

Pragmatist Ethics and Climate Change

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Abstract: This essay explores some features of pragmatic pluralism as an ethical perspective on climate change. It is inspired in part by Andrew Light's work on climate diplomacy, and by Bryan Norton's environmental pragmatism, while drawing more explicitly than Light or Norton from classical pragmatist sources such as John Dewey. The primary aim of the essay is to characterize, differentiate, and advance a general pragmatist *approach* to climate ethics. The main line of argument is that we are suffering culturally from a sort of moral jetlag due in part to moral fundamentalist habits, and that a critical focus on pragmatic pluralism—in moral theory generally and climate ethics particularly—would be salutary for our recovery if philosophers are to speak more effectively to “wicked problems” on a warming planet in a way that aids public deliberation and social learning. Moral fundamentalist habits, and the monistic one-way assumption that unintentionally—but not blamelessly—exercises and unduly reinforces them, are obstacles to fostering habits of moral and political inquiry better suited to dealing with predicaments rapidly transforming our warming planet.

Soon after his 90th birthday, John Dewey (1859-1952) was feted at his alma mater, the University of Vermont. Too tired to rise and speak to the crowd in Burlington, he simply said: "I'm thankful for the privilege of living on this good planet, Earth. But living on this Earth has become the supreme challenge to mankind's intelligence" (1975.05.25? [22283]: Herbert W. Schneider to American Humanist Association).

A century ago in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” Dewey famously advocated a spirit of public engagement by intellectuals: “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems” of humanity (1917, MW 10:46). By facing widely shared problems and helping to guide inquiry into them with fresh hypotheses, Dewey argued that philosophers could recover a coherent social function (cf. Fesmire 2015). Those who join Dewey in seeing philosophy’s public function as cultural interpretation and criticism are not likely to see professional philosophy’s recent past as the best guide to its future, isolated as it has been from contemporary conflicts, disparities, divisions, and drift. Nevertheless, philosophers in areas such as bioethics and environmental ethics have for decades been charting a course to determine, in Dewey’s words, “the character of changes that are going on and to give them in the affairs that concern us most some measure of intelligent direction” (1930, LW 5:271).

Building especially on Dewey, this chapter explores some features of pragmatic pluralism as an ethical perspective on climate change. It is inspired in part by Light’s work on climate diplomacy (e.g., 2013; 2017) in 2013-2016 as Senior Advisor and India Counselor to the U.S. Special Envoy on Climate Change in the Obama administration, and by Norton’s environmental pragmatism (e.g., 2005; 2015), while drawing more explicitly from classical pragmatist sources than either Light or Norton. My primary aim in this essay is to characterize, differentiate, and advance a general pragmatist *approach* to climate ethics, programmatic though it is, rather than to defend specific governing principles, formulate or prescribe climate policy recommendations, or advance action items. In the main, contemporary climate ethicists focus on assessing policy options and making prescriptions. This is unsurprising, as much of the agenda for climate ethics has been set by meetings responsive to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

However, an exclusive focus on policy assessments would take the “practical” too narrowly. Despite the practical bearings of debating policy options, this chapter does not, for instance, weigh in on controversies regarding Stern vs. Nordhaus on ethically appropriate ways to discount future costs and benefits of climate action, or the relative prioritization of adaptation and abatement, or how best to assess expected future value in lieu of an excessively moralistic precautionary principle. My main line of argument is that we are suffering culturally from a sort of moral jetlag due in part to moral fundamentalist habits, and that a pragmatic turn—in moral theory generally and climate ethics particularly—would be salutary for our recovery if philosophers are to speak more effectively to “wicked problems” on a warming planet in a way that aids public deliberation and social learning.

A Moral Fundamentalist Pledge of Allegiance

I sometimes ask my students to bring examples of people weighing in on a contemporary issue such as climate change, immigration, race, gender, reproduction, or marriage. How many of those people, I ask, would knowingly raise their hand and pledge the following?¹

“There’s a single basis of moral and political life, and this supreme basis determines the right way to proceed. I have access to this supreme basis. When others don’t agree with me, it’s because they have the wrong faith commitments or they aren’t analyzing things properly. Agreement with me is a prerequisite to solving our problems. Consequently, I have nothing to learn about these matters from those who disagree with me. Their participation is at best an irrelevant distraction and at worst an evil to be defeated. My diagnosis of the issue has precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant. It’s exhaustive, hence beyond revision and reformulation.”

After my students and I swap stories about those who might blithely take such a pledge, we invariably conclude that the pledgers are outnumbered by their counterparts: conservatives, liberals, and radicals who would, upon conscious reflection, reject this outright as cocksure arrogance. Moreover, it quickly becomes clear that this pledge—especially beginning with the third sentence—does not speak to the sort of people my students wish to become.

