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Environmental Pragmatism and Environmental Philosophy: A Bad Marriage!

Lars Samuelsson*

Environmental pragmatists have presented environmental pragmatism as a new philosophical position, arguing that theoretical debates in environmental philosophy are hindering the ability of the environmental movement to forge agreement on basic policy imperatives. Hence, they aim to lead environmental philosophers away from such theoretical debates, and toward more practical—and pragmatically motivated—ones. However, a position with such an aim is not a proper philosophical position at all, given that philosophy (among other things) is an effort to get clear on the problems that puzzle us.

During the last two decades or so, the view called “environmental pragmatism” has established itself as a quite popular and influential position in environmental philosophy.¹ One explanation of its popularity is arguably that it deliberately avoids some theoretical questions the discussions of which have saturated environmental philosophy—most notably the question of whether or not, and in what sense, nature has intrinsic value. It is not surprising if some environmental philosophers have grown weary of this question.

To provide a characterization of “environmental pragmatism” is not easy, since it is such a diverse position, or, more adequately, set of positions. Rather than denoting one uniform view in environmental philosophy, environmental pragmatism seems to be best regarded as an umbrella term covering many different approaches to the field, approaches which are, however, taken to have something important in common. In the introduction to the anthology *Environmental Pragmatism*, edited by Andrew Light and Eric Katz, we can read that

This collection is an attempt to bring together in one place the broad range of positions encompassed by calls for an environmental pragmatism. For us, environmental pragmatism is the open-ended inquiry into the specific real-life problems of humanity’s relationship with the environment. The new position ranges from arguments for an environmental philosophy informed by the legacy of classical American pragmatist

* Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden. Samuelsson’s current research interests are in environmental ethics and value theory. He thanks two anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ According to Clare Palmer, “The expression ‘environmental pragmatism’ was first advocated by Andrew Light in 1992 at a conference in Budapest, Hungary (although work advocating pragmatic approaches to environmental ethics . . . had already been published).” Clare Palmer, “An Overview of Environmental Ethics,” in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston, III (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 32.

philosophy, to the formulation of a new basis for the reassessment of our practice through a more general pragmatist methodology.²

What, then, do the different positions adequately described as environmental pragmatism have in common? Reading on in Light and Katz's introduction, the answer to this question becomes pretty clear: what these positions have in common is the conviction that environmental philosophers ought to put practice before theory; that they ought to move away from theoretical debates—such as those concerning intrinsic value in nature—and toward more practical ones—relating directly to environmental policy and decision making.³ Implicit in this view are the opinions that there are certain environmental goals toward which we ought to strive, and that it is the job of environmental philosophers to contribute to this task. Light and Katz write: “The *pragmatist* claims of all the papers here, as we hope is clear, is towards finding workable solutions to environmental problems now. Pragmatists cannot tolerate theoretical delays to the contribution that philosophy may make to environmental questions.”⁴ The background to this statement is the view that “theoretical debates are problematic for the development of environmental policy.”⁵ According to environmental pragmatists, traditional or mainstream environmental ethics—which to a large extent has focused on theoretical questions—has failed

² Andrew Light and Eric Katz, “Introduction: Environmental Pragmatism and Environmental Ethics as Contested Terrain,” in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. Andrew Light and Eric Katz (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 2. A few pages down we can read that environmental pragmatism can take at least four forms: “(1) Examinations into the connection between classical American pragmatism and environmental issues; (2) The articulation of practical strategies for bridging gaps between environmental theorists, policy analysts, activists, and the public; (3) Theoretical investigations into the overlapping normative bases of specific environmental organizations and movements. . . . (4) General arguments for theoretical and meta-theoretical moral pluralism in environmental normative theory” (*ibid.*, p. 5). While Light and Katz consider these topics related, it is clear that they do not take any one of them to be a necessary ingredient of an environmental pragmatism view. What relates these “forms” of environmental pragmatism, and what *makes* them forms of environmental pragmatism (if we are to make sense of Light and Katz's introduction), is their commitment to *practice before theory*, which I focus on below.

