

CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS FROM METAETHICS TO PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: In the past thirty years environmental ethics has emerged as one of the most vibrant and exciting areas of applied philosophy. Several journals and hundreds of books testify to its growing importance inside and outside philosophical circles. But with all of this scholarly output, it is arguably the case that environmental ethics is not living up to its promise of providing a philosophical contribution to the resolution of environmental problems. This article surveys the current state of the field and offers an alternative path for the future development of environmental ethics toward a more publicly engaged model of applied philosophy.

Keywords: environmental ethics, metaethics, value theory, philosophy and public policy.

Since the inception of environmental ethics in the early 1970s, the principal question that has occupied the time of most philosophers working in the field is how the value of nature could best be described such that nature is directly morally considerable, in and of itself, rather than only indirectly morally considerable, because it is appreciated or needed by humans. Nature might be indirectly morally considerable because it is the source of things that humans need, such as natural resources used to provide the foundations for building and sustaining human communities. Nature might be directly morally considerable if it possesses some kind of value (for example, some kind of intrinsic value or inherent worth) demonstrable through a subjective or objective metaethical position. If nature is the sort of thing that is directly morally considerable, then our duties – for example, to preserve some natural park from development – would not be contingent on articulating some value that the park has for humans but would instead be grounded in a claim that the park has some kind of value that necessarily warrants our protection (for example, because it is a wild place or because it is the home of endangered species) without needing further appeal.

The very possibility that nature or nonhuman animals might be directly morally considerable has launched a thousand metaethical and metaphysical ships in environmental ethics. Whereas many other fields of applied

ethics (for example, business ethics and medical ethics) originally evolved along the traditional lines of debate in normative ethics, environmental ethics (especially of the “holist” variety, which I shall explain below) has been concerned with a different set of debates altogether. In part because our traditional models of moral inquiry have not previously been applied to nonhumans, let alone entire ecosystems, it is not entirely clear what the scope and limits of this form of philosophical inquiry should be. And although there have been some environmental ethicists from the consequentialist or nonconsequentialist traditions who have more or less expanded these ethical traditions to cover nonhuman animals and ecosystems (e.g., Singer 1990; Regan 1983; Taylor 1986), many environmental ethicists have resisted this so-called extensionist approach. A different set of metaphysical questions has emerged as predominant in the field. Such questions as: Should environmental ethics be inclusive of concerns of the individual welfare of animals or should it be directed only at questions concerning entire ecosystems? Should the field be concerned only with “natural” environments that are not the creation of humans or should it also be concerned with humanly created and manipulated environments? Such questions are thought to be not only practical – directing our attention at certain problems and not at others – but also philosophical, resolving cases of moral conflict to one side or another.

Even with the ample development in the field of various theories designed to answer these questions, I believe that environmental ethics is, for the most part, not succeeding as an area of applied philosophy. For while the dominant goal of most work in the field, to find a philosophically sound basis for the direct moral consideration of nature, is commendable, it has tended to engender two unfortunate results: (1) debates about the value of nature as such have largely excluded discussion of the beneficial ways in which arguments for environmental protection can be based on human interests, and relatedly (2) the focus on somewhat abstract concepts of value theory has pushed environmental ethics away from discussion of which arguments morally motivate people to embrace more supportive environmental views. As a consequence, those agents of change who will effect efforts at environmental protection – namely, humans – have oddly been left out of discussions about the moral value of nature. As a result, environmental ethics has been less able to contribute to cross-disciplinary discussions with other environmental professionals (such as environmental sociologists or lawyers) on the resolution of environmental problems, especially those professionals who also have an interest in issues concerning human welfare in relation to the equal distribution of environmental goods.

But can environmental philosophy afford to be quiescent about the public reception of ethical arguments over the value of nature? The original motivations for environmental philosophers to turn their philosophical insights to the environment belie such a position. Environmental philosophy evolved

out of a concern about the state of the growing environmental crisis and a conviction that a philosophical contribution could be made to the resolution of this crisis. If environmental philosophers spend most of their time debating non-human-centered forms of value theory, they will arguably never be able to make such a contribution.

After outlining the varieties of environmental ethics today, I shall turn to the question of why environmental ethics has focused on the question of the direct moral consideration of nature and largely rejected human forms (anthropocentric forms) of valuing nature, which are at the center of most practical efforts to resolve environmental problems. I shall then conclude with a brief discussion of an alternative path that the field could take toward assuming a more ambitious public role in the ongoing debates about the resolution of environmental problems.¹

The Metaethical Debates of Environmental Ethics

There are many ways to parse out the various metaethical and metaphysical schools of thought that have shaped the development of contemporary environmental ethics. My preference is to track this development in terms of a series of debates, with the first and most important one involving the rejection of anthropocentrism. Tim Hayward defines ethical anthropocentrism as the view that prioritizes those attitudes, values, or practices that give “exclusive or arbitrarily preferential consideration to human interests as opposed to the interests of other beings” or the environment (1997, 51). Although I shall say more about the rejection of anthropocentrism below, it is important to point out right away that many early environmental ethicists were adamant that if environmental ethics was going to be a distinctive field of ethics, it necessarily had to involve a rejection of anthropocentrism in ethics. Using Hayward’s definition, this amounted to a rejection of the claim that ethics should be restricted only to the provision of obligations, duties, and the like among and between humans, thereby prioritizing in moral terms all human interests over whatever could arguably be determined as the interests of nonhumans, species, or ecosystems.

