

How Far Have We Cared? Recent Developments in the Geography of Values, Justice and Ethics

Audrey Kobayashi and James Proctor

Questions of ethics, values, justice, and the moral principles according to which we engage in geographical scholarship, have always been a part of geography, but for the past two decades – and perhaps even significantly, since the events of September 11, 2001 – they have become a central part of the lexicon of American and international geographical scholarship. The Values, Justice and Ethics Specialty Group (VJESG) was formed in 1997 to respond to a felt need for geographers to focus on both the ethical issues that inform our academic work, and the ways in which that work is connected to larger societal issues.¹ The concerns of the group have been less upon a particular range of topics or approaches than with the ethical questions that cut across the entire discipline, on the assumption that such questions are bounded neither by subject matter nor by theoretical constraints.

The group was formed at a time when questions of *whether* geographers should be concerned about the moral, ethical implications of their work had long since been replaced with questions of *how* geographers could focus attention on these issues. Concern is with the very difficult questions that link personal commitment, or reflexivity, with larger questions of research and pedagogy. One of the best sources of evidence of the importance of such questions, and of the intellectual sophistication with which they are being asked, is the journal *Ethics, Place and Environment*, inaugurated in 1998. This group felt a need, therefore, for a geographical forum in which to explore the relationship between American geography and the world in which it operates.

¹ At the annual meeting of the AAG in 2001, a decision was made to merge the Values, Ethics and Justice Specialty Group with the Human Rights Specialty Group, creating a new Values, Ethics and Human Rights Specialty Group. Many if

While a relatively small number of geographers works in a more narrowly defined field that might be called moral philosophy (Sack 1997; Smith 1997; 1998a 2000), for the vast majority of ethical questions connect the academic and the personal lives of geographical practitioners, in ways that influence directly the questions they ask, the methodological and theoretical choices they make and perhaps most importantly, their personal relations with their research subjects and their own communities. As Hay (1998, 73) suggests, "the place to start that process is on our [geographers'] own professional bodies." This paper is a very cursory attempt to describe the context in which such issues are currently being taken up by geographers and, taking our cue from David Smith (1998b) to raise some issues about how geographers have cared.

It would be accurate to say that ethics have always been an aspect of geography. Immanuel Kant, for example, was fundamentally concerned with developing an explicit understanding of ethics upon which his vision of geography could be layered. In the present, we are less concerned with the specifics of his moral system than with the normative grid that Kantian thought, as well as that of other Enlightenment thinkers, effectively placed over subsequent notions of space and rationality. Most geographers today would recognize that while most of the content of Kant's geography has long-since been replaced with new ideas, his influence on the fundamental ways in which we think about human being, and his role in shaping the values of colonial and imperial expansion that underlie today's political and economic systems, was profound. Kant provides just one example of a thinker whose work is essential to understanding today's moral landscape, as the cumulative efforts of those in a position to influence the way in which society is ordered to set the moral guidelines and boundaries within

not all of the concerns of the two groups are cross-cutting. In this review, however, we have focussed our discussion on the emphases of scholars focussing on questions of ethical concern to geographers.

which people regulate their lives. Although, as Burch (1997) has recently pointed out, that normative grid does not create a simple epistemological divide between the higher pursuit of moral philosophy and the practical concerns of the geographer, as is commonly believed, its greatest significance lies nonetheless in the ways in which it has directed and infused notions of correct action and proper beliefs, in both popular and scholarly contexts.

Recent texts devoted to philosophical interpretations of geography and environmental ethics (Light and Smith 1997; Proctor and Smith 1999) reveal a rich legacy of questions that link human being and nature, and that question the nature of human being, in an ethical context. This collection emphasizes the fact that ethical understanding, while it may involve a significant amount of self-reflexivity on the part of the scholar, needs to be placed within a long and complex history of intellectual and social development that lies well beyond the scope of this essay.