And yet, our class conversation continues, how many of us certified broader-minded souls act as though problems come prepackaged with our singular interpretation of them? Do we prejudge and offhandedly dismiss alternative diagnoses of shared moral issues? However open-minded we may seem to ourselves, do we react to others as though we are navigating with the one, universal moral compass? Are our real moral habits implicated in the very pledge most of us would disavow?

At this point, shifting uncomfortably in our complicity, my students and I pause to explore our cognitive dissonance. Perhaps we are merely hypocrites, parading open-mindedness while betraying its opposite. Or perhaps we are beset with a neural vestige of moral tribalism, which some think might finally be enlightened by a universal morality (Greene 2013).

But I think there is also something more philosophically interesting at work. To explain, I introduce in this section the terms *moral jetlag* and *moral fundamentalism*, then single out two tell-tale features of *wicked problems*, a vague and overused notion that nevertheless has some practical traction for climate ethics.

Dewey proposed soon after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that citizens of techno-industrial nations suffer from “cultural lag” (1945, LW 15:199–200; cf. 1929, LW 4:203–28). I will call this “moral jetlag,” a condition in which most of the basic alternatives we have on hand to think and talk about moral life, from customary moralizing to sophisticated

theorizing, were developed, canned, and pickled on a shelf so long ago that they now lag far behind the multi-faceted problems that our values must speak to. Our moral imaginations are nourished in this conflicted social matrix, resulting in moral jetlag.

In *Reason in a Dark Time*, Jamieson explores an implication for climate change (2014, ch. 5) of what I am calling moral jetlag. In the Anglophone world, the commonsense prototype of a harmful activity—one for which we ought to feel and be held responsible—is one that has negative consequences that are immediate, localized, intentional, and directed toward individuals. But this conception of responsibility for harm is eerily out of step with the actual conditions of contemporary lives in complex systems. For example, the greatest harm caused by local greenhouse gas emissions is long-term, widely distributed, unintentional, and not directed toward individuals. Partly on this basis, Jamieson concludes that climate change presents challenges that “go beyond the resources of commonsense morality” (2014, 6). In this context, our moral jetlag is characterized by inherited moral concepts and theoretical frameworks that are too narrow, homogeneous, and individualistic to adequately meet many of the problems of techno-industrial civilizations, exemplified by a lack of fit with anthropogenic climate disruption.

Due in part to this moral jetlag, many of us have an uneasy relationship with our inherited “moral fundamentalism,” which can be defined ostensibly as the cluster of habits betrayed in “the pledge” activity. The term moral fundamentalism was coined by Johnson (2014) as a synonym for moral absolutism. Its rejection as a general outlook, by whatever name, has entered politics and policy in part through extensive research on “wicked problems,” inspired by Rittel and Webber (1973) and now ubiquitous in the field of environmental studies, along with research

on democratic decision-making and negotiation by pragmatists such as Norton (2015; cf. Sarkar and Minter 2018).

Moral fundamentalism is a vice because it obstructs communication, constricts our deliberative excursions *ex ante* into what is possible (cf. Fesmire 2003), and underwrites bad choices. It makes the worst of our native impulses toward social bonding and antagonism. And when we oppose “their” moral fundamentalism with our own, we drive our society’s us-them wedge even deeper.

Research on wicked problems suggests a more precise definition of moral fundamentalism, one that offers a resource for climate ethics. Without canvassing the many senses of wickedness” in the policy literature, at least two necessary features can be identified that cut through the noise: when we say a problem is wicked rather than benign, we hypothesize at least that (1) there is no single definitive solution and (2) the way we formulate a problem, and the way we appraise success in dealing with it, are themselves at issue. When confronting wicked problems, as Norton observes, “it is necessary to problematize problem formulation itself” (2015, 37), because in these cases even the most sincere and informed participants formulate problems and interpret facts differently. Many contemporary problems are candidates for wickedness in this sense, especially in complex systems: e.g., climate, ecosystems, international relations, economic systems, food systems, legal systems, governmental institutions, inter-governmental institutions, and educational institutions. In climate ethics, for example, perhaps there just is no theoretically correct balance between a focus on vulnerable individuals (i.e., climate justice) and a focus on systems.

Observing that many problems have similarly intractable tensions, Gardiner argues that wickedness is an unnecessarily vague concept (2017). Nevertheless, the concept has proven

useful in policy studies for highlighting that moral and sociopolitical life-as-usual is messier than many theorists have taken it to be (cf. Thompson and Whyte 2012).

