Democracy and the Claims of Nature

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“Environmental pragmatism, ecocentrism and deliberative democracy: between problem-solving and fundamental critique’

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Introduction

The debate over the virtues of ecocentric theory (moral monism) versus environmental pragmatism (moral pluralism) provides an occasion to reflect upon the democratic character of these respective environmental philosophies and their associated political practices. Environmental pragmatists have been generally critical of monistic philosophies, which they understand ecocentrism to be, on the grounds that they are dogmatic, insensitive to diverse cultural and moral contexts and therefore too inflexible to be of any assistance in the practical resolution of environmental problems and conflicts. Environmental pragmatism, on the other hand, is defended as more tolerant, open-minded and ecumenical in its respect for moral pluralism and cultural diversity and more democratic in its defense of environmental policy deliberation by the affected parties. It is also defended as more effective when it comes to practical environmental problem solving.
In response, ecocentric philosophers (most notably J. Baird Callicott) have argued that the pragmatists’ embrace of moral pluralism carries with it the danger of lapsing into indecisive relativism. In particular, the refusal by environmental pragmatists to privilege any substantive environmental values in advance of policy dialogue is seen as problematic insofar as it can lead to philosophical contradictions and dubious political outcomes that may not necessarily protect the environment. According to this construction, ecocentric theorists and activists are the fearless environmental justice advocates, standing up for the interests of the environmental victims of economic development, including both humans and nonhuman species.

On the face of it, environmental pragmatism would appear to be able to boast better democratic credentials than ecocentrism insofar as it does not seek to shape or determine environmental policy in advance of democratic deliberation among the affected parties. While ecocentric philosophers, such as J. Baird Callicott, have offered a spirited defense of moral monism, they have not yet offered any sustained defense of the democratic credentials of ecocentrism against the charges of environmental pragmatists. This is somewhat surprising, given the embrace of deliberative democracy by so many ecocentric political theorists. Moreover, this embrace of deliberative democracy draws considerable inspiration from critical theory (particularly that of Jurgen Habermas), and provides a fertile point of connection and engagement with environmental pragmatism, which defends the virtues of practical deliberation following the classical tradition of American pragmatism.

In this chapter, I seek to defend the democratic credentials of ecocentrism and offer a sympathetic critique of environmental pragmatism. I also suggest that the different...
philosophical approaches and strategic practices preferred by environmental pragmatism and ecocentrism may be understood as two different and necessary “democratic moments’ in the processes of environmental policy making, which carry with them different purposes, strengths and weaknesses. I shall call the pragmatists “the mediators’ and ecocentric theorists and activists the “advocates’. (I apply these labels equally to theorists and activists in each camp, on the view that public philosophical reflection and communication is no less political than practical political engagement and activism.) The environmental mediators are good listeners who are flexible and open-minded. They are respectful of the diversity of different human modes of interacting with and valuing ecological communities and they seek to reduce conflict by focusing on immediate, practical environmental problem solving. Often this may require deftly side-stepping intractable and heated moral conflicts in order to concentrate the minds of the parties on common practical problems. In contrast, the environmental advocates are the relentless critics of the status quo who are deeply committed to particular environmental values, worldviews and policy goals. They are the activists and long term visionaries who seek to inspire, move, persuade and cajole others in order to shift cultural understandings by a variety of different forms of political communication and engagement (such as political rhetoric, satire, science, logic, poetry, literature, art and practical example). They are prepared to challenge and disrupt conventional norms and policy discourses, generate political conflict and sometimes they may refuse to engage in formalized democratic deliberation if it is likely to compromise their values and goals.

These distinctions may be understood as two different ideal types, which means that not all environmental pragmatists and ecocentrics would necessarily confirm exactly
to the respective criteria. Moreover, these ideal types are not entirely mutually exclusive, in that both the mediator and the advocate support democratic deliberation, at least in principle. However, as we shall see, there are tensions associated with how democratic deliberation is understood and best realized. I therefore enlist the figures of the pragmatic mediator and the activist advocate in order to draw out these differences and illuminate the necessary and potentially productive tensions between these different types of democratic engagement. Indeed, these tensions resonate with a more general tension in political thought and practice about the relative importance of, and relationship between, justice and democracy. On the one hand, we are familiar with the claim that justice should be the “first virtue” of political thought and practice and therefore prior to, or at least determinative of, democracy while, on the other hand, we find claims that justice is simply that which emerges from a fair democratic dialogue. Posing the tension in these stark terms would suggest that ecocentrics understand environmental justice to be the necessary starting point of political inquiry and practice, while environmental pragmatists would accord this status to democracy since it provides the fairest means of reconciling value pluralism. However, this is not meant to suggest that ecocentrics are necessarily undemocratic nor that environmental pragmatists are not concerned about environmental justice. Rather, the different starting points merely illuminate different entry points and objectives that inform different understandings of the relationship between justice and democracy. In any event, in recent debates in political theory there seems to be a growing acknowledgment that neither justice nor democracy should be understood as the prior virtue, that justice and democracy presuppose each other and are therefore mutually defining (Gould 1988; Young 1990; Kingwell 1995; Benhabib 1996). The real debate, as
we shall see, concerns how environmental justice and democracy are mutually related, in
text and practice.

While both approaches have their strengths and drawbacks, ultimately I will be
arguing that environmental pragmatism ought to take a more critical and less
instrumental approach to deliberation and that such a move would enable more
opportunities for creative (as distinct from destructive) engagement between the figure of
the advocate and the mediator. I show that the contemporary environmental pragmatists’
and ecocentric political theorists’ understandings of deliberation diverge in some
significant respects and suggest that the differences between pragmatic
mediation/conflict resolution and ecocentric advocacy can be understood in terms of the
distinction between a “problem-solving” versus a “critical” orientation to environmental
deliberation and policy making. In order to develop this argument, in the following
discussion I evaluate environmental pragmatism from the perspective of the (ecocentric)
environmental advocate, although in the concluding discussion I also expose some of the
limitations of the more adversarial advocate role.