In the more immediate present, our work is directly a result of the so-called 'relevance debate' of the early 1970s. What began as a rather emotional response to the influence of the 'quantitative revolution' initiated what is perhaps the most important period of social science theorizing in the history of our discipline. The critical approaches to understanding spatiality that are now placing geographers on the intellectual map within the wider social sciences owe a huge debt to the questions over moral values raised by people such as Anne Buttimer (1974), Yi Fu Tuan (1974) and Wilbur Zelinsky (1975). Furthermore, the early work of radical geographers such as David Harvey (1973), William Bunge (1971) and Richard Peet (1975, 1978) laid the ground for a critical morality that was to become deeply entwined with the so-called 'humanist' work of those working under the 'values' banner, although it took some time before the links began to be made explicitly (Kobayashi and Mackenzie 1989). Beginning about a decade ago,

however, it was clear that both these strands, the humanist and the marxist, had influenced a new 'critical' turn in geography (Sayer 1989) that both situated the discipline within emerging debates over postmodernism (Ley 1989) and that challenged geographers to expand the limits of discussion over normative issues. Geographers of the 'baby boom' generation, the immediate post-World War II era, grew up with the concerns of the civil rights movement, the early stages of second-wave feminism, the ecological movement, and the 1960s anti-war movement. Students during the turbulent times of the 1960s, they are the aging professors of the discipline today, and their life experiences are profoundly etched upon the moral questions that we ask today as well as on the broader set of issues that define public policy (Harvey 1974).

From a more academic perspective, what Sayer and Storper (1997) have called the 'normative turn' in social theory and social science stems, therefore, from a refutation of the notion that value free science is possible and upon recognizing the socially constructed nature of knowledge and of moral values. The notion of value-free science became popular in the immediate post-World War II intellectual environment when scholars turned to positivist thinking as a means of removing the doubt and bias of value judgments from their work, substituting instead universal and irrefutable 'truth' as a basis for knowledge. The search for universal truths, however, proved not only impossible, but also dangerous because it led to a certain blindness to the biases and values that are entwined in all attempts to achieve objective knowledge. It was that recognition, combined with their commitment to human rights, that led geographers of the 1970s and 1980s in a new direction.

The possibility of neutrality has in most of the past quarter century of writing by geographers been debunked as not only improvable, but also itself a normative speculation that informs the kinds of geographical knowledge that are possible (Gregory 1979; Pickles 1985), and

therefore also informs the values and ideological positions through which we interpret social processes, and the languages we invoke to describe them. Debates over subjectivity and reflexivity, and the relationship and importance of personal values over structural conditions, have provided a central strand of geographical thinking throughout that period.

By the early 1990s, there developed a considerable body of literature that illustrated the ethical dilemmas inherent in epistemological choices. These are especially apparent in areas such as cartography (Harley 1991, Monmonier 1991, Rundstrom 1993) and geographic information systems (Wasowski 1991, Lake 1993, Curry 1994, Crampton 1995, as well as planning (Lake 1993, Entrikin 1994). Similar issues have been raised with respect to the geographer's professional capacity as teacher (Havelberg 1990, Kirby 1991, Smith 1995, Merrett 2000), writer (Brunn 1989, Curry 1991), and as researcher with a particular moral obligation to her or his subjects (Eyles and Smith 1988, England 1994, Hay 1995). Although physical geography has been less thoroughly infused with ethical questions, several physical geographers have raised serious questions concerning the place of the geographer in ensuring environmental sustainability (Kates 1987, Manning 1990, Cooke 1992, Reed and Slaymaker 1993), and a recent special issue of the *Annals* has been entirely devoted to this theme (1998). Experts in geographic information systems have asked questions about the ethics of data usage (Gilbert 1995), or concerning the relationship between data manipulation and larger social issues such as the provision of water resources (Clark 1998).

These more or less introspective works represent a very important assessment of the how questions of ethics and values affect the formal discipline of geography. Much more voluminous by far is the literature that addresses the ethics and values of geographical subjects empirically. Providing a conceptual framework for these moral concerns, Proctor and Smith (1999) have

suggested that three dominant metaphors - space, place and nature - dominate geographical scholarship. Recognizing that these metaphors, and the manner of their usage, need to be subjected to much deeper critical analysis than this cursory overview allows, we now turn to describing some of the recent trends in a geography of ethics.

