2000: 134], he immediately transforms this reference to attitudes).

Dickson's next main goal is to raise four questions about the selected environmental positions taken by the ethicists he examines in order to assess 'the philosophical work in environmental ethics' (Dickson, 2000: 148). Not surprisingly, given Dickson's empirical orientation, all four questions are about factual claims concerning the attitudinal causes of environmental problems, not the normative content nor reasoned support for the ethicists' prescribed environmental values. Dickson asks of these ethicists' work: (1) Were these attitudes held in the past or currently? (2) Are such problematic attitudes directly or indirectly causally related to environmental consequences? (3) Whose attitudes, and how large is the number of people who hold such attitudes? and, (4) How important are these attitudes in solving environmental problems? (2000: 136–7). All of these questions posed by Dickson are about empirical phenomena and their causes, and, therefore, require scientific inquiry and data. Why these issues are significant to environmental *ethics*, and normative ethical inquiry as a whole, is not addressed by Dickson.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS' SOCIAL EFFICACY AND SOCIAL CHANGE WITHIN MODERNITY

Dickson's account raises some key philosophical issues about the nature of normative discourse in general (even if this is not his stated focus), and environmental ethical discourse in particular: their subject matter; the type of claims made by their users; the latter's mode of reasoning; and, perhaps, most importantly to Dickson's conclusion on the non-relevance of environmental ethics to environmental problems' solution in modern society: the practical, real-world significance of such philosophical value discourse. In contradistinction to Dickson, I believe that it is precisely because of the urgent status of environmental problems and their normative nature that the philosophical branch of environmental ethics holds immense practical consequences despite its highly abstract and theoretical nature (as is true for all ethical, and normative discourse, in general).

On this important point, Callicott's reference to Socrates in his discussion of environmental ethics' role in achieving social change is instructive.⁹ As the Athenian accusers of Socrates recognised, changes in social ideas and values, especially in the vaunted paradigm shifts and value revolutions, or merely the

threat of such changes, *do* seriously matter socially. The high intensity of social conflicts over environmental (ethical, political theoretical, aesthetic and theological) problems and policy reflect the social power of normative discourse. Callicott offers a counter to Dickson's view about the role of environmental ethics as social change catalyst when he says:

People come to believe that old norms ... should be abandoned, and new ones adopted ... only when their most fundamental ideas about themselves and the world undergo radical change. Much of the theoretical work in environmental ethics is devoted to articulating and thus helping to effect such a radical change in outlook. (Callicott, 1995: 21).¹⁰

In opposition to this view of Callicott's regarding the social activism orientation of environmental ethics, Dickson rejects the possible contribution environmental ethics (and, by implication, all of normative discourse) can have in successfully addressing ('solving?') the various pressing environmental problems facing humanity today. If we accept Dickson's prescription for environmental ethicists to '... engage much more closely with empirical questions about the nature of such [modern] societies' (Dickson, 2000: 148),¹¹ we will abandon exactly what we need to do: in Callicott's words, 'to reconfigure the prevailing cultural worldview' (which importantly involves the prevailing social values – Callicott, 1995: 34) in order to achieve necessary social transformation. I believe that if we follow Dickson's recommendation, we will fail to create the needed 'reconfiguration' of the very modern social values, social practices and institutions that by their nature are environmentally endangering our planet by producing the modern industrial worldview and way of life that deny environmental limits and have brought us to the brink of global environmental disaster. Examples lie both on the global and local levels with global warming, and local environmental catastrophes such as preventable flooding caused by locating housing for the poor on ecologically untenable sites, respectively.

Strikingly, Callicott, as an environmental ethicist, calls for a cultural or social revolution. Dickson, in contrast, emphasises the existing social system's barriers to social and environmental change, such as corporate profits and the electorate's desire for jobs and 'prosperity' (Dickson, 2000: 146–7).¹² Callicott's advocacy for social revolution through philosophy and environmental ethics/activism is quite alien to Dickson's position. Dickson presumes the maintenance of the modern value and institutional status quo along with the explicit denial of the practical relevance of environmental ethics and a change in ethical values and judgments, and their possible contribution to solving environmental problems. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Dickson derides Callicott's admonition of the social change role of environmental philosophy as 'heroic' (Dickson, 2000: 149),¹³ and rejects totally Callicott's environmental ethical revolutionary and activist viewpoint which leads to Callicott's high valuation and appreciation of environmental philosophy.

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The upshot of this conflict between Callicott's normative position prescribing ethical change leading to desirable social change in order to solve environmental problems and Dickson's empirically-based denial of the relevance of environmental ethics to the solution of such problems and achieving social change is great. One is transformational, based on value assessments and prescriptions for the ethical within and social change of modern society (Callicott); the other is indirectly or implicitly conservative, rejecting the possibility of fundamental social change through the means of environmental ethical (normative) philosophical analysis and ethical change (Dickson).

Dickson's position is flawed when he argues on behalf of the denial of a role for normative environmental ethics in the human response to the current environmental crisis, and instead prescribes an exclusively empirical approach to the nature of environmental problems and their solution.¹⁴ I contend that Dickson (and others who denigrate the practical value of environmental ethics based on the empirical reductionism of environmental problems) either fail to recognise or reject the inherent and irreducible normative nature of environmental issues, as I shall attempt to show in the discussion that follows.¹⁵ As a result, they overlook the private individual actions and support for public policies that are required to produce change in our current social values and practices (Callicott's 'reconfiguring the prevailing cultural worldview' and Dickson's 'ethical change'). Therefore, Dickson's view has profound implications for the proper behavior of citizens and public policy-making in the contemporary world.