³ Thus, environmental pragmatists do not count among “the specific real-life problems of humanity's relationship with the environment” the question of whether various parts of nature are worthy of protection for their own sake. Apart from the fact that so many environmental philosophers disagree, I find it remarkable how little effort there is in the environmental pragmatism literature to support this view. Of course, there is Bryan Norton's famous convergence hypothesis (Bryan G. Norton, *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991]), which is taken, by some, to have this implication (but see Katie McShane, “Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care?” *Environmental Values* 16 [2007]: 169–85, for a different opinion). Anyhow, this hypothesis has been the target of much (I believe often well-founded) critique over the years, one of the most eager critics perhaps being J. Baird Callicott, claiming, as he does, that it is “dead wrong” (J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999], p. 31). See Lars Samuelsson, *The Moral Status of Nature: Reasons to Care for the Natural World* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009), pp. 32–34 and 205, for more references and a discussion.

⁴ Light and Katz, “Introduction,” *Environmental Pragmatism*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

to influence environmental decision making and policy formation, and thereby failed to contribute to the task of solving environmental problems. Thus, environmental pragmatism aims to lead us away from such questions and toward more practical—and pragmatically motivated—ones. It is this feature of environmental pragmatism—which I take to be the “lowest common denominator” of the various views thus described—that I concentrate on in this paper.⁶

Already in the foreword of *Environmental Pragmatism*, environmental pragmatism is described as “a coherent philosophical position” and

. . . a new strategy in environmental thought: it argues that theoretical debates are hindering the ability of the environmental movement to forge agreement on basic policy imperatives. This new direction in environmental philosophy moves beyond theory, advocating a serious inquiry into the practical merits of moral pluralism.⁷

Let me briefly pause here to consider the mention of “moral pluralism.” What is moral pluralism, and what role does it play within environmental pragmatism? The phrase “moral pluralism” has different meanings, and here it is used to mean at least two things. Light and Katz write:

On our interpretation environmental pragmatism recognizes two distinct types of pluralism: theoretical and metatheoretical. Theoretical pluralism is the acknowledgement of distinct, theoretically incommensurable bases for direct moral consideration Metatheoretical pluralism involves an openness to the plausibility of divergent ethical theories working together in a single moral enterprise.⁸

Depending on how “incommensurable” should be understood, both these kinds of pluralism can be found in traditional, non-pragmatist, environmental ethical views. Many environmental ethicists hold that there is more than one basis for direct moral consideration,⁹ and I think no one doubts that people who hold divergent ethical theories can work together toward common goals—indeed, most environmental

⁶ Of course, even if it is true that environmental ethics has failed to influence environmental decision making and policy formation to the extent that it could have (or should have), it does not follow that the best remedy for this failure is environmental pragmatism. There may be some other explanation of the alleged low impact of environmental ethics than the reluctance of environmental ethicists to attend directly to practical questions. Perhaps the main problem is not to be found within environmental ethics at all, but somewhere else. We do not know whether environmental pragmatism would have fared any better than traditional environmental ethics when it comes to influencing decision making and policy formation. See also n. 26 below.

⁷ Light and Katz, *Environmental Pragmatism*, p. i.

⁸ Light and Katz, “Introduction,” *Environmental Pragmatism*, p. 4.

⁹ E.g., Holmes Rolston, III, “Value in Nature and the Nature of Value,” in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, ed. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Robert Elliot, “Intrinsic Value, Environmental Obligation and Naturalness,” *The Monist* 75 (1992): 138–60; and Robert Elliot, “Instrumental Value in Nature as a Basis for the Intrinsic Value of Nature as a Whole,” *Environmental Ethics* 27 (2005): 43–56.

ethicists can be said to work together toward several shared “environmentalist goals” despite their advocating quite different theories.

Based on the writings of various pragmatists, I conclude that the pluralism of environmental pragmatism typically comprises the view that we should acknowledge many different values, regardless of their theoretical underpinnings (or regardless of whether the different theoretical underpinnings of these various values are commensurable).¹⁰ That is to say, irrespective of theoretical considerations, we should, on practical grounds, take a plurality of values into account in our philosophical efforts to provide input relevant to policy formation. Hence, I take the reference to moral pluralism to be, first and foremost, another way of emphasizing what I understand to be the main point of environmental pragmatism: that environmental philosophers should shift focus from theory to practice.¹¹ Indeed, if environmental pragmatism is supposed to be a *new* direction in philosophy, then its main feature has to be its dissociation from theoretical debates, which is what I focus on in this paper.