The issue of spatial justice has motivated a whole generation of social geographers since Harvey introduced the concept in 1973, and remains a dominant geographical theme (Smith 1994). The theme of spatial justice ranges from the unequal relationships established through relationships between the developed and developing world (Corbridge 1993, 1998, Slater 1997), to territorial justice (Boyne and Powell 1991) or access to social justice through migration (Black 1996), as well as the spatial attributes of the issues - such as war and environmental disasters - that create the conditions from which refugees are fleeing. For all the variety of interpretations of spatial justice, questions of class remain fundamental (Harvey 1993), and provide a moral starting point of departure for geographical justice, in common with issues of 'race', sexuality, ability and other markers of difference.

For feminist geographers and the growing numbers of queer-identified geographers, the metaphor of spatial justice has probably provided the impetus for the largest body of work, concerned with issues of home, work and childcare; transportation and other forms of access, social services and more recently, the moral construction of public space, an issue taken up also by those concerned with the plight of the homeless, or the need to assert rights around different forms of sexuality. Work in these areas is becoming too voluminous to cite individual examples, so we shall instead make a few remarks on the major ethical themes of recent work. Feminist geography in particular began from the ethical position of wanting to include women in male-dominated world in which patriarchy is spatially expressed (Women and Geography Study

Group 1984). Feminism in geography, and in general, is thus significant for the fact that an ethics of care and inclusion is a starting point and justification, rather than a conclusion or an object of study. The ethic extends fundamentally to developing methods of enquiry that are gender inclusive (McDowell 1992), and that challenge the many ways in which masculine control has resulted in normative spaces (Rose 1993) and the widespread spatial domination of 'heteropatriarchy' (Valentine 1993).²

Especially in the United States, but also in Canada and Britain, issues of spatial justice are the main concern of anti-racist geographies. Like feminists, anti-racists take as their starting point the moral goal of countering and eliminating racism. As Dwyer (1997) has recently shown, the preponderance of this work has been aimed at understanding and changing the growing disparities that exist in major cities, but recent issues also include geopolitics (Delaney 1993, Forrest 1995), the construction of racialized identities (Natter and Jones 1997), and racism and migration (Kobayashi 1995).

The concept of place receives continued, indeed renewed attention, both in a critical reflection on concerns over the objectification of community or of regional identities, as well as in the more explicitly moral context of understanding how moral relationships are produced in industrial, developing, advanced capitalist or postmodern societies. There is a huge range of work on the moral geographies of places, that includes the moral order of the city and the street (Jackson 1984, Driver 1988, Ogborn and Philo 1994, Valentine 1996), the countryside (Matless 1994), the everyday (Birdsall 1996, Johnston and Valentine 1995), institutions (Ploszajska 1994) and in some cases even the worlds of the fantasy or the future, all of which provide a sense of how societies structure the kinds of normative activities that are appropriate to particular places,

² This term refers to a normative grid in which value and power are centred on the moral system of the heterosexual white male. Social systems are built to conform to such values.

and what happens when normative landscapes are transgressed (Cresswell 1996). Recent work on embodiment emphasizes the construction of places from a perspective of how gender, 'race' (Jackson 1994, Dwyer 1998) ability (Butler 1998) or health, age (Skelton and Valentine 1998), or sexuality (Bell *et al.* 1994, Valentine 1996) work distinctively or in tandem to influence the quality of life (Kobayashi and Peake 1994, Chouinard and Grant 1995). These geographies of the 1990s differ from the much more romanticized work of previous decades in that their focus is so strongly on injustice and exclusion (Sibley 1995). Sack (1999) goes further, however, to suggest that a theoretical focus on place raises the geographer's ability to make moral judgements because "[p]lace emphasizes our own geographical agency and draws attention to the breadth of moral concerns" (p. 42). Drawing strongly upon earlier work by Tuan (1989, 1991) Sack's work shows that the act of place-making is itself a moral act, thus opening up some interesting avenues for an empirical understanding of social morals.

