

# Philosophy's Engagement in Environmental Discourse: Opportunities and Obstacles

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## Introduction

Something interesting is happening in philosophy. The philosopher's at MSU – really, the philosophers in this room – feel and understand this, and are committed to lead this change. This workshop series is evidence of this commitment and evidence of the responsibility we have to foster this change in ways that respect our communities. Engaged philosophy, as we are calling it, is both an emerging mode of philosophy and a call to action to reflect on the practices borne out in philosophical investigation that harm our communities – even if they are done under the auspices of benevolence. In this workshop, I want to prompt us to collectively reflect on the engagement of philosophy in environmental discourse, specifically in those discourses that have policy/regulatory/management/governance implications. It is required, by definition, that *to engage* is to demand a subject to engage with. When the subject of engagement is the sort of thing that impacts people's lives, we ought to demand of ourselves the critical reflection that our privileged positions both afford us and demand of our responsible attention. I suggest that environmental discourse has this sort of character, and thus we must reflect on our practices in environmental discourse.

What is “environmental discourse”? Surely there is an environmental discourse that occurs within philosophy itself – discussions of environmental ethics would fall under this purview – but there are also environmental discourse occurring in other disciplines. Environmental sociology, environmental studies, environmental management and a host of other studies without the “environmental” descriptor. Outside of the academy, there are environmental discourses occurring in the political sphere, in non-profit conference rooms, and in small-scale local groups, each working to better understand their relationships and commitments to their own environments. When I say “environmental discourse”, I am mobilizing this broad conception that encompasses all of the above discourses and includes the multitude that I have left out.

When philosophy engages in one of these discourses – including its own environmental discourses – it is making some sort of mark on the discourse. These discourses (with their philosophical marks) are often bound within the walls of academic institutions. Whereas it would be an important task to reflect on this set of discourses, I want us to turn our attention to those discourse that either leave the academic institution or have occurred entirely outside of its purview. When philosophy engages with these discourses, philosophy is engaging with other people's communities and worlds. So, given that we wish to critically reflect on our engaged practices, we can now ask our question: How do we responsibly engage with those environmental discourses that are themselves products of people's worlds and communities? This is the topic of this workshop, and will underlie the questions we will collectively discuss.

However, I do not expect that we will answer it. True to our training in philosophical methodology, our reflection on this question will only offer more questions. I hope that we can come to see these sets of questions as our framework for responsible engagement in environmental discourse, and let them help guide our personal reflections in our personal

projects. Lastly, I presume that our discussion today could be equally directed towards discourses other than environmental. Environmental discourse, however, makes many of the issues we will discuss salient in that it often (if not necessarily so) involves the environment which requires special reflection on how to *listen* to it and much philosophical reflection of the environmental-ilk is devoted to articulating a position for the environment in light of its relative silence. Additionally, the values that we (the royal sort) hold in relation to the environment are wide ranging and often legitimate even if conflicted or otherwise incommensurable. This, in my opinion, *requires* engagement of different communities, knowledges, and worldviews in environmental discourse. So, although this discussion should be reflected on in other engaged situations, I foreground environmental discourses in the following discussion.

## Questions

Is there a substantive difference in how we engage with a “disembodied” discourse and an “embodied” discourse, or, put differently, when we are engaged with an idea versus being engaged with a person?

In embodied engagement, what is philosophy’s special role? Is “philosophy’s” role different than the individual “philosopher’s” role? What can philosophers offer that is previously unavailable to the persons?

Much of philosophical argument is aimed at *being right*. What is philosophy’s relationship with ‘being right’ and how do we understand the importance of ‘being wrong’?

Philosopher’s take positions on issues, and these can often conflict with the communities’ own positions. How do understand this tension? Is the philosopher’s role to defend their own position or to do something else? What else could it be?

The role of “place” to local communities is especially salient in environmental discourses. Philosophy often homogenizes their subject in ways that render differences in place invisible. For example, an argument that we should not develop previously undeveloped land does not itself recognize any difference in the sense of place different communities possess with their local environments. In these cases, does the philosopher and their philosophy need to adapt or should the community consider the unaltered philosophical position? In the former, is the philosophical position correct if must be adapted to local conditions?

I offered that philosophical engagement with some discourses can sometimes cause harm to communities. What are these possible harms and how are these harms unique to philosophical engagement?

In light of the previous question/discussion, how can we as engaged philosophers mitigate for these harms? What are some practical strategies to responsibly engage in potentially harmful practices?

## Conclusion

This workshop and these discussions are another step forward in developing an ethic of engaged philosophy. Before wrapping up, I want to offer some considerations that I have developed after

reflecting on my own engagement practices (given that I'm writing this before the workshop, it is likely that everything following has already been discussed in detail. If so, this is a good time to start tuning out!). First, and I'm sure this has come up many times, engagement with embodied discourses should take seriously the ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundations of pluralism. When we are engaged in problem solving in the world, it is *prima facie* required to understand and engage with heterogeneous difference on whatever level it occurs instead of shoehorning an ill-received position that runs contrary to local intuitions. This is not to say that we give up our own commitments. It is to say, however, that we take seriously other's commitments as a reflection of truth in the *exact* same way that our own commitments are a reflection of our own truths. Depending on our prior commitments, this may be a small or large task. But, I implore anyone committed to engagement to undertake this task regardless. I am not asserting or defending that pluralism – even in the strictest senses – is ultimately True (with a capital T), but it is at least pragmatically useful.

Somewhat of an ornery beast in philosophy is the role of *belief*. I want to suggest that the engaged philosopher is required to take up belief in earnest and deploy it regularly. What I mean by this is that we should enter into another's discourse with the stance that *we believe*. The things I hear may not make sense to me, and they may be exactly contrary to how I think. But to responsibly engage in the discourse, I must begin with the small statement "I believe". I believe that the other's comment is a reflection of their understanding of their own world which I may not have access to – and, it is often possible that I *should not* have access to it. Believing without understanding should not make us uncomfortable – it should permeate our practices and made a comfortable traveling companion.

Lastly, we should not undervalue or otherwise ignore the role of local peoples in formulating and responding to their own discourses. The "local" is powerful, and there is substantial risk of harm in engaging with a discourse when we do not take seriously the project of understanding the people with which we are engaging, including their cultures, traditions, histories, values, and reasons for their practices. To engage with a subject in a way that is respectful, we first need (and I say *need* in the strongest way) to understand the subject as a subject (not an object) on their own terms. If we cannot do this, then we need to seriously reflect on the ethical grounds of our own philosophical practices.

I am an engaged philosopher for this last reason – I believe that properly deployed, my philosophical training has provided me a unique ability to recognize and reflect on my own practices in ways that I find personally fulfilling. In this process of recognition and reflection I make a lot of mistakes, and we should all expect to. But, we also have to tools to rectify these mistakes in the future and become better. And this is what engaged philosophy needs – a mess of brilliant engaged philosophical leaders actively helping to right the wrongs in the world while building a better mode of doing philosophy. Thank you.