Dickson's position on the nature of environmental problems and their solution reduces the capacity for environmental ethics to contribute to the social transformation advocated by Callicott that may be necessary to address our modern environmental predicament. One must regrettably conclude that accepting Dickson's position does not increase the probability of saving our world from environmental disaster. I hope it is clear that the critical scrutiny of Dickson's essay is being offered here in the philosophical spirit of truth-seeking in order to contribute to the practically urgent inquiry into the normative nature of environmental problems and how to solve them. It is difficult to conceive of a more important issue for students of the environment.

Let me try to elucidate further this important point about the social efficacy of environmental ethics for the needed transformation of a society based on the environmentally deleterious modern values and practices, and Dickson's advocacy of conservatism, by a reference to an important political theoretical (another normative discourse) concept of regime or political 'legitimacy'. Political legitimacy, like the other central concepts in normative discourse has dual meanings: one empirical and the other normative. For the former, it refers to what a particular body politic at a particular time holds regarding whether they, *in fact*, accept the current regime; the latter distinctively normative meaning refers to whether the regime is *worthy* of the people's support whether the citizens in question happen, in fact, to support it or not. The former question is one for

empirical scientific inquiry (by public opinion survey, perhaps), and the latter is a typical issue for normative political theory and a theory of legitimacy involving the theorist's values about the nature of the good society, and so on. Even in his prepublication comments, Dickson distinguishes between an actor's 'sense of responsibility' and her or his 'actual ethical responsibility', where I take the modifier 'ethical' to mean the key normative question of whether a moral agent *should* have a responsibility independent of her or his attitude or sense of this important moral issue. Dickson again confuses the empirical and normative realms, their respective subject matters, modes of discourse, interrelationships, and different human purposes. His position is therefore seriously misguided on the nature and resolution of environmental problems from an environmental ethical point of view.

Let's look at Dickson's text. His first goal for his critique of environmental ethics and its contributions to the solution of environmental problems is to show '... that ethicists' large empirical claims pay insufficient attention to the social context. *If the ethicists wish to defend their claims then they will have to show that they are consistent with the circumstances that obtain in modern societies*' (2000: 137–8, emphasis added). I believe that this statement is mistaken and has deleterious consequences for public policy. To be sure, environmental ethicists must pay attention to the social context about which they theorise, if only to highlight the very social values they assess and possibly recommend for change. However, *as environmental ethicists*, they are not environmental scientists whose primary aim is the pursuit of the ecological causes and consequences of environmental problems without ethical inquiry into the role of values in the complex social dynamic that constitutes environmental problems. Such ethicists, must, as I see it, by definition of their distinctive role and *raison d'être* of their subfield within philosophy, address, analyse and ethically assess the modern social values as to their desirability and how they affect the environment if they are to meet Dickson's own prescription of 'paying sufficient attention to the socio-economic context in which environmental problems arise and are dealt with' (see Dickson 2000: 128). An excellent example of such a modern social value deserving of critical environmental ethical examination would be ceaseless material consumption and the resulting overconsumption producing depletion of natural resources and environmental pollution. Environmental ethicists should (and do throughout their work) assess whether having a society whose supreme value appears to be acquisition of material goods is a morally good social value, and how such a modern value impacts the physical environment.¹⁶ The key point here for Dickson's empirical approach is that actual human behaviour is importantly influenced by our values, thereby connecting the normative with the empirical. Any student of ethics would recognise and grant this normative–empirical relation, going back to Aristotle, because it gives ethics its important practical bite. While theoretical in its mode of discourse, the field of ethics does possess profound practical implications for human action.

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We focus on our values, in part, because they do count mightily in how moral agents act (along with the ideal theory of how they *should* act).

Ironically, Dickson's charge that environmental ethicists do not pay sufficient attention to the social context is probably more aptly applied to the empirically-oriented environmental scientists who infamously tend to study environmental problems scientifically in a social value vacuum, devoid of value assessments and prescriptions. Who neglects more of what is central to their enterprise: environmental ethicists or environmental scientists? Or, is this question itself misconceived since we need both inquiries wherein each focuses on its quintessential problems as a form of an appropriate division of labour? Scientists, as we know, are not trained to analyse values, and, therefore, shy away from discussing them explicitly; an examination of ecology textbooks will clearly demonstrate this point. In contrast, environmental ethicists, trained in and committed to the study of human values and normative discourse do – and must – concentrate their studies upon the dominant social values – their acceptability and alternatives, if necessary – that lie at the foundation of the prevailing modern social institutions and practices that constitute the society producing the environmental dangers that we face today. Excellent illustrations of this point from two ethicists referred to by Dickson, which form counter-examples to Dickson's critique of environmental ethics, are the works by Lynn White on the ecological consequences of Western Civilisation's Christianity and by Aldo Leopold on the anthropocentrism of modern society (see Dickson 2000 for specific references).

Moreover, Dickson's proposition about the need for environmental ethicists 'to be consistent with the circumstances that obtain in modern society' itself demands normative – environmental ethical, specifically – critique. *Why must environmental ethicists accept and conform to modern social values and social structure?* This unexamined conservative value judgment and prescription by Dickson begs a fundamental issue within environmental ethics: the acceptability of the values of the modern social order. Arguably, these are the very values that have produced the global environmental crisis. Dickson's admonition to conform to modern social conditions is impossible for environmental ethicists who locate the main component of the environmental crisis within these very 'modern circumstances', especially modern values like consumerism that Dickson urges consistency with. Therefore, environmental ethicists, who constitute a consensus within their field, view modern society, its values, social structure and institutions, as an inappropriate standard for environmental ethics. The conflict here is dramatic. Environmental ethicists like Callicott typically advocate radical change in the very realm – modern society – that Dickson prescribes adherence to without providing evidence for his sweeping and controversial recommendation. Furthermore, the environmental ethical argument and prescribed action for ethical and social change in such societies will be thwarted by the same modern social 'circumstances' with which Dickson demands that environmental ethicists be consistent. Gunn's conclusion is telling on this

important point: ‘... a crude [empirical] analysis of the direct costs and benefits [of individual actions affecting the environment] will not suffice to evaluate the desirability of a change [in action]’ (1994: 213). It is to the latter normatively crucial question that environmental ethics is specifically dedicated, and that fundamentally, I believe, creates our environmental problems.