On page ii of *Environmental Pragmatism*—a page devoted to information about the Environmental Philosophies Series (in which *Environmental Pragmatism* is a volume)—we can read that “Philosophy, in its broadest sense, is an effort to get clear on the problems which puzzle us.” In the present paper, I argue that environmental pragmatism, *as characterized above*, is not a proper philosophical position at all, on this very understanding of *philosophy*.¹² The reason is simply that environmental pragmatism, rather than seeking clarity on puzzling problems, advises us to avoid such problems (or at least to sidestep them for pragmatic reasons). I want to emphasize that my argument is not just a play with words. As stated in the quoted passage about philosophy, *philosophy* is here understood in its broadest sense. Seeking clearness about puzzling problems should be one of the minimal (necessary) requirements in a philosophical position.¹³ A position which does not

¹⁰ See, e.g., Andrew Light, “The Case for a Practical Pluralism,” in Light and Rolston, *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*; Bryan G. Norton, *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Bryan G. Norton, “Convergence, Noninstrumental Value and the Semantics of ‘Love’: Comment on McShane,” *Environmental Values* 17 (2008): 5–14; and Anthony Weston, “Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 321–39.

¹¹ See also Andrew Light, “Contemporary Environmental Ethics: From Metaethics to Public Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 33 (2002): 434; Light, “The Case for a Practical Pluralism,” pp. 229–30.

¹² There may be environmental philosophers who call themselves pragmatists who do not agree with this characterization. I am silent about them. As stated above, environmental pragmatism is not a uniform position. See, for instance, Andrew Light, “Environmental Pragmatism as Philosophy or Metaphilosophy? On the Weston–Katz Debate,” in Light and Katz, *Environmental Pragmatism*. Also, particular views of particular environmental pragmatists may surely be philosophical views. What is unphilosophical is the recommendation of environmental pragmatism (understood as a new position, or “movement”) to give up on theoretical issues such as the ones about intrinsic value in nature (or at least to sidestep such issues for pragmatic reasons).

¹³ “Philosophical position” is here understood in relation to the Western context of philosophy in which the philosophers relevant to this paper work. A philosophical position may be something else in some other context.

do so, or which recommends that we avoid seeking clarity with regard to puzzling problems, is just not a *philosophical* position.¹⁴

Let us for the moment suppose, for the sake of argument, that pragmatists are right that theoretical debates, such as those about intrinsic value in nature, are hindering the ability of the environmental movement to forge agreement on basic policy imperatives.¹⁵ Does it follow that philosophers should not participate in such debates? It certainly does not. As *philosophers* we should not let our choices of objects of investigation be guided by pragmatic considerations of this sort (e.g., shared environmental or political goals). As philosophers we should ask and try to find answers to the philosophical questions that have caught our interest—that puzzle us—irrespective of the consequences of so doing (at least most of the time—see below). In the discussion below, I use the question of whether or not (and in what sense) nature has intrinsic value as an example.

To make the point clearer, consider the following analogy: some people believe that questioning the possibility of free will provides a threat to morality. Even if this claim were true, philosophers should of course ignore this pragmatic reason—at least unless some extraordinary circumstances counted strongly against doing so—and continue to question and discuss the possibility of free will. The problem of free will is simply an intriguing and fascinating object of investigation, which warrants the attention of philosophers. Investigating such (puzzling) problems is what philosophy is all about. But suppose that some extraordinary circumstances made it the case that we ought not, all things considered, to investigate the problem of free will. Suppose we had somehow found that if it were shown that human beings lack free will, in a certain sense, then all moral standards would break down, which in turn would lead to the end of human civilization. Such a finding should torment our philosophical hearts. As philosophers we should wish to continue to investigate also this problem, even if we would have to accept that, all things considered, we ought to stop. The reason for giving up on the problem of free will would be a non-philosophical reason: it would be a reason from, so to speak, outside of philosophy for not undertaking philosophical investigations into a particular philosophical problem.¹⁶

¹⁴Of course, environmental pragmatism does not tell us to avoid (or sidestep) all theoretical questions, or all the problems which puzzle us. Practical problems may puzzle us too, and theoretical questions often arise in connection with practical ones. But the theoretical questions that environmental pragmatism does want us to avoid (or sidestep) are typical philosophical questions, and—as I argue below—they certainly concern problems which puzzle us. To recommend the avoidance of such questions is blatantly unphilosophical.