Married to this literature on wicked problems, a moral fundamentalist might be redefined as someone who holds that there is (a) a single right way to diagnose moral or political problems and (b) a single approvable practical solution to any particular problem. This definition clarifies the sense in which moral fundamentalism is a vice. When we see a moral or political problem only as given, not taken, the chief problem is presumed to be that others do not get the problem (Norton 2015). Or the main problem is presumed to be the general failure of others to bow to our brilliant solutions. Never mind the unnoticed parts of the mess occluded by our well-defended general principles, which are often presented as being value-neutral and free of interest-driven rationalizations and inherited biases. If we suppose our diagnosis of the problem is incorrigible, then we will autocratically predefine what is relevant, and we will prejudge alternative formulations without conferral or consultation.

What happens, then, to opportunities for democratically learning our way toward a more sustainable future across a spectrum of values? In public disputes, vying camps restrict the sympathies of in-groups to a singular channel. They typically demand this to the logical exclusion of attempts to secure toeholds to debate and achieve controverted social goals like justice, freedom, security, health, and sustainability. For example, Thompson observes of the food movement that “Advocates of both biotechnology *and* organic systems too often compare the most advanced and optimistic interpretation of their favored approach to the least successful applications of the alternative” (2015, 252). The result has been dichotomized either/or thinking, which comes attended by tendencies to oversimplification, ignoring context, and quests for purity (cf. Boisvert and Heldke 2016). In this way, moral fundamentalist habits encourage

parochial antagonism toward excluded standpoints, closure to being surprised by the complexity of many situations and systems, neglect of the context in which decisions are made, and a related general indifference to public processes and adaptive policies. It is a truism that people happily weigh in on matters concerning which they are incompetent, but no problem is so bad that we cannot make it worse through our way of dealing with it.

A Wicked Case for Pragmatic Pluralism in Moral Theory

Moral theory gets its value by enlarging perceptions and making us more sensitive to the world. Moral fundamentalism, alongside the reactionary nihilism and extreme moral skepticism that are its mirror images, is among our chief obstacles to cultivating such sensitivity. To help us navigate contemporary entanglements, theories should avoid legitimizing and perpetuating this obstacle. Yet moral theory too often props up moral fundamentalism by legitimizing its one-way feature, as a by-product of monistic appeal to a supreme moral principle (e.g., Gewirth 1978), value standard, law, concept, or ideal that purportedly exhausts whatever is morally relevant.

Moral fundamentalism cannot logically stand without its monistic premise. Or to approach it the other way, only a monist can be a logically consistent moral fundamentalist. Pluralists (Rossians, pragmatists, cosmopolitans, etc.) are moral fundamentalists at the cost of logical coherence. The fact that monism and moral fundamentalism rely on a shared premise does not on its own refute that premise, but it suggests that setting the monistic premise aside (at least methodologically) could place practical ethics on a stronger footing that better checks and compensates for our complicity in moral fundamentalist behaviors, regardless of which moral philosophy captures our imaginations. We especially need these checks when dealing with climate disruption and other anthropogenic drivers of rapid global change (e.g., habitat depletion,

invasive species, nonpoint source pollution, and antibiotic resistance), in which problem formulation across disparate groups is itself among the key problems.

Monists in moral theory abstract some factor of moral experience as central and uppermost, hypostatize it, then treat it as the self-sufficient starting point for moral inquiry and the bedrock for justification. The popular habit of singling out one trump value among a wide range of relevant values tracks the same pattern, as when economic criteria are presumed by mainstream environmental economists to have supremacy over other key values (aesthetic, recreational, ecological, etc.) (Norton 2005). The simpler the problem, the more likely a monistic reduction is to work. But contemporary moral and political conflicts are rarely so simple that a correct rational analysis could, even in principle, sweep the path clear toward what is “truly” good, right, just, or virtuous (cf. Taylor 1982; Williams 1985).

As Dewey observed, under the restrictive monistic assumption legitimized by traditional moral theorizing, conflict and diversity are merely apparent (1930, LW 5:279-288). A situation may *seem* to be a quagmire, the supposition runs, but closer examination, or more data to feed into our utility calculations, will reveal that there had been a right or fair path through it all along. If there is a single conceptual home range of moral action, the conflict boils down to hesitancy on our part about what to choose. What is good or virtuous or right is presumed to be already licit, ready to be laid bare by intellectual analysis.

Dewey proposed, however, that traditional key moral categories such as good, duty, and virtue express different experiential origins. He argued that none operates as the bottom line that can accommodate all that is of moral worth in the rest. If one concept is neither logically derivable from another nor translatable without remainder into the terms of another, then, he

contended, distinctive experiential phenomena in moral life cannot be blanketed by a single covering concept (see Fesmire 2018).

