

# *Pluralism Without Pragmatism*

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## **What Is Environmental Pragmatism?**

Though environmental pragmatists disagree on a number of issues, they seem to be united in their endorsement of one form or another of pluralism. In fact, they often seem to equate pragmatism with pluralism and to contrast it with moral monism as exhibited in such approaches as environmental economics and intrinsic value theory. While they do not all agree about what environmental pragmatism is, they seem to treat pluralism as a necessary and/or sufficient condition for pragmatism. J. Baird Callicott, the most vocal opponent of environmental pragmatism, explicitly endorses moral monism in his arguments against pragmatism, thus reinforcing the common perception that pragmatism is to be equated with pluralism and contrasted with monism. In this paper, I attempt to show how one can endorse a form of value pluralism in environmental ethics without endorsing environmental pragmatism in any of its various forms. In endorsing a pluralistic framework which does not attempt to reduce all moral values to any one type of value, one need not commit oneself to the pragmatic conception of truth or the pragmatic epistemology endorsed by the American pragmatists. Nor need one endorse the methodological pragmatism of Andrew Light, which suggests that we ought to focus our efforts on developing only those arguments which are most likely to persuade people to adopt environmentally friendly public policies while ignoring nonanthropocentric arguments which are not likely to resonate with the mainstream. Thus, I argue that pluralism can be separated from both philosophical pragmatism which attempts to apply the central ideas of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy and methodological pragmatism which asks

us to focus on only those arguments which are most likely to be effective in persuading people to adopt policies which protect the environment by only to their existing (anthropocentric) value commitments.

A growing number of environmental philosophers now refer to themselves as environmental pragmatists, including Anthony Weston (1985, 1988, 1992), Bryan Norton (1991, 1997, 2005), Ben Minteer (1999, 2001, 2004, 2006), Andrew Light (1996, 2002, 2004), Mark Sagoff (xxxx), Aristotelis Santas (2003), Peter Wenz (1999), Kelly Parker (1996), and Sandra Rosenthal and Rogene Buchholz (1996). These self-proclaimed environmental pragmatists do not speak with an entirely unified voice. While some advocate anthropocentrism (Norton, 1991, 2005; Light, 2002), some include nonanthropocentric values (Wenz, 1999, 2003). While some explicitly advocate the application of the perspectives and methods of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy (Weston, Norton, Wenz, Sagoff, Parker, Rosenthal and Buchholz), others do not (Light). While some think that environmental philosophy must “move beyond” discussion of intrinsic value (Weston, Norton, Light), others defend pragmatic conceptions of intrinsic value (Minteer, Santas). It is thus not always easy to tell exactly what it is that makes one an environmental pragmatist.

Andrew Light (1996, 2004) makes a distinction between *philosophical pragmatism* and *methodological pragmatism*.<sup>1</sup> Philosophical pragmatism is the effort to apply the fundamental ideas of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy. Methodological pragmatism, on the other hand, is the effort to articulate arguments that will be morally motivating to both policymakers and the general public in order to successfully promote policies which protect the environment. Methodological pragmatism then is the view that we ought to be focusing our

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<sup>1</sup> In 1996, Light makes the distinction between “philosophical pragmatism” and “metaphilosophical pragmatism.” He later changes the terminology from metaphilosophical pragmatism to “methodological pragmatism.”

attention on giving arguments which have practical application to environmental policy, and particularly on those arguments which are most likely to be persuasive. It is the job of the philosopher, on this view, to use his or her particular skills to help clarify concepts and articulate these arguments as clearly and persuasively as possible.

