

The Value of Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

Environmental justice, at least, entails preserving the environment as a global entity, but also making those persons who feel, have felt, have been, or are victims of environmental crimes and atrocities feel as if they are part of the solution as full members of the human community and not just the environmental dumping ground for the well-off.

INTRODUCTION

FOR THIS ARTICLE, we were asked to give our thoughts as to what Environmental justice entails. As a Black American, who is also a professor and academically trained philosopher, the question of what environmental justice entails looms large. Since my area of academic expertise is African American philosophy, I have spent the past 25 years looking at the manner in which racism, sexism, and classism impacts on the lives of not only blacks, but also the poor. I see philosophy as being interested in questions of value. Why should we value the well being of other humans? Why should we value life itself? Why should we value the environment? There are many answers to these questions. The fact that there are many answers does not mean that there is no answer. Some answers are clearly bad. It does not or would not take a trained philosopher to see that some of the answers are bad answers. The philosophical goal is to mark out the bad answers and to demonstrate why they are bad. Then we must mark the competing good answers and examine these answers with an eye to the past and to the future of this planet. This is very important if we want public policies that respect the histories of all environmental stakeholders involved. Examining these arguments and claims, I think is one of the roles of the philosopher in the area of environmental justice.

DISCUSSION

I want to start with the Environmental Protection Agency's definition of environmental justice:

Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, culture, education, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair Treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal environmental programs and policies. Meaningful Involvement means that: (1) potentially affected community residents have an appropriate opportunity to participate in decisions about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and/or health; (2) the public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision; (3) the concerns of all participants involved will be considered in the decision-making process; and (4) the decision-makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.¹

I want to focus on item number 3 in the section Meaningful Involvement as my starting point for what environmental justice entails. I argue that environmental justice entails, at least, preserving the environment as a global entity but also making those persons who feel, have felt, and have been victims of environmental crimes and atrocities feel as if they are part of the solution as full members of the human community and not the dumping ground for the rest of us.

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¹ <<http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/faqs/ej/index.html>> (2008).

I will use one of the major problems facing environmentalists as my focal point. The problem is the bringing together of diverse environmental stakeholders to resolve issues regarding the environment. This is particularly difficult when environmental policies appear to be rooted in class or race divisions. That is, where members of poor or raced groups have been the victims of environmental policies that have benefited the well-off. (Lawson, 2006) I want to focus, in this article, on environmental stakeholders of color, particularly African Americans in the United States. Not because I think that their plight is more important than that of the poor in general, but because the African American experience in the United States has been my area of study.

The African American experience is unique in that their history must be situated in a state that political and social policies are supposedly underpinned by liberal tenets that are meant to garner respect for worth and autonomy of each individual. It is clear that these liberal tenets were not applied to the social and political experiences of African Americans for most of their tenure in the United States. Not only have African Americans had to fight for application of the liberal tenets to their status as citizens, these same tenets have often been used against them. I have argued elsewhere how the appeal to protection of private property has been used to keep African Americans out of white communities and how laws have been enforced to ensure that white autonomy has been protected and respected. The history of the environmental policies attests to the manner in which African Americans are not respected as full members of the political order.

Robert Bullard and others have documented the manner in which neighborhoods of persons of color have been the site of environmental contamination. Not only have these communities been sites of contamination but also when it comes time to clean up the sites, the government is slow or reluctant to do so. These actions by state and federal officials have led to feelings of mistrust between these communities and the government at all levels. There is no wondering why there would be mistrust between members of communities of color and the local, state, and federal government as well as environmentalists who often see the land that members of communities of color live on as not the part of the environment that has to be protected. The actions of these groups have fostered a sense of mistrust between these communities and those agencies and groups that purport to be concerned with the environment. This mistrust is especially problematic when the divisions have been race-based. Race based discrimination has been a long-standing problem for African Americans.

Because of the history of racism, African Americans who should be anxious to join environmental coalitions are often reluctant to join with mainstream groups pushing for global action regarding the environment. This reluctance often leads mainstream environmentalists to argue that this group is uncaring when it comes to the global environment. Thus there are various studies of the environmental concern of African Americans that tend to correlate their environmental concerns with local environ-

mental issues. That African Americans would be interested or concerned with their local space should not be surprising. After all there is the problem of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) that is held by persons across the racial and economic spectrum. The difference is that the backyards of African Americans have not been respected. Generally, this lack of respect has been caused by racism.

This is not to claim that environmentalists are or have been racist. However, we must agree that some environmental policies seem to hint strongly of racist intent. Here, I only want to claim that racism has impacted on how African Americans view their status in the United States. Even environmentalists can agree that racism has been and continues to be a problem for African Americans, but also note that environmental concerns are not like racism or sexism, which may affect a particular group of people, environmental concerns impact on us all and thus should be the concern of us all. This means that as members of the human family we have a vested interest in good environmental policy and a clean planet.