¹⁵However, it is certainly doubtful whether they are right. For some of these doubts, see Christopher Preston, “Epistemology and Intrinsic Values: Norton and Callicott’s Critiques of Rolston,” *Environmental Ethics* 20 (1998): 409–28, and J. Baird Callicott, “The Pragmatic Power and Promise of Theoretical Environmental Ethics: Forging a New Discourse,” *Environmental Values* 11 (2002): 3–25. I come back to this question below.

¹⁶Cf. Norman S. Care, “Environmental Pragmatism” (book review), *Ethics and the Environment* 2 (1997): 199–202.

Returning to the question of intrinsic value in nature, we may first note that nothing that even remotely resembles this scenario obtains in this case. But that is not the main point here. The point is that even if it did, and if we therefore had decisive reason to avoid discussing this question, that would be an equally non-philosophical reason.¹⁷ It would not be an expression of an alternative philosophical approach (at least not as *philosophy* has been understood here and in the Light and Katz anthology). Plausibly, however, environmental pragmatists in general do not think that discussing the intrinsic value of nature is “dangerous”—they merely think that nothing practically useful comes out of such discussions. But the above points apply to this more modest position as well. “That nothing practically useful comes out of it” is not a philosophical reason. One can argue that many philosophical discussions are such that nothing practically useful comes out of them (although I think that one should be very careful about making such claims—also regarding the question of intrinsic value in nature). It is difficult to see the direct practical relevance of several (most?) questions within, e.g., epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of language. There is no reason why environmental philosophy should constitute a special case here. If epistemologists are allowed to continue pursuing their philosophical investigations without first establishing the practical relevance of these investigations, then, surely, environmental philosophers who are interested in the possibility of intrinsic value in nature should be equally allowed to continue pursuing their investigations into this question without first establishing its practical relevance. Philosophy is theoretical by nature.

Of course, an underlying assumption here is that if one is an environmental philosopher, then one’s overriding aim is to “save nature.”¹⁸ But even if that is true in many cases, it is irrelevant here. Indeed, the assumption that environmental philosophers generally embrace such aims may rather be (and is, unfortunately, by some) taken to count against them, as philosophers. It is usually considered a theoretical merit to be dispassionate and unbiased about one’s subject of investigation. Also people who do not take as their overriding aim to save nature must, of course, be allowed to pursue environmental philosophy.

Perhaps it might be thought that environmental philosophy constitutes a special case because of the urgency of the environmental problems. Given this urgency, one may want to claim that environmental philosophers ought to use their critical talents to contribute to solving these problems (in a more direct way than by pursuing theoretical environmental philosophy).¹⁹ There is plausibly some truth

¹⁷ What I call “a non-philosophical reason” *may* be reached through philosophical reasoning (e.g., ethical reasoning), but it is non-philosophical in the sense that—once reached—it goes against the aim of philosophy: to get clear on the problems which puzzle us.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Light, “Contemporary Environmental Ethics,” pp. 427–28 and 436.

¹⁹ This point was stressed by one of the referees, who expressed it as follows: “Given the urgency of environmental problems, investing time and talent in resolving issues such as whether nature has intrinsic value is just fiddling while Rome burns.” Cf. Palmer, “An Overview,” p. 32. See also Light, “Contemporary Environmental Ethics,” p. 441.

in this claim: most of us (who have the possibility) should probably do more than we currently do to contribute to solving environmental problems—among other things invest our critical talents. But, again, environmental philosophy does not constitute a special case in this respect. Astrophysicists in general could probably also do more to contribute to solving environmental problems, as could psychologists and linguists—they all possess critical talents. It is not necessarily the case that environmental philosophers are best suited to attend to the practical matters highlighted by environmental pragmatists. Actually, much of what Light says about these matters suggests that they are not.²⁰ Two questions seem particularly important from an environmental pragmatist perspective: (1) which states of various natural systems are the ones that best serve different (human) ends? (2) Which are the best ways to motivate people to contribute to the task of realizing such states of these various natural systems? Both of these questions are better left to the empirical sciences (such as ecology, psychology, human physiology, sociology, etc.).²¹