With this distinction in mind, Light (2002) identifies two central tasks for environmental ethics. One task, arising from philosophical pragmatism, is “a traditional philosophical task involving an investigation into the value of nature.” (p. 557) The second task, arising from methodological pragmatism, is “the articulation of arguments that will be morally motivating concerning environmental protection.” (p. 557) By my account of the literature, most environmental pragmatists begin with philosophical pragmatism and take this commitment to philosophical pragmatism to entail methodological pragmatism. The most notable exception is Andrew Light, for whom methodological pragmatism is of primary importance. Light (1996) says, “I count myself as a [methodological] environmental pragmatist, and sometimes a closet philosophical environmental pragmatist, depending on the issue. But importantly, it is my commitment to [methodological] pragmatism that gives me the ability to pick and choose the time and place to apply my philosophical pragmatism.” He goes on to say, “For some questions, I find straightforward pragmatism unduly limiting, and unfortunately too subjective to aid in the formation of action guiding moral principles.” (p. 331) Light (2002, 2004) later recognizes, correctly I believe, that these two central tasks for environmental pragmatism are at odds with one another. If (methodological) environmental pragmatism is to succeed in making environmental philosophy relevant to public discussions about environmental policy, he says (Light, 2002, p. 560) “it cannot afford to serve as a launching pad for yet another round of metaethical debates in environmental ethics. To insist that all environmental philosophers give

up their nonanthropocentric commitments in favor of a Deweyian naturalism, for example, would be an invitation to plunge further into debates that can only be resolved (if ever) through a long and protracted discussion of the metaphysical relationship between humans, nature, and the act of valuing.” Light’s apparent rejection of the project of applying the central concepts of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy leads Norton (2005) to suggest that some who call themselves environmental pragmatists simply because they believe that environmental philosophy should be geared toward real-world policy discussions are not really environmental pragmatists at all; and Light acknowledges that as the field progresses, we may need to come up with different names to identify the different views.

While there is much that the self-proclaimed environmental pragmatists disagree about, one thing that seems to unite them is their endorsement of moral pluralism or value pluralism. After identifying four different forms of environmental pragmatism, Light and Katz (1996) say “But given the appreciation that all environmental pragmatists have for either theoretical or meta-theoretical pluralism, such distinctions are not cause for alarm when considering the coherence of this type of environmental philosophy.” (p. 6) Several of these environmental pragmatists (Weston, Norton, Light, Wenz, Minter and Manning) seem to equate pragmatism with value pluralism. Norton (2005), for example, says that environmental value theory has been dominated by two monistic theories of value, which he identifies as the utilitarian theory of value as exemplified in environmental economics and intrinsic value theory as exemplified by nonanthropocentric holistic philosophers. After critiquing these two “monistic” theories of value and explaining why he thinks that they are inadequate for addressing environmental policy issues in terms that the general public can understand, and after explaining why he thinks that the pragmatic conception of truth defended by Peirce and Putnam leads to a form of

(metatheoretical?) value pluralism, Norton seems to assume that all pragmatists must be pluralists and all pluralists must be pragmatists. If all environmental pragmatists do in fact endorse one or another form of pluralism, and if this is what separates them from the non-pragmatists, it would seem to follow that being a pluralist is both necessary and sufficient for being a pragmatist.

While it may be true that all environmental pragmatists are pluralists in one form or another, I shall argue that not all pluralists are pragmatists, and that we should therefore be careful not to conflate the two. In order to understand why value pluralists in the field of environmental ethics need not be environmental pragmatists, we must first get clear on what we mean by 'pluralism' and 'pragmatism'. Using Light's distinction between philosophical pragmatism and methodological pragmatism, we can say the following about environmental pragmatism:

1. Endorsing philosophical pragmatism, that is, advocating the application of the perspectives and methods of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy is sufficient but not necessary for being an environmental pragmatist.
2. Endorsing methodological pragmatism, or the view that we ought to focus our philosophical efforts (at least in public) on articulating only those arguments which are most likely to persuade policy-makers and the general public to adopt environmentally friendly policies, is sufficient but not necessary for being an environmental pragmatist.
3. Endorsing either philosophical pragmatism or methodological pragmatism (or both) is necessary for being an environmental pragmatist.

