From Civil Rights to Nature's Rights

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Hailing from the American South, I was a slow student, awakened by Plato in high school and introduced to philosophy in college. Alienated from analytic trivia and minutia, I did graduate work in Greek philosophy at Syracuse University. My first academic job at Memphis State University involved me in the Southern Civil Rights Movement; my second at the Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point involved me in the environmental movement and inspired me to create first environmental ethics and then, in collaboration with Roger Ames, comparative environmental philosophy. In the face of unprecedented challenges, such as global climate change, academic philosophy must abandon its preoccupation with arcane puzzles and its studied intellectual isolation and work collaboratively with the natural and social sciences if it is to survive in the competitive and accountable academic climate of the twenty-first century.

Key words: analytic philosophy; comparative philosophy; environmental philosophy; Greek philosophy; land ethic; Leopold

I was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, a backwater of the American South, in the dark days of the Jim Crow era, and educated in the public school system. I was fortunate to be the son of a man who was a graphic artist and a person of uncommon compassion. Our family attended the First (and only) Unitarian Church of Memphis. I was thus spared both the mind-numbing religious fundamentalism and mindless racism that permeated my working-class social milieu. For that I paid a price among my peers—a social outcast, otherized, a target of teasing and bullying. But my memories of childhood are mercifully neither vivid nor many.

Until my teenage years, I seem to have lived in a state of mind more purely animal than distinctly human—very much in the present with only the vaguest sense of an impelling past and an impending future. I drifted through the school day, came home at 3:00, went out to play, was called in for supper, and then maybe did some homework—although I remember nothing of that activity. I liked to play sports, but was never much of an athlete. My summers were spent idling away at a city park that offered organized activities for neighborhood (white) kids such as crafts, softball, and other games. After both my parents died, I discovered that my mother had saved all of my report cards—pretty much straight Cs until my junior and senior years in high school, when I started getting mostly As. People noticed the change and asked my dad, "What happened to Baird?" He said with a shrug, "He woke up." Held after school in detention, I selected a tiny book from the library shelf with which to pass the time: Book I of Plato's *Republic*. I was enthralled by the debate between Socrates and Thrasymachus. It was my first taste of philosophy.

I owe my awakening partly to the Unitarian church and its "LRY" (Liberal Religious Youth) organization for teenagers. Newly mobile with a driver's license at 16, my social world expanded citywide and consisted of the LRY kids. Most of them belonged to more affluent families hailing from the Northeast and Midwest whose fathers had taken managerial or professional jobs in Memphis. Sunday morning sermons at our church were nothing like the ravings of Southern Baptist

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preachers about sinners in the hands of an angry god. We did sing traditional hymns—the tunes, that is, all the lyrics having been changed to avoid proclaiming Christian doctrine—and we had call-and-response minister-and-congregant readings. But the sermons were lectures on topics inspired by public intellectuals like Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian-born British essayist. They fascinated and excited me. I thought I might be destined to become a Unitarian minister.

Still not fully engaged with an impending future, I never got around to making timely applications to colleges. I had friends bound for Dartmouth, Harvard, Vanderbilt, but I cannot remember being at all concerned about where I would go to college or taking any initiative to secure admission to any such. It was August before I applied to Southwestern-at-Memphis (now Rhodes College) and was miraculously admitted. My father taught at the Memphis Academy of Arts, just across North Parkway from the campus, and doubtless I was let in for his sake.

Philosophy courses were not available to first-year students at Southwestern. Propaedeutic to any philosophy course was a team-taught, two-semester general humanities sequence, required of all entering students, titled Man in the Light of History and Religion. (The same basic course is still taught at Rhodes, retitled The Search for Values in the Light of Western History and Religion.) It whetted my intellectual appetite, and I was especially impressed with one member of the teaching team, Charles Bigger, of the philosophy department. During my sophomore year I enrolled in an introductory philosophy course and the future, of which I had heretofore been scarcely aware, opened up before me like a clear, sunny morning. I was going to be a philosopher.