The irony is heavy here: Dickson criticises environmental ethics for its ‘wide’ and ‘loose’ propositions, as well as its failure to consider the social context for its practitioners’ claims, yet he takes a controversial conservative stance, ignoring the great unequal social power and wealth that prevails within the modern social context for environmental ethics in modern societies and globally. Dickson’s criticism of environmental ethics boomerangs and can be levelled against his own argument. Where is Dickson’s reasoned defence of the existing socio-economic context of modern societies? Why should environmental ethicists support this socio-economic structure and make their work – environmental ethical assessments, prescriptions, and their reasoned defenses – consistent with it? Dickson never examines, nor defends, these crucial challenges to his position. Therefore, Dickson’s discussion seems to defend modernity and its social values, whereby his empirical reductionism of environmental ethics and resulting critique serve as an unstated argument to perpetuate current hegemonic social values and practices. Moreover, by denormalising environmental ethics and claiming that it must conform to modern social conditions and concluding that this philosophical subfield does not have a contribution to make in solving environmental problems, Dickson denies environmental ethics its essential and significant role in social criticism and social change.

Dickson’s analysis of the existing social pressures on citizens of modern societies exhorts us against adopting new environmental ethical values. He writes:

Since the environmentally sound option will typically cost more than the non-environmental option, the pressure will frequently translate into pressure to choose the non-environmental option ... choosing the cheaper, non-environmental option, is likely to do more to secure her job and to increase her chances of advancement ... Consistently, choosing the more expensive environmental option is likely to have the opposite consequences, threatening her job, her income and her self-esteem (2000: 144).

Here, and elsewhere, Dickson tells his readers what is commonplace in our economic and materialistic society: environmentally consistent values and actions will probably ‘cost more’ – *economically* (importantly this realm of human values was unstated but assumed by Dickson). He does not examine the trade-off with environmental benefits, and, importantly, whether environmental values should override economic goals when they conflict. The possibility that ‘environmentally sound options’, values and actions, could produce an enhancement of our environment or prevent harm to the environment is ignored or

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devalued by Dickson, and, thereby, exemplifies his conservative economic reductionism. Such ‘environmentally sound options’ may indeed hurt corporate profits in the short run, but where will corporate profits be after a global environmental catastrophe? Will there be more jobs for citizens and opportunities for corporate profits in the economy after a disaster such as flooding of coastal cities as a result of global climate change? In addition, Dickson overlooks environmentally sound options which can generate new corporate opportunities for profits, such as catalytic converters or fuel cells for cars; or how being Green can be profitable as some corporations are discovering (see the increase in organic food production and consumption). It should be evident that Dickson is arguing here that advocating environmentally consistent public policy will create public opposition to supporting and acting in a manner consistent with environmental limits (but this conflict assumes that our same materialistic modern values remain in place, and thereby avoids the crucial environmental ethical question of whether they *should* or not). He concludes his brief discussion for the status quo with the economic truism: ‘Expensive environmental measures will eat into a firm’s profitability’ (2000: 146). Regarding the possibility of changing the regulations faced by such economic organisations, he adds, ‘The non-environmental option will have to become illegal, or too expensive, or undesirable in some other way’ (2000: 146).

The critical reader may well ask of Dickson: ‘Just what is a “non-environmental” option?’ How long can a society act in the twenty-first century in such a manner as to deny its environmental needs and make policy with no environmental consequences? Dickson’s use of the term ‘non-environmental’ instead of terms like ‘environmentally harmful’, ‘environmentally costly’, ‘environmentally narrow’, or ‘environmentally one-dimensional’, reflects how the environment and its constraints on the dominant, modern worldview is masked by the prevailing economistic modern worldview. The conceptual framework and value structure of modernity inappropriately subordinates, or even suppresses, non-economic issues like environmental values. This constitutes the fallacy of economism, or the favouritism of economic values to the undue harm of other types of human value; one recent student of modern society calls it ‘the colonisation of ethics by economism’ (Gagnier, 2000: 8).

I recognise that all of the empirical conclusions drawn by Dickson about the existing socio-economic structure and popular beliefs about economics and the environment by today’s populations in advanced modern societies are probably true on the whole (although they omit the growing, if not yet dominant, Green movement). Therefore, socially critical environmental ethics must challenge these conclusions, and not assume them as given in the modern social order, with its current values and socio-economic structure. Members of the philosophical field of environmental ethics must do what Dickson advises: ‘pay more attention to the social context’. This goal cannot be achieved by accepting the status quo uncritically as Dickson does, but by analysing and assessing which aspects of the

current modern social structure are worthy of continuation from an environmental ethical perspective, and which must be replaced with superior alternatives. Such assessments and prescriptions, the heart of normative discourse, may be, *pace* Dickson, inconsistent with modern economic circumstances and values such as limitless economic growth. The philosophic nub here is why the implicit supremacy of economic values (economism) over environmental ones should rule, as opposed to a social order where environmental values trump economic ones. Dickson, reflecting our modern worldview, never makes this crucial issue explicit nor does he provide a reasoned argument in his taken-for-granted defence of the status quo materialistic market society.

