



Philosophy and Gender

Environmental Justice: Some Ecofeminist Worries About a Distributive Model

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ABSTRACT: Environmental philosophers, policy-makers and community activists who discuss environmental justice do so almost exclusively in terms of mainstream Western *distributive* models of social justice. Whether the issue is treatment of animals, human health or property, wilderness and species preservation, pollution or environmental degradation, the prevailing and largely unchallenged view is that the issues of environmental justice are for the most part distributive issues. I think this wholesale framing of considerations of environmental justice solely in terms of distribution is seriously flawed. Drawing on both ecofeminist insights into the inextricable interconnections between institutions of domination and Iris Young's work on the inadequacy of distributive models of social justice, I argue for the twofold claim that a distributive model of environmental justice is inadequate and that what is needed is an additional nondistributive model to supplement, complement and—in some cases—take precedence over a distributive model.

Introduction

Environmental philosophers, policy-makers, and community activists who discuss environmental justice do so almost exclusively in terms of mainstream Western *distributive models of social justice*: Environmental justice is about the fair or equitable distribution of environmental goods, services, and "resources."

I think this wholesale framing of environmental justice issues solely or primarily in terms of *distribution* is seriously problematic. Drawing on both ecofeminist insights concerning the inextricable interconnections between institutions of human oppression and the domination of the natural environment, and on feminist insights concerning nondistributive justice given by Iris Young, I argue for the twofold claim that a distributive model of environmental justice is *inadequate* and that what is needed is an additional *nondistributive model* to supplement, complement, and, in some cases, preempt a distributive model.

The Need for Environmental Justice

Whether it is trees, forests and forestry, unsanitary water, food production and agriculture, or training in environmental technologies, it is often poor women and children, particularly women and children of color in the South (or, Southern hemisphere), who suffer disproportionately the effects of environmental degradation. Because of subordinate gender roles as forest managers, it is poor rural women and children in India who walk farther for

fuelwood and fodder (e.g., an average of ten kilometers every three or four days for an average of seven hours each time). Because it is poor women and children who perform the water collection work in the South, it is women and children who experience disproportionately higher health risks in the presence of unsanitary water. Each year millions of people, primarily women and children, are affected by major illnesses acquired while drawing water. Women farmers grow at least 59 percent of the world's food, and in some places (e.g., parts of Africa), as much as 80 percent. Yet the gender division of labor gives women unequal access to cash crops and their labor is often unpaid. And so-called "appropriate technologies" often are inappropriate for women: Such technologies, when developed and implemented without a basic understanding of women's lives, has resulted in the creation of solar stoves for women in Africa who cook before dawn and after dusk, maize shellers which take longer to do the job than when women do the shelling themselves, and pedal-driven grinding mills in areas where women are forbidden to sit astride.

Such examples of environmental injustice abound in the United States as well. In 1987, the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice published an already classic study entitled "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States." The study concluded that race is a major factor in the location of hazardous waste in the United States: Three out of every five African- and Hispanic-Americans, and over half of all Asian Pacific Islanders and American Indians live in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites. 75 percent of residents in the rural Southwest of the U.S., mostly Hispanic, drink pesticide-contaminated water. The nation's largest hazardous-waste landfill, receiving toxins from forty-five states, is in Emele, Alabama, which is 79.9 percent African-American. Probably the greatest concentration of hazardous waste sites in the United States is on the predominately African American and Hispanic South Side of Chicago. In Houston, Texas, six of the eight municipal incinerators, and all five city landfills are located in the predominately African American neighborhoods.

In the United States, Native Americans are the primary workforce in the mining of uranium. Pregnant Native American women and children face unique health risks because of the presence of uranium mining on or near Indian reservations, suffering higher rates of miscarriages (e.g., on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, 38 percent compared to the national average of 10 to 20 percent), bone and gynecological cancers, and cleft palate and other birth defects in newborns. Reproductive organ cancer among Navajo teenagers is seventeen times the national average.

These empirical examples raise issues of environmental justice. So it is especially important that environmental philosophers think seriously about the models of social justice we adopt for analyzing and resolving these issues.