**Environmental pragmatism**

The environmental pragmatists’ commitment to open-ended inquiry and practical
democratic engagement is grounded in the insights of the classical American pragmatists,
the chief pioneers of whom were C.S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910)
and especially John Dewey (1859-1952). As a philosophical movement, the early
pragmatists were concerned “to improve the methods by which human beings can acquire
new knowledge and understanding of their environment, both in an ordinary life context
and, in a more organized way, through science’. Common and related themes developed by the “classical pragmatists’ included an emphasis on the tentative and provisional character of knowledge, the self-corrective character of inquiry as an ongoing experiential process, and the interpretation of ideas, meaning and truth through their practical consequences. According to this radical empiricist approach, truth is interpreted not in any abstract or absolutist way but rather from the standpoint of particular agents in relation to their experience of particular problems, an experience which includes agents’ beliefs and utilities. John Dewey, in particular, reinterpreted pragmatism as instrumentalism and interpreted truth as “warranted assertability”.

Socially and politically, the classical pragmatists were humanists and democrats who emphasized the importance of the social construction of knowledge, and social learning through democratic inquiry. As Parker puts it, “For the pragmatist, ‘participatory democracy’ is a political expression of the metaphysical idea that reality is involvement and transformation.” That is, humans are active experimenters who constantly reorder their understanding of and orientation to the world as a result of their constructed and reconstructed experience in the world. John Dewey, in particular, believed that science advanced because it was self-corrective by virtue of its method of testing scientific claims and counterclaims against experience. By a parity of reasoning, he hoped that society would progress by means of the “deliberative testing” of public policies against experience. As a democrat, he also argued that deliberation should be socially inclusive, not elitist.

Contemporary environmental pragmatists likewise defend inclusive democratic deliberation that is respectful of the plurality of existing environmental values, beliefs
and lived experiences within particular communities. Indeed, Light and Katz - editors of
the first comprehensive volume of environmental pragmatist thought - speculate that one
of the reasons for the failure of much environmental philosophy to influence public
policy is its “methodological and theoretical dogmatism.” 6 In particular, they accuse
nonanthropocentric moral monism of forcing a premature closure in environmental
philosophical discourse and they seek to counteract this with a more ecumenical method
of inquiry which they claim is more sensitive to the fact of moral pluralism. Historically,
they point out that environmental philosophy is still a relatively young field of inquiry - a
stage which they argue justifies multi-vocality and an opening out of inquiry, not
stabilization or closure.

For some environmental pragmatists, the human perspective is the only thing we
know as humans and therefore the human perspective becomes the measure of all things
by default. 7 For committed Deweyians, it is meaningless to talk about the value of
something in the absence of a human valuer, although this need not rule out the valuing
of nonhuman entities for their own sake by human subjects. Indeed, respect for moral
pluralism necessarily entails respect for those cultures and traditions that value
nonhuman nature in moral, aesthetic or spiritual terms. But it also necessarily entails
respect for those cultures and traditions which do not. Some pragmatists go so far as to
reject the ends-means distinction in environmental ethics along with the notion of any
fixed and final end. From this perspective, it makes no sense to say that an entity is
intrinsically valuable in the sense that its value is self-sufficient, abstracted from its
relations with other entities. Values are web-like, interrelated and specific to particular
human/environment contexts and cannot be meaningfully defended outside such real
world evaluations and choices where different clusters of values must always be related to each other.  

The relational ontology, constructivist epistemology and radically empiricist methodology of environmental pragmatism support a social and political philosophy of justice that is essentially proceduralist. Environmental pragmatists may therefore be included among those political philosophers who have taken the dialogic turn in justice theory, where instead of developing substantive principles of justice and associated policies in advance of particular problems, the preoccupation is with “attempting to specify the conversational conditions under which citizens can begin to negotiate their political difference.” That is, environmental pragmatists are concerned to discover the most appropriate democratic procedures in which a constructive environmental dialogue and practical problem solving might take place. Just solutions to social and ecological problems must be understood as provisional, dialogical and context specific in relation to a particular community of inquirers rather than fixed, monological and universal.

Although I have so far introduced environmental pragmatism as essentially a method of environmental policy making rather than as a substantive environmental philosophy, there are some environmental pragmatists, such as Bryan Norton, who have developed pragmatism in a more substantive direction, insofar as they have defended the principle of sustainability as philosophically consistent with environmental pragmatism. That is, sustainability is defended on the grounds that it keeps open options and opportunities for future generations and is consistent with a Darwinian emphasis on practical survival and a pragmatic conception of truth. For Norton, pursuing the practical path of sustainability is more likely to guarantee the survival of the community of inquirers.
and their descendants than any rival philosophy, and is therefore “destined, in the terms of Pierce, to be adopted as the conclusion of all rational inquirers, as they struggle through many experiments to make coherent sense of human experience.”11 The principle of sustainability is also defended as especially amenable to social learning: it is open-ended and therefore requires social interpretation and experimentation before it can find expression in practical policies in response to practical problems.

However, for Andrew Light and Eric Katz, environmental pragmatism is defended primarily as a methodology rather than a substantive environmental philosophy.12 This approach involves starting with existing environmental problems and conflicts, and understanding and working with the experience, beliefs, values and “baggage” that real people carry with them in particular contexts. Given their keen sensitivity to context, most environmental pragmatists are reluctant to specify in advance exactly how constructive dialogues might be fashioned, other than to acknowledge the fact of moral and cultural pluralism and urge the parties to look for creative ways of maintaining respect for moral and cultural difference in the processes of deliberation and decision making. Although environmental pragmatists personally wish to see more environmental protection, in privileging method over substance they cannot allow their personal desires to distort or derail the processes of constructive dialogue. In so far as environmental pragmatists find themselves embroiled in real environmental conflicts as distinct from philosophical ones, we would still expect them to assume the figure of the mediator in seeking to pacify the parties and facilitate the democratic resolution of practical problems. Their “tools” are being respectful, listening, remaining open-minded, experimenting, working creatively with the moral and cultural resources at hand, and
seeking only the minimum necessary common ground for the purposes of practical problem solving. In this context, the tactful avoidance of deep-seated moral, religious, cultural and social differences is defended as more productive than allowing unnecessary heated debate about deep-seated differences. As a method of environmental problem solving, environmental pragmatism is necessarily flexible and cannot offer any further specificity. No “how-to-do-it” manuals or institutional designs are offered, only loose heuristic guidelines, since the point is to leave the clarification of issues, agenda setting, practical problem solving and adaptive learning and management to real stakeholders who constitute the relevant “community of inquirers” that must live with, and learn from, the consequences of their decisions. Under these circumstances, compromise, incremental change and even “muddling through” are preferable to grand social engineering. In this they follow the Popperian tradition according to which “grand social engineers” are the “enemies” of the open society.