As I shall explain later, I do not consider myself to be an environmental pragmatist because I do not endorse either philosophical pragmatism or methodological pragmatism. That being said, I

do share several things in common with the environmental pragmatists. First, I endorse a form of pluralism. Second, I think that environmental philosophy should generally be directed toward addressing the actual issues that are of concern to policymakers and activists. And third, I think that people with divergent values (anthropocentric, biocentric, zoocentric, ecocentric holism, etc.) may often find convergence at the practical level. However, I believe that all of this can consistently be done without endorsing either philosophical pragmatism or methodological pragmatism.

## **Pluralism**

Let us briefly turn our attention now to the issue of pluralism. Light (1996, p.328) correctly notes that pluralism is not one view, but a host of views. Light identifies three “levels” of pluralism with regard to environmental values, which I shall refer to as first order, second order, and third order pluralism. At the most basic level, first order pluralism, an environmental ethics is pluralist if it recognizes that there are many values in nature which interact with each other in various ways. At this level, one simply notes that there are different kinds of descriptions of value in nature (e.g. diversity, stability, beauty, etc.). This claim seems so non-controversial that, as Light notes, it seems unlikely that anyone would disagree with it. Even a card carrying monist, such as Callicott or Singer, recognizes that there are many different kinds of things in nature that we value. I thus take it that first order pluralism is not relevant to the debate about pluralism vs. monism and is not what environmental pragmatists are referring to when they endorse pluralism. A moral monist can endorse first order pluralism because he/she believes that these different ways of describing value in nature can all be reduced to one single way of valuing nature (e.g. they all contribute to the welfare of sentient beings, or they can all be

expressed as economic value). Second order pluralism, what Light calls pluralism of valuation, is the view that there are many different ways of valuing nature which cannot all be explained in terms of one single way of valuing. It is this second order pluralism which I believe is at the heart of the pluralism vs. monism debate. In addition to these two forms of pluralism, Light (1996, p.328) suggests that “We may also notice another level of pluralism, which though related, is somewhat distinct: a metatheoretical pluralism concerning approaches to environmental philosophy in general.” Given the difficulty of accounting for all of the different forms of value within one theoretical framework, Light suggests that we ought to have a principle of tolerance in theory construction which encourages the formation of many different overlapping theories of how to value.

I think that we can also conceive of second order pluralism as a value pluralism which occurs primarily at the intrapersonal level when one person allows several different types of valuing within her/his value framework which she/he does not try to reduce to one single way of valuing. We can think of third order pluralism as something which occurs at both the intrapersonal level when a person has several theories of value within his/her framework and at the interpersonal level when we attempt to develop an attitude of tolerance for theories of value which differ from our own. It is important to notice this distinction between intrapersonal value pluralism and the attitude of tolerance for interpersonal value pluralism. In political science literature, the term ‘pluralism’ seems to refer almost always to the diversity of values, beliefs, etc. within a society. This diversity of values and beliefs, or pluralism, may be conceived of as an empirical claim, which it is difficult to imagine anyone disagreeing with. It may be conceived of as a normative claim about tolerance of diversity, which is likely to be endorsed by all liberal political theorists, pragmatist and non-pragmatist alike. One can be tolerant of values and

theories of value which differ from one's own without thereby endorsing those theories or adopting those values. An attitude of tolerance of diversity of values or theories of value is not particularly controversial unless it includes the claim that all of these values are equally justified or equally significant. It is at this point that one worries that tolerance or pluralism amounts to a form of relativism.

What this discussion shows is that there are many forms of pluralism, some of which are likely to be endorsed by almost everyone, and others of which are highly controversial. The sort of pluralism which seems to be particularly relevant to the pluralism vs. monism debate (which is the focus of the environmental pragmatists' discussion of pluralism) is the second-order pluralism which says that there are many forms of value which cannot all be reduced to one way of valuing or accounted for with a single theory of value. If one is a pluralist in this sense, it may still be an open question whether it is *in principle* impossible to account for the many forms of value within the framework of a single theory of value, or merely impossible at this time.