Dewey consequently saw little place for zero-sum disputes in theory or policy assessment (cf. Edenhofer and Kowarsch 2015). Historical ethical theories and traditional codes of conduct are resources for inquiry, not finalities to be accepted or rejected wholesale. For example, Broome's utilitarian notion in *Climate Matters* that "the good of the world is the arithmetic total of people's well-being" allows him to develop a project with a distinctive set of dominant emphases, angles, and inferences. This can contribute to democratic discourse. But from Dewey's pragmatist perspective it cannot finally do something that Broome apparently wants to do, which is to help determine in advance whether to adopt a policy by taking "a sort of weighted average across the portfolio of all the possible amounts of well-being that might result from our policy" (Broome 2012, 116). The utilitarian aggregator's inference flows not from logic but from a hidden premise of theoretical correctness, which presumes that an account of metaethics and normative morality can be given in terms of one supreme root.

Akin to Dewey's pluralistic account of the tangled terrain of moral action, Latour (1993) argues that "imbroglios" typify moral experience: that is, moral predicaments are entanglements of often-incompatible forces. From a pragmatist perspective, this relative incommensurability of forces presents a *practical* problem (not primarily a theoretical one): if diverse situational factors are already in tension with each other so that we are tugged in multiple ways, then one-way decision-making leads to normative prescriptions that ignore or relegate factors relevant to intelligent choices. This is analogous to the logical fallacy of causal reductionism, assuming a single cause for a complex outcome and ignoring multiple conjoint variables.

If moral action is heterogeneous in its origins and operations, and typified by underlying tangles between irreducible forces, then ethical monism's usefulness to moral understanding is limited. That is fine. Indeed, as Appiah argues, the articulation of one-sided idealizations is a personal or collective help in specific contexts (2017), and the pluralist for her part is not immune from obtuseness. The problem with traditional monism, however, is that the quest for a plumb-line of reason that will square our moral lives to the world and impose order on deliberation is (a) philosophically dubious, and (b) fastens the linchpin of moral fundamentalism.

Again, we should delegitimize moral fundamentalism if we are to recover from our moral jetlag and inquire more effectively into wicked problems. More specifically, far from being an antidote to what Callicott wittily dubs pluralism's analogue to "multiple personality disorder" (1999, 175), monism's greatest risk is that it will obstruct or exclude inquiry into situational tensions that are off-the-radar of our idealizations. There is nothing anti-theoretical in this observation. It simply raises a question about how to theorize more effectively, in a way that helps to create a context for making better decisions together. If being theoretically correct in ethics implies, as a regulative ideal, a completely enlightened standpoint secured in advance of confronting difficulties in particular contexts—a standpoint from which our general habits of moral thinking will, with tweaks here and there, be adequate to meeting every relevant situation—then the quest for it increases our moral jetlag.²

Traditional monistic theories are helps. But their good work becomes the enemy of better work when we fail to remember that whatever we see with their help is always situated within what we do not see; what they put us in touch with is situated within what is inconspicuous and ungrasped (cf. LW 1:44). As James said, "Something always escapes" (1977, 145). When we

forget this, we pay for conceptual clarities by forgetting relevant aspects of the troubled existential subject-matter that occasioned our inquiries in the first place.

In sum, traditional moral theorizing's "zeal for a unitary view" (1930, LW 5:288) tends to oversimplify and standardize moral life in a way that is ill-suited to navigating complex, indeterminate systems. This is a problem for climate ethics, and it arises in part from the monistic one-way feature that traditional moral theory shares with moral fundamentalism. The resulting moral jetlag is troubling, but not merely because we persist in using benighted ideas. Moral jetlag is worrisome because of the lack of fit between our habituated outlooks and real, unsettled, on-the-ground circumstances. To ameliorate the morasses we face, we need the moral clarity (see Neiman 2008) of theoretical idealizations, not merely new iterations of postmodern suspicions of them. In the idiom of Sherlock Holmes, such idealizations keep us concentrated on what is vital instead of being dissipated by what is incidental. But instead of incorrigibility and oversimplification, we need to reintegrate abstract ethical theorizing with the entanglements of direct experiences.

Pragmatism and the Ends-Means Continuum

Like other ethical naturalists, pragmatists argue that we can intelligently deal with problems and direct ourselves toward desirable goals, both individually and collectively, without transcendental standards or *a priori* deductions that hide from inspection even as they pretend to guarantee the validity of judgments. More distinctively, though in common with many other strong pluralists, pragmatists tend to regard the mainstream quest in moral theory for the central and basic source of normative justification as outdated. For the pragmatist, the moral theorist's job, in Dewey's representative view, is to systematically work through and generalize about

situations in which the way forward is not well lit, when multiple paths beckon, and when incompatible goods and colliding duties “get in each other’s way” (1932, LW 7:165).