Against this background, we can see why both ecocentric theorists and activists might be portrayed by those sympathetic to environmental pragmatism as “the self-appointed guardians of an uncompromising ideology”…”indulging in a fantasy of Platonic education.” That, is ecocentrics (as advocates of deeply held convictions about the green good life) appear to wish to “foist” their vision on others without regard to religious, cultural and philosophical difference. From this perspective, if ecocentric political activists were to capture state power, liberal democracy would be in danger of giving way to ecoauthoritarianism. Environmental pragmatism may thus be seen as joining force with green liberalism in defending the freedom of individuals to choose their own environmental destinies. If forced to choose between the unpalatable alternatives of the
liberal distopia of a global Manhattan or the green distopia of the eco-authoritarian state, green liberals would choose the former.\textsuperscript{15}

Environmental pragmatism also shares with liberalism what political philosophers refer to as a “right over good” conception of justice. In the case of environmental pragmatism, only the fair rules of dialogue are expected to trump different conceptions of the good life (including those of deep ecologists) to the extent to which such conceptions conflict with such rules. Indeed, the primary appeal of “right over good” theories of justice - or what Agnes Heller has called “an incomplete ethico-political concept of justice” - is that they seek to avoid the tyranny of perfectionism and promote toleration of difference while providing a fair framework and procedure for making legitimate decisions.\textsuperscript{16} Legitimate decisions are never perfect, correct or absolute. They are merely decisions that parties can “live with” for the time being because they accept the processes of decision making as fair, even though they might have personally preferred a different outcome.

In the philosophical debates, we see this commitment to moral pluralism and an “incomplete ethico-political concept of justice” at work in the distinction made by environmental pragmatists between “applied” and “practical” philosophy. Whereas applied environmental philosophy seeks to deduce particular policies from general environmental principles that are determined in the abstract, in advance of practical problems, practical philosophy seeks a reconciliation of real world moral pluralism by developing principles and strategies in the context of specific practical problems. Deliberation, creative conflict mediation and social learning thus replace any quest for ethical perfection. For Bryan Norton, moral monism (such as nonanthropocentric
environmental ethics) and applied philosophy typically go together. That is, moral monists are “armchair philosophers” who develop and defend particular universal principles from which policy makers and others are expected to “derive” particular policy options. In contrast, practical philosophers seek to generate workable principles from practice rather than work out practical policies from general principles.\textsuperscript{17}

Paul Thompson has taken Norton’s critique of applied philosophy a step further in questioning the role of environmental philosophy if all it does is clarify and articulate the different ethical arguments (utilitarian, Kantian, contractarian, egalitarian and so on) underpinning the perspectives of competing stakeholders in environmental policy conflicts. He has suggested that attempts to understand stakeholders’ conflicts as representing applications of different moral theories is more likely to exacerbate any stand off between the protagonists, sharpening formerly inchoate views and intuitions into more articulate and entrenched views, adding to the levels of self-righteousness of opposing parties and foreclosing the possibility of agreement.\textsuperscript{18} Instead of constructing philosophical principles in advance of application, Thompson argues that we need to deconstruct philosophical abstractions in order to prepare the ground for more creative practical thinking. As he explains, “Pragmatic deconstruction is a form of moral pedagogy that goes before reconstruction, and hence before any attempt at prescription.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, Thompson maintains that once we have stripped away the philosophical gloss, environmental problems can typically be boiled down to a question of incompatible use of a particular resource or ecosystem by different stakeholders.\textsuperscript{20} Once understood in these terms, it is possible to sort out a program of action based on the requirements of pragmatic necessity - an approach he believes will produce a response...
that is more likely to be “serviceable” in relation to the specific problem facing the relevant community of inquirers than abstract philosophical inquiry.

**The limitations of “practical problem-solving”**

So far, we have outlined the environmental pragmatist understanding of how a “genuine environmental democracy” ought to function. That is, environmental pragmatists hold to a regulative ideal of democratic deliberation that is respectful, ecumenical and directed toward practical problem solving. As appealing as this regulative ideal may be, I nonetheless want to highlight three major, interrelated limitations and/or undeveloped dimensions of environmental pragmatism. The first is that its narrow focus on problem-solving makes it insufficiently critical and emancipatory when examined from the perspective of oppressed and marginal groups and classes or nonhuman species. From this perspective, environmental pragmatism runs the risk of being too accommodating of the existing constellation of social forces that drive environmental degradation. The second limitation is that it is too instrumentalist in the way that it seeks to close off noninstrumental democratic encounters and the opportunity for the parties to engage in dialogue for dialogue’s sake - a possibility that can sometimes work to build mutual respect and trust as much as it can deepen antagonisms. Moreover, although environmental pragmatists seek to avoid moral reductionism, their method of inquiry is reductionist in the sense that it seeks to filter out arguments that do not address questions of practical necessity - effectively reducing collective deliberation to deliberation about competing utilities. The third criticism is that there is ultimately nothing especially *environmental* about the kind of democratic inquiry defended by environmental
pragmatists, in the sense that environmental pragmatism ultimately rests on a liberal humanist moral premise rather than any explicit environmental values. And as we shall see, many ecocentric political theorists have taken issue with the moral foundations of liberal democracy on the ground that it is not pluralist or inclusive enough.