Traditional Distributive Models of Social Justice

Historically, the main question of social justice is, "Who ought to get what, and on what grounds ought he or she get it?" Traditional models of social justice are conceived as *distributive*: They distribute something (e.g., rights, food, jobs, salaries, taxes) according to some basis for distribution, either egalitarian bases (e.g., humanness, basic human needs) or non-egalitarian bases (e.g., utility, compensation, merit, effort, contribution).

Not surprisingly, traditional distributive models of social justice have been virtually the only way to think about questions of environmental justice. Environmental justice is simply assumed or stated to be about the fair or equitable distribution of environmental goods, services, and "resources."

Three strengths of a distributive model of social justice for environmental issues are worth noting: First, it permits the extension of favored mainstream ethical positions to environmental issues. For example, in rights-based cultures, it provides a way of talking about "rights" of non-human animals as morally considerable when considering allocation of benefits and burdens. It also provides a clear argument for the injustice of environmental sexism, racism, and classism: they inequitably distribute environmental burdens on morally irrelevant bases.

Second, it is amenable to uses of popular cost-benefit analyses (e.g., in legal, economic, political contexts) to resolve conflicting claims about just outcomes. This is important in market economies where assigning quantifiable "costs" and "benefits" is strategically crucial in ascertaining and resolving moral (and other) issues about just outcomes.

Third, it builds on the civil rights and women's movements to help explain why the environmental movement is a social justice movement. Appeals to principles of distributive justice shows why disproportionate "costs" of environmental degradation suffered by women, people of color, children, and the Third World are wrong.

Limitations of a Distributive Model of Social Justice

So why am I skeptical of the distributive model as the model of environmental justice?

The simple answer is that crucial categories of environmental justice issues are *not* about distribution. To support that claim, I now draw on the work of philosopher Iris Young.

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Young critiques the distributive model of social justice on two main grounds: First, "it tends to focus thinking about social justice on the allocation of material goods such as things, resources, income, and wealth, or on the distribution of social positions, especially jobs." Second, even when the distributive paradigm is widened to include nonmaterial social goods (e.g., power, opportunity, self-respect), it continues to treat them as static things, rather than as functions of social relations and processes.

Young's critique of a distributive model focuses on three categories of social issues which, she claims, a distributive model fails to accommodate: (a) Social decision-making structures of power and privilege that often help determine patterns of distribution. These social issues are about the institutional contexts within which decisions are made, rather than the decisions themselves. Social justice issues within this category challenge, for example, economic decision making structures which operate to *reproduce patterns* of wealth, privilege, and inequality, even if not all who make these decisions within those structures are themselves wealthy or privileged; (b) The definition (not distribution) of labor. This definition must include class, race, gender relations (including family structures) in conceptions of labor and occupations themselves--a nondistributive issue, and not merely how pre-given occupations are allocated--a distributive issue. It calls attention to the ways the definitions of some jobs are associated with masculinity and femininity, for example, by associating those jobs with affectivity, instrumentality, or passivity; and, (c) Culture, including cultural imagery, symbols, meanings, habits, stories, through which people express themselves and communicate with each other. Such cultural considerations challenge the injustices of cultural imagery, stereotypes, symbols which are not themselves primarily or solely issues of property rights, individual liberties, or human rights. The three categories of social issues Young identifies are the launching off point for my ecofeminist worries about the limitations of a distributive model as the model of environmental justice.

Limitations of a Distributive Model of Environmental Justice

In my writings I have identified five features of an *oppressive conceptual frameworks*, understanding a conceptual framework as the basic set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions which shape and reflect how we see ourselves and the world: (a) *Value-hierarchical (Up-Down) thinking*; (b) *Oppositional value-dualisms*; (c) Conceptions of power as *power-over*; (d) Conceptions of *privilege* which systematically advantage the Ups over the Downs; and (e) A *logic of domination*, a moral principle which justifies the domination of the Downs by the Ups (e.g., the principle that *superiority justifies domination*). An oppressive *patriarchal* conceptual framework sanctions and justifies the domination of women ("Downs") by men ("Ups").