Bryan Norton (2005) treats "intrinsic value theory" as a paradigm case of moral monism and contrasts it with both pluralism and pragmatism. Norton defines monism as the "reduction of all types of environmental value to a single ontological type." (2005, p. 361) Norton identifies intrinsic value theory with ecological holism and treats it as the dominant view in environmental ethics over the past thirty years. On this view, all value is either intrinsic value or instrumental value, and all instrumental value is simply a means to intrinsic value. Thus, all value can ultimately be reduced to intrinsic value, and Norton concludes that intrinsic value theory has room for only one type of value, one way of valuing, and one all-encompassing theory of value.

However, ecological holists, such as Callicott and Rolston, attribute intrinsic value to both individual human beings and to holistic, non-sentient entities, such as species and ecosystems.

Gary Varner (1991) has effectively argued that if we are to attribute intrinsic value to non-sentient, collective entities, it must be for a very different reason than is usually given for attributing intrinsic value to individual human beings (and perhaps other living organisms). One can justify the attribution of intrinsic value to individual human beings and other sentient beings by appealing to the fact that they each have a welfare of their own—things can go well or poorly for them. The intrinsic value of individual human beings is sometimes justified by appeal to other traits, such as rationality, autonomy, moral agency, etc. However, no such justification can be given for the intrinsic value of non-sentient, collective entities. Intrinsic value theory need not be a monistic theory which reduces all value to one type of value—intrinsic value. Rather, it can be a pluralistic approach that recognizes many different intrinsic (and instrumental) values without giving one theoretical account for the variety of intrinsic values. Within my value framework, I recognize anthropocentric, zoocentric, and ecocentric intrinsic values, as well as instrumental values, without offering one value theory or one type of valuing to account for them all. This is why I consider myself to be a pluralist. Of course, this sort of pluralism raises a host of questions concerning decision making procedures and how to go about balancing these competing values; however, I will not attempt to answer these questions here. My point is not to defend value pluralism, only to explain what I mean when I say that I am a pluralist.

### **Without Pragmatism**

Now I turn to the question of why I am not an environmental pragmatist. Again, my primary purpose is not to give an argument against pragmatism, but simply to explain what I mean when I say that I am not an environmental pragmatist in order to show how one can be a pluralist without being a pragmatist. I said earlier that in order to be an environmental

pragmatist, it is necessary that one endorse either philosophical pragmatism or methodological pragmatism (or both). I reject philosophical pragmatism in part because I have never enjoyed reading the American pragmatists, due in part to their style(s) of writing. This, of course, is not a philosophical argument against pragmatism, but it explains in part why I am not particularly interested in applying the ideas and methods of American pragmatism to environmental philosophy.

More importantly, I reject philosophical pragmatism because I have never been convinced by the pragmatic conception of truth, or perhaps I should say the pragmatic conceptions of truth, because once again the pragmatists do not speak with a unified voice. While James says that truth is whatever it is useful to believe, and Rorty says that we should simply stop talking about what is 'true' as it is not a particularly useful or meaningful concept, Peirce says that the "truth-seeking community" will inevitably arrive at a unified understanding given unlimited time and experience. According to Peirce then, truth is the hypothetical endpoint at which the community of inquirers would arrive. (Norton, 2005, pp. 107-120, 570-572) This is what Norton calls 'limited realism', and it is this conception of truth which Norton endorses as "the pragmatic conception of truth." In contrast to the 'limited realism' of Peirce or the relativism of James and the nihilism of Rorty, my view is what might be called naïve realism. Of course, naïve realism has been under attack for the last one-hundred years or so, and has been subjected to a number of very sophisticated objections, and so it cannot really afford to remain so naïve. It is my hope that a sophisticated defense can be mounted for naïve realism—one that recognizes many of the insights of the cultural constructivists while preserving the core of naïve realism. At any rate, I agree with Peirce, Putnam, and Norton that the truth tends to emerge from the struggles of a community of inquirers who are skeptical, methodical, and diligent. However,

I think that their pragmatic conception of truth gets things backwards. I think that the truth tends to emerge from such struggles because it is true, while they believe that it is true because it tends to emerge.

