

Critical Analysis of  
Doing Environmental Ethics (Robert Traer)

The following is a critical analysis of the book *Doing Environmental Ethics* by Robert Traer. From what I could find online, as there is nothing in the book, Traer has a PHD in theology and appears to have worked as a theologian and an instructor. He is the author of several other books most of which seem related to religion and ethics. Traer doesn't seem to have formal ethics training but I guess ethics and religion are intertwined. Where the author develops his interest or knowledge of environmental issues is unknown. I think it was chapters online (sorry no reference as I can't find it again) that describes the book as a book in applied ethics. I am still working on my understanding of what ethics really is. I had always considered ethics to be choices and I guess I still believe that to be true, ethics is choices in how we live and who we choose to be (at least in my opinion, today).

The book doesn't really explore a lot of ethical theory at least for more than a page at a time. The author has a nice way of bringing in multiple perspectives to help gain an understanding of an issue. The author references a number of persons and thinkers from a variety of backgrounds to give perspective to the issue. The book has references to George Bush, Clinton, Darwin, Socrates, Adam Smith the widely revered Bob the Builder and many others. I like the way the author approached a subject with small sections all building some piece of our understanding of the issue. In several of the chapters he took time to explain a particular religions perspective on an issue. One common and well defined issue in the text was the treatment of animals. Traer explored this issue from the perspective of Christianity, as well as the Jewish and Muslim faiths, he even referenced the fairy tale Cinderella and its references to the treatment of and the importance of animals.

Each chapter explored a number of different issues with the chapters in some ways building on or referencing one another as they helped develop a message. The books starts by building a foundation, he speaks of reasoning, faith, duties and rights, the rule of law, feminism, consumer choices and other basic principles. The foundation is built so slowly in fact that half way through the book I found myself wondering, what does this book have to do with the environment. At times I thought his focus was narrow, only focused on treatment of animals or too focused on economy or that he was missing so many of the issues around the environment. A full picture is painted before the end of the book and it does go on to address the issues of automobiles, agriculture, pollution and waste.

As I read I considered if there was a relationship to the Sinclair/Kohlberg paradigm, was this about moral reasoning or simply about the state of the environment and what it is that got us there? In hindsight and after reading "Have we Got the cart before the horse?" I do see some relationships. First, to truly want to make a difference to one's environment or to mankind's impact on the environment a person would need to be operating at a high level of reasoning. If we are concerned only with what affects me in the here and now, we would have little consequence for broad environmental issues. One could say that appearing to be green to affect one's image or how one is perceived is operating at a moral level 3. Truly wanting to make a difference for the sake of the greater good is level 5 moral actions; and acting to affect the environment simply because one believes it is what needs to be done, regardless of cost or personal sacrifice would vault one to a level 6, at least in my opinion. Traer speaks about environmental laws that allow for pollution because governments set maximum levels of contaminants and as long as one pollutes below those levels your pollution is legal. Therefore, a person operating at a level 4, rule of law position, would not feel compelled to act as the pollution is within the defined boundary of what is acceptable and moral. Lastly the book has made me think about my own feelings about the environment and my own actions or inactions as it relates to climate change. Perhaps some of my lukewarm interest in the issue relates to the fact that I am not at a sufficient level of moral reasoning to understand the need for change. I am currently operating at a level that says "we should do something but not if it costs me money or makes my life harder". Sinclair/Kohlberg may say that I need to step up my level of moral reasoning before I am able to truly work for the greater good and am willing to self-sacrifice.

## **Relevance to the field of Public Health**

As a public health inspector first and foremost, and a rather straight line thinker most of the time, it is a bit of a stretch for me to find much application for this book within my professional life. There are a few foundational ideas that he puts forth that really do cross most boundaries and could have relevancy almost anywhere. First, I appreciated his notion that it is difficult to predict consequences or to account for all possible outcomes. This isn't to suggest that we shouldn't try or that the process doesn't have merit, but rather that it is imperfect. In public health we could apply this principle to try to implement programs or make choices that will do the greatest good with the fewest negative consequences. Prior to acting we need to consider what the consequences are, but inevitably we will cause unintended harm or hardship at some point to someone. Second, Traer puts forth the notion that we need to encourage the good, with some sort of relaxation or reward and punish the bad with a tax or a penalty. Too often in life we will punish the good. An example that pops in mind for me is that when a staff member does good work, I reward that good work with more tasks because I have faith in their work. Consequently a staff member that consistently does poor work will often be given fewer tasks as there is no faith in the quality of their work. What should happen is a reward for good work and a penalty for bad, in my example perhaps doing the work over could serve as a lesson. Thirdly Traer suggests that most people won't make the good choices on their own, especially if the choice is more difficult, they need to be pushed and persuaded. That theory certainly applies in public health as the easy choice is not usually the best choice. In my work as a public health inspector the easy way is to not clean, to not wash hands or to not deal with the fecal

accident in your pool. The proper choice of closing the pool to deal with the accident is much more difficult. Public Health is all about finding ways to make good choices.

### **Relevance to my personal life**

As I mentioned earlier I am not a climate change junkie. It is not that I don't believe we should act or that I don't believe there is a problem, just that the issue is far from the top of my priority list. My climate change issues involve the cold shoulder of my 15 year old daughter and the heated arguments that ensue; couple that with a career, a marriage, hopes of a masters degree, volunteer work, etc. and my passion for most other things dwindles. All that being said this is a reasonably good book for someone like me. The book makes no effort to prove the issues but rather to build a foundation of understanding and to present an overview of the challenges and it even offers a few solutions. You don't find the usual charts and graphs, the pictures of sad looking polar bears and dwindling glaciers. What I did find was some new understanding of the issues around intensive livestock, the inflated production of corn, overuse of fertilizer, and the environmental costs of my car, my house and the meat I eat. So what is the personal usefulness of the book? I may eat a few more vegetables, will reconsider the solar panel and be slightly less sceptical about climate change. I think the relative soft sell and the broad considerations of the book could have some effect on how I impact the world.

In conclusion I would have to say that this is a decent book for the average person. The variety of perspectives introduced throughout keeps it an interesting read for the most part. The book addresses the major issues around climate change and the environment without getting overly involved in the details. This book would serve as a good introduction for someone with climate

change apathy. On a critical note it did take some time to develop into a complete thought.

The author did try to point to further information to come but at times I was wondering what the point was and if the author truly understood what environment meant. There were some perspectives that I did have trouble relating to the environment. As an example I still find it difficult to believe that the feminist movement has much to do with the environment, I don't deny its link to ethics but people are people when it comes to the environment and if feminism does have a role then so should racism and others. Overall the book explores some interesting issues in a clear and understandable manner, it doesn't overcomplicate and while it does point blame it is not overly critical. I would recommend the book to persons with an interest in the area of environmental ethics.