Too accommodating, not critical enough

To remain consistent with their methodological approach, we would expect environmental pragmatists to approach environmental conflicts by recommending practically oriented deliberation and mediation among the parties or their representatives. We would also expect them to counsel against anything that might lead to an escalation of conflict, since conflict stands in the way of practical problem solving. Now there certainly are many circumstances when such a strategy is likely to be prudent and effective. Indeed, the concern to unify disparate political actors around a common problem is one of the greatest strengths of environmental pragmatism, which has suggested some tactful and creative methods that might, in some instances, serve to soften or shelve such deeply held moral convictions in order to achieve practical outcomes.21

However, deeply held moral, religious and/or cultural convictions may not be the only reasons why the respectful and practical democratic disposition hoped for by pragmatists may be found in short supply. In real world democracies, differences in income, wealth, status, knowledge and “communicative power” are widespread. In their effort to acknowledge and work with moral pluralism, environmental pragmatists have tended to neglect a wider range of other reasons for conflict, intransigence or non-
cooperation by particular parties to environmental disputes. For example, it may be because of poverty and economic necessity brought about by capital flight, debt or corruption. It may be because certain parties have other, more “effective” means of force at their disposal to achieve their goals other than the force of argumentative persuasion, such as the public coercive power of the state, the private power to make threats or inducements or even the more subtle power that comes with simply belonging to the dominant cultural or ethnic group in a particular society. Or it may be because certain parties or their advocates do not believe they will achieve a fair or meaningful hearing precisely because the forces arrayed against them are more powerful and/or because the outcome of any cooperative dialogue may serve to deflect attention away from deeper and more systemic “background injustices”, including social and economic structures and the social dispositions they foster. This is a situation that regularly confronts the unemployed, indigenous peoples, women, people of color and those advocates who seek the protection of endangered and threatened species and their habitats. In their otherwise laudable practical concern to work creatively with the diverse moral orientations of the parties in particular policy dialogues in response to particular problems, structural injustices and the powerful social agents and dominant discourses that serve to reproduce them are necessarily placed in the background. Of course, environmental pragmatists would doubtless be aware of, and troubled by, such structural problems. However, my point is that there is nothing in their practical method of problem solving that would encourage or facilitate a shift towards a more general political or economic critique precisely because such a move would detract from reaching a practical agreement in response to particular and immediate problems. These limitations of environmental
pragmatism are neatly encapsulated in Robert Cox’s distinction between problem-solving theories and critical theories. As Cox explains, “whereas the problem-solving approach leads to further analytical sub-division and limitation of the issue dealt with, the critical approach leads towards the construction of a larger picture of the whole of which the initially contemplated part is just one component, and seeks to understand the processes of change in which both parts and whole are involved.”

A roughly similar distinction can be found in the critical rationalism of Karl Popper as compared to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly in the “second wave” work of Jurgen Habermas.

However sympathetic and inclusive environmental pragmatists may be in relation to the powerless, their focus on procedural questions, rather than substantive questions of justice, provides only a minimal means of bridging the discrepancy between those who possess “communicative power” (along with other forms of power) and those who do not. Nor does the otherwise commendable ecumenical ethos of environmental pragmatism provide any assurance to advocates of marginalized and oppressed groups (including those advocates who act as the political representatives of nonhuman species) that their deepest concerns will be addressed. Moreover, the reluctance of environmental pragmatists to specify or institutionalize the kinds of procedures, decision rules, and devices that might provide a practical embodiment of their method of dialogical justice, leaves marginalized groups without any institutional safeguards to ensure a fair and informed hearing - other than the goodwill of the parties and the generic skills of any pragmatist mediators who happen to be present. In short, the more radically open are democratic procedures, the more they are susceptible to abuse as well as good use.
The problem of broader discourses and structures that transcend the local policy making community raises considerable institutional challenges for environmental pragmatism, which has not engaged in any critical analysis of macro policy developments at the national and global level, such as the ascendancy of neoliberalism and the increasing salience of the rights of corporations relative to citizens, which condition and constrain the negotiating margins of local and regional environmental policy making. As is typically the case in an increasingly globalized world, local and even regional conflicts cannot always be practically solved by the immediate parties in dispute because they rarely have control over the broader structures, social forces and decisions that have helped to generate environmental degradation. Of course, this problem cuts both ways. Given that local stakeholders are rarely the only ones affected by the spatial and temporal consequences of their decisions, their decision-making should be “layered” into broader, macro-policy frameworks. For example, local policy making communities should be guided by international environmental treaty commitments, while at the same time be given the opportunity to influence such treaty negotiations.

Bryan Norton is an exception here in drawing attention to the multi-scalar dimensions of environmental problems as part of his pluralistic, integrative framework for ecological management. According to this normative framework, local stakeholders ought to consider impacts on larger spatial and temporal dynamics and scales. Such an approach avoids the limitations of a narrow problem solving approach while also being explicitly environmental if not critical. Such an approach also departs significantly from the strictly methodological/procedural focus of most of the environmental pragmatist literature by offering a substantive normative framework that is defended on the basis of
“a broadly Darwinian approach to epistemology and morality.”25 In other words, such a framework is defended as likely to be accepted by policy makers because it provides “useful knowledge” about how humans might best survive in a changing world. While the broad direction (if not the philosophical underpinnings) of this framework would doubtless appeal to many ecocentric advocates, Norton, as a pluralist, has not fully grappled with the question of how his normative insights might be institutionalized in local, regional and global policy making processes. Moreover, there is also a need to engage critically with the limited time horizons and forms of political representation in real-world liberal democracies, social and economic structural inequalities, and the powerful social agents and dominant discourses that serve to reproduce them, that stand in the way of reform. Of course, any such move would necessarily entail a shift from the figure of the pragmatic mediator, who acknowledges and respects the values and interests of environmentalists and developers alike, to the figure of the critical advocate as a committed political actor seeking change.