It is precisely our dominant social practices and values – such as corporate profitability and economism – that make value and social changes necessary, according to the environmental ethicists like Callicott, who claim that the foundation of the environmental crisis consists of mistaken modern values and the social structure built upon them. Change is necessary precisely because the current hegemonic social values and institutions obstruct solutions to environmental problems as a result. Environmental ethicists ‘... need to consider both the systematic pressure against environmental solutions and the underlying dynamics of the socio-economic systems [of modernity] that give rise to that pressure’ as Dickson says (2000: 148). I agree with this important prescription, but would quickly add, in contrast to Dickson, that such empirical considerations constitute merely a portion of the work of environmental ethicists. They form the application or implementation phase of the necessarily prior normative thinking and assessment, reasoned debate and ethical and political decision-making. This point demonstrates the essential relevance of environmental ethics to the normative nature of environmental problems presented by the ‘modern circumstances’, and their solution: ethical assessment and social change.

The real limitations of environmental ethics do not lie in what Dickson claims are its ‘empirical’ deficiencies or its failure to conform to its social context. Rather, environmental ethics is constrained by its normative criticism of the dominant social paradigm and social order of modernity. By attacking such modern social values as: competitive materialism, consumerism, economism, ageism, (and favouring the present generation to the detriment of future generations – this anti-future value lacks a handy label but might be called something like ‘presentism’ or ‘timeism’) and so on, along with the longstanding Western discriminatory values of anthropocentrism, racism and sexism, and the social institutions that have been created to support them, this ethical discourse puts itself in direct and unavoidable conflict with the prevailing values, behaviour and institutions of advanced modern society – and now, with globalisation, the aspirations of virtually the entire human population. As a statement of fact, normative discourse lacks the social power to override hegemonic modern beliefs and practices, especially when they are enforced by the most powerful means of thought and social control in human history: mass media. Alas, this is

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not only the weakness of environmental ethics, but it is the vexing weakness of all normative discourse: 'How do we get there from here?' where 'there' is the prescribed ideal that unfortunately confronts the unprecedentedly powerful resistance of the status quo, advanced modern society, and, 'here' is a social order that has never experienced successful revolution nor even widespread radical normative change. Therefore, the discussion of how, specifically, to achieve this needed but historically unique social change should be a top priority for all students of the environment, but first and foremost, environmental ethicists.

If Dickson's ultimate purpose in his essay is to advocate that environmental ethicists must work harder to address the practical implementation of their prescriptions for modern society and, therefore, combine their ethical analysis, including social activism (as Callicott argues), with empirical public policy and political economy analyses, I would agree with this recommendation wholeheartedly. More social-scientific analyses and more successful activism in creating an effective environment movement for social change are desirable goals. If environmental ethics is to have any impact in the real world, we must educate modern citizens to be factually informed about the state of the environment, and must persuasively articulate and defend its assessments and prescriptions to the public, including its calls for value and institutional changes. Normative claims must be translated into specific, practical public policies (three recent examples of such works are Brown, 2001; Gottlieb, 2001; and Milani, 2000). And, most importantly, an environmental ethics that is relevant to the solution of environmental problems must mobilise the citizens to demand implementation of these prescribed public policy changes. Dickson's discouraging conclusion about the irrelevance of environmental ethics to the solution of environmental problems would prevent these goals from being achieved; therefore it should not go unchallenged.

4. A POSSIBLE REJOINDER IN DEFENCE OF DICKSON'S ARGUMENT AND A REPLY FOCUSING ON THE RELATION BETWEEN ETHICAL THOUGHT AND SOCIAL ACTION

In his prepublication review comments, Dickson responded to this critique of his argument against the significance of environmental ethics to the solution of environmental problems by claiming that he is interested only in *describing and causally explaining* the current environmental crisis; hence, the emphasis upon the purported phenomenology of environmental action in modern society and how environmental problems could be solved (see his early emphasis upon the empirical aspects only, 2000: 127–8). The defender of Dickson's view could continue (again, as he did in his comments to me) by stating that environmental ethics – as illustrated by the six ethicists examined – is irrelevant to solving

environmental problems because of the nature of the modern social context and its particular conditions for environmental action.¹⁷ Dickson could further claim that his argument does not contain ethical content, nor the ethical assessment of environmental ethical claims, because he does not wish to engage in (environmental) ethical discourse itself. The upshot of such a rejoinder would be that my normative-based critique seriously misconstrues Dickson's (empirical) purposes and recommendations. This renders my critique a misstatement of his position and, therefore, off target.

In reply, I concede that there is an important place for an empirical social scientific analysis of modern society's values and practices in addition to normative assessment and prescription. Indeed, this is the heart of multidisciplinary inquiry within such social sciences as: Cultural Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Social Psychology, and Sociology. However, just as it is crucial to conduct such multidisciplinary studies within the disciplines of empirical social science, I would add that we sorely need interdisciplinary studies that combine and integrate empirical and normative discourses about the environment where our challenge is to attempt to solve complex and wide-ranging environmental problems. (For two excellent examples of works that begin such a combined, interdisciplinary discourse about environmental problems see Brulle, 2000 and Gottlieb, 2001.¹⁸) Various social scientific inquiries are valuable, and probably even necessary, to engender the ethical and social changes within modernity if we are to avert environmental catastrophe. Nonetheless, it is my foremost claim that in order to solve environmental problems and save our world, such empirical social scientific analyses of existing environmental problematic realities and values are insufficient by themselves. We must, I contend, engage in normative discourse about the environment, including, at its centre, both environmental ethical issues and value-based environmental action. This is so because at the foundation of environmental problems are our modern values and the social structure built on them. 'Environmental problems are fundamentally based on how human society is organised. Accordingly, social change is required for their resolution' (Brulle, 2000: 5).