Perhaps I should mention that there is at least one pragmatist who agrees with me. Nicholas Rescher (2001) calls himself a pragmatist while defending a realist conception of truth. In fact, he defends a good old fashioned correspondence theory of truth. He says, “claims are not true because they can (hypothetically) be verified. The actuality of it is the very reverse: they can (hypothetically) be verified because they are true.” (p. 9) Rescher criticizes the relativism/postmodern skepticism of James and Rorty because they do not recognize the possibility of a gap between that which we accept as true based on our evidence and “the real and actual condition of things.” (p. 8) He criticizes James and Rorty for abandoning truth. And he criticizes Peirce and Putnam (and by implication, Norton) for giving a deflationary account of truth which alters its meaning in evidentialist directions. In order to make truth epistemically accessible, Peirce and Putnam abandoned the correspondence theory of truth in favor in favor of an account which defines truth as the eventual outcome of careful and deliberate scientific investigation. In response to objections, however, they abandoned the claim that truth was the outcome of actual scientific investigations in favor of the view that truth is the product of *idealized* scientific inquiry. By opting for an idealized account, Rescher says, they have lost the epistemic accessibility which was their original aim. Rather than abandoning truth altogether or changing its definition, Rescher argues, pragmatists ought to be focusing on the processes which lead to rationally justified estimates of the truth. Pragmatists, such as himself, he says, “insist that there is a practically effective route to rational truth estimation, namely the criteriological route afforded by the standard experience-based methodology of inquiry. Thus in retaining the

classic construction of truth... sensible pragmatists can – and presumably would – insist on viewing truth determination in a “realistic” light.” (p. 10) I’m quite happy with the “sensible pragmatism” which Rescher defends; however, it stands in stark contrast to the claims of most other pragmatists, and it is difficult for me to see in what sense it continues to be pragmatism at all. It appears to me that pragmatism can be all things to all people.

Furthermore, and this is the closest I shall come to really giving an argument against philosophical pragmatism, the debate between limited realism and naïve realism is a philosophical/metaphysical debate about the nature of truth. As nearly as I can tell, there are no practical consequences that are in any way relevant to environmental policy which hinge on the outcome of this metaphysical debate. Norton and I agree that the truth tends to emerge from a scientifically minded and empirically oriented community of inquirers. Our conceptions of truth are more or less co-extensional and we have no real disputes regarding the methodology of truth-seeking. Furthermore, there is no reason that a naïve realist should not accept the Quine-Duhem Thesis, which Norton (2005) cites in his appendix (p. 559), asserting that whenever one sets out to test a hypothesis, one submits for test not only the hypothesis but also all of the auxiliary assumptions and definitions which are necessary to assert and test the hypothesis. The naïve realist can also accept Norton’s assertion (p. 110) that “we must give up... the idea that any of our beliefs, taken individually, can be compared to a chunk of reality,” assuming that we take this claim to mean that we must give up the idea that any of our beliefs, taken individually, can be compared *experimentally* to a chunk of reality. This is because a negative (falsifying) result in the experiment could be the result of one or more of the auxiliary assumptions being false. What separates naïve realism from Norton’s limited realism is the belief that reality is what it is independently of our experience. From the naïve realist perspective, an individual belief could

theoretically be compared to a chunk of reality by an ideal observer who has no false auxiliary assumptions. As I said, however, this metaphysical dispute about the nature of reality and truth has no apparent practical consequences that are relevant for environmental policy. Thus, I contend that Norton's commitments to the pragmatic conception of truth and pragmatic epistemology are not doing the work that he claims they are doing. These philosophical commitments are superfluous to the issues of environmental policy which Norton takes to be of primary importance.