For methodological pragmatists, however, the commitment to pluralism provides the very basis for defending a strictly proceduralist conception of democracy, since there is no background of shared moral beliefs to give any substantive moral purpose to the political order or provide any overarching constraints on democratically determined decisions, save those that recognize and protect the political equality of each of its members and their rights to participate in the democratic processes. That is, we have no basis for agreement other than the need for “fair” procedures.26 Thus those political rights which are necessary for democracy are constitutive; all other rights and substantive claims, including environmental ones should not serve as constraints on democracy.
From the point of view of those who advocate change on behalf of the “environmentally disempowered”, such a methodological focus is too narrowly conceived. Approaching environmental problems and conflicts with the open-minded, respectful and practical disposition suggested by pragmatists can be positively foolhardy when there are more powerful forces arrayed around the negotiating table, and especially when their arguments resonate with dominant economic discourses. Indeed, maintaining a narrow problem-solving focus runs the risk of perpetuating structural injustices by, for example, ameliorating environmental side-effects for particular local communities and making the structural injustices a little easier to live with. This problem is generally recognized by new social movements and radical democratic theorists and requires difficult and ongoing practical judgments about whether to cooperate in policy dialogues or adopt more confrontational strategies, which may extend to civil disobedience in those cases where the relevant legal and policy regimes are believed to be manifestly unjust.

Boycotting the processes of negotiation in order to highlight more systemic injustices may be more politically and strategically beneficial than participating in negotiations, even when such negotiations may carry the promise of producing compromises and incremental policy shifts in favor of such groups in particular cases. That such tactics are regularly employed by environmental justice and wilderness advocates is testimony to, among other things, the political frustration experienced by those with limited resources and limited control over agenda setting.

Of course, a cynic might suggest that refusing to continue a formal dialogue because it is not “free enough” is really just a code for saying that the dialogue is not running in the direction that the environmental advocate might wish. While this
accusation is necessarily true (and therefore frequently made) in real-world liberal democracies, it also trivializes or fails to acknowledge the systemic injustices and associated discourses that constrain the parameters of policy deliberations in such democracies. When differences in communicative power distort democratic communication, both justice and democracy are more likely to be served by persisting with critical advocacy rather than “submitting” to mediation and narrow problem-solving. This is not to say that successful mediation cannot or does not occur. Rather, it is merely a reminder that it has sometimes served as a strategic tool for developers and therefore has ambiguous potential.  

Introducing strategies of empowerment can therefore help to “correct” democratic processes. Similarly, devising special forms of representation for those who are systematically under-represented can help to ensure communicative equality. After all, what Cohen calls a “favorable associative environment” does not always arise naturally. It has to be actively constructed by the use of public powers - a move that itself requires deliberation and is invariably contested by those social forces that stand to lose. However, such strategies can be justified in democratic grounds. That is, for so long as organized public power is not fully democratic, then justice advocates may resort to strategic rather than communicative action in order to establish the conditions for fair and free deliberation. From a Habermasian perspective, “[s]trategic action would appear justified only as long as it seeks to establish conditions that allow communicative rationality to unfold its potential, not insofar as it anticipates the possible outcomes of praxis as discourse.” While opting to “walk-out” and engage in further strategic or communicative action elsewhere may seem petulant and uncompromising from the point
of view of the frustrated mediator who is concerned to achieve a practical outcome rather than a stalemate, from the perspective of the advocate it is a continuation of democratic deliberation by other means.

Now some environmental pragmatists may well object to my argument by pointing out that environmental pragmatism has the potential to develop in a much more critical direction. After all, if economic and political structural inequalities stand in the way of a more robust democracy, then as democrats, pragmatists ought to challenge those structural inequalities and therefore incline towards a more critical pragmatism. Indeed, Dewey emphasized the need for institutional criticism. And as Michael Walzer has shown, those who reject abstract and universal moral theory in favor of democratic dialogue that is respectful of moral and cultural pluralism and can still play the role of social critic by enlisting and critically interrogating the shared meanings that are local and internal to particular communities. This would apply especially where members of particular communities are excluded from participating in the construction of shared social meanings within that community.

While I accept that there is plenty of room for environmental pragmatists to travel in this direction, such moves would tend to divert attention away from practical problem solving towards more of a Big Picture analysis and critique of social structures (of the Coxian kind). This would necessarily weaken some of the claimed advantages of the pragmatist method of inquiry, namely, that it is practically efficacious because it focuses on immediate problem-solving by reconciling competing environmental uses and bracketing more fundamental differences in environmental values and worldviews. Moreover, as we have seen, this Big Picture critique will invariably have global
dimensions, with social meanings that now operate well beyond local, territorially based communities and cultures. This, in turn, makes the defence of cultural particularism in local communities more challenging. Now none of these points represent insuperable barriers for environmental pragmatism, although if it took a more critical turn it would need to change its ‘marketing’. That is, it cannot claim to offer a method of environmental problem solving that is efficacious from an instrumental point of view while also remaining consistently critical of broader social structures. Indeed, I do not believe any political theory can reasonably make such a claim!

Too instrumentalist

Even where environmental pragmatists are at their strongest in suggesting that intractable debates about deeply held moral convictions might be deftly side-stepped in order to focus on the practical problems at hand, I have suggested that this is a recipe that is likely to work only some of the time. One of the reasons for this is that not all environmental conflicts can or ought to be reduced to a simple question of incompatible use of nonhuman nature by differently situated humans. This is because environmental conflicts are also manifestations of deeper social and political controversies concerning lifestyle, identity, cultural dispositions and modes of relating to others. Under these circumstances, practical conflicts cannot and ought not be isolated from these deeper social and political conflicts because any resolution of particular problems usually serves as a precedent for future policy making, in which case much more is at stake than merely solving the particular practical problem at hand. In such circumstances, what Thompson calls “the force of necessity” is therefore unlikely to bring together the relevant community of
inquirers and allow them to let go of their fundamental convictions in order to reach an effective pragmatic resolution of the immediate environmental problem/conflict.

Yet there is a deeper, and somewhat ironic, point to be made against the instrumentalist, problem-solving orientation of environmental pragmatism. For those sympathetic with the work of Hannah Arendt and also the Frankfurt School, keeping the dialogue alive in order to ask more and deeper questions is ultimately more valuable and important than resolving immediate, narrowly defined practical problems. From an Arendtian perspective, democratic exchange is an intrinsically valuable end in itself rather than a mere means to other ends while for the Frankfurt School the challenge is merely to prevent instrumental reason from dwarfing or displacing other forms of human reason. The irony here is that approaching deliberation in a less goal directed way may turn out to be more “instrumental” in fostering mutual trust and mutual understanding of difference precisely because the pressure of practical imperatives are lifted. After all, it is difficult simultaneously to listen and open oneself outwards in order to understand differently situated others while also making instrumental assessments and calculations of one’s environmental claims in relation to others.