Dickson (and an anonymous reviewer) have appropriately challenged me to elucidate further what I mean by the 'essential normative nature of environmental problems'. This is a fair request of those who claim the priority role of this component of environmental problems and their solution. However, given space limitations, I shall not be able to address comprehensively the whole complex question of the normative nature of environmental problems and their solution. Instead, I shall merely list what I consider to be the normative aspect of environmental problems. Environmental problems are essentially and irreducibly normative in nature, in my view, because:

1. Environmental problems are the result of human behaviour, and human behaviour is the result of human values (usually socially inculcated, which

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is why the agents of social inculcation, such as the institutions of mass media and education, along with a yet-to-be-designed-and-implemented environmentally sophisticated environmental education, are so important to our future).

2. Our detrimental behaviour to the natural environment in modern industrial society is the result of the specific modern values, such as, limitless economic growth and competitive materialism, so that changes in these values will be necessary if we are to resolve our environmental problems.
3. Science alone will not be sufficient to solve environmental problems since they involve more than empirical causation and consequences, the foci of science.
4. Since technology applies scientific knowledge without examining or arguing about existing social values, the community's public political process of discussion, debate and decision-making among value alternatives will be necessary to lead to the solution of environmental problems according to such political values as: justice, fairness, equality and democracy.
5. Political theorists – who study political values – have an important role to play in environmental studies despite the latter's domination by environmental scientists producing the misleading impression that our environmental problems are purely empirical (see Kassiola, 1990, and, as a attempted correction of this error by providing sample discussions in the emerging field of environmental political theory, see, Kassiola, Forthcoming). The other elements of normative discourse – environmental ethics, aesthetics and theology – will also be important to the value changes needed to the mitigation, or amelioration of our environmental problems, let alone, their solution.
6. Finally, environmental problems, producing the widely admitted global environmental crisis, will be the catalyst for the transformation of the current hegemonic modern social values, practices and institutions, making normative discourse with its critical and prescriptive functions vitally important to both environmental studies and the aim of saving the world.

In summary, it is important to note that this point about the foundation of environmental problems being normative is not a value judgment on my part but an empirical observation (and parallel to Dickson's approach of discussing facts about values). All environmental problems contain an irreducible value component that can and must be addressed by students of normative discourse, especially environmental ethicists. I hope it is clear that our environmental problems will not be solved, and our world will not be saved, unless we understand the normative nature of environmental problems and their required

value assessment and prescription, resulting in desirable social change being conceived, accepted and implemented. My goal in this discussion has been to elucidate this point in reaction to Dickson's contrary position.

Now, on the subject of social change and environmental ethics, I would like to refer to a work by Kate Rawles on the relation between environmental ethics and environmental social activism (Rawles, 1995). She makes a simple but profound and often-neglected point in discussing the stereotype that '... while activists get on and do something, philosophers just think' (1995: 149). Rawles provides insight on the error of this common false dichotomy:

There is, of course, something not quite right about a straight contrast between thinking and doing. Thinking *is* doing; it is, in some sense, an activity. Here, the kind of activity to be contrasted with thinking is the kind that has, and intends to have, a direct effect on the world. But deciding what will qualify as a desirable effect clearly requires some [normative] thought. 'She acted blindly' presumably means she acted without thinking, and blind or mindless action isn't what we are after when we talk about activism. (1995: 149, emphasis in original)

Rawles's statement is apt to this discussion of environmental ethics' value in solving environmental problems. Dickson misses the important point that solving environmental problems and acting effectively upon them requires thought; a specific kind of thought – normative thought – about what is desirable, if our actions are to create a 'direct and desirable effect' on the world. Rawles argues that thinking and acting should not be separated. I agree, and would add that neither should we separate empirical thinking from ethical thinking about the environment as Dickson proposes. We need causal and phenomenological analyses of modern social conditions like Dickson's (although more critically penetrating as to the possibility and desirability of change), however, we also need ethical (and other normative) analyses about what constitutes a desirable ethical social order (such as in Gottlieb, 2001: Chapter 4, where the author presents such a combined discussion of environmental justice and the social action to advance this normative goal).¹⁹

Rawles goes on to propose that philosophy as a whole (presumably including ethics and other normative philosophical subfields like environmental ethics) can contribute to environmental activism by: 'motivating', 'guiding', and 'legitimising', or justifying it (1995: 150). I think this is a good starting point in the specific inquiry into how environmental ethics can, despite Dickson's objections, contribute significantly to the solution of environmental problems. Moreover, I encourage readers of this essay, including those who are like the environmental ethicists examined by Dickson and those who are empirically oriented, like Dickson himself, to explore the important normative relationship between environmental ethical thought and environmental action in our efforts to save the world and solve environmental problems. The original question of

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Socrates and Plato that underlies Western philosophy remains relevant, especially for environmental thought and action. As Rawles phrases it:

... the very purpose of environmental philosophy ... would be to explicitly address the [Socratic and Platonic] question 'how ought we to live' in relation to the environment ... though it would not amount to an alternative to activism. (1995: 164-5)

Rawles ends her discussion with the following statement: 'I would argue, then, that philosophy is both crucial to and a component of activism and that thinking and acting are both essential components of long- and short-term constructive change' (1995: 166). I would add that our thinking about the environment requires it to be both empirical and normative because the key word in Rawles's assertion: 'constructive', like 'desirable' earlier, is inherently value-based.²⁰

5. CONCLUSION

I have tried to be fair to Dickson's argument. I have considered his prepublication review comments on a previous draft of my essay in order to improve this final version, and I give him credit for raising the essential issue in his essay that both environmental ethicists and environmental scientists need to address: What must we do in order to solve environmental problems? This raises the question that is the focus of this essay: What actually is the nature of environmental problems? Dickson deserves praise for highlighting the nature of the environmental problematique, a subject often overlooked. Nonetheless, Dickson's position on the key subject of the value of environmental ethics is fundamentally flawed, in my view, because of confusions based on his insufficient attention to and misguided understanding and valuation of the latter halves of the following pairs: the empirical with the normative; the causal with the normative (including evaluation, obligation and prescription); science with ethics; and conservative description with prescription for social change. Even though he claims to address only the first part of these pairs (downplaying the normative and ignoring the socially conservative consequences of his position), his view is unavoidably normative in its consequences. For Dickson not to recognise this outcome reflects a normative myopia which creates excessive and misleading empiricism for environmental ethics and environmentalism. Thereby, he is inattentive to the differences in the content, mode of reasoning, conception of evidence and, most importantly, purpose of these discourses.