I recently googled Charles Bigger and discovered that he died in 2015 at the age of 91. His obituary revealed a life and education far richer than he let on during the many teacher-student hours we spent together. His undergraduate degree was in physics, his MA in English lit, and his PhD in philosophy—all from the University of Virginia. He did post-doctoral work at UC-Berkeley in math and logic. His studies were interrupted by WWII combat in the South Pacific. After the war he worked for the newly formed CIA before beginning his academic career, largely spent at Louisiana State University. I also found an interview with him conducted in 2002. By then, with both a touch of bitterness and a punch of irony, he said that he did not call himself a "philosopher." He explained why: "I was educated in a tradition which has now died out. [. . .] We tried to measure ourselves by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, the British empiricists. [. . .]. Not much attention was paid to contemporary philosophy. On the whole we were remarkably ill-equipped to fit into the Positivism that was dominating the schools when I began to teach."[1] And when I was poised to enter graduate school in 1963 that was just the kind of education that I had received from him. And I had just the kind of expectation he had entertained: to measure myself against the standards set by the philosophers before the "discipline" of philosophy, emerging in the twentieth century, had shrunk the meaning of "philosophy" to such cramped dimensions that neither he nor I fit into it.

I had won a Woodrow Wilson Scholarship and, on the strength of that, could have been accepted at any number of graduate programs in philosophy. I was determined to avoid the "narrowness and rigidity" of analytic philosophy, as David Wong characterizes it in the pages of this journal, that held American, British, and Australian philosophy departments in a vice-grip (Wong 2017: 150).[2] So I chose the philosophy department of Syracuse University for grad school, which at that time had somehow remained diverse and eclectic. Two of Bigger's cohorts from U. Va. were there: Panayot Butchvarov and José Benardete. With their benignly loose oversight, I could pursue an education in philosophy and not have to endure being "trained" in it. And so, happily, that's what I did, focusing my doctoral research on Plato, my first and enduring love, and in particular on Plato's aesthetics, jointly directed by Benardete and Catherine Lord.

After three years, I had earned an MA and passed the exams qualifying me for doctoral candidacy. Because it snowed on my birthday, May 9th, I decided I had had enough of the North and

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returned home to write my dissertation. One summer day I dropped in on the chair of the Memphis State University (now the University of Memphis) philosophy department to get on his mailing list so that I could attend colloquia and get acquainted with the local philosophers. I left his office with a half-time teaching job, which became full-time the following year. The baby-boomer-driven growth spurt in American higher education was in full swing and, as my case illustrates, people were being hired off the streets to teach the influx of new college students. Memphis State had been racially integrated just a few years prior. There were only several dozen African American students, and some wanted to form a Black Students Association. But to be formally recognized as such they needed to have a faculty advisor. They asked me to serve in that capacity. And in that capacity I coordinated campus demonstrations in support of the sanitation workers strike that drew Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis for his last campaign. My activism (and involvement in other excesses of the 1960s) resulted in a polite letter from the university president informing me that my services were no longer wanted.

Married and with a baby not yet a year old, I took the first job on offer in the department of philosophy at Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point (WSUSP). After the trauma of the MLK assassination and loss of my job, I began to reassess my role as scholar, teacher, and activist. I had been but a foot soldier in the Civil Rights Movement, the philosophical foundations of which had been set out in the eighteenth century. Was I making the best use of the resources at my command holding a sign and marching in demonstrations for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam? Surely not. So, what could I contribute, *as a philosopher*, to positive social change? I had already begun to think about the third major focus of concern in the 1960s, the environmental crisis, as philosophical terra incognita. Nature was pushing back—in the form of smoggy skies, polluted water, vanishing species—against its philosophical misrepresentation as a vast mechanism that uniquely rational humans were entitled to reengineer with impunity. The oldest questions in philosophy—the nature of Nature, human nature, and the proper relationship between the two—begged to be asked anew. And I could approach them just as the Presocratics did—with a broad brush. Thus I could continue to avoid "responding to the latest controversy in analytic philosophy that only professional philosophers can understand or take an interest in," to quote David Wong again (Wong 2017: 154).

WSUSP was one of ten four-year campuses, each with one or two small master's programs in an applied field, such as business administration. At WSUSP it was natural resources, with majors in forestry, wildlife management, fisheries, and so on. I had colleagues in the College of Natural Resources from whom I could learn in developing an evolutionary-ecological ontology and metaphysics. And I could provide their students with a relevant course for the humanities requirement—environmental ethics—which I began to teach in 1971, the first of its kind in the world. Stevens Point was located at the northern reach of the sand counties of central Wisconsin, the landscape that had inspired the young John Muir, who celebrated the glories of Nature in spirit-warming prose, and the mature Aldo Leopold, an astute ecologist and homespun natural philosopher. Leopold's book *A Sand County Almanac*, with its climactic essay "The Land Ethic," was the central text for my new course and the focus of my early research.