In defending the virtues of noninstrumental democratic deliberation, Douglas Torgerson has carried Arendt’s insights to their extreme conclusion in arguing that maintaining a relentlessly questioning dialogue in the “green public sphere” is ultimately more important than maintaining a green political movement, which is mostly oriented towards achieving environmental results. While this seems to me to be carrying the point too far in providing a justification for endlessly foreclosing any practical policy action, Torgerson nonetheless helps us to see the inevitable tensions that can arise
between the unconstrained moment of dialogue (where parties seek mutual understanding freed from the force of practical necessity) and the constrained moment of decision making under the pressure of reaching a decision with decisive consequences (where not all perspectives, interests and values can be equally accommodated).

There is, of course, a more familiar dimension to the ecocentric critique of instrumentalism. A common feature of the variety of different ecocentric philosophies is a rejection of a purely instrumentalist posture towards the human and nonhuman worlds. This is not a denial of the use-value of ecosystems, merely a refusal to reduce the human relationship with human and nonhuman others to a purely instrumental one. Now environmental pragmatists, as we have seen, also acknowledge and respect the variety of different human modes of relating to nature (instrumental, moral, aesthetic, religious) and some have gone so far as to reject the instrumental value versus intrinsic value distinction on the grounds, rightly I believe, that values are web-like, interrelated and specific to particular human/environment contexts. However, when it comes to making practical policy decisions, the radically empiricist epistemology of environmental pragmatism is one that ultimately calls on the parties in a policy deliberation to privilege instrumental evaluations over noninstrumental ones on the grounds that this is the most efficacious way of reaching practical agreement. However, behind this instrumental argument lies a deeper set of claims: that humans must necessarily construct a uniquely human environment out the materials of nature, one that serves and expands human survival and human purposes.33

Now the appeal of this approach is that it concentrates the discussion on what it is we all have in common. That is, whatever else we may value or desire, we are all
instrumentally dependent on ecosystems for our survival and well being and this is indeed a point of convergence among all humans, whether environmentalists or not. Moreover, this pragmatic focus manages to avoid the crude utilitarian calculations of neoclassical economists, who take individual preferences as given and merely seek to aggregate them for the purposes of cost-benefit analysis. In contrast, environmental pragmatists seek the reflexive, collective scrutiny and evaluation of practical consequences within a deliberative setting in a way that is able to facilitate societal learning.

While such an approach may often work to achieve a greater measure of unity among environmentalists, whether preservationists or conservationists, in relation to complex problems such as global warming and species extinction (where instrumental and noninstrumental arguments increasingly converge), the plain fact is that the policy making community is not made up of environmentalists alone. What this means is that in deliberative encounters between environmentalists and developers, environmentalists would always have to show that preserving and protecting nature is more instrumentally valuable to present and future human generations than exploiting and transforming it. As Callicott puts it, environmentalists would find themselves having “to compete head-to-head with the economic values derived from converting rainforest to lumber and pulp, savannahs to cattle pasture, and so on.” Enlisting Norton’s principle of sustainability as a guide to environmental policy deliberations will not necessarily steer policy deliberations towards environmental protection, since the principle leaves it open to the parties to determine what is to be sustained (natural capital or the total capital stock, made up of natural and human made capital?) and for whom (human or nonhumans) and
over what time period (how many generations?). For those parties who are ready to accept that human-made capital can substitute for natural capital, to satisfy the sustainability principle it is enough to hand on to the next generation a capital stock that is no less than that enjoyed by the previous generation, even though this may be made up of an ever diminishing proportion of natural capital.

In the light of such anticipated dangers, the deployment by radical environmentalists of the language of the “intrinsic value” of nonhuman nature, or “the rights” of nonhuman nature serves as a strategically useful, though somewhat imperfect and clumsy, attempt to force a more systematic consideration of nonhuman interests and hopefully “trump” competing arguments that favor exploitation on grounds of utility. While there may be better ways of achieving such systematic consideration (for example, I have argued elsewhere for the constitutionally entrenchment of the precautionary principles as a mandatory procedural requirement in policy making), the resort to the language of “rights”, “intrinsic value” or “inherent dignity” of nature may be understood, among other things, as a strategic attempt to tap into an emancipatory vocabulary. Historically, the successive struggles to extend rights have been struggles to deepen and extend recognition to hitherto excluded social classes and groups (slaves, working class, women, ethnic minorities). Such struggles have also been struggles over social power and the “social construction of reality”, including the power to define what is “real” and who/what should count as “normal” and morally considerable. More recently, however, new social movements and a diverse range of linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities have introduced a identity/difference politics which has challenged the liberal democratic “color-blind constitution” along with homogenizing models of political identity and
Such movements and groups have challenged the idea of “extending” political recognition on the basis of criteria that does not reflect their own experiences and identities.

Similar problems arise with the method of “humane extensionism” that has been employed by many environmental philosophers and activists, which seeks to incorporate nonhuman others and ecosystems into human moral frameworks by analogy with humans. Despite well meaning intentions, such a method serves to privilege similarity with humans over difference. This sets artificial limits on the range of values and reasons why we might respect nature, creating a web of incorporations and inclusions that leaves us unable to respect “unassimilated otherness.”

Ironically, some environmental pragmatists, such as Weston, have recognized this problem, but have not seen the need to explore how the unassimilated otherness of nonhuman nature might be acknowledged and respected in its own right by the environmental policy making community. Yet, ultimately, there seems to be no non-question begging moral standpoint from which to justify exclusion of any nonhuman others from the moral horizons of environmental policy making. Epistemological and experiential limitations on human understanding of nonhuman nature certainly make the challenge a difficult one but, as we shall see, these limitations should not be used as a basis for withholding prima facie recognition.