Perhaps the most prolific area of moral geography in recent years has surrounded environmental issues. A recent collection devoted to this theme (Light and Smith 1997) shows not only that the intellectual heritage of environmental issues has influenced geographical thinking profoundly, but that contemporary philosophical questions engage the spectrum of critical thinking from Heidegger's and Mead's spatial ontology (Steelwater 1997) to the influence of the Frankfurt School in situating environmental concerns within a modernist context (Gandy 1997). Several geographers have noted the importance of cultural context in understanding environmental ethics (Gandy 1997; Simmons 1993, Booth 1997, Wescoat, Jr. 1997), while others have established a strong basis for understanding the social theoretical basis for environmental understanding (O'Riordan 1981, Lewis 1992, Proctor 1995, Proctor 1998c), some calling for a specifically political role for the geographer (Pepper 1993, Pulido 1996a). Others

highlight the ethical tensions between environmental issues and those surrounding questions of 'race' or class (Bowen et al. 1995, DeLuca and Demo 2001, Pastor et al. 2001,) or gender (Whatmore 1997), or the differences between care for the environment and the right to a safe environment (Rogge 2001).

The emphasis on environmental issues also shows that the debate over essentialism is not closed. For many, perhaps most, understanding environmental ethics as thoroughly socially constructed and representative of dominant ideological and moral regimes has provided a major impetus for linking concerns for environmental and social justice (Harvey 1996, Low and Gleeson 1998). In this perspective the environment is viewed not as something of simple intrinsic value, but as a web of values based in human history, human decision-making. Following the path breaking work by the sociologist Bullard (1990), for example, geographers have paid increasing attention to issues of environmental racism are receiving to show the complex ways in which environmental ideologies are deeply racialized, politicized and place-based (Laituri and Kirby 1994, Cutter 1995, Pulido 1996b, c, Heiman 1996, Westra 1996). In contrast, however, some feminist geographers have been less concerned with environmental injustice than with a feminist ethics of caring through eco-feminism. Although eco-feminism has been developed primarily by non-geographers, geographers have played a significant role in recovering ecological projects from masculinist interpretations, and in turning around some of the more essentialized eco-feminist concepts in favor of a social constructionist environmental agenda (Seager 1994). Yet essentialist positions are quite widespread (though implicit) in geographical research devoted to nature conservation, where demonstration of, for instance, spatial inequity in habitat protection is deemed sufficient justification for action (Dion 2000). What is missing is the realization that value is a relational construct and does not reside solely in

nature itself (nor is it simply “projected” on nature by humans, the other pole of nonrelationality). In short, nature remains contested terrain to geographers precisely in the ways that its normative assumptions are grounded, whether in nature itself, or culture, or some engagement of the two.

The work of both feminist and anti-racist refers consistently to the question of whether it is possible to be moral without being normative, and whether it is possible to be normative without being dominant and, thus, oppressive. Cutting a very long and complex philosophical story short, these questions in theoretical geography have centered around issues of essentialism, or the belief that there are unchangeable and essential attributes of human beings (such as, for example, qualities of gender, or ‘race’) that determine their behavior, their abilities or their condition, and that should influence the ways in which social scientists interpret human systems. While most geographers today adopt a position of social constructivism, which claims that the human condition is a result of historically produced human action rather than pre-determined and immutable traits. Morality is therefore historically contingent, a product of human action rather than of universal moral values, and thoroughly dependent upon the ways in which human beings organize themselves in relationships that are powerful, spatial, and usually in some way or another involve the assertion of dominance and subordination, whether these relationships occur between human beings, between humans and animals, or between humans and nature.

Finally, a fourth broad area concerns questions of geographical activism. In its more critical forms, the normative turn has also led to attempts by geographers and other social scientists to *affect* social processes by joining social movements in hopes of forging new normative social systems. This area has two major dimensions. The first is an increasing range of writing around questions of academics as activists, a theme that has emerged repeatedly in the

journals, in the sessions at this and other meetings, including a major conference on critical geography held in Vancouver two years ago. We have come a long way since the days of Bill Bunge's geographical expeditions. This literature, and the activist actions that sustain it, focus not only on a simple advocacy position for geographers (which is important in itself), but also addresses more complex theoretical and methodological concerns regarding situated knowledge (Katz 1992), the role of the intellectual in effecting social change (Knopp 1999), questions of relationality and identity (Larner 1995), and the ethical dilemmas involved in restructuring the relationship between researcher and subject in terms of class (Rose 1997), or in the context of developing countries (Mohan 1999). Feminist geographers in particular have addressed the question of unequal power relations (McLafferty 1995, Katz 1996) and material conditions (Gilbert 1994), as well as political credibility when scholarship and activism coincide (Kobayashi 1994).