Eugene C. Hargrove began publishing *Environmental Ethics* in 1979. The journal enabled a small community of scholars to coalesce, and a new subfield in philosophy was born. While radical innovation in the sciences occurs mostly in the centers of academic power and prestige, such innovation in philosophy was then only possible in the academic hinterlands. What I was up to at WSUSP would have been professional suicide a hundred miles down the road at UW-Madison. Other institutions harboring my colleagues in the new field were Colorado State (Rolston), California State, Humboldt (Devall), and Sierra College (Sessions)—the latter a California

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community college. Courses in environmental ethics, ecofeminism, ecophenomenology, and other species of environmental philosophy are now commonplace in the curricula of the majority institutions of higher learning throughout North America. But they are still not be found in the curricula of the highest-rated quartile of philosophy departments by the Leiter index.

Back in the North, I jumped at the chance to participate in the NEH-sponsored, eight-week Institute for Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hawaii in the summer of 1984. The goal of the institute was to provide mid-career faculty at teaching-oriented institutions the wherewithal to introduce Asian philosophy into their curricula. My goal was to persuade the comparative philosophers that they had something of importance to contribute to environmental philosophy. I succeeded, and panels on comparative environmental philosophy were organized for the upcoming meetings of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, the American Philosophical Association (Eastern), the Association of Asian Studies, and the American Academy of Religion. Selected papers forthcoming from those panels were published in special issues of *Environmental Ethics* and *Philosophy East and West*. And selected papers from those special issues were collected in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, which Roger Ames and I co-edited. Thus another new subfield in philosophy was born.

Previously, I had given some scholarly attention to the popular claim that American Indian thought was also a resource for environmental ethics, which had been published as *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales: An Ojibwa World View*. Subsequently, I returned to the University of Hawaii as visiting professor and there took an interest in Polynesian thought. Having the scholarship of the emerging comparative environmental philosophers at my disposal, I did some further research in African and Australian indigenous philosophy in preparation for writing a monograph in comparative environmental philosophy on a global scale. *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* was intended as a work of philosophical provocation. I am by no means an area expert and I hoped to provoke a corrective response from those who are—thus expanding the literature in the field. To my surprise, few howls of outraged protest regarding my treatment of non-western philosophical traditions came forth. Proving most controversial was my claim that the Aldo Leopold land ethic was the standard against which all other ecological ethics were to be evaluated. *Earth's Insights* has been my most popular book, with over 10,000 copies sold and translations appearing in Japanese, French, and Spanish.

Roger's former student James McRae and I edited a sequel to *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* and then a more specialized collection, *Japanese Environmental Philosophy*. But for all the work I have done in this area, I remain more facilitator, popularizer, and provocateur than original scholar. My own philosophical center of gravity remains the Greeks, to whom I returned with my most recent book, *Greek Natural Philosophy: The Presocratics and Their Importance for Environmental Philosophy*. It was first conceived as a textbook, coauthored with Keith Brown, a former teaching assistant, for the courses I regularly taught in ancient philosophy practically every year throughout my entire career. John van Buren joined us as a third author and, in addition to beefing up the scholarship, he drew the connection to contemporary environmental philosophy.

We calibrate the history of philosophy in centuries: the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE, the seventeen, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries CE. The twentieth century is now long over. For its very survival as a discipline, twenty-first-century philosophy must make as radical a break from twentieth-century philosophy as twentieth-century philosophy did from nineteenth-century philosophy. This will require radical innovation, and if a clean break is to be made with the philosophy of the past century, it must reach into the still-recalcitrant academic centers of power and prestige. Work on things that only philosophers can understand or take an interest in is unsustainable in the current return-on-investment climate of higher education and dog-eat-dog

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competition for shrinking financial support. Philosophers must find a way to add value in collaborative research teams on any number of pressing problems—from global climate change to artificial intelligence to genetic engineering. My collaborative work has mostly been with ecologists and conservation biologists. Environmental philosophy was among the first species of philosophy to engage with other disciplines, but it is by now hardly the only one to do so. Despite obdurate resistance, philosophy is slowly returning to its pre-twentieth-century role of synthesis and relegating analysis to an aberrant period in its long and otherwise venerable history.

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1 Richard Whittaker, "Interview: Charles Bigger—On Philosophy: *Baton Rouge, LA,* Aug 18, 2002," *Works & Conversations* (http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=2)

2 David Wong, "The Excitement of Crossing Borders," *Journal of World Philosophies* 2, (2017): 149–55.

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