Among the first papers published by professional philosophers in the field (e.g., Naess 1973; Rolston 1975; Routley (later, Sylvan) 1973; Singer 1974) some version of anthropocentrism was often the target even if it was not explicitly labeled as such. For Singer the worry was more specifically over “speciesism,” the arbitrary assumption that only the interests of members of the human species matter in schools of ethics that otherwise

¹ One word of warning at the start: this article does not intend to provide a complete overview of the field. Because of the nature of this essay, many important figures and themes will not be discussed. Those interested in a much more comprehensive overview of the field should consult Ouderkirk 1998, Palmer 2002, and Wenz 2000.

provide no necessary reason for excluding the interests of nonhumans (such as the pain/pleasure criterion of utilitarianism); for Routley the worry was over “human chauvinism,” or, as put in a much cited paper with Val Routley (later Plumwood), the claim that “value and morality can ultimately be reduced to matters of interest or concern to the class of humans” (Routley and Routley 1979, 36). Human chauvinism is expressed when warrants for moral consideration are defined in ways that necessarily favor capacities found only, or most paradigmatically, in humans (such as rationality or language).²

Regardless of the early debates over terminology, the assumption that axiologically anthropocentric views are antithetical to the agenda of environmentalists, and to the development of environmental ethics, was largely assumed to be the natural starting point for any environmental ethic. So pervasive was the assumption that it was often not adequately defended. It has become one of what Gary Varner calls the “two dogmas of environmental ethics” (1998, 142). Furthermore, the notion of what anthropocentrism meant, and in consequence what overcoming anthropocentrism entailed, often relied on very narrow, straw-man definitions of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism was equated with forms of valuation that easily, or even necessarily, led to nature’s destruction (rather than anthropocentric values, such as aesthetic values, which might count as reasons to preserve nature). Therefore, a corollary assumption of this dogma has been that even a limited endorsement of anthropocentric forms of valuation of nature would necessarily give credence to those anthropocentric values that prefer development over preservation.

Again, I shall revisit the legacy of the rejection of anthropocentrism below. For now, the first divide among environmental ethicists is between those who accept the rejection of anthropocentrism as a necessary prerequisite for establishing a unique field of environmental ethics and those who do not accept this position, arguing that “weaker” forms of anthropocentrism (for example, those that admit humanly based values to nature other than mere resource value) are sufficient to generate an adequate ethic of

² There is some dispute over whether speciesism and human chauvinism can or should be equated with each other or with anthropocentrism: after all, one can imagine elimination of speciesist or chauvinist reasoning in ethics without a full rejection of anthropocentrism, at least in the sense that one can be skeptical that we could ever coherently articulate an ethic that did not prioritize the human origin of valuation (Hayward 1997, 57). Alternatives have been proposed, such as Robyn Eckersley’s suggestion that anthropocentrism be scrapped in favor of “human racism” – a “systematic prejudice against nonhuman species” – evidenced when human welfare is advanced over nonhuman welfare even when reconciliation between competing human and nonhuman interests is possible (Eckersley 1998, 169). Others, such as Norton (1987), appear more content to label antispeciesist and antihuman chauvinist forms of moral reasoning together as “nonanthropocentrism,” while acknowledging their important differences. Still, most environmental ethicists appear content to continue using the term *nonanthropocentrism*, especially, as we shall see below, if animal-liberation issues (where the term *speciesism* is usually applied) is excluded from the proper framework of the field.

the environment (see Norton 1984). But even the general picture of this divide is more complicated. If environmental ethics was to start with a rejection of anthropocentrism, then the next step was to come up with a description of the value of nonhumans, or the nonhuman natural world, in nonanthropocentric terms. The preferred description of this form of value has generally been as some form of intrinsic value, thought to mean that nonhumans or ecosystems possessed some sort of value in and of themselves (as opposed to only possessing instrumental value to the achievement of human ends).³ Nonanthropocentrists have long argued that anthropocentrism cannot justify a basis for the intrinsic value of nature and so should be rejected (see Callicott 1996).⁴

Early on, those rejecting nonanthropocentrism argued that there were no rigorous grounds on which we could base claims for the intrinsic value of nonhumans or the natural world. Such challenges included those of John Passmore (1974) and R. G. Frey (1983). For Passmore, less regressive forms of anthropocentrism (grounded in more traditional ethical theories) could be used to provide moral grounds for progressive environmental policies based on forms of value that did not challenge traditional notions of the unique quality of human value and moral commitments. These positions have been taken up and extended in various degrees by figures like Bryan Norton (1987) and Eugene Hargrove (1992) and various other theorists sometimes collectively known as “environmental pragmatists” (see Light and Katz 1996). The upshot, however, is that the debate between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists in environmental ethics has long been entwined with debates over the validity of ascribing intrinsic value either to nonhuman animals or to species or ecosystems.

If we are to persist with some form of nonanthropocentrism, the next relevant question becomes how to define the scope and limits of our descriptions of the intrinsic (or at least noninstrumental) value of nature. The second of Varner’s “two dogmas” in the field is the rejection of animal rights or animal-welfare views (which I shall jointly call “animal-liberation” views) from the typical understanding inside the field of what the scope and limitations of environmental ethics are. Even though the field

³ The term *intrinsic value* here, as in other fields, has many senses, and many debates in environmental ethics hinge on competing conceptions of how the intrinsic value of nature should be decided and further whether a description of an entity as having some form of intrinsic value necessarily warrants a relevant set of moral obligations to it (see O’Neill 2001). To avoid certain of these problems some, such as Katz (1997), have abandoned the term *intrinsic value* while maintaining a focus on justifying noninstrumental foundations for environmental value.

⁴ On the issue of whether anthropocentrists can only value nature instrumentally, a number of dissenting positions have emerged. See for example the arguments of Alan McQuillan (1998), Peter Wenz (1999), and Ben Minteer (2001). All three argue that pragmatists, who hold that valuation is inherently anthropocentric, can also value things other than other humans for their own sake. Thus, there is a relatively benign sense in which some anthropocentrists can value nature intrinsically.

arguably began with an understanding that the work of an animal liberationist like Singer was as much a part of environmental ethics as that of figures like Naess and Routley, a new debate very quickly emerged between “individualists” and “holists,” or “sentientists” and “holists,” which wound up largely excluding animal liberationists from the domain of environmental ethics.

Individualists are those who argue that the extension of moral consideration beyond humans should be limited to other individuals, namely, those individuals who could be argued to have interests, or in the case of sentientists, were sentient, such as other animals.⁵ Primarily these arguments, no matter what their normative foundations (for example, consequentialist, nonconsequentialist, or virtue based), result in moral arguments for vegetarianism and against industrial animal agriculture, arguments questioning scientific experimentation on animals (especially of the more frivolous variety, such as for testing cosmetics), and sometimes arguments against hunting.