The term ‘pragmatist’ has perhaps done as much to muddle as to clarify. In 1908, Lovejoy identified thirteen conflicting senses of pragmatism then in vogue among philosophers (Lovejoy 1963). ‘Pragmatism’ in colloquial English is a bit more definite, with arguably two principal meanings. It primarily suggests the tempering of ideologies with practicality, the balancing of principles with achievable outcomes, or simply flexibility amid contingencies. To call someone a pragmatist popularly suggests a counterweight to compensate for pie-in-the-sky ideals or dogmatic ideology. The worldly pragmatist ensures that some portion of our ideals may be realized, which we presume is better than none at all. The word secondarily means, again outside of academic philosophy, pursuit of the most expedient means to satisfy a self-interested desire, often associated with an outlook in which political actors take short-sighted gambles that may well backfire (e.g., Jotzo 2016).

If we shave off its anti-intellectual and anti-theoretical connotations, the first popular sense above may capture something of the “Yankee pragmatism” in Dewey’s theorizing. But this requires a string of qualifications: Dewey’s corpus rings with criticisms of shallow practicality, unprincipled realpolitik, machinations toward fixed ends, atomistic individualism, acquisitiveness, and American swagger. His philosophical reconstructions cut much deeper than the pragmatism of common parlance. Indeed he wrote in a 1940 letter: “The word ‘pragmatism’ I have used very little, and then with reserves” (1940.09.06 [13667]: Dewey to Corliss Lamont).

Dewey expanded and rigorously systematized Peirce’s and James’s pragmatisms as a means for reconstructing philosophy to meet evolving difficulties. Dewey’s pragmatism is, minimally, the critical attempt to replace inherited beliefs and distorting prejudices with

intelligent inquiry. Had he ever formulated a pragmatic maxim to clarify just what he thought made inquiry more *intelligent*—which was one with specifying what makes it *experimental*—it might spotlight his emphasis on the ends-means continuum: Always state your ends in terms of the means you plan to use to achieve them. For example, if you are ultimately aiming for climate justice, equitable distribution of emissions, the right to sustainable development (Moellendorf 2014), or the rights of future generations (Gardiner 2011), then state these ends in terms of what you intend to do or advocate to bring them about. Then do your best to confer and pool experiences so that you track *all* of the rippling consequences of those means and not just the ones that suit your agenda. Review what you have actually done, and revise what you mean to do next accordingly.

Alternatively, framed negatively as a cautionary maxim: Beware anyone's ends which are asserted *ipse dixit* or autocratically as finalities or absolutes rather than “in terms of the social means” being proposed (Mead 1930, 104-5). Take security as an end. Ronen Bergman's book *Rise and Kill First* shows that Israel's longstanding practice of targeted assassination—drone strikes, bombings, shootings, and poisonings—has resulted in many “tactical successes” that have dramatically worsened diplomatic relations. Yet the shared social goals of conflicting actors in this region can only be achieved through diplomacy, not imposed through the method of force. Bergman observes in an interview: “They felt that at the tip of their fingers, they can hit someone way beyond enemy lines, deep in the enemy state and solve the problem, and therefore, they do not need to turn to statesmanship or political reconciliation. And therefore I think the story of the use of these special means is a series of extraordinary tactical successes but, at the same time, a disastrous political failure” (Bergman 2018b).

Or on the lighter side: “Where are you going?” Hobbes asks. Calvin, walking with a bucket in hand, replies: “I’m going to the other side of the lake.” “What’s the bucket for?” “I’m going to drain the lake” (Watterson 1988). The only alternative to singling out and favoring some fragmentary preferred consequence as “the” end is to evaluate desires, ends, and consequences as themselves “means of further consequences” (1939, LW 13:229). The mad, anti-pragmatist maxim “the end justifies the means” arises from the warped idea that ends are to be valued irrespective of means. We can imagine a fictional universe in which this is not absurd: by way of advice to science fiction writers, it would have to be a universe in which miracles intervene to keep the means we employ from having their usual side effects. It would also have to be one in which things reliably turn out fine whenever moral agents crave particular ends so much that they fail to forecast other consequences cascading through the entire network of relationships and events in which their lives are embedded, “no matter how intrinsically obnoxious” these consequences are (228).

