13 | Environmental pragmatism, ecocentrism and deliberative democracy

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How might our framing devices – both informal (through aesthetic judgements) and formal (for example, through systems thinking) – help to provide space in relaying understanding and support for more effective policy design? The question is taken up in the second half of the original reading by Andrew Light (Reading 9) in pursuing the fourth debate in environmental ethics – between monists and pluralists. Robyn Eckersley takes as her point of departure the same debate in an attempt to identify how particular approaches to valuing nature – considering nature ‘matters’ – might influence policy and action. She regards monists as ecocentric ‘advocates’ and pluralists as ‘mediators’ associated with environmental pragmatism. While Light is regarded as a ‘mediator’, Eckersley adopts a more circumscribed view of environmental pragmatism – providing ‘a sympathetic critique’. As a political theorist, Eckersley identifies three weaknesses of the pragmatist tradition and delineates circumstances where such framing can be of value and where other more challenging monist-based approaches might be more appropriate. The reading makes reference to ideas of social learning and deliberative democracy picked up subsequently in Parts Three and Four of this anthology, but more immediately invites attention to the kind of cognitive space required for citizen involvement referred to in Reading 14.

Introduction

[...] [E]cocentric 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.1 According to this construction, ecocentric theorists and activists are the fearless environmental justice advocates, standing up for the interests of the

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environmental victims of economic development, including both humans and nonhuman species. [...] 

In this chapter, I seek to defend the democratic credentials of eco-centricism and offer a sympathetic critique of environmental pragmatism. I also suggest that the different philosophical approaches and strategic practices preferred by environmental pragmatism and eco-centricism 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 eco-centric 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 eccentrics would necessarily conform 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 eocentrics 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 eocentrics 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 theory and practice. [...] 

**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 assertibility'.

Taken from: Open University Course TD866: Environmental responsibility: ethics, policy and action
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. [...]  

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. 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. [...]  

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’. 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. 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. [...]  

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. [...]

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.7

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 toward 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. [...] 

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 toward a more critical pragmatism. Indeed, Dewey emphasized the need for institutional criticism. [...] 

[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 to 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.\(^8\) 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 is 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. [...] 

[...]the resort to the language of ‘rights’, ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘inherent dignity’ of nature may be understood, among other things, as a strategic attempt [by environmental pragmatists] 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 an identity/difference politics which has challenged the liberal democratic ‘color-blind constitution’ along with homogenizing models of political identity and citizenship.\(^9\) Such movements and groups have challenged the idea of ‘extending’ political recognition on the basis of criteria that do 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.\(^10\) 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’.\(^11\) [...]
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 [...], 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. [...]

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? [...]

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 the nonhuman to flourish and if it is acknowledged that our understanding of nature is incom-
plete, 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. [...]

Conclusion

[...] [B]oth 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.

Notes

1 Callicott (1990; 1995).
2 Magee (1987, p. 29).
5 ‘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 (1996, ‘Introduction’).
6 Norton (1996, p. 108). Similarly, Daniel Farber has argued that ‘A convincing analysis should be like a web, drawing on the coherence of...’
many sources, rather than a tower, 
built on a single unified foundation’ 
(Farber 1999, p. 10).

7 Cass Sunstein (1997) 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 agree-
ments’ are a distinctive solution to 
social pluralism (p. 115). As Andrew 
Light (2000) has shown, Arne Naess 
has also defended the deep ecology 
platform along these lines.

8 See, for example, Hannah 
Arendt (1958), Theodor Adorno and 
Max Horkheimer (1979) and Jürgen 
Habermas (1971).

9 As Benhabib (1996, p. 5) 
explains, ‘Contemporary Western 
liberal democracies are being chal-
lenged by groups who insist upon 
their unassimilatable difference and 
who want to use their experience of 
alterity to demystify the rationalist 
and idenitary illusions of these 
liberal democracies.’

10 See, for example, Rodman 


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