Holists argue in contrast that individualism or sentientism is inadequate for an environmental ethic because it fails to offer directly reasons for the moral consideration of ecosystems, wilderness, and endangered species – all top priorities for the environmental movement. Because conservationists and environmental scientists evaluate the workings of nature at the ecosystemic level (without much worry about the welfare of individuals so long as a species is not in danger), an ethic covering the same ground should also try to describe the value of nature and the priorities for preservation at the same level sometimes without regard for the welfare of individuals. At times, it is argued, the ends of individualism and holism conflict, as in the case of therapeutic hunting, where holists have maintained that killing individual members of a nonendangered species is justified whenever the numbers of that species produce a threat to endangered species or fragile ecosystems.

The debate between individualists and holists has evolved similarly to the debates between anthropocentrists and nonanthropocentrists. For example, sentientists argue that there is no clear defensible grounds for describing the noninstrumental value of nature per se without appeal to things in nature that can be considered to have interests, such as animals. Thus, trees, rocks, and whole ecosystems cannot be directly morally considerable, even though it is arguably the case that the health and welfare of whole systems and of endangered species could be covered indirectly by some combination of concern for the interests of nonhumans and of future human generations. Other individualists, most notably Tom Regan (1983), one of the leading deontologists working on animal rights, have gone on to press harder still, arguing that holism entails a form of

⁵ There are, as one might expect, a variety of distinctions among sentientists that are beyond the scope of this article. For a helpful overview see Varner 2001.

“environmental fascism,” whereby the strong likelihood is raised that the welfare of individuals will often, if not always, be sacrificed to the needs of the greater biotic good.⁶

Somewhat in between these two camps are biocentric individualists, such as Paul Taylor and Gary Varner, who have pushed the boundaries of individualism beyond sentientism, arguing for a coherent individualism extended to cover the value of the capacity for flourishing of nonsentient organisms. For Taylor there is broadly speaking a sense in which all natural entities flourish, and so what is good or bad for them is a matter of what is good or bad for this flourishing, a claim that is not dependent on human interests. This expansion of individualism in part helps to bridge the gap between holists and individualists, even though biocentric individualists are adamant that holism in itself must be rejected. Not all interests among all living individual things are granted equal status on such views, with various arguments put forward for which some interests count more than others (for example, the interests of individuals capable of desires might be considered more important than those of individuals not capable of desires).

Nonetheless, despite such compromising positions, holists, such as J. Baird Callicott (especially Callicott 1980) and Holmes Rolston III, have prevailed in staking a claim for environmental ethics in some form of holism, most forcefully by recourse to the argument that many forms of individualism encounter problems in their plausible extension to species and ecosystems. Although many important challenges have been made to try to bridge this gap between individualists and holists (especially by Varner 1998 and Jamieson 1998), and much more theoretical subtlety has been brought to bear on cases of conflict like therapeutic hunting, a strong bias exists in the field that would exclude animal-liberationist positions from the scope of environmental ethics proper.⁷

Among holists there are still further debates, though not so much over the proper scope of environmental ethics. These debates largely cut along the lines of whether a case for the noninstrumental or intrinsic value of nature can best be made on subjectivist or on objectivist grounds. Leading

⁶ Charges like Regan’s have been debated at length. What is interesting for my purposes here is that Regan’s has largely been accepted as a charge against “environmental ethics,” which may be susceptible to this accusation, as opposed to the separate field of “animal rights” or “animal welfare,” which is immune from the charge by virtue of necessarily excluding holism from its range of conceptual schemes.

⁷ Although there are the inevitable exceptions, separate academic journals and societies devoted to environmental ethics, conceived of as a holist enterprise, and to animal liberation, as an individualist enterprise, have evolved largely independent of each other. Partly because of this, and because arguments among individualists have tended to evolve along more conventional philosophical lines of disagreement (e.g., Singer’s utilitarianism versus Regan’s deontological-rights views), the literature on animal liberation has followed a more traditional path of debates among different schools of normative ethics. One could claim that the argument that much of environmental ethics is largely involved with debates in metaethics is true only if we accept the claim that environmental ethics is a holist enterprise.

subjectivists include Robert Elliot (1997) and Callicott, the latter best known for developing a Humean, and what he refers to as a “communitarian,” line of reasoning out of the work of the forester and conservationist Aldo Leopold. Leopold is best known for his 1949 posthumously published memoir, *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he developed a holist “land ethic” (see Callicott 1989 and 1999).

For Callicott, while value for him is subjective (as value is always a verb and can only be engaged in by those beings with the capacity to value, namely, humans, though perhaps some nonhumans as well), there are things in the world that can be subjectively considered to be intrinsically valuable (valued by a valuer for their own sake) through an evolutionary extension of what counts as inclusively important among a community of valuers. In the past what has been considered valuable for us has been restricted to other members of the human community (which has progressed from the empathetic bonds of the family to the clan to the tribe to the town, and so forth); the next progression of this evolution should be to consideration of nonhumans and ecosystems as similarly valuable. In Leopold’s words, the next evolution of ethics should be to human-land relations. For Callicott, sorting out conflicts in value among competing demands from different communities that warrant our attention (for example, duties to our immediate families versus duties to ecosystems) requires adopting two second-order principles, ranking as higher our obligations to more intimate communities (such as our families in many cases) and to “stronger interests” (such as duties to the preservation of endangered species).