In any case, most of us think that doing more to contribute to solving environmental problems is compatible with having an employment which is not directly related to this task. People work with different things, and some of us have among our assignments to undertake philosophical investigations regarding the possibility of intrinsic value in nature. (This job may actually make us more interested in, and more inclined to, contribute to solving environmental problems, which, of course, is a good thing.) If, on the other hand, one's employment is incompatible with contributing to a sufficient degree to solving environmental problems, then that may certainly be a reason to change profession (or to change the direction of one's profession, if that is possible). But (a) this reason would be a non-philosophical reason, and (b) being a theoretical environmental philosopher certainly does not seem to be a profession that is particularly difficult to combine with efforts to contribute to solving environmental problems.²²

At this point, it might be suggested that questions concerning intrinsic value in nature do not belong to "the problems which puzzle us." But this claim is clearly false. Such questions are indeed puzzling. To begin with, they share the puzzling features of value questions in general (e.g., on the one hand values might appear to be something that we project on the world; on the other hand, they are something

²⁰ Light, "Contemporary Environmental Ethics," pp. 443-46.

²¹ It is clearly the job of philosophers to identify the ultimate human ends (to investigate the question of what constitutes the human good), but that question is arguably not very important from a pragmatist perspective: if we want to convince "the public," then we must appeal to what people actually take to be their ends, and not to what philosophers claim to be human ends.

²² Light does not disagree. He writes: "Taking seriously this public task for environmental ethics does not, however, mean that those who do so must give up their pursuit of a theory of nonanthropocentric natural value. They can continue this work as one of their other tasks as environmental ethicists" (ibid., p. 445). (This is a softening of the formulations in the introduction to the Light and Katz anthology.) But he thinks that a practical, policy-oriented, pragmatic component ought to be one part of their work *as environmental philosophers* (even one part of their environmental philosophy) (ibid., p. 446). I believe this component is much better suited as one part of their work as environmentally engaged citizens.

that we seem to be expressing beliefs about, or at least that we argue and disagree about). Furthermore, the questions of intrinsic value in nature have their own puzzling features. Here is an example. Richard Routley's last man thought experiment may be taken to indicate that we (many of us) are inclined to value even non-sentient nature noninstrumentally.²³ It simply seems wrong of the last man to destroy the nature around him, even if no other sentient creature will ever again experience it. On the other hand, it is hard to see in what sense it *matters* that the last man destroys the nature around him if no sentient creature will ever again experience it. Are our intuitions about the wrongness of the last man's action unwarranted, or have we identified a value that lacks a direct connection to the practical question concerning which actions matter (but if so, in what sense is the last man's action wrong)? Or should we perhaps opt for some other alternative? Discussions about intrinsic value in nature also raise interesting philosophical questions about the scope of values and ethics, in general. The question arises as to whether morality should be restricted to the (potentially) conscious or sentient, or whether it can be extended to comprise also non-conscious/non-sentient things.

The question of whether nature has intrinsic value is philosophically interesting in its own right, and there is every reason to pursue it even if doing so would put some hindrances in the way of policy-forming environmentalists—they will simply have to face up to the challenge of overcoming these hindrances (and perhaps there is something useful to be gained on the way).²⁴ As Dale Jamieson has recently written,

... some philosophers have wanted us to move beyond discussions of intrinsic value and get on with saving the world. However, deep questions about the nature of value do not disappear upon command. It is the job of moral philosophers to address such questions. While moral philosophy can contribute to clear-headed activism, it is not the same thing, and should not be confused with it. Discussions of intrinsic value are not going to go away.²⁵

With regard to the worry expressed by environmental pragmatists that such theoretical discussions in environmental philosophy stand in the way of developing (good) environmental policy, I believe that this worry is highly exaggerated. I think it both (1) overestimates the practical importance of environmental philosophy, and (2) underestimates the practical significance of investigating questions concerning intrinsic value in nature: (a) to think that environmental philosophy has the power

²³ Richard Routley (later Sylvan), "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?" in *Philosophy and Science: Morality and Culture: Technology and Man*, Proceedings of the Fifteenth World Congress of Philosophy (Sophia: Sophia Press, 1973), vol. 1, p. 207 (reprinted in Light and Rolston, *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*).

