Editorial: Commons Made Tragic

On March 1, the United States State Department issued its most recent report on the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project, which aims to transport enormous amounts of heavy crude oil from Canada's tar sands to refineries in the southern United States. The report concluded that the project would have little environmental impact (United States, 2013: ES-15).

Environmentalists were appalled. North American environmentalists have long been opposed to the project precisely because of its catastrophic environmental consequences, particularly for the climate. Releasing the carbon currently sequestered in the tar sands into the atmosphere, NASA's James Hansen (2011) said, 'would make it implausible to stabilize the climate and avoid disastrous global climate impacts'. He famously referred to the Keystone XL project as 'game over for the climate' (Hansen, 2012).

In response to the report, the Sierra Club (2013) issued a statement saying that it was 'mystified as to how the State Department can acknowledge the negative effects of the Earth's dirtiest oil on our climate, but at the same time claim that the proposed pipeline will "not likely result in significant adverse environmental effects"'. How indeed? In reading through the report, one sees a familiar line of reasoning: If the United States doesn't import the tar sands oil, someone else will. So the question isn't whether the oil should be extracted at all; the question is just whether the oil should go through the United States or through some other country on its way to the global marketplace. The environmental impact of the oil going to the United States rather than to China is, after all, minimal.

One imagines the smirk on Garrett Hardin's face upon hearing this reasoning. While environmental science might have taken a more global perspective in the last few decades, national governments still don't make environmental policy from a global perspective. Instead, they ask questions of the following form: 'Given that someone is going to emit these greenhouse gases, should it be us?' The answer is almost always 'yes'. But of course, that is clearly the wrong question to ask. What they should ask instead is, 'What is needed to solve the problem and what role can we play in bringing about that solution?'

Many ethicists, social scientists, and policy analysts have long been arguing that a wiser approach to environmental decision-making is needed. Within these literatures, one finds many proposals for revising the way that we think about environmental problems. The papers in this issue all engage with these ongoing discussions in different ways.

Matthew Cotton (2013) argues that due to the complexity and uncertainty involved in imagining the far future, backcasting (imagining a desirable future state of the world and then thinking through what it would take to get there) is a better tool to use in ethical deliberations about future generations than

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forecasting (projecting present states of the world into the future). He proposes backcasting as an ethical tool to be used in the process of Deweyan 'dramatic rehearsal', an empathetic imagining of different ways the world could go as a result of different choices.

Moving to the question of how such interests might be represented politically, Kerry Whiteside (2013) criticises proposed strategies for ensuring the representation of nonhuman and future interests within democratic institutions. Whiteside argues that assigning proxies to represent these interests will not constitute politically acceptable representation: the representatives will not be electorally accountable to those whose interests they represent; they will have no dialogical relationship with their constituents; and they will be unable to shape or respond to changes in their constituents' priorities. He concludes that we should give up the assumption that representation is the best way to ensure the inclusion of these interests in political decision-making and argues for the creation of extra-legislative institutions and procedures to do so instead.

The last three papers analyse and recommend changes to the ways that we think about environmental problems. Schmidt and Shrubsole (2013) argue that the early creators of United States' water policy saw their policies as an expression of the success of European civilisation. On this view, U.S. utilitarian approaches to water policy should not be seen as attempts to be 'value neutral', but rather as attempts to promote a certain set of ethnocentric values. This opens up the possibility of thinking about water policy in terms of the substantive communal and cultural values that it expresses, a development that would be welcome by those who oppose the spread of U.S. approaches to water policy outside of the U.S.

Sciberras (2013) defends Pāli Buddhism from the criticism that it cannot regard the natural world as valuable. She argues against the charge that central texts of the Pāli canon regard the world as having negative value, and also against the claim that *nibbāna* requires a total rejection of the world (including the natural world). She then claims that because it regards basic features of the world as indeterminate, Pāli Buddhism is compatible with a subjectivist understanding of nature's value as an attitude that one might take toward the world rather than as a determinate feature of a determinate object.

The cultivation of such valuing attitudes, Newman and Dale (2013) argue, can be achieved through an appreciation of 'mundane nature', the nature found within 'cultural' spaces such as cities. The cultivation and appreciation of mundane nature, they argue, can help us to understand ourselves and to live as 'one species among many' while avoiding the nature/culture division which continues to characterize Western environmental thought.

In academic and environmentalist circles, careful and thoughtful analyses of how we might better approach environmental problems are not in short supply. If policy-makers choose the path of short-sightedness and narrow-mindedness

instead, it is not because there are no better alternatives. It is because they have chosen to ignore them.

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