In contrast, Rolston (see Rolston 1988, 1989, and 1994) argues that intrinsic values in nature are objective properties of the world. He does not claim that individual animals are unimportant (though he does not have strong qualms against the production and consumption of other animals; indeed, he even claims that meat eating is necessary to maintain our identity as a species). Rolston takes a position that is, initially at least, compatible with some form of individualism, arguing, similarly to Taylor, that every living organism has a *telos* from which we may derive a baseline form of intrinsic value. But different characteristics, such as the capacity for conscious reflection, add value to each organism. Along with this scheme of value he also offers arguments for the intrinsic value of species as well as ecosystems. For Rolston, there is a conceptual confusion involved in the claim that we could value individual organisms without valuing the larger wholes that produced them through evolutionary processes.⁸

A further debate, brought on by the scope of holism, has evolved over the question of whether preservation of the environment should be

⁸ Still, as should be expected, the individualist-holist divide does not map onto the subjectivist-objectivist divide. Individualists like Paul Taylor and Robin Attfield (1987) are also objectivists about the existence of intrinsic value while holding individualist positions of the deontological and consequentialist variety, respectively.

grounded in a monistic foundation or whether a coherent ethical view of it can tolerate pluralism. Monists in environmental ethics generally argue that a single scheme of valuation is required to anchor our various duties and obligations in an environmental ethic (see, for example, Callicott 1990). This would mean that one ethical framework would have to cover the range of diverse objects of moral concern included under holism: other humans, other animals, living organisms, ecosystems, species, and perhaps even Earth itself. Such a view would have the advantage of generating a cleaner methodology for resolving disputes over conflicting obligations to and among these objects – itself a very worrisome problem, as an environmental ethic has a mandate covering many more competing claims for moral consideration than a traditional ethic.

Pluralists counter that it cannot be the case that we could have one ethical theory that covered this range of objects, either because the sources of value in nature are too diverse to account for in any single theory or because the multitude of contexts in which we find ourselves in different kinds of ethical relationships with both humans and nature demand a plurality of approaches for fulfilling our moral obligations (see, for example, Brennan 1988 and 1992). Accordingly, for Andrew Brennan, there is “no one set of principles concerning just one form of value that provides ultimate government for our actions” (1992, 6). Such claims lead Callicott to charge pluralists with moral relativism.

While less a dogma than nonanthropocentrism and holism, argument over moral monism continues to push the evolution of the field, particularly over the issue of the relationship between theory and practice in environmental ethics. The debate over pluralism raises the question of how appeals concerning the welfare of the environment cohere with other issues in moral philosophy in particular situations. Many, if not most, cases of potential harm to the value of ecosystems are also cases of moral harm to human communities, which can be objected to for independent anthropocentric moral reasons. The literature on “environmental justice,” the concern that minority communities often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harms, such as exposure to toxic waste, is based on linking concerns about human health and well-being to environmental protection (see Schlosberg 1999). A truly pluralist environmental ethic would not be terribly concerned with whether the claims of harm to the interests of a minority community by the siting of a toxic-waste dump could or could not be based on the same scheme of value that would describe the harm done to the ecosystem by the dump. A pluralist ethic would be open to describing the harm to the ecosystem and to the human community in different though compatible terms for purposes of forming a broader coalition for fighting the dump (see Light 2002).

To conclude this section, a key set of debates – anthropocentrism versus nonanthropocentrism, individualism versus holism, subjective versus objective holism, and monism versus pluralism – have largely shaped the

development of contemporary environmental ethics. At a minimum, the field is most clearly defined, though not always adequately defended, through its rejection of anthropocentrism and its commitment to holism. But the portrayal here of the varieties of this exchange has been far from complete. Consistent with the connection to broader questions in social and moral philosophy raised by the monism-pluralism debate, an extensive literature has developed connecting environmental ethics to feminism (for an overview of ecofeminism see Davion 2001), as have more restricted literatures on humanism (Brennan 1988), virtue theory (O'Neill 1993; Welchman 1999), pragmatism (Light and Katz 1996), communitarianism (de-Shalit 2000), and more nuanced understandings of human self-interest (Hayward 1998). All of these alternative directions in the field have presented new challenges in metaethics and normative ethics, but they have also done something more. In their own ways they have all moved beyond the more abstract questions of the metaethical debates concerning nonanthropocentric intrinsic value in nature to provide, in John O'Neill's words, "more specific reason-giving concepts and corresponding claims about the ways in which natural objects are a source of wonder, the sense of proportion they invoke in us of our place within a wider history" (2001, 174). The question that I shall take up in the remainder of this article is how best to provide a platform on which such further discussions can take place and have more of an impact on bettering the health and sustainability of the natural world.

Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy

With this variety of views in the field, how should environmental ethics proceed? One answer would be that it will simply proceed, whether it should or not, as a new set of debates between the more traditional nonanthropocentric views and the biocentric, anthropocentric, or other alternative views briefly mentioned at the end of the previous section. Many anthropocentric environmental ethicists seem determined to do just that (see Norton 1995 and Callicott 1996). There is, however, an alternative: in addition to continuing the tradition of most environmental ethics as philosophical sparring among philosophers, we could turn our attention to the question of how the work of environmental ethicists could be made more useful in taking on the environmental problems to which environmental ethics is addressed as those problems are undertaken in policy terms. The problems with contemporary environmental ethics are arguably more practical than philosophical, or at least their resolution in more practical terms is more important than their resolution in philosophical terms at the present time. For even though there are several dissenters from the dominant traditions in environmental ethics, the more important consideration is the fact that the world of natural-resource management (in which environmental ethicists should hope to have some influence, in the same way

that medical ethicists have worked for influence over the medical professions) takes a predominantly anthropocentric approach to assessing natural value, as do most other humans (more on this point in the next section). Environmental ethics appears more concerned with overcoming human interests than redirecting them toward environmental concerns. As a consequence, a nonanthropocentric form of ethics has limited appeal to such an audience, even if it were true that this literature provides the best reasons for why nature has value (de-Shalit 2000).⁹ And not to appeal to such an audience arguably means that we are not having an effect either on the formation of better environmental policies or on the project of engendering public support for them. As such, I would argue, environmental ethics is not living up to its promise as a field of philosophy attempting to help resolve environmental problems. It is instead evolving mostly as a field of intramural philosophical debate.

To demonstrate better how the dominant framework of environmental ethics is hindering our ability to help address environmental problems, let us examine a more specific case where the narrow rejection of anthropocentrism has hindered a more effective philosophical contribution to debates in environmental policy.