In summary, my objections to the case presented by Dickson for the non-applicability of environmental ethics to the solution of environmental problems (and, by implication, my own argument for the vital significance of environmental ethics to the solution of such problems) revolve around the following weaknesses in Dickson's argument:

1. not clarifying or defending his conception of the empirical nature of the 'solution' to environmental problems;
2. not clarifying or defending the alleged empirical nature of environmental problems, and, as a result, overlooking their irreducible normative nature;
3. confusing the nature of normative discourse (in particular, environmental ethics) and its rational process with empirical discourse and its rational process – the scientific method;
4. not recognising his implicit endorsement of the values and social structure of modern society; and therefore,
5. inappropriately devaluing, in his conclusion, the social value of environmental ethics and its essential contribution to solving environmental problems.

Dickson is mistaken, I believe, when he rejects the proposition that environmental ethics can be significant in solving environmental problems. His argument incorrectly denies the main task of environmental ethics – to ethically assess and prescribe fundamental ethical and social changes that will produce an environmentally sustainable and ethically desirable social order. Dickson's position mistakenly advises against the urgent global need for an environmental ethics that can lead to effective social change for the better. Therefore, I conclude that environmental ethics can, and must, play an essential role (with the other normative discourses) in saving the world.²¹

NOTES

¹ The title for this essay was inspired by Gunn (1994).

² Although the phrase 'solution of environmental problems' and its variants (usually in the verb form 'solving environmental problems') are used throughout Dickson's work (for example, 134, 149, with an entire section headed 'Solving [Environmental] Problems', 143–7), curiously and detrimentally to his argument, he never explores the meaning of this central concept to his position or its implied analogy to mathematics. 'How are environmental problems solved?' could be viewed as the key question to his essay, however, the nature of or the criteria for such 'solutions' are not explained, or even discussed by Dickson. I would ask: are environmental problems 'solved' when they are prevented? made to disappear? mitigated? managed? reversed? and so on.

Furthermore, how would such a concept of 'solution' be applied to specific environmental problems, such as biodiversity; deforestation; the existential finitude of global natural resources; and the threats to wilderness areas? Is the meaning of the concept of 'solution' identical in all of these environmental problems? Clearly, without a satisfactory explanation and rational agreement on the concept of their 'solution', environmental problems will remain vexing both theoretically and practically, and, therefore, continue to present serious and immediate dangers to all life on Earth.

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It is puzzling to the reader at the beginning of Dickson's article when he makes a tripartite analysis of environmental philosophy's claims: normative (which means 'attitudinal' to Dickson, but more on this below), causal, and 'about solutions' (127). The usual normative–empirical (causal) distinction is recognisable here in his first two types of environmental ethical claims, but their important respective epistemological differences are not noted by Dickson. However, the alleged third type of environmental ethical claim, 'about the solutions of environmental problems', and specifically, its epistemological nature, so essential to Dickson's argument, is not discussed at all. This *lacuna* is merely one manifestation of Dickson's omitting the difference between normative and empirical discourses, as will be discussed, and how these two each play a role in discourse about the 'solutions of environmental problems'.

Regrettably, the limited scope of this essay does not permit a detailed discussion of the nature of environmental 'solutions'. I have subordinated such a discussion in order to concentrate upon the nature of environmental problems, believing 'first things first', or consideration of the nature of problems should take priority over the nature of their solutions, although they are importantly related, as we shall see. Nevertheless, I do hope Dickson and other environmental scholars will take up this essential conceptual issue in their future work. Hereafter, although I shall use Dickson's term 'solution' without scare quotes for ease of reading, it should be understood as problematical and requiring caution.² Here I mean by the term 'normative', 'having to do with values', like ethical ones, but this concept normally includes political, aesthetic and religious values as well. The resulting conventional understanding of normative discourse and inquiry as a whole, therefore, consists of the disciplinary subfields that revolve around these values: ethics, political theory, aesthetics, and theology, respectively. I rely upon this conventional meaning when referring to normative discourse in the discussion that follows.

⁴ I would like to acknowledge here the constructive and thoughtful comments on a previous version of this essay by Dickson. In these remarks he claims that I miss the meaning of his first paragraph (and, therefore, his whole endeavour) where he makes a distinction between the normative concerns of environmental ethics and the empirical claims about how environmental problems are caused and might be solved. He then goes on to say that his interest in the article lies with 'evaluative attitudes' and their causal and remedial roles regarding environmental problems. Thus, Dickson says his focus is empirical and not normative even though the subject he analyses is normative (environmental attitudes) in his terminology, although I would not use this normative reductionist language and prefer the ethical cognitivist terms of ethical 'values', and 'obligations', over 'attitudes'.