Now reconsider the three categories Young identifies as problematic for a distributive model. First, social structures and institutional contexts. According to ecofeminists, environmental policy, decisionmaking, and analysis often occurs within oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks and the structures and institutional contexts to which they give rise. As such, a critique of distributional patterns *within* such structures and contexts must explicitly challenge those patriarchal conceptual frameworks and the institutions *themselves* as unjust. The hundreds of grassroots environmental organizations and actions initiated by women and low-income minorities throughout the world are not simply challenging the distribution of toxins within communities of color, or the distribution of water collection and distribution tasks among women and children, or the inequitable and disproportionate effect of deforestation on women as managers of domestic households and subsistence economies in the South--though they certainly do that. They are also challenging the justice of oppressive (e.g., patriarchal, racist, classist, ethnocentric) institutions *themselves*; they challenge decisionmaking structures which give unjustified power, privilege, and authority to "Ups" over "Downs" in such matters as determining where to locate hazardous waste landfills or radioactive uranium tailings, deciding on the rules and procedures which permit such decisions to be made, and defining and maintaining such occupations as fuel and water collection work as "women's work."

This leads to Young's second category of social issues omitted by a distributive model: the very definition of occupations and labor. Many environment-related occupations are imbued with problematical race, gender, class, and age overtones. Weeding, water and wood collection, uranium mining, grape picking are all job categories associated with "Downs"(viz., women, Native Americans, and "migrant workers") and characteristics of "Downs" (e.g., inferior status, "women's work") in such a way that one could fail to notice the injustice of the definition of the job categories *themselves*--definitions which, as a consequence, promote disproportionate and unjust environmental "costs" to "Downs" in the distribution of these jobs.

Third, consider Young's category "culture." Among the most important environmental issues any adequate environmental ethic must honor are the cultural contexts *themselves* in which environmental costs and benefits are analyzed, calculate, and distributed. The loss of indigenous Amazonian tribal attachments--symbolic, experiential, ideological--to the Brazilian rainforest; the loss of traditional Native American ways of life--oral traditions, ritual, creation myths, and a kinship connection with "Mother Earth and Grandfather Sky;" the loss of Australian aborigine art, music, "dreamtime" stories, "walk about" experiences of the bush; the loss of cultural values of sharing and appropriate reciprocity, familiar to gift-based (rather than market-based) primal communities--these are all *themselves* issues of environmental justice, in addition to whatever distributive issues are raised by violation of rights or diminishing of individual liberties.

Since institutional contexts, definitions of labor and occupations, and culture are not themselves things, they are not distributable things. As Iris Young argues, *they are processes, functions, structures, and relations which themselves produce distributions,*

rather than the distributions produced. As such, they cannot themselves be captured, even captured inadequately, by a distributive model of justice. A nondistributive model is needed to give them their appropriate place in any adequate or complete model of environmental justice.

Furthermore, there are additional features of a distributive model which make it incomplete and unacceptable as *the* model of environmental justice. I discuss three here.

As Iris Young argues, the distributive model rests on an ontology which pays too little attention to social groups and social situations. By extension, I claim that it is thereby unable to pay sufficient attention not only to ecological species, ecosystems, and natural habitats, but also to ecological communities of which humans are (in the words of Aldo Leopold) "co-members." Attending to groups, species, ecosystems, natural habitats and ecological communities *themselves* (and not just to their individual members), as well as to important differences among them (e.g., differences between marshes, dunes, rainforests, deserts, oceans which are crucial to the healthy functioning of each) is crucial to any ecologically informed environmental ethic. Just as attention to human groups and group differences (e.g., among United States white communities and communities of color, or women and men in forest areas of the South, around the distribution of toxins or forest tasks, respectively) is crucial to environmental justice concerns, so, too, attention to nonhuman groups and group differences is crucial to justice concerns about the unsustainable exploitation of the nonhuman environment. To the extent that a distributive model is not equipped to appropriately attend to such group differences, it cannot be the model of environmental justice.

As a related fifth point, feminists and ecofeminists alike have been among the most vocal opponents of a theory of ethics or justice which presupposes "abstract individualism," i.e., a theory of human nature according to which humans are what we are independent of and abstracted from any social contexts and relationships. Many feminists and ecofeminists (such as myself) have suggested an alternative view of humans as selves-in-relations. If this view of relational selves is correct, then a distributive model alone will be inadequate as a model of environmental justice, because it relies on an inaccurate conception of humans.