In “Moving Beyond Anthropocentrism: Environmental Ethics, Development, and the Amazon” (1993), Eric Katz and Lauren Oechsli reject anthropocentrism as a plausible basis for protection of the Brazilian rainforest even in the face of countermending evidence. One of the more striking aspects of this piece is that it does not seek to defend a direct nonanthropocentric argument for the value of the rainforest, but instead attempts to demonstrate the practical policy advantages of a general nonanthropocentric approach to connecting environmental ethics to environmental policy making (providing what the authors call an “indirect” case for nonanthropocentrism in environmental policy). This argument therefore represents a challenge to the concerns I have been raising that nonanthropocentrism is counterproductive to influencing environmental policy.

In the context of the question of preservation of the rainforest, Katz and Oechsli pose the question of whether there are valid moral principles that “transcend human concerns” and justify moral consideration of the environment. Their answer is that there are, and despite their acknowledgment in the first part of the article of strong and sound arguments based on human interests to protect the rainforest, they maintain that, for questions of environmental policy, we should stick to nonanthropocentric conceptual

⁹ Some, like Callicott, would demur that environmental ethics has been very influential, especially on those in conservation biology, a subfield of biology that is explicitly founded in normative holistic ethical principles (Callicott 1996, 221). But clearly most resource managers (let alone most humans) are not conservation biologists. Environmental ethicists should try to cast their nets broader to seek a larger audience than only other philosophers and our closer allies in other academic fields.

foundations to provide a more adequate justification for environmental protection. The problem with claims based on human interests is that they confront “inescapable” problems of utility and justice. What are these problems? The problem of utility is empirical. If the value of a natural resource like the rainforest is to be protected by appeal to human interests – such as the argument that the resource should be protected because it may contain a hitherto undiscovered cure for cancer – then there will always be an uncertainty concerning the utility calculation of the benefits and harms from either developing or preserving an area. The claim is that the various benefits and harms of development are incommensurable and not easily weighed, involving differences between global and local goods – the benefits of selling wood fiber for local populations versus the possible global benefits of a potential cure for cancer or a contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gases. Whose interests count for more? The only way to resolve this conflict is through appeal to a value outside anthropocentric instrumental value (p. 53).

Concerning issues of justice, Katz and Oechsli maintain that we can always be certain that an appeal by developed countries to developing countries to preserve a resource for the good of all (which would otherwise aid in the latter’s development) always imposes an unjust burden on these countries. Specifically, in the case of the rainforest, Katz and Oechsli argue that first-world appeals to Brazil to forgo short-term economic gain for long-term environmental sustainability is “imperialistic.” The need for economic development seems so great that such consequences as the effect of cutting down the forest on global warming “appear trivial” (p. 56). Instead, an acultural ascription of the value of the rainforest in nonanthropocentric terms would trump other human instrumental concerns and provide a universal and impartial basis for preservation of the rainforest. Katz and Oechsli propose (in a kind of thought experiment) that if we assume that a nonanthropocentric moral theory inclusive of nonhuman natural value has been justified, our moral obligations become perfectly clear: questions of the trade-offs and comparisons of human benefits, as well as questions of international justice, would no longer “dominate” the discussion. The nonanthropocentric value of the rainforest would trump all other considerations. And despite a closing caveat about how such an assumption is only the “starting point” for serious discussions of environmental policy, the authors nevertheless suggest that environmentalists (not just environmental ethicists) should endorse this approach. Doing so, they claim, will enable environmentalists to “escape the dilemmas” of utility and justice, thus “making questions of human benefit and satisfaction irrelevant” (p. 58).

It is indeed ironic how an attempt specifically aimed at addressing empirical and political difficulties in the application of ethical theories to policy disputes winds up endorsing an approach rife with empirical and political problems. Nonetheless, the argument presented here is entirely

consistent with the profile of the dominant approaches to environmental ethics sketched above (including Varner's dogmas).

First, the, perhaps, externalism of this approach (or motivational rationalism), entailed in the thought experiment that Katz and Oechsli propose whereby we first assume the existence of a justified moral theory in order to test its veracity in a policy setting, is both practically and theoretically unsound.¹⁰ How the mere justification of a nonanthropocentric theory would motivate dismissal of competing claims by humans for satisfaction of their needs is never made clear. Given that a nonanthropocentric theory would not eliminate the rational concern of moral agents about their own welfare, at the very least, some minimal model of moral psychology should be required of such a theory to make the thought experiment plausible. Human interests still exist even if a nonanthropocentric theory has been justified, and as with contemporary cases of moral dilemmas faced by agents even when they recognize competing moral claims of other humans on them, we can easily imagine that humans who had recognized the valid justification of nonanthropocentric natural value would still feel the reasonable tug of competing claims to protect human welfare and would conceivably decide contrary to the nonanthropocentric calculus. Additionally, in theoretical terms, no reason is offered here why the "interests" of nature recommending preservation of the rainforest would necessarily trump the interests of humans for development. This is simply assumed by Katz and Oechsli. After all, a nonanthropocentric theory does not necessarily reduce all human interests to a subservient position in relation to nature. Even if strong second-order principles were justified in this hypothesized nonanthropocentric theory that provided reasons for resolving conflicts of value, the application of those principles would not in this case ensure that natural welfare would trump considerations of human welfare. Every nonanthropocentrist who has taken seriously the question of conflicts of value in a nonanthropocentric approach acknowledges that in many cases human interests will still trump nonhuman interests where these interests directly come into conflict (see Eckersley 1998 for a helpful discussion). If this were not true, nonanthropocentrism would quickly degenerate into an absurd position (see Lynch and Wells 1998).