What then should we say about methodological pragmatism? According to Light (1996, 2002), philosophers began working on environmental ethics in order to help policymakers and activists to shape responsible environmental policies. Given the training and interests of academic philosophers, however, we have tended to engage in protracted theoretical debates about the foundations of environmental ethics. Light contends that these debates have not been particularly useful to activists or policymakers. Methodological environmental pragmatism is the view that when there is convergence among environmentalists at the policy level, it should be the job of environmental philosophers to help articulate arguments which are most likely to convince the public and policymakers to adopt the policies in question.<sup>2</sup> Light then makes the empirical claim that most humans think about nature in human-centered terms. Thus, he says, people are more likely to be convinced by anthropocentric arguments than by non-anthropocentric arguments. Methodological environmental pragmatism thus leads to what Light calls strategic anthropocentrism.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Rescher (2001) uses the term 'methodological pragmatism' rather differently than Andrew Light uses it. Rescher uses the term to describe an approach which focuses on "the methodology of truth estimation, bringing into the forefront the processes of evidential and substantiation by which we in practice go about determining what to accept as truth." (p. 13) Methodological pragmatism for Rescher is a pragmatism regarding our epistemic methods for estimating truth. He contrasts this with what he calls *thesis* pragmatism, or meaning-of-truth-revisionism, which denies the correspondence theory of truth in favor of something that seems more epistemically accessible.

Strategic anthropocentrism is problematic for several reasons. First, strategic anthropocentrism can be morally repugnant because it encourages disingenuous arguments when nonanthropocentrists give anthropocentric arguments which they themselves do not believe or consciously avoid the arguments which really motivate them. When someone is a vegetarian out of concern for animals and restricts her public arguments for vegetarianism to human health issues, she is being disingenuous. In addition to the fact that this sort of dishonesty is morally objectionable in itself, it is unlikely to produce the desired results. People tend to know when one is being disingenuous, and they are put off by this. For example, number of people reported that they did not vote for John Kerry in the 2004 United States Presidential election because they did not think that he believed the things he was saying; even when they disagreed with George W. Bush's policies, they liked the fact that he seemed to be sincere. Furthermore, methodological pragmatism caters to current prejudices. In addition, most people recognize that we have some moral duties to animals and do not appear to be thoroughgoing anthropocentrists. Even the average meat-eater believes that wanton cruelty to animals is wrong. The empirical premise for strategic anthropocentrism—that most people are motivated only by anthropocentric reasons—thus appears to be wrong in regard to animals, and it is difficult to motivate animal-friendly policies on purely anthropocentric grounds. Finally, there is a core minority who are strongly motivated by nonanthropocentric arguments, and motivating such activists is one way to influence policy—environmental pragmatists are not being particularly pragmatic by excluding this minority.

## **Conclusions**

In order to understand whether all pluralists must be pragmatists, we must consider the question of whether the endorsement of value pluralism, as I have described it here, gives one any compelling reason to accept either philosophical pragmatism or methodological pragmatism, and I can see no reason to think that it does. The view that there are a variety of forms of intrinsic value which do not reduce to one form of value and cannot at this time be accounted for by a single theory of value does not entail a pragmatic conception of truth or a pragmatic epistemology. Nor does it entail that we ought to avoid giving arguments which appeal to environmental values that are unlikely to be readily endorsed by the majority of the general public. If anything, it suggests that we ought to challenge the existing prejudices and encourage the recognition of values which may be ignored or underappreciated by the general public. This has been one of the most important roles of political, social, and moral philosophers from Locke and Mill to Singer and Regan.

The pluralism that I am endorsing is neither a form of relativism nor a call for tolerance. I am a pluralist because I recognize several forms of value in

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