*Liberal humanism, not pluralist enough?*

As we have seen, environmental pragmatists purport to celebrate moral pluralism and reject nonanthropocentric theory as monistic and reductionistic. Yet if the environmental
pragmatists’ embrace of moral pluralism is to avoid arbitrary or indecisive relativism
then pragmatists must ultimately privilege some moral values over others, if only to
justify their pragmatic democratic procedures. Any approach that understands justice in
dialogic terms - as fair dialogue - necessarily presupposes a prior moral theory of what is
fair. As we have seen, environmental pragmatism ultimately comes to rest on the basic
(monistic?) liberal humanistic principle of respect for individuals and their right to
participate in the determination of their collective fate. Ecocentric democratic theory may
be understood not as rejecting this principle but rather as seeking to extend it (by
vicarious means as I explain below), on the ground that the moral pluralism of
environmental pragmatism is not quite pluralist enough. That is, it calls for a more
inclusive moral and procedural framework that acknowledges and seeks to reconcile not
just conflicting human values and interests but also conflicts between human and
nonhuman interests in ways that ensure special advocacy on behalf of nonhuman
interests. If this is still monism, as pragmatists aver, then it is at least a more
encompassing monism than liberal humanism.

Now we have seen that environmental pragmatists recognize that some
individuals and cultures value nonhuman nature for its own sake. In view of the
ecumenical spirit of environmental pragmatism, where such preferences and values are
held by particular stakeholders in environmental policy conflicts, they must be
acknowledged and brought into the policy deliberations. Here, it must be noted that
some of the ‘methodological environmental pragmatists’ (such as Eric Katz and Andrew
Light), seem to be more agnostic than the committed Deweyians about the sources of
value and are prepared to extend pluralism to encompass nonanthropocentric intuitions about value.

However, this only arises when such preferences or values happen to be held by particular stakeholders in particular conflicts. There is nothing in the environmental pragmatist method of inquiry that would guarantee any special representation rights to nonhuman species - as a matter of procedure or due process - where their fate may be imperiled in those circumstances where there are no self-appointed nonhuman advocates in the relevant human stakeholder community.

By way of clarification, it should be pointed out that the argument that there is ultimately nothing especially environmental about the kind of democratic inquiry defended by environmental pragmatists is directed to the liberal humanist premises of environmental pragmatist thought (i.e. to the ultimate values that an environmental pragmatist democracy is supposed to serve and uphold), not to the pragmatic arguments that are offered in support of practical deliberation as a method of environmental policy making. This is because an ecocentric case can also be made that democratic deliberation, through its requirement of publicity and the giving of reasons acceptable to others, is more conducive to the protection of common or generalizable interests - such as ecological interests - than the “distorted” and strategic political communication that is characteristic of liberal democracies. 41 However, unlike environmental pragmatists, many ecocentric political theorists have looked more critically at deliberative democracy in order to explore how the moral foundations, procedures and forms of democratic representation might be widened to acknowledge nonhuman others. This is not a question
that has been seriously entertained by environmental pragmatists since it does not make sense in terms of their constructivist and radically empiricist epistemology.

Indeed, it is this epistemological question about how we come to know nature that has been central to the general resistance to ecocentric efforts to transcend anthropocentrism or human chauvinism in policy making. To borrow Kate Soper’s terminology, are we seeking to emancipate “nature” or Nature? That is, are we seeking to liberate the “nature” we have constructed, or Nature as extra-discursive reality? Now some deep ecologists have resisted social constructivism and have sought to invoke the authority of science to buttress their moral arguments for, say, wilderness preservation and species protection. But it is not necessary to subscribe to a naïve realist epistemology in order to argue the moral case for considering the interests of nonhuman others in policy making. Indeed, to accept that reality is socially constructed, and that “truth” is standpoint dependent, is necessarily to acknowledge that there are many “realities” and “standpoints”, human and nonhuman, even though they may be incommensurable with our own experience, and therefore not easy to grasp. Yet this “difficult to grasp” argument is too often used as a shield against ecocentric moral claims. Here, environmental pragmatists effectively rely on their radically empiricist epistemology, which interprets ideas, meaning and truth through their practical consequences for humans, as a justification for restricting moral considerability to humans. No positive moral argument is advanced in defense of this posture. It is mostly arrived at by default as if it were somehow “natural” in terms of their Darwinian emphasis on practical survival. But even this argument could be enlisted on behalf of nonhuman others, who likewise possess an interest in their own survival.
A postpositivist, constructivist epistemology does not deny the existence of Nature as an extra-discursive reality; it simply acknowledges that we do not have any shared access to this reality other than through human frameworks of understanding. The distinctive political project of ecocentrism, as I understand it, is to enable the flourishing of Nature in the knowledge that we must always necessarily grapple with the fact that we only have access to Nature through our own discursive maps (whether based on scientific or customary/vernacular knowledge), which are approximate, provisional understanding of so-called “real” Nature. If we understand the problem in this way, then there ought to be no necessary moral objection to proceeding with the project of enabling and promoting a flourishing nonhuman Nature. Indeed, the acknowledgment that the only Nature we know is a provisional, socially constructed “map” that is at best an approximation of the “real territory” provides the basis of a number of cautionary tales as to how the “emancipatory project” might be pursued. Such an argument might run as follows: if we want to enable nonhuman to flourish and if it is acknowledged that our understanding of nature is incomplete, culturally filtered and provisional then we ought to proceed with care, caution and humility rather than with recklessness and arrogance in our interactions with “nature.” In short, we must acknowledge that our knowledge of Nature and its limits is itself limited (and contested). Practically, these arguments provide support for a risk averse posture in environmental and technology impact assessment and in environmental policy making generally.