¹⁰ Externalists believe that there are objective reasons for action, not dependent on desires. No antecedent desire to follow a principle, for example, need be demonstrated. While such externalism is not in and of itself objectionable, its function in environmental ethics must be reconciled with at least one concern. Because nonanthropocentric holism is admittedly such a departure from the long history of moral theorizing (and the longer history of human moral interaction) the hurdles involved in its eventually influencing laws or policies enforced over the traditional human-centered approach to such problems are substantial, and the time horizon for overcoming these hurdles is quite long. We would be remiss then to assume that motivations will necessarily follow nonanthropocentric reasons without further argument.

A second problem with this overall approach is political. As advice to environmentalists, the approach would be politically suicidal. To the extent that such considerations as utility benefits for preservation or development are a reasonably persistent part of the discussion over whether to develop the Amazon, adopting an approach that conveniently skirts around such issues ensures that environmentalists will be excluded from such discussions, or at least easy to ignore. To come to the bargaining table armed with a theory "making questions of human benefit and satisfaction irrelevant," when issues of human benefit and satisfaction are necessarily on the table, and when representatives of those interests are the only ones who are at the table and able to articulate those interests, would make bargaining irrevocably caustic if not impossible. To negotiate environmental priorities from the point of view of an irreconcilable and intractable moral view opposing human interests is not to engage in negotiations but simply to make demands from a presumed superior moral position. To the extent that it is difficult for environmentalists even to find themselves with a voice at a forum where such decisions are made, this approach would be, at the very least, naïve and imprudent. It also stands against the substantial amount of research that has been done on negotiations and policy making (for an application to similar cases see de-Shalit 2001).

Third, Katz and Oechsli oddly assume that the imposition of a nonanthropocentric account of the value of the rainforest on the third world would somehow not be imperialistic. Even if one were committed to the claim that the nonanthropocentric description of natural value did articulate the only true value of nature independent of human perception or human cultural perspective, it is still the case that using that conception of value to justify a halt to Brazilian development would be an imposition on the Brazilians. If it is "imperialistic" to force the Brazilians to accept our first-world utility calculus of the value of the forest, which gives more weight to global welfare than to local development, then it must be imperialistic to impose upon them our developed version of nonanthropocentrism. After all, it is not necessarily the particular forms of justification of the moral calculus that is an imposition on Brazil but the fact that it is *our* assessment of the value of the rainforest and not theirs. Building in a thought experiment that assumes the prior justification of a nonanthropocentric ethic does not solve this problem, as these are not the conditions under which worries about imperialism occur. To insist otherwise is simply to hide behind an externalist view that would assume compliance with a normative claim if it could be justified.

More important than these three concerns, however, is that Katz and Oechsli ignore the empirical evidence that it was weak anthropocentric reasons that worked best to motivate resistance to development in the Amazon, not nonanthropocentric reasons. To date, one of the most successful and far-reaching movements to preserve the rainforest was initiated by Chico Mendes's Brazilian Rubber Tappers Union (working in

conjunction with the indigenous Forest People's Alliance). Tellingly, in several public appearances (including the occasion of his being named one of the U.N. Global 500 – an annual citation of the most significant crusaders for world environmental protection) Mendes was explicit that the rationale for his protection of the rainforest was because it was his home, in fact his place of business, and not because of some abstract sense of the forest's value in and of itself. In 1988 Mendes was shot by agents of forestry development in response to his activities (for a summary see Hecht 1989).

Katz and Oechsli are not alone in overlooking the importance of local human interests in forming an effective strategy for fighting development of the Amazon. Susanna Hecht has remarked that many North American environmentalists have missed the real social and economic factors involved in the destruction of these forests, which locally are understood more as issues of social justice. These are the issues that motivate people to act to protect the forest, not abstract global human or nonhuman concerns. Says Hecht: "While Chico Mendes was certainly the best-known of the rural organizers, there are hundreds of them. And many, like him, are assassinated – not because they want to save the Amazon forests or are concerned about the greenhouse effect, but because they want to protect the resource base essential to the survival of their constituents" (cited in Cockburn 1989, 85). While such assessments need not be taken as definitive, the experience of those working much more closely with an issue like this should at least be taken into account by environmental ethicists interested in coming up with better models of applying ethical concerns to this particular policy dilemma. Not to consider such information relevant to this situation is not to apply environmental ethics to a particular dilemma of environmental policy; it is to make general metaethical claims absent the particularities of any situation to which an ethical claim could be applied.

Whether because of principle or predilection, a human-centered rationale (or at least a rationale that included strong anthropocentric reasons even if it was not limited to those reasons) was sufficient to motivate Mendes and others to risk sacrificing everything to protect the forest. If we are to take seriously the political realities of such issues, as Katz and Oechsli evidently desire to do, then a position that ignores such evidence can only be willfully blind.¹¹

This example should serve as a cautionary tale for nonanthropocentrists.

¹¹ For his part, Katz has changed his views since the publication of this article so that he no longer completely rejects anthropocentric reasoning (Katz 1999). But consistent with a blind spot in favor of nonanthropocentric reasoning, he still explicitly endorses the conclusion of this particular article on the Amazon and only admits to the propriety of anthropocentric reasoning in cases where the welfare of anthropogenically created landscapes are at issue. The question of what motivates humans to act to protect nature is still not at issue.

Even if Katz and Oechli's arguments are technically correct as a possible statement of the implications of anthropocentrism in environmental policy and environmental activism, the facts of the case do not bear out their worries. And we can imagine this to be so in many other cases. Even if sound nonanthropocentric motivations can be described for other policies or acts of environmental heroism, at best we would expect that any motivation for any action would be mixed, especially when it is a human performing that action. An environmental ethic that ignored this lesson would be one that would be ill fitted to participate in policy decisions where the context always involves an appeal to a variety of intuitions and not only to a discrete set. We must ask ourselves eventually: What is more important, settling debates in value theory correct or actually motivating people to act, with the commitment of someone like Mendes, to preserve nature? The pressing time frame of environmental problems should at least warrant a consideration of the latter.