²⁴ Hence, even if the convergence hypothesis should be true, that would not mean that we (as philosophers) have no reason to attend to theoretical questions concerning intrinsic value in nature.

²⁵ Dale Jamieson, *Ethics and the Environment: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 75.

of significantly slowing down the environmental movement (or of considerably speeding it up) is to overestimate the importance of environmental philosophy within that movement. Environmental philosophy is but one part of the environmental movement, and I have seen no compelling arguments to the effect that it is such an important part as to have this power. (b) On the other hand, there is at least some evidence that both the environmental movement, and political decision makers, have been influenced by theoretical discussions within environmental ethics, such as those concerning intrinsic value in nature.²⁶

When Light and Katz take *the overriding aim* to be “finding workable solutions to environmental problems now,” this is certainly a praiseworthy initiative, and in one respect this aim is indeed an overriding aim, but it should not be the overriding aim of environmental *philosophy per se* (although it may, of course, be the overriding aim of particular environmental philosophers). The question of whether or not, and in what sense, nature has intrinsic value does not stand in contrast to questions of finding workable solutions to environmental problems. To the contrary, such questions can often go hand in hand. Debates about intrinsic value in nature take place *within* environmental ethics, while finding workable solutions to environmental problems is a question for the entire environmental movement (indeed, for everyone). The whole field of environmental ethics (as well as the wider field of environmental philosophy) can be seen as a part of this larger environmental movement, within which it has its specific role. While the aim of this larger movement is indeed to find workable solutions to environmental problems, the role of environmental ethics is (among other things) to provide theoretical foundations for these solutions. Environmental ethics interacts with other parts of the environmental movement in various ways, and a lively internal debate within environmental ethics should be seen as a sign of health for the environmental movement at large, indicating both self-criticism and the absence of dogmatism.²⁷

²⁶ See Preston, “Epistemology and Intrinsic Values,” and Callicott, “Theoretical Environmental Ethics.” See also my discussion about the practical relevance of theoretical environmental ethics in Samuelsson, *The Moral Status of Nature*, chap. 6. We may note that even if Preston and Callicott are wrong about the practical impact of environmental ethics, this may not be such a disturbing fact that environmental pragmatists take it to be. To begin with, environmental ethics is a young discipline, and perhaps it is too early for its “results” to have had any significant impact. Furthermore, the impact of environmental ethics on decision making and policy formation should reasonably be judged in relation to the impact that moral philosophy “normally” has on these things. How common is it that results from moral philosophy (including applied ethics) in a direct way significantly influence decision making and policy formation? Moreover, even if theoretical debates in environmental ethics can be considered hindrances, in some sense, they need not be bad hindrances in the sense of being unnecessary hindrances. On the contrary, it may be essential to attend to these debates in order to formulate adequate environmental policies. See Mikael Stenmark, “The Relevance of Environmental Ethical Theories for Policy Making,” *Environmental Ethics* 24 (2002): 135–48.

²⁷ It is common among environmental pragmatists to accuse mainstream environmental ethics of dogmatism. The claim is that rather than defending nonanthropocentrism over anthropocentrism, environmental ethicists have simply assumed that an adequate environmental ethics theory has to be nonanthropocentric (see e.g., Light, “Contemporary Environmental Ethics,” p. 429). This may be true

Given the nature of philosophy (and of ethics), it is principally a good thing that environmental ethicists are not completely united on the theoretical level, that they force each other to refine their theories and meet objections (so that they are an efficient medicine against dogmatism). (Complete unity on philosophical questions should normally arouse our suspicion.) Such a lively environmental ethics is a resource for the environmental movement. If we abandon the theoretical questions, and reduce disagreements to an allegedly harmless moral pluralism—as environmental pragmatists want us to do—this “liveliness” may disappear, and environmental ethics may become a philosophically empty shell, interesting only for those who already accept the environmental goals which it would then be its sole purpose to defend (from various perspectives, and with various principles, but with one voice). Such a pluralist “ethic” would be pointless for the purpose of moral reasoning, if not question-begging; it could be used to defend almost any goal that its adherents would want to defend.

