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Placing Environmental Issues Higher on the Bioethics Agenda

I think it's fair to say that in the 35 year history of contemporary bioethics, environmental issues have *not* been at the top of the agenda – even though one of the original uses of the term “bioethics” was to address ethical issues and the biosphere.

Biomedical issues early on claimed and retained priority in the field for a number of reasons:

- Issues in contemporary biomedicine could easily be placed on an historical continuum with medical ethics. For example, direct harms and abuses associated with human subjects research in Nazi Germany and in the U.S. were highly visible and amenable to critique, in part, because they were associated with medical actors who were in violation of established norms of professionalism.
- Environmental harms, by contrast may be so distant and indirect that they are either difficult to associate with specific actors or those actors – corporations, governments, individuals are not bound by clear role specific obligations.
- In the field of bioethics, *biomedical* issues have had priority over environmental issues because the impact of new biomedical technologies has been dramatically displayed in *personalized* conflicts in the health care setting – think: Terrie Schiavo, Karen Quinlan, Barney Clark, Baby M.
- Environmental issues, by contrast, have not been easily personalized – in part because people have not been seen as the immediate objects of environmental degradation and people have had a hard time resonating with harms to nonhuman species or to land, air, or water. Witness how effective the rhetoric “tree hugger,” for example, has been in trivializing environmentalism.

As sophisticated methodologies such as climate modeling, biomarker research in environmental epidemiology, and social science research on health disparities and environmental justice have borne fruit in the last 2 decades or so, the human impacts of environmental degradation have become more evident and compelling. Thanks in part to this research, it is becoming clearer as Paul Epstein at the Center for Health and the Global Environment has said, “how bad environmental policies can make people sick.”

I'd like to suggest that **placing environmental issues higher on the bioethics agenda is a way not only to help define progressive bioethics but to give bioethics strategic relevance in support of a broader progressive political agenda.**

By “environment” I mean the land, air and water on which all life depends – whether it is

- land that is environmentally at risk such as New Orleans' lower 9th Ward, land used to manufacture or store hazardous chemicals, or land that is used as a child's playground;
- air that carries CO² molecules to the ozone layer, air that contains nanoparticles in occupational settings, or air that contains particulate matter from bus and truck depots located in low income communities;
- ground water that becomes a reservoir for mine tailings, surface water at risk for pesticide runoff, water treatment plants managing billions of excreted pharmaceuticals per year, or the privatized water resources no longer available to a local community.

If it is true that only 30% of Americans say they support the goals of environmentalists, why would progressive bioethics want to hitch its

star to a political non-starter? Part of this is a framing problem.

By now we should understand and be able to communicate that environmental issues are public health issues many of which disproportionately affect the poor, people of color, and industrial workers. As public health experts have long known, these aspects of the “natural environment” – land, air, water – are intimately related to the built and the social environments.

Environmental issues are also matters of local, global, and international security. Unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens of environmental resources creates civil unrest that can contribute to an overall decline in health, prosperity, and stability in unequal societies.

Environmental issues are also economic issues with companies competing on the basis of environmental performance measures.

Environmental issues are also social justice issues that require transparency and public participation in decision making regarding risk and fairness in burden-sharing and the distribution of public goods.

Progressive bioethics needs to shape its identity proactively, not reactively, and to see itself as a partner to like-minded groups, not as a counterpoint to ideological opponents. It is just as much a mistake for a group that supports something called “progressive bioethics” to shape its identity in response to a conservative agenda as it is for something called the “Democratic Party” to shape its identity in response to neoconservatism.

Perhaps a lesson could be taken from the proactive work done by social investment companies, such as the Calvert Group that have set corporate best practices on social, environmental and management issues; religious groups such as the Interfaith Climate Change Network that advocate for sound energy policy, and the United Church of Christ and grass-root groups such as the West Harlem Environmental Action that do policy and advocacy work on environmental justice.

The Calvert Group, for example, one of the pioneers in socially-responsible investing has established ratings, based on ethical criteria such as

- human rights (including worker safety, fair compensation, indigenous peoples’ rights, comprehensive and consistent standards for national and international operations)
- product safety (including integrity in advertising and labeling and goods and services that improve the health or quality of life of consumers)
- environmental sustainability (including pollution prevention and environmental performance measures for senior management)
- transparency in environmental performance (including the publication of environmental emissions information and environmental audits)

Interfaith Climate Change Network campaigns have recruited 25,000 individuals as advocates to reduce green house gas emissions on the basis of arguments from social and intergenerational justice.

The United Church of Christ and West Harlem Environmental Action are two of the first organizations of any kind to recognize and address – through public participation – the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on minority communities.

Giving a more prominent place to environmental issues on the bioethics agenda underscores the need to orient bioethics to the public interest; it orients the field to public health issues that have only recently begun to receive concerted attention in the field; and it points the way for bioethics to form partnerships with organizations that have already committed themselves to commonly shared ethical principles.

Let me end with a word of caution. In the last decade, corporate players in biomedicine, most notably in the biopharmaceutical industry, have hired bioethicists as consultants to burnish their corporate image or to lend credibility to troubling avenues of research. These affiliations threaten to compromise the ethics of bioethics. As environmental issues gain greater priority on the bioethics agenda, we can expect industry to come calling. **Let’s make sure that progressive bioethics takes the lead in demanding standards of ethics and accountability for all industries – the bioethics industry included.**