In reply, I would note Dickson's title, 'The *Ethicist* Conception of Environmental Problems', and its appearance in a Journal whose readership is focused upon Environmental Values (and by implication, normative inquiry). At the very least, Dickson's title appears to be misleading, (mis)indicating to the reader that the discussion to follow will concentrate on the distinctive ethical aspects of environmental problems (otherwise why call it an 'ethicist' conception as opposed to 'The "scientific" or "causal" conception of environmental problems'?) While (environmental) ethical problems have a necessary empirical element – after all, they do occur in this world – (environmental) ethicists quintessentially do not focus upon these factual components of (environmental) ethical problems or issues that are usually left to (environmental) scientists. Instead, they concentrate their attention on the distinctive value or normative components of our (environmental) ethical lives and thinking. If I misunderstood Dickson's exclusive

empirical intentions, as he claims in his prepublication review, then it is the fault of both the title and his stated concerns about environmental ethics and his negative conclusion about ‘the value of philosophical work in environmental ethics’ (Dickson, 2000: 148), and the role of ‘ethical change’ in the solution of environmental problems. I ask, what could this mean other than a normative inquiry into the nature and grounds of ‘ethical change’, or normative inquiry? This probably led me (and most readers) to think that the author of such an entitled essay with these aims would address the core value aspect of environmental problems, which contributes the essence of such a perspective and the defining object of environmental ethicists’ reflection and discourse – the subject matter whose value is under purported investigation by the author.

⁵ Here, as noted earlier in this discussion, Dickson’s failure to analyse the nature of the concept of ‘solution’ in the environmental realm is glaring.

⁶ In Dickson’s commentary on my earlier draft he emphasises his focus is upon environmental attitudes and only concerned with the empirical consequences of such attitudes. Again, I must object that Dickson seems to confuse a central point to the treatment of ‘the ethicist conception of environmental problems’ over the meaning of ‘ethicist’ here. The contemporary view of ethics is that it is not about or reducible to nonrational attitudes (unless one is a A.J.Ayer-inspired, and now discredited, emotive subjectivist who maintains that human value judgments and obligations are really attitudes and emotional expletives expressing our feelings, such as: ‘Lying – Boo!’)

In contradistinction, we may view ethics as a rationally critical inquiry involving our cognitive beliefs and their grounds about our ethical behaviour or judgments. That Dickson would use this highly charged concept and word referring to the essential evaluative and prescriptive processes within normative ethical discourse – given its association with sceptical subjectivist efforts to deny the rationality of ethical discourse and reduce it to empirically measurable and nonrationally-based attitudes – is telling, and probably the foundation of our disagreement over the nature of ethical discourse and its role in environmental thinking, problem definition and solution.

He repeats this empirical (attitudinal) reductionism of environmental ethical claims throughout the article, such as when he discusses Gunn’s belief that environmental ethics possesses the capacity to solve environmental problems. Dickson concludes as follows about Gunn’s view: ‘... philosophy can make a contribution to the solution of environmental problems because of the part it can play in persuading people to adopt environmental *values*’ (Dickson, 2000: 134, my emphasis). Significantly, Dickson then immediately switches from this statement about Gunn’s position about environmental *values* and their role in the solution of environmental problems, to ‘attitudes’ in his next sentence: ‘There are some indications that Gunn thinks that this change of *attitudes* will be necessary both because it will lead individuals to behave in a more responsible fashion in their own direct interactions with the natural environment, and because it will cause them to push for political change’ (Dickson, 2000: 134, my emphasis).

This move from normative values to empirical attitudes – after all, attitudes are what people, in fact, have, not necessarily what they should normatively have – illustrates clearly Dickson’s basic misconception of the nature of value discourse. Attitudes, being empirical traits, are important to social scientific inquiry into the nature of human behaviour. What attitudes people *should* have is a quintessential normative question that Dickson totally and fatally omits. Dickson also commits attitudinal reductionism when he discusses the environmental ethical philosophies of Lynn White and John Passmore (Dickson, 2000: 130).

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⁷In order to avoid the straw man charge against my own reading of Dickson's essay, I offer as evidence here his characterisation of the subject of his reflections: the two environmental ethicists' assumptions of 'ethically inappropriate and appropriate attitudes toward the natural environment' (see Dickson, 2000: 128). Once again, Dickson does not recognise the normative content in such claims because of the unavoidable value-laden nature of judgments of 'ethical appropriateness or inappropriateness'.

⁸In this assertion by Dickson we see clearly the reductionism of the selected environmental ethicists' work to the empirical domain of causes, and the unexplained and problematic concept of 'solution'.

⁹See epigraph and quoted passage by Callicott, and his entire article about environmental philosophy constituting environmental activism, (Callicott, 1995).

¹⁰Dickson himself makes reference to Gunn's statement on this point about environmental ethics and social change when he says: 'It can be pointed out that acting ethically is not just a matter of behaviour change. At [sic] Peter Singer ... points out, the ethical vegetarian does not merely stop eating animal products: he or she should be endeavouring to create a movement urging supermarkets and restaurants to cater to vegetarians, lobbying government, and so on' (Dickson, 2000: 150, note 42). The original passage is in Gunn, 1994: 212–13.

¹¹I should note here that this prescription by Dickson about the importance of environmental ethicists studying the nature of modernity is one I strongly endorse only I emphasise modern values. In fact, it is a basic theme of my own work in environmental political theory where I attribute the fundamental cause of the environmental crisis to the nature of modern society and its values (see Kassiola, 1990, and forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the basic opposition between Dickson's empirical and reductionist approach and my own normative (political and ethical) one to the nature of the significance of modernity to environmental problems and their solution can be seen in that I highlight the essential role of modern values, and the social practices predicated upon them, leading to the practically important judgment that they need to be replaced. I maintain such value and social changes should be viewed as the requisite means to solve environmental problems, in direct contradiction to Dickson's empirical position that includes the rejection of environmental ethics as a contributor to achieving this important planetary objective. His position results in an implied conservative stance with regard to the status quo of modern social values and practices with dire environmental consequences. I shall have more to say about this last point subsequently.