But returning to *our* universe, perhaps a suitably broad, multi-scalar, and long-range conception of ends could indeed justify the means. I will leave that Pandora’s Box closed except to caution that Dewey’s ethics does not fit most familiar forms of consequentialism (cf. Pappas 2008). For instance, Dewey joined Kantians in criticizing utilitarians for overlooking the practical bearings of attitudes and predispositions, of will (1932, LW 7, ch. 12). Nevertheless, he thought that his naturalistic deconstruction of “the end justifies the means” was far more plausible than Kant’s anti-naturalistic and anti-pragmatic notion in *The Critique of Practical Reason* that “the concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law . . . , but only after it and by means of it” (Kant 2002, 37; cf. Rawls 1971, 31). The pervasive notion in deontological ethics that some objectives are ends-in-themselves is, from Dewey’s perspective,

incoherent and worryingly short-sighted about the way events relate to one another over time and scale. There is something more basic to honesty than that it is the best policy, and something more to kindness than that it is reciprocated, but this does not entail that honesty and kindness are coherently defended as ends-in-themselves.

That we can rarely if ever do a single thing was formulated by Garrett Hardin as the first principle of ecology, and the fact that choices are pregnant with unanticipated connections, both proximal and distant, has more recently become par for the course in the field of ecological economics. Some decades earlier, in *Theory of Valuation* (1939), Dewey explored moral implications of such commonplaces from the physical sciences. “Nothing happens which is final in the sense that it is not part of an ongoing stream of events” (TV, LW 13:229). We usually do more than we mean to do. Whatever end we bring about will engender other existential connections and possibilities, so it must be evaluated empirically as a potential help or hindrance.

Kyoto Hedgehogs and Parisian Foxes

“The Hedgehog and the Fox” (1953) is Berlin’s famous riff on Archilochus’s saying that “*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.*” There are two kinds of intellectuals, Berlin proposes, tongue slightly in cheek: monistic hedgehogs and pluralistic foxes. He contrasts the “centripetal” actions and ideas of the hedgehog with the “centrifugal” ones of the protean fox.

To pursue a rhetorical simplification in Berlin’s spirit (inspired by Norton 2015), with a binary heuristic that would amount to caricature if applied *in toto* to any individual moral or political theorist, the monistic hedgehog—with its one big idea—looks for moral answers and progress in the wrong place. We might imagine a physician, Dewey prodded, who seeks to heal

patients in light of some ultimate, final, complete, and universal ideal of perfect health, when what is needed is to aid living processes of recovery (1922, MW 14:196). In the face of dynamic complications, whether in medicine or climate policy, this would be quackery. In contrast, the pluralistic fox approaches matters *in medias res*, starting with the entanglement. The hedgehog is a detached spectator, while the fox emphasizes our role in actively remaking situations through reflective choices and deeds. Instead of disengaging as a calculator or hovering legislator, the fox is an active, imaginative, and experimental participant.

Do we serve our students well if we merely educate them to judiciously weigh matters so that the balance tips toward a purportedly optimal policy supported by general principles derived prior to inclusive participation in real situations? Economizing deliberation with a pre-determined, rule-governed metric can be helpful for some purposes. But insofar as an approach fails to also prioritize sensitivity to context, creative social inquiry, and experimental understanding of complex underlying structures, its end result is too often reminiscent of an offhanded criticism that Dewey once made about “popcorn” solutions: put the right amount in the right mechanism and you get some “unnutritious readymade stuff” that will not sustain anyone for long (1951.02.14 [14090]: Dewey to Max C. Otto).

Exemplifying a foxlike approach to climate ethics and politics, the pragmatist starts with the concrete situation, not an abstract concept such as equity. Take the responsibilities of countries for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Light highlighted in the buildup to the 2015 Paris climate agreement “a problem for any treaty that includes a notion of equity that conceives of the atmosphere as a global commons in which individuals, groups, or nations may claim shares.” Many countries had been following India in advocating for equity in *historical* per capita emissions as the best way to determine a country’s fair share of allowable emissions.

Light observes that this abstractly defensible allocation places the United States in a severe “carbon debt” (2013, 33). Moreover, there is no clear path in federal law to restrict its emissions to accord with such an allocation. This presents a domestic hurdle for the United States to join an ambitious agreement, yet American participation is necessary to achieve “some modicum of climate safety” (30).

In *One World*, Singer acknowledges that the historical version of the principle of per capita equity is an internal political hurdle for industrialized countries (2004, 195). As a political compromise to bring about the best outcome, Singer proposes a forward-looking principle of “equal per capita future entitlements to a share of the capacity of the atmospheric sink” (194). An emissions trading scheme is compatible with this principle, and Singer thinks such an approach is politically plausible, though it may eventually require United Nations sanctions against the United States analogous to those against apartheid South Africa (198).