Environmental Ethics as Public Philosophy

How does one begin discussing a reform of the field so that it better responds to the need for arguments focusing on the moral motivation of humans to respond to environmental issues rather than reject such concerns wholesale as "anthropocentrism"? When we look at some of the earlier debates that I outlined in the first section, a pattern emerges. Most often philosophers working on environmental issues are at great pains to prove to each other that their individual approaches, though different from those of their colleagues, nonetheless achieve the same ends. It is almost as if there is an inevitable push toward convergence of these differing views.

For example, in a recent overview of the place of animals in environmental philosophy, Peter Singer, after running through a series of supposed disputes on which animal liberationists and environmental ethicists wind up converging, settles on the introduction of exotic European rabbits in Australia as a case of incommensurability of the competing metaethical positions. Introduced into the country in the nineteenth century as a food source, the rabbits have now become a major pest and have created a serious threat to the survival of native vegetation, as well as contributing to soil erosion. "Australian farmers and environmentalists are therefore united in attempting to reduce the number of rabbits in Australia. From the point of view of an ethic of concern for all sentient beings, however, rabbits are beings with interests of their own, capable of feeling pain and suffering" (Singer 2001, 423).

After carefully summarizing the flaws in various plans to remove the rabbits, from the point of view of an animal-liberationist position, Singer nonetheless seeks to find a compromise solution – a solution that would preserve the rare plants and ecosystems without necessarily doing damage

to the rabbits. Importantly, Singer does not attempt to justify saving the rabbits at the expense of the ecosystem. Even though he does not grant ecosystems or native plants value obliging direct moral consideration, he does not rest with a claim that the value he does find in protecting the welfare of the rabbits regrettably trumps the need to protect the plants and ecosystem. We can assume his reasons for continuing to seek a compromise solution are now prudential, but they are nonetheless driven by something else, perhaps an unwillingness to fly in the face of conventional ecological wisdom. Assuming that no compromise solution is available, Singer suggests that we resort to endorsing a precautionary principle that extends protection to the rare plants by virtue of the fact that they could be valuable someday in satisfying the interests of some future humans or nonhumans (p. 424). The only caveat is that removal of the rabbits should be done as humanely as possible.

But what environmental ethicist would disagree with this conclusion as a practical outcome of the situation? It would be an odd holist who would argue that the rabbits should be treated inhumanely. So if the rabbit case is supposed to represent an instance of incommensurability between individualists and holists, it is quite weak. After all, could not Singer's final compromise solution, to claim possible harm to future moral agents for the loss of this ecosystem as a reason for humanely removing the rabbits, be used generically in almost any case to justify protection of almost any part of nature? The drive toward convergence is strong, especially when we assert the importance of the thing we are considering and assume its value in ecological terms.¹²

Many in the broader philosophical community may find this pattern curious, as the ends of these debates appear to be assumed at the beginning. The issue between the two sides amounts to a struggle over who can prove that their view also achieves these same ends in the fewest coherent steps. Environmental ethicists take on the appearance of newcomers to marathon running: interested first only in proving that they too can reach the agreed-upon finish line. But how can we be so sure that these ends are philosophically justifiable? While there certainly are disputes about the ends of environmental practice, it is surprising how rare it is to find debates between philosophers about these ends.¹³ One is left wondering what all the fuss is about.

It should not present us with so much of a surprise, though, to find environmental ethicists struggling over the same ground. Environmental ethics

¹² Other debates in the field duplicate this pattern. See for example the exchange between Jamieson (1998) and Callicott (1998) on the merits of individualism versus holism. Jamieson's strategy is to prove that there is a scheme of value whereby sentientists can value ecosystems intrinsically even though they are derivatively valuable (rather than bearers of "primary value," such as humans and other sentient animals who have a perspective from which their lives get better or worse).

¹³ I do not think that environmental ethics is alone as a subfield of ethics with this problem; consequentialists and deontologists often arrive at the same ends as well.

does not exist in a vacuum of philosophical arguments. If environmental ethicists were suddenly to come out strongly against preservation of biodiversity, for example, then one might wonder about the viability of the field, not necessarily as a field of philosophy but rather as a field of environmental inquiry. While environmental ethics may not be linked to a particular environmental practice (such as the strong connection between medical ethics and the medical practices and professions mentioned above), it is nonetheless tethered practically, if not methodologically, to a larger environmental community. At least part of the constitution this community upholds is a strong commitment to the priorities for environmental protection and restoration as demonstrated by the science of ecology, itself a form of science that is strongly normative, as it assumes in part a focus on how the workings of an ecosystem may or may not be hindered or helped by human needs, processes, and systems. If environmental philosophers were to fly in the face of a more or less stable view of ecological science, then at the very least a much stronger justification would be needed for this position than we might expect from a relevantly similar position in a debate only with other philosophers.

Because of the nature of the concerns that environmental ethics has, and its origins as an endeavor by philosophers to try to contribute to the resolution of environmental problems, environmental ethicists find themselves part of the larger environmental community, rather than only part of the philosophical community. Although the connection has never been clear, the field continues to be part of at least an ongoing conversation about environmental issues in the wider world beyond the academy, if not an outright intentional community of environmentalists. The focus on ends in the current debates in environmental ethics is therefore not really out of place. It is the overwhelming focus of the environmental community. Instead, I would maintain that this focus on ends has not gone far enough. We should focus at least part of our work (perhaps we can call it the "public" part) on helping the environmental community to make better ethical arguments in support of the policies on which our views already largely converge. This drive to apply ethical theories in this way is motivated not only by a desire to participate actively in the resolution of environmental problems but also to hold up our philosophical end, as it were, in the community of environmentalists. The advice of those like Katz and Oechli to environmentalists, which simply applies the standard views in the field to a problem at hand, does not fulfill our obligations to this broader community, nor does an almost exclusive focus in the field on metaethical debate when the ends of most of the sides of these debates already converge.

Making environmental ethics more useful to the larger environmental community does not require giving up all of our lively philosophical debates. These debates are deserving of continued attention. But if we are to attend to the needs of our larger community we must give up the dogmas

in the field, at the very least in those contexts where various views have converged and where incommensurabilities between positions do not arise. Other changes in the application of ethics to environmental problems would have to occur as well. Here, following my observations in the previous section, I shall only make one other suggestion. A more fully responsible environmental ethics must abandon the wholesale rejection of anthropocentric reasons for protecting the environment, at least as part of our public philosophical task.