¹²See, especially his statement that environmental ethicists '... ignore the possibility that systematic pressures generated within society, could, directly or indirectly, undermine this [ethicist] approach to solving environmental problems (Dickson, 2000: 147).

Dickson's decision not to pursue value questions and not to normatively (and, specifically, ethically) assess the currently hegemonic modern social structure and taking it as an unchangeable given should be clear. Furthermore, these characteristics of his position directly follow from the conservative outcomes that are inherent in his misconceived empirical critique of environmental ethics which implies the acceptance of the current modern social values and institutions – whether such acceptance is intentional or not on Dickson's part.

¹³Here Dickson agrees with Bryan Norton's initial application of this critical term to Callicott's position. See Dickson, 2000: 133.

¹⁴In particular, Dickson prescribes that environmental analysts should focus upon two specific empirical phenomena within modern society that work against environmental

ethical solutions to environmental problems: ‘... the systematic pressure against environmental solutions and the underlying dynamics of the socio-economic systems that give rise to that pressure’, (Dickson: 2000: 148).

¹⁵ This conclusion must be textually supported in order to preempt the straw man rejoinder against my own analysis. Dickson’s central claim in his critique of environmental ethics’ role in solving environmental problems is: ‘The main line of criticism [provided in his discussion] is that the [environmental] ethicists are making large empirical claims about the causes and solutions of environmental problems but they pay insufficient attention to the socio-economic context in which these problems arise and are dealt with’ (Dickson, 2000: 128). This statement shows that it is Dickson who ‘pays insufficient attention’ to the distinctive value components of environmental ethics along, to be sure, with its necessary but not ethically and philosophically distinctive empirical components.

¹⁶ See Dickson’s own granting of the environmentally harmful consequences of consumptive actions, although he omits mentioning the values that underlie these actions. (See Dickson, 2000: 151, note 62, and Section 3 entitled: ‘Consuming the Environment’, 138–42). Typically, Dickson undermines the consequences of this anti-consumption position by inappropriately relying upon the alleged difficulties of the modern citizen to empirically *sense* her/his environmentally damaging behaviour, instead of addressing the normative moral obligation to do so whether it is empirically recognised or not.

¹⁷ In prepublication comments, the author claims not to have said that environmental ethics is ‘irrelevant’ to solving environmental problems. Yet, in his concluding paragraph he specifically says that ‘environmental ethics does not have a major contribution to make to the solution of environmental problems’ and, furthermore, that ‘whatever value it [environmental ethics] has does not lie in the heroic role that Callicott would assign it’ – and presumably my view of its role as well (see pp. 148–9). His explanation within this final paragraph about denying the role of ethical change in solving environmental problems and his belief that environmental ethics concerns itself with ethical change led me to the conclusion that environmental ethics will not, in Dickson’s view, contribute to the solution of environmental problems because its nature lies outside what such problems require for their solution, even if this mode of discourse does have some other value – as he concedes in this paragraph on p. 149. It is this part of his article that led me to use the word ‘irrelevant’ in my text, and I shall let the reader decide if this is a fair usage of the word. To be precise, I take Dickson’s words here to mean: environmental ethics is irrelevant to the solution of environmental problems because calls for ethical change by environmental ethicists (like Callicott’s) do not address what is needed for the solution of such problems. Hence, such calls for ethical (and social) change by environmental ethicists and their reliance upon this mode of discourse lie outside what is needed for the solutions of environmental problems, or are irrelevant to the latter.

¹⁸ Brulle concludes his application of critical theory to the social change possibilities of the American environment movement as follows: ‘... the development of collective action depends on a discourses’ sustaining the validity claims of truth, normative rightness, and authenticity. This means that the multiple and partial discourses on the natural environment must be integrated to form a coherent discourse that can provide cognitive scientific, normative, and aesthetic rationales for the preservation of nature’ (2000: 278). What I have in mind in the text is just such an ‘integrated, coherent discourse’ that combines both empirical and normative discourses as Brulle prescribes.

Gottlieb concludes: ‘Mapping all of our [environmental] assets still requires a perspective, a discourse if you will, where the social and the ecological are not just

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meeting halfway from their separate spheres but have become joined as part of a common exercise through the construction of a common vision. It is this common vision that can help liberate environmentalism from its confines as a bounded movement where it has largely been defined on the basis of a separation of the social and the ecological ... When the social and the ecological are joined together, movements for change have the capacity to become more powerful actors in the struggles to come' (2001: 286–7). What I argue in the text is recognised here by Gottlieb: the combination of the social (normative) and the ecological (empirical) in environmental thought and action.

¹⁹ See this chapter, entitled 'Janitors and Justice: Industry Restructuring, Chemical Exposure, and Redefining Work', where he discusses social action to assist the janitors of Los Angeles County in achieving an ecologically safe and normative just jobs.

²⁰ In his review comments, Dickson admits, 'it is difficult to pin down the nature of the claims Dickson is making'. I would reply that I do not believe that the difficulties with Dickson's argument lie in the different types of causal factors to environmental problems he merely alludes to in this generous self-critical admission. To be sure, this is a challenging issue to environmental science: for example, whether dumping non-toxic waste in the oceans harms coral reefs, and if so, how. The disagreement between us, on my reading of his essay and reinforced in his review comments on my article lies in Dickson's confusion of empirical and normative discourse, and as a result, his misidentifying the latter, and its role in conceiving of environmental problems and their solution, and, moreover, how humans *should* respond to the environmental challenges. This error of Dickson's, as I have tried to show, has profound public policy implications for our goal of saving the world.

²¹ For further discussion of the essential role of normative considerations in environmental thought and action, see Kassiola, 2002.

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