The difference between Singer and Light does not pivot on a disagreement about the “optimal allocation of global reductions in emissions in the abstract,” nor on how this should be carried forward in a global climate treaty that will hold everyone’s feet to the fire (Light 2013, 35). Light does not deny that there may be a theoretically defensible optimal emissions allocation for countries, or more-or-less optimal ways to deal with high short-range costs that have uncertain long-range benefits (see Broome 2012, ch. 8), but he insists that we remain clear about the aim of such debate: to sort out what to do, not to agree in advance on justifications or on the single correct way to reason about the matter. So he focuses instead on a decision process to elicit the generative possibilities of an international situation that had been shackled by an overly legalistic approach that was insensitive to intractable tensions.

This may be clarified by contrasting the Kyoto Protocol with the Paris Agreement. At risk of oversimplification, the Kyoto Protocol took a top-down, punitive approach tethered to an abstract principle of equitable emissions. According to Light, by emphasizing *ends fixed in advance*, with penalties attached, Kyoto precipitated a race to the bottom when it came to agreeing on binding targets.³ The Paris Agreement took a bottom-up, “pledge and review” approach (a.k.a “shame and blame”), which Light regards as exemplifying a more pragmatic emphasis on adaptive action, making it more likely that evolving situations will be met creatively. While retrospectively acknowledging the unreliability of the United States as an international actor in non-binding agreements, Light argues that relying on the benefits and backlash of being judged a good or bad international actor—especially as the stakes of climate disruption continue to rise—“will not guarantee success for achieving some level of climate stability, but it will create an environment in which that will be more likely” (2017, 495). Additionally, Light argues, this approach makes it more likely that climate justice issues will be effectively addressed, such as the necessity for the United States to return to a coalition that agrees on a high-ambition interpretation of shared but differentiated responsibilities—i.e., recognition that those most to blame are generally least vulnerable to the harms of climate disruption (2017; cf. Caney 2005).

In Light’s view, Kyoto’s justifications about why we must deal with the problem were monistic, while Paris’s approach was pluralistic and culturally contextual, at least in the sense that a country’s pledge to the world has to make sense domestically. Light observes, for example, that India under Prime Minister Modhi understands dealing with climate disruption as a religiously-bound moral obligation tied up with Hindu scriptures, not primarily as a utilitarian problem about how to secure the aggregate welfare of India’s growing population. By

encouraging pledges “to be embedded in their cultural contexts,” countries under the Paris Agreement need not share views about *why* they should respond to the problem, but they can nevertheless create a context of inquiry in which they may converge on policies.

Light adds that, in his view, Paris is ameliorative and encourages the celebration of intermediate progress as part of five-year plans. This raises a question about what counts as “progress” for a pragmatist, given the absence of any “big” idea of a final and ultimate good for measuring it. Dewey argued that achievements in our dealings with intrinsically messy problems are real, and they are to be celebrated. But they are not measurable by any rigid “general formula of progress” (MW 14:196). He rejected the two most influential variations of the misguided quest for an absolute standard by which to measure progress: (1) the juvenile notion that progress “means a definite sum of accomplishment which will forever stay done, and which by an exact amount lessens the amount still to be done ... on our road to a final stable and unperplexed goal,” and (2) the popular though foolishly pessimistic notion that all achievements are negligible in comparison to ultimate and perfect goods (1922, MW 14:197-198). From this angle, whereas Jamieson (2014) is inclined to see the 2009 Copenhagen climate meeting as a disaster from which no good could come, Light sees Copenhagen as a prelude to bringing together a “high-ambition coalition” of odd bedfellows in the Paris Agreement, a coalition that might take things to the next level.

Returning to Berlin’s binary heuristic, the hedgehog, at home in a settled world, asserts *a priori* that its job is to show which antecedently defended, (relatively) static principles should govern choice, so the hedgehog focuses on getting the theory right and impersonally deciding whose values measure up to its supreme metric (whether taken to be constructed or foundational). Start with getting the theory right, and the rest follows! Meanwhile, the fox, at

home in an open world and spotlighting the fallibility and incompleteness of any decision or policy, attends to controlled adaptive *processes* through which we may *interpersonally* decide what to *do*, listen, pursue creative leads, take stock, and correct our mistakes. Hedgehog processes (more akin to Kyoto) are expert-governed to predetermine a metric that will yield the right, optimal, or ideal outcome; foxlike processes (more akin to Paris) engage communities of inquirers, thereby fostering growth in the public imagination as both means and end.

We all have hedgehog habits, but it might help to ask them to take a back seat for a while. They do not do much to check our inveterate moral fundamentalism. Foxlike adaptive habits have been underdeveloped in our culture despite their compensatory value for dealing with widely shared problems in complex systems. Regardless of the pragmatic worth of hedgehog habits (Dworkin 2011), there is at least no logical inevitability in their codification remaining the primary focus of moral theorizing about climate change.