In addition to the reasons offered above, there are at least two practical reasons for reconsidering the rejection of anthropocentrism to consider as well. First, consider that the focus in environmental ethics on the search for a description of the nonanthropocentric value of nature also separates it from other forms of environmental inquiry. Most other environmental professionals look at environmental problems in a human context rather than try to define an abstract sense of natural value outside the human appreciation of interaction with nature. Fields like environmental sociology and environmental health, for example, are concerned not with the environment *per se* but with the environment as the location of human community. This is not to say that these fields reduce the value of nature to a crude resource instrumentalism. It is to say instead that they realize that a discussion of nature outside the human context impedes our ability to discuss ways in which anthropogenic impacts on nature can be understood and ameliorated. If environmental philosophers continue to pursue their work only as a contribution to value theory, they cut themselves off from the rest of the environmental community, which seeks to provide practical solutions to environmental problems, solutions that it is almost trite these days to suggest must be interdisciplinary.

One may fairly wonder how environmental philosophers can make a contribution to something other than value theory. After all, what else are they trained to do as philosophers? My claim is that if philosophers could help to articulate moral reasons for environmental policies in a way that is translatable to the general anthropocentric intuitions of the public, they will have made a contribution to the resolution of environmental problems commensurate with their talents. But making such a contribution may require doing environmental philosophy in some different ways. At a minimum it requires a more public philosophy, as the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey envisioned, though one more focused on making the kind of arguments that resonate with the moral intuitions that most people carry around with them on an everyday basis.

It is the empirically demonstrable prevalence of anthropocentric views on environmental issues that is the second practical reason for reconsidering the wholesale rejection of anthropocentrism. In a survey by Ben Minteer and Robert Manning about the sources of positive attitudes toward environmental protection in Vermont, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the reason they most thought the environment should be

protected is that they think we have positive obligations to protect nature for future human generations (Minteer and Manning 1999). More exhaustive surveys of American attitudes toward environmental protection have also found such results. In the preparatory work for their landmark study of environmental attitudes in the United States, Willett Kempton and his colleagues found that obligations to future generations was so powerfully intuitive a reason for most people to favor environmental protection that they would volunteer this view before they were asked. In a series of interviews that helped determine the focus of their questions for the survey, the authors remarked:

We found that our informants' descendants loom large in their thinking about environmental issues. Although our initial set of questions never asked about children, seventeen of the twenty lay informants themselves brought up children or future generations as a justification for environmental protection. Such a high proportion of respondents mentioning the same topic is unusual in answering an open-ended question. In fact, concern for the future of children and descendants emerged as one of the strongest values in the interviews. (Kempton et al. 1997, 95)

The larger survey conducted by Kempton, which included questions about obligations to the future, confirmed these findings. Therefore, a public environmental philosophy that took as one of its tasks the translation of the converged ends of environmental ethicists to arguments that would morally motivate humans would have to take seriously the prospects of making these arguments in terms of obligations to future generations. We are empirically more likely to motivate humans to protect some part of nature if they consider it part of their generalizable obligations to the future. Other anthropocentric claims will no doubt also be warranted as targets for this translation exercise, but this one will be certain.

Taking seriously this public task for environmental ethics does not, however, mean that those who do so must give up their pursuit of a theory of nonanthropocentric natural value. They can continue this work as one of their other tasks as environmental ethicists. But when the goal at hand is to influence policy makers or the public, they must not dogmatically apply these views. Elsewhere (Light 2001) I have sketched in more detail how such a two-pronged approach would work – continuing one's commitment to one side or another of the metaethical debates in the field while setting aside those commitments in certain circumstances. Here I shall simply note that what I am calling the "public" task of this strategy is only valid where convergence has been reached. That is, where the preponderance of views among environmental ethicists of various camps, as well as among environmentalists themselves, has converged on the same end, the public work of the philosopher is to articulate the arguments that would most effectively morally motivate nonenvironmentalists to

accept that end. Empirically, for many issues this will involve making weak anthropocentric arguments (which also have the virtue of often being less philosophically contentious). But one can imagine that in some cases nonanthropocentric claims would be more appealing as well. What appeals best is an empirical question. Where convergence has not been achieved, however, this public task of translation is not warranted. There we must continue with our “environmental first philosophy,” attempting to hammer out the most plausible and defensible views.¹⁴ There are of course many details in this approach that have yet to be filled in; I trust charitable readers will allow for its full defense elsewhere.

I call the view that makes it plausible for me to take such a position “methodological environmental pragmatism.” By this term I do not mean an application of the traditional writings of the American pragmatists to environmental problems. Instead, I mean that environmental philosophy of any variety ought to be pursued within the context of a recognition that a responsible and complete environmental ethic includes a public component with a clear policy emphasis. Environmental pragmatism in my sense is agnostic concerning the existence of nonanthropocentric natural value or the relative superiority of one form of natural value versus another. Those embracing this view can either continue to pursue nonanthropocentric theories or they can take a more traditional pragmatist stance denying the existence of such value (see Weston 1992 and Parker 1996), so long as they do not insist in their pursuit of a purer philosophical pragmatism the exclusive descent into more metaethical debates.

I believe that the principal task for an environmental pragmatism is not to reengage the metaethical and metaphysical debates in environmental ethics but rather to impress upon environmental philosophers the need to take up the largely empirical question of what morally motivates humans to change their attitudes, behaviors, and policy preferences toward those more supportive of long-term environmental sustainability. Although there are other ways to achieve this same end in ethical practice, to abandon such a project would be irresponsible to the different communities we inhabit as environmental ethicists, as well as being broadly inconsistent with the admirable reasons why this field got started in the first place.

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¹⁴ Note, however, that I have not argued that this public task is conceptually or practically justified for other areas of applied ethics. For now I am making this argument only given the structure of current debates in environmental ethics and the nature of the problems to which it is addressed.

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