



INTERVIEW

Interview of Richard B. HOWARTH

23 April 2004

	Richard B. Howarth ¹
By/Par	Dr. Damien BAZIN

M. Richard B. HOWARTH

Dartmouth College

Environmental Studies Program

HB 6182 Steele Hall

Hanover, New Hampshire 03755, USA

INTERVIEW

Damien Bazin (D.B.): -“Do you think that responsibility in its original form, i.e. in its Kantian acceptance, could be of use in the fields of environment and economics if one is to aim at the long term protection of nature?”

Richard B. Howarth (R.B.H.): -“In general, I think that deontological or Kantian ethics has very important implications for environmental economics. As you know, economists tend to think in terms of a consequentialist framework that seeks to balance benefits and costs. Important areas of environmental policy, however, are based on the legal and moral principle that individuals or society as a whole have a *right* to enjoy the benefits of environmental quality. From a Kantian perspective, this implies that polluters have a duty or responsibility to avoid imposing uncompensated environmental impacts on third parties. In my own work, I’ve argued that future generations have a right to share in the benefits of natural resources and environmental quality. If one accepts this premise, then it follows that present decision-makers have a responsibility to manage resources and the environment in a sustainable manner”.

¹ A short biography follows the interview.

D.B.: -“On a more personal note, concerning your works, do you think that it is possible to go beyond altruism in search of an economical ethics/ethical economics linked to environmental questions? Do you believe that your model (Howarth-Norgaard 1992) could be revised to accommodate the variable of responsibility? If so how?”

R.B.H.: -“As I see it, it’s not only possible but indeed necessary to go beyond altruism in thinking about issues such as intergenerational fairness and its implications for environmental management. Kant, for example, emphasized that one’s duties are categorically distinct from one’s preferences, even one’s other-regarding preferences. My 1995 *Land Economics* paper focuses directly on that distinction in the context of the sustainability debate. In that paper, I argue that sustainability should be interpreted in terms of a *duty* to ensure that human well-being is non-diminishing from generation to generation. Within the set of choices that are sustainable in this sense, I believe that it’s natural and appropriate for society to choose whether or not to make present sacrifices so that future generations can enjoy enhanced life opportunities. The 1992 paper I wrote with Richard Norgaard does not really address this issue. Instead, it simply shows that the environmental policies that we judge as “optimal” depends on the way we frame issues of intergenerational fairness. That finding led me into a deeper analysis of the underlying philosophical questions.

D.B.: -“Do you believe that the works of economists, which attempt to integrate the works of authors from other disciplines such as philosophy (the works of Kant, Jonas, Ricoeur, Habermas and Levinas etc) are of any relevance?”

R.B.H.: -“ I think that it’s very important for economists to integrate concepts and arguments from moral philosophy and other relevant disciplines. We sometimes forget that the classical political economists saw politics, economics, and ethics as one, integrated field. It was only in the late 19th century that the disciplines became differentiated in ways that allowed specialization but which, unfortunately, also produced fragmentation. I personally have been drawn most strongly to the writings of Kant and Rawls, though Habermas’ work on discourse ethics strikes me as very important to issues of social choice. Certainly Amartya Sen’s work is both relevant and influential in fields like development economics and environmental economics. Still, the challenge is to boil down the philosophical concepts to a level that is well matched to the needs of modelling and institutional analysis.

D.B.: -“In your opinion, what are going to be the major axes of environmental studies in the years to come? The 1980s largely dealt with global threats such as the green house effect and sustainable development. What do you think we shall be dealing with in the new millenim?”

R.B.H.: - “ Certainly climate change will remain a crucial challenge in the 21st century. While environmental scientists have understood the broad outlines of this issue for at

least 25 years, the impacts and implications of climate change are becoming more tangible and salient to decision-makers. Addressing the climate change issue will require major changes in energy production and utilization. So I'd expect debates over energy policy to rise in importance in the coming decades. The second main issue that I'd emphasize is the conservation of endangered species and unique communities and ecosystems. In both terrestrial and marine ecosystems, human disturbances associated with land-use, resource consumption, and pollution are having pervasive environmental impacts. Designing governance strategies to address this issue is and will likely remain a big and interesting challenge.