If the foregoing arguments are accepted, then we have reason to question the pluralist credentials of environmental pragmatism in the same way that William Connelly has challenged the pluralist credentials of liberal pluralism. According to Connolly,
conventional liberal moral pluralism serves to constrain the ongoing pluralization of moral values and is therefore too cramped and stingy. That is, despite its celebrated tolerance of diversity, liberal pluralism sustains consolidated identities, congealed moralities, barriers and notions of normality/abnormality which serve to suppress and oppress the other, reducing the other to what some “we” already is. Connolly has argued that we ought to be both generous and critical in encountering new political movements and their claims. As he explains, “The ethos of critical responsiveness pursued here does not reduce the other to what some ‘we’ already is. It opens up cultural space through which the other might consolidate itself into something that is unaffected by negative cultural markings.” Connelly’s arguments join force with the aspirations of ecocentric theorists who are concerned to recognize “unassimilated otherness” in nonhuman nature and find ways of acknowledging such otherness in deliberative dialogue without distorting or assimilating that “otherness” in the process. As advocates, the point is to widen the “terms of contestation” rather than to prevent contestation.

**Conclusion**

As is so often the case, the very strengths of a particular philosophical approach can, when examined under a different light, emerge as weaknesses. The greatest strength of the problem solving approach of environmental pragmatism is that it is practically minded and focused only on that which is strictly necessary to resolve a problem in order to keep conflict to a minimum. The greatest weakness of such an orientation is that has a tendency to be conservative, to take too much as given, to avoid any critical inquiry into “the big picture” and to work with rather than against the grain of existing structures and
discourses (such as those that are prevalent in real world liberal democracies) and
facilitate “interest accommodation” in the context of the prevailing alignment of social
forces. It accepts the path-dependency of institutional design, and prefers incrementalism
over any radical overhaul of social institutions precisely because the latter is disruptive
and likely to generate conflict of a kind that makes agreement much more difficult.

By the same token, while ecocentric advocates avoid the limitations of
pragmatism by keeping “the big picture” in view and pursuing relentless critical inquiry,
the down side of this is that they can indeed become uncooperative, deaf to criticism and
often responsible for thwarting well meaning efforts to reach practical policy
compromises over pressing environmental problems. Because of their deep seated moral
commitment to overcoming environmental injustices, they tend to be more concerned
with their own desired policy outcomes than reaching consensus. And since
environmental advocates typically find themselves working in inhospitable contexts that
fall short of their demanding ideals, they are often forced to act strategically and not
necessarily communicatively in the Habermasian sense of the term, sometimes utilizing
material and even coercive levers to bring about their desired end. On this score,
sympathetic critics are right to suggest that the environment movement ought to be more
reflexive, and more attentive to the importance of communicative action, both within its
own ranks as well as with the broader society.47

Indeed, both pragmatist mediators and ecocentric activists must operate in a
political context that falls short of their mutually informing ideals of justice and
democracy (albeit in different ways) - a brute fact that requires difficult strategic political
choices about where to direct intellectual focus and political energy. In this context, the
choice as to whether to “weigh in” as an advocate (and therefore become a relentless critic of those who disagree) or a mediator (in an effort to generate respect and trust and find common ground) is always a difficult one. However, in view of the respective strengths and limitations of critical advocacy and pragmatic mediation, I suspect we would find our “real world democracy” even poorer if it were made up of only mediators, or only advocates. This is because the tension between the advocate and the mediator ought to be understood as a healthy, constitutive tension in any democratic society because, among other things, it serves to steer democratic deliberation away from policy paralysis, on the one hand, and policy complacency, on the other. Democracy is about arguing as well as making decisions and advocates and mediators play different but invaluable roles in each of these phases. Now, in theory, the tensions between environmental pragmatism and ecocentrism might be narrowed or possibly even resolved by the development of a more critical pragmatism if some of my criticisms are taken on board. However, ultimately - in practice - I do not believe they can, or ought, to be eliminated in any “real world” democracy.
Bibliography


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Endnotes

1 This is the predominant view of the contributors to Andrew Light and Eric Katz’s edited collection *Environmental Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996). Much of the environmental pragmatists’ critique, particularly that of Bryan Norton, has been directed against the nonanthropocentric moral monism of J. Baird Callicott. See, for example, Norton, ‘Integration or Reduction: Two Approaches to Environmental Values’ in Light and Katz, *Environmental Pragmatism*, 105-38.


Parker, “Pragmatism and Environmental Thought”, 33.


Exceptions are noted below.


“For us, environmental pragmatism is an open-ended inquiry into the specific real-life problems of humanity’s relationship to the environment”, Light and Katz, “Introduction,” 2.

Norton, “Integration or Reduction,” 124.


19 Thompson, “Pragmatism and Policy”, 203.

20 Thompson, “Pragmatism and Policy”, 204.

21 Cass Sunstein has also defended agreements on outcomes and narrow or low-level principles on which people can converge from diverse foundations. He argues that such ‘incompletely theorised agreements’ are a distinctive solution to social pluralism. See Cass Sunstein, “Deliberation, Democracy and Disagreement” in *Justice and Democracy: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ron Bontekoe and Marietta Stepaniants (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 115. As Andrew Light has shown, Arne Naess has also defended the deep ecology platform along these lines. See Andrew Light, “Callicott and Naess on Pluralism” in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays on the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Andrew Light and David Rothenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

23 For an illuminating discussion of these differences, see John Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32-33.

24 Norton, “Integration or Reduction”, 129 and 132.

25 Norton, “Integration or Reduction”, 133.


27 Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy*, 46.


33 As Bob Pepperman Taylor has shown, John Dewey was no different to Locke, who saw nature as something that was to be used for ‘the support and comfort’ of humans.

34 Norton’s plea for a pluralistic integration of environmental values, bringing together Conservationists and Preservationists, is directed to environmentalists, not the broader community. See Bryan Norton, Toward Unity Among Environmentalists (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)

35 Callicott, ‘Environmental Philosophy is Environmental Activism,” 22.

36 Eckersley, “Deliberative Democracy, Ecological Representation and Risk.”

37 As Benhabib explains, ‘Contemporary Western liberal democracies are being challenged by groups who insist upon their unassimilatable difference and who want to use their experience of alterity to demystify the rationalist and identitary illusions of these liberals democracies’. See Benhabib, ed., Democracy and Difference, 5.


40 Weston, “Beyond Intrinsic Value,” 289.


45 Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, xvii.


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