It is thus in the best interest of all persons to be involved in the push to clean up and cool down the planet. If this answer does not suffice, environmentalists could argue that not only are persons of color (African Americans) often the victims of bad environmental policies, they often bear the brunt of harm done by these policies. They should be willing participants in the movement for well-formed environmental policies and acts. In addition, African Americans are to some degree responsible for the degrading of the environment. It is clear that members of these communities have an environmental footprint that impacts on the health of the planet.

At this point the environmentalist would sit down thinking that he or she has adequately addressed the question of the responsibility of members of communities of color (African Americans) to join with other concerned citizens of the world to help save the environment. But notice what question the environmentalist has answered. It is with one noticeable exception the question of why should persons of color be concerned with global issues of the environment. The question I want to address is why should they feel any responsibility to participate in environmental programs. The answer that they also have an environmental footprint seems to not carry much weight or at least not as much weight as some environmentalists think it should. Why do I think that this is the case?

I want to draw a distinction between being or feeling concerned and being or feeling responsible. By concern I mean caring about and giving attention to some particular interest. Being responsible, on the other hand, has two related meanings: (1) being the cause of some action and (2) being expected to feel obliged to participate in some joint action.

Here I want to draw on the experiences of African Americans and their environmental problems. Let me be clear: my use of the African American experience is not meant to suggest that they are the only group that will have a problem feeling responsibility to global environmental concerns. If it is true that African Americans feel that they are victims of racism and the resulting envi-

ronmental problems are a *consequence* of the racism, why should they feel any responsibility to help the persons responsible for both their plight and the plight of the planet? One might think that to hold such a position is very short sighted. Yet, if we draw on the liberal model of the responsibilities of the individual, then it become apparent that the persons responsible for the wrongdoing have the greater burden of responsibility in correcting it. I want to suggest that a part of the reason this attitude can be manifest is we live in a society that puts the onus of responsibility on individuals or groups for the wrongs they have done. That is, if you do the wrong, you are responsible for correcting it. This means for many persons of color, not only have "white folk" done evil to persons of color, they have harmed the planet. It is therefore their responsibility to fix it. In this manner blacks can feel concern but not responsible for the environmental problems of the planet. I am not suggesting that African Americans have no responsibility to help with environmental projects. I do contend that given the history of racist social interaction there are feelings that whites have more responsibility for harming the planet than do persons of color. Because of the racial history, there are often feelings of mistrust between African Americans and those persons that push some form of collective responsibility for the environment.

Is it possible to alleviate some of the mistrust? I think that it is possible but it will require a great deal of work on the part of both parties. What I want to suggest is that those persons concerned with environmental justice rethink how they approach persons of color in regard to working on environmental issues. I am suggesting that they ask: Why should poor persons of color feel any responsibility to participate in environmental programs? This question points to one of the essential values of environmental justice.

I contend that not only cleaning up and preserving the environment as a global entity but making those persons who feel, have felt, are, or have been victims of environmental crimes and atrocities feel as if they are part of the solution as full members of the human community and not the dumping ground for the wealthy of the world. These are concerns that environmental groups have to address.

As I write this article a major political party has nominated the first African American, Barack Obama, for the president of the United States. This is a historic moment. Yet, we must be careful as to how we use his candidacy in our future moral and political deliberations. I think that this point is very important for those of us concerned with environmental issues. His candidacy will give whites a chance to show that they are not racist. Some will claim that: "I voted for Obama therefore I couldn't be racist." Logically the conclusion does not follow from the act of

voting for Obama. We must be on our guard to remind those persons who use this claim as proof that their environmental policies cannot be racist are wrong. This is an important moment in the social and political history of the United States, but we should not be lulled into ideological complacency because of Obama's political ascendancy. We must remember that racism is still a problem and a vote for Obama may soothe one's conscience but it does not follow that in other areas of one's life race does not play an important role. Those of us concerned with environmental justice should not forget this salient point.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the failure of the environmental movement to address the feelings of victims of bad and unjust environmental policies that have often been seen as racial atrocities may be a reason that many persons of color, in this case African Americans, feel no responsibility to join with environmentalists to address environmental issues beyond their local issues.

Environmentalists want to claim that we are all in this together. We may all be in it together but some of us have been getting screwed. Now you want us to join you in a global environmental program, why should persons of color trust environmentalists. The challenge for both environmentalists and environmental justice advocates is to allay the fears of persons of color that the burden for environmental reclamation will not fall solely on persons of color. In the end, environmentalists must provide arguments that are sound and rooted in the history of all of the parties concerned.

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