D.B.: -“Your work mainly deals with the preservation of nature: What made you choose this topic and have you noticed much evolution in the field between now and then?”

R.B.H.: -“ I think of myself as a conservationist rather than a preservationist. By this, I mean that the challenge is to manage the links between human and natural systems in ways that simultaneously promote human well-being and ecological sustainability. In some cases, this implies a need to preserve ecosystems in the sense of minimizing human impacts. But the preservationist goal of taking humans out of ecosystems is not always realistic. It can even be damaging in certain disturbed ecosystems in which active management can be necessary to restore and sustain ecosystem functioning.

My interest in environmental issues goes back to my early childhood. I've always experienced nature as a source of inspiration and aesthetic power. I worry that the emergence of today's consumer culture has cut many people off from a rich sense of connectance with the natural world. This, along with the decline of community, has been a negative that partially offsets the gains society has made in terms of material prosperity.

Certainly the field of environmental studies has developed substantially since my years as a student in the 1980s. In environmental economics, there's increasing acceptance that environmental issues have social, moral, and ecological aspects that push economists to think in new and creative ways. The old barriers to interdisciplinary work have eased considerably. This means that environmental issues can be understood and addressed in their own terms, drawing together concepts and methods from various related disciplines. This is clearly apparent in contemporary scholarship, policy discourse, and in the classroom as well.

D.B.: - “What in your opinion is the most suited type of public policy in today's world, if we are to protect the environment?”

R.B.H.: -“ I don't think there's any single approach to environmental policy that should be applied across-the-board. Instead, the key is to design mechanisms that are responsive to the particular challenges posed by a given issue. Where appropriate, it's desirable to use market-based incentives to enhance flexibility and to reduce the costs of environmental compliance. At the same time, however, governments can

sometimes play a crucial role in the development and adoption of “green” technologies.

My work emphasizes the need to set environmental quality goals in a way that is morally grounded and sensitive to people’s rights and interests. One can approach this issue as a matter of identifying the “right” moral principles. Alternatively, one might follow the path described by authors like Mark Sagoff, who focuses on the importance of civic discourse in negotiating shared values and responsibilities.

Richard B. Howarth²

Rich Howarth is an environmental economist whose work focuses on issues of energy use, climate change, and ecological conservation. His research and teaching are based on the view that good economic analysis is essential to understand the causes of environmental problems and to design effective solutions that take into account the multiple objectives of environmental policy. At the same time, environmental issues have moral, behavioral, and scientific dimensions that are sometimes in tension with the assumptions of textbook economics. This highlights the need to connect economics with a broad-based, interdisciplinary approach to environmental problem-solving.

Professor Howarth's research program emphasizes themes such as:

- * The role of discounting, sustainability, and intergenerational fairness in evaluating long-term environmental policies.
- * Mathematical models of the relationship between economic growth, the natural environment, and human well-being.
- * The role of public policies in promoting energy efficiency and the adoption of environmentally benign energy technologies.

Professor Howarth was educated at Cornell, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the University of California at Berkeley. Prior to his appointment at Dartmouth in 1998, he held positions at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the University of California at Santa Cruz.

BOOKS

- 2003 R.B. Howarth and D. Rothman (editors). Special issue on "Climate Change and Ecological Economics." *International Journal of Sustainable Development* 6: 263-392.
- 2002 K.A. Brekke and _____. *Status, Growth, and the Environment: Goods as Symbols in Applied Welfare Economics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- 2001 D.C. Hall and _____ (editors). *The Long-term Economics of Climate Change: Beyond a Doubling of Greenhouse Gas Concentrations*. Advances in the Economics of Environmental Resources, Volume 3. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- 1997 _____ (editor). Special issue on "Defining Sustainability." *Land Economics* 73: 445-622.
- 1992 L. Schipper and S. Meyers with _____ and R. Steiner. *Energy Efficiency and Human Activity — Past Trends, Future Prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² The following informations were found on Pr Howarth webpage at :
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~rhowarth/>. More informations can be found at the same webpage.