A related concern is with bringing asking questions of how we treat one another as geographers and fellow members of the academy, bringing questions of ethics into our classrooms, offices, even our homes. In particular, those concerned with questions of marginality have asked probing questions of the ways in which the student/teacher relationship is structured through power relations. A recent special issue of the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (1999) on teaching sexualities in the geography classroom includes a number of papers that show that teaching is a form of activism fraught with moral issues, while a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Geography* is devoted to 'teaching race'. There is also growing concern with relations among colleagues over a range of issues from employment equity to questions around how the process of differencing creates divides according to gender, 'race', sexuality or ability. The recent piece by Gill Valentine (1998) in *Antipode* has not only shocked the discipline into an awareness

of problems of harassment, but has generated a huge upwelling of intellectual support for understanding how we structure human relations according to ethical terms.

This example pushes us to note that discussion of ethical issues among geographers, and more generally, occurs increasingly in electronic form via the internet, more informally through e-mail list-servs and through the somewhat more formal medium of World Wide Web publication. The medium itself gives rise to ethical questions concerning how knowledge and human relationships are re-structured as a result of electronic communication, especially given the space-time compression involved and the substantial changes to the meaning of 'distance', and we look forward to the emergence of debate over these issues. It is also important to note, however, that new forms of communication have meant immediate and widespread engagement with ethical and political issues. For example, Shell Oil's sponsorship of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers represents one of the most emotional and ethically charged issues in the history of the discipline, and emerged predominantly through the list-serv and web site devoted to Critical Geography (<http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/crit-geog-forum/>). In the United States and Canada, a group of anti-racist geographers has recently developed an 'Anti-racist Manifesto' calling on geography departments to adopt affirmative action policies in recruiting graduate students. This project too has developed largely through electronic communication. While we would not want to suggest that electronic relations have replaced, or even have the potential to replace, either face-to-face dialogue or traditional forms of publication, we do believe that the level of debate and discussion, and as a result the level of political involvement and engagement, have been increased in recent years as a result of net talk, and that this development is directly related to larger social and ethnical concerns regarding the significance of new electronic landscapes (Morley and Robins 1995).

Conclusion:

We find ourselves in the somewhat ironic position of concluding that the label Values, Ethics and Justice *Specialty* Group is something of a misnomer, for questions of professional and personal ethics cut across every specialty group, and few if any issues in human or physical geography are unconnected to values and justice. Certainly it was this recognition that led to the convergence of this group with the Human Rights Specialty group, with the hope that by coming together we would create a stronger focus on questions of common concern. But our fundamental mission has not been to carve out a special intellectual space but, rather, to recognize that all geographies represent moral positions and locate themselves within a moral terrain, whether self-critically acknowledged or not. It is equally important that issues of ethics, values, and morality not be balkanized as the concern of a few who decide to place one of their limited 'specialty' choices on the VEJSG line when they renew their memberships each year, for it is our belief that this group has designs neither on occupying a distinctive territory of empirical investigation, nor on acting as the discipline's moral gatekeepers.

What place is there, then, for a specialty group on Values, Ethics and Justice? We already have specialty groups devoted to feminism, sexuality, socialism, and native issues. There is a movement afoot to create a new specialty group devoted to anti-racism. Most of the members of the VEJSG also belong to some of these other groups. And the VEGSG can certainly make no claim to have identified a specific realm of geographic enquiry to call its own, no territory of difference. We would argue that there is room for the group, nonetheless, for two reasons. The first is the purely instrumental reason that there is sufficient interest, as shown by strong attendance at annual meeting sessions and healthy submissions to the journal *Ethics, Place, and*

Environment. The second is that across the contested field that represents our discipline, with its increasing awareness of and attention to ethical questions, there is an important place for the synthetic focus on how we address moral concerns. Our task, more broadly specified, is to bring these issues to the fore and hope that in so doing we might stimulate wide debate on the ethical implications of our work as geographers. And, if recent writing across the discipline is anything to go by, that debate is ongoing, intense, highly theorized, and deeply ethical, a sign that many of us have cared very deeply.

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