This line of reasoning leads us over to the aspect of environmental pragmatism that I find most disturbing, from a philosophical point of view, namely, that it gets things in the wrong order. Instead of starting with the question of what is valuable—what we have reason to cherish or bring about—environmental pragmatists start by simply stating that there are certain “basic policy imperatives” that we should implement. These are the imperatives that we can expect various environmentalists from various camps (philosophical and other) to be able to agree upon: “*appropriate* environmental praxis will determine the limits and the content of environmental philosophy and political theory.”²⁸ The idea is that from an environmentalist perspective certain goals are desirable, and theoretical philosophical debates stand in the way of agreeing on, and in the end implementing, these goals. In a reply to McShane, environmental pragmatist Norton writes:

It was my intention, then [in *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*], to lead the discussion of environmental ethics and policy away from ideology based in a priori theories, toward open-ended, post-metaphysical discourse in which the emphasis is on improving communication and increasing cooperation in decision making by finding actions that support many values.²⁹

It may seem obvious that there are certain basic environmental policies that are good, and that we ought to defend. But this fact is not itself a justification of these

to some extent, or in some cases (especially with regard to early environmental ethics), but it does not show that there is something problematic with theoretical debates within the field. On the contrary, it seems more natural to attribute the problem of dogmatism to the absence of certain theoretical debates.

²⁸ Light and Katz, “Introduction,” p. 11 (emphasis added).

²⁹ Norton, “Comment on McShane,” pp. 12–13. The paper to which Norton replies is McShane, “Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism.” In this paper McShane discusses and refutes some of the arguments from anthropocentric environmental pragmatists against the need of moving beyond anthropocentrism to nonanthropocentrism. See also McShane’s (convincing) response to Norton’s reply: Katie McShane, “Convergence, Noninstrumental Value and the Semantics of ‘Love’: Reply to Norton,” *Environmental Values* 17 (2008): 15–22.

policies. It is the job of philosophers to provide such justification (if they think these policies are correct). Moreover, as philosophers we should at least remain open to the possibility that we might be wrong about these policies being correct (even policies supporting, and supported by, many values). If we believe that a certain policy is warranted, then we should argue for this claim on the basis of the considerations that make us believe it, and (theoretically) defend these considerations (e.g., that some things are valuable).³⁰ It is in that way we can argue that an environmental praxis is *appropriate*. The claim that it is appropriate is a normative claim, and to defend such a claim we have to turn to normative theory. We should not decide, beforehand, that such a claim is correct, and then (on pragmatic grounds) construct the most plausible framework for making it seem correct (or for convincing decision makers and others that it is correct). That, if anything, looks like dogmatism!³¹ Most importantly, it is deeply unphilosophical.³² We may have good reasons to do it as environmentalists, but not as philosophers.³³

³⁰This, of course, does not mean that the values in question have to be so called “nonanthropocentric” values.

³¹ I find it somewhat ironic that Light and Katz (and other pragmatists) accuse traditional, or mainstream, environmental ethics of dogmatism (e.g., Light and Katz, “Introduction,” pp. 2–3), given that what they themselves opt for is best described as a predetermined consensus based on shared but theoretically unfounded opinion (it is not entirely clear whose opinion, but supposedly the opinion of “the average environmentalist,” if there is such a thing). That sounds an awfully lot like dogmatism to me.

³² Cf. Care, “Environmental Pragmatism,” p. 202, and Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic*, p. 32.

³³ Thus, I do not argue against environmentalists appealing to all kinds of “values” in order to convince people that certain (good) policies are correct. What I am opposed to is that this is philosophy. Here a final clarifying note may be appropriate: I do not mean that philosophical issues cannot arise in connection with questions such as which policies would most efficiently solve a certain problem, how we should convince people that a certain policy is desirable, how we should best reach unity among certain groups of people, and so on. What is unphilosophical is to give up on (or sidestep) theoretical questions in favor of such pragmatic questions.