Sixth, ecofeminist philosophers have consistently advanced ethical positions which centralize and honor values of care, appropriate reciprocity, and special relationships (e.g., between a mother and her child, between humans and their bioregions), in contrast or addition to values of rights, impartiality, or fairness. However, as Anthony Weston argues, many traditional distributive theories of justice (e.g., Rawlsian theories) incorrectly assume that fairness (typically unpacked in terms of impartiality and rights) is an overriding value:

A perspective that honors relationship may acknowledge that an ethic of care and of special relationship is not entirely fair. But from this perspective fairness is not the overriding and ultimate ethical concern. Impartial fairness is instead only one strand in a much richer fabric. The demands of love and relationship go beyond and may even go against justice. [One] may even be obliged to do what is *unjust* to save his wife.

Recasting Weston's point, on a distributive model of injustice, fairness often is given as an ultimate norm. But in real-life situations of care that honor special relationships, such as that of a mother to her child or nurse to her patient or friend to friend, the carer may morally be justified, even obliged, to treat the cared-about in ways which conflict with demands of justice, and thereby, on a distributive model, have one's conduct deemed "unjust". In contrast, a nondistributive model which values care and special relationships may deem such conduct not only just but in some sense obligatory. In environmental contexts, principles of fairness or equal treatment may be overridden by considerations that

special relationships of care (e.g., care of humans toward a pod of dolphins or a wilderness area), or of dependency relationships (e.g., food chains and plant succession), or by the principle that group differences should always be acknowledged in public policy (e.g., in policy aimed at eliminating environmental racism) in order to both reduce unjustified domination and to foster healthy social and ecological life.

Conclusion

An additional nondistributive model of justice is needed if what really matters ethically concerning the exploitation of human and nonhuman natural environments is to be captured and expressed. This model would recognize structures of power and privilege and systems of oppression; gender, race, and class-biased definitions of labor; the relevance of culture to justice issues; the importance of nonmaterial, nondistributable goods (e.g., power, care); the role of special relationships (e.g., dependency relationships); selves as relational. A distributive model simply is inadequate, by itself, to the task of explicating and resolving the relevant issues of social and environmental justice.

Notes

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(1) For arguments supporting these claims, and documentation of the examples of environmental injustice provided in this section, see my essay "Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, Culture*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997): 3-20.

(2) "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States," 1987, Commission for Racial Justice, United Church of Christ, 105 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

(3) So Peter Wenz claims, in one of the first books devoted exclusively to the issue of environmental justice, that environmental justice focuses "on the distribution of benefits and burdens among all of those affected by environmentally related decisions and actions." (Peter S. Wenz, *Environmental Justice*. New York, State University of New York Press, 1988: 4.) Similarly, Troy Hartley, defending a Kantian-based view, claims that environmental justice is "the fair distribution of environmental quality." (Troy W. Hartley, "Environmental Justice: An Environmental Civil Rights Value Acceptable to All World Views," *Environmental Ethics*, Fall, 1995, vol. 17 (3): 287.)

(4) Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

(5) Young: 14.

(6) Young: 16. Note that Young is not interested in rejecting distributive theories as unimportant. Rather, she wants to offer the concepts of oppression and domination, not distribution, as "the starting point for a conception of social justice" (16).

(7) Young argues that a distributive model "tends to ignore, at the same time that it often presupposes, the institutional context that determines material distributions" (18).

(8) It is not my intent to defend Young. In fact, there are parts of Young's account which I find troublesome. Rather, her critique of a distributive model has helped me think through my own ecofeminist worries about how issues of environmental justice have been construed. So I use what I take to be the salient features of Young's critique to *sketch* both the limitations of such a model for environmental issues and the reasons for saying that what is needed is a supplementary nondistributive model.

(9) See, for example, my two essays, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics*, Spring 1990, vol. 12 (3): 125-146, and "A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum Press, 1993): 119-132.

(10) Young: 18.

(11) Young: 4.

(12) Anthony Weston, *Toward Better Problems: New Perspectives on Abortion, Animal Rights, the Environment, and Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992): 141.