Pragmatism and Moral Theory

Pragmatists tend to find common cause with those criticizing the quest for a self-sufficient “ideal theory,” as Rawls (1971) called his idealized “original position” approach to a well-ordered society. The Rawlsian in climate ethics tries to discern policy options in which free, equal, and autonomous rational contractors can fully comply with the requirements of justice. Rawls proposed a division of labor between ideal and non-ideal theories. The former’s job is to determine “what a perfectly just society would be like” (1971, 8-9), whereas non-ideal theories are tasked with discerning principles to deal with non-ideal conditions in which people do not comply with the principles of justice, as with war or racial oppression, or in which circumstances make perfect justice unrealizable. We need to start by constructing an ideal theory, Rawls

thought, if we are to construct a moral compass for dealing with non-ideal conditions. His critics argue that he was mistaken.

Recent critics of “ideal theory” approaches to moral and political theory (an approach also illustrated by Nozick (1974) and arguably Dworkin (2000)) include, to various degrees, Mills (2005, 2017), Anderson (2009, 2013), Pappas (2008 and 2018), Sen (2009), Valentini (2012), Gaus (2016), and Appiah (2017). Anderson, for example, has influentially argued that Rawls’s approach to an ideal society blinds us to race-based, gender-based, and other social injustices to a degree that is “epistemologically disabling” (2013, 5).⁴ These critics propose shifting to a non-ideal starting point for sociopolitical inquiry. They insist that values have to be appraised in light of the particular experiential contexts and purposes that generated them.

Wedges between ideal and non-ideal theories are easily overstated, and they often converge more than is acknowledged in the current debate. For example, Moellendorf’s *The Moral Challenge of Dangerous Climate Change* fronts an “Antipoverty Principle” (2014, 22) that is a variation on Rawls’s worst-off principle, and in justifying this principle he rejects dichotomizing theoretical justifications from practical applications (4). Nevertheless, Appiah enjoins, even a plausible and practically informed ideal theory “doesn’t help much in the circumstances of an actual non-ideal world” (2017, 120).

Dewey approached and evaluated ethical and political theories not on analogy to logical or mathematical problems, but as experiments in “living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others” (1938, LW 13:303). In the contemporary ambit of Kitcher and Johnson, Norton and Light follow Dewey in being focused on moral inquiry as an experimental process rather than merely as incessant verbal argumentation. What Kitcher (2014)

calls “the ethical project” is a process in which, as Johnson explains it, we actively try out “various modes of behavior (verbal and nonverbal), various institutional structures, and various life strategies.” Moral theorists have neglected the way experiments in living also constitute “arguments” for and against various practices, in the sense that certain practices address or fail to meet problems. Such arguments, Johnson argues, are enactive, embodied, and embedded (2014, 126), and they should be more central to the future of moral theory.

Dewey saw variability in valuing and valuations as a starting point for constructive inquiry, rather than as deviations to be suppressed or intellectually standardized in the name of ethical truth. Through ongoing shared inquiry—again, not only verbally arguing, but also “on-the-ground experiments in living” (Johnson 2014, 126; cf. Kitcher and Keller 2017; cf. Mill 1986)—we can better steer between what Elgin aptly calls “the absolute and the arbitrary” (1997).

Our experiments in living together involve ideals and idealizations through which we appraise moral alternatives, as Appiah has argued (2017), but they must proceed without privileged access to an ideal standpoint. Favoring such a non-ideal, context-steeped starting point may seem, especially to deontologists, to endorse a “Missouri Compromise” attitude, bartering away human rights and dignity for the sake of a mealy-mouthed pragmatic solution. But what we judge to be progressive or regressive is ultimately, in Kitcher’s words, “something people work out with one another. There are no experts here” (2014, 286). On this view, the main job of the expert in moral theory is not to tell us the right thing to be doing, but to shed light on how we could make better decisions together. Nevertheless, Kitcher and Johnson argue that rejection of aperspectival ethics “in no way keeps us from making reasonable claims about” the suitability of certain “values, principles, and practices” over others (Johnson 2014, 129;

Kitcher 2014, 210ff.). Given a non-ideal starting point, facing non-ideal conditions, Kitcher and Johnson recommend an experimental pragmatic pluralism as a strategy for moral and political inquiry into what we ought to deem progressive.

Environmental Pragmatism

In their edited volume *Environmental Pragmatism* (1996), Light and Katz define environmental pragmatism as “the open-ended inquiry into specific real-life problems of humanity’s relationship with the environment” (2). Franks et al. are correct, as far as they go, in asserting that environmental pragmatism is “an approach to environmental ethics that emphasizes the need for environmental activists and academics to open-mindedly engage with people’s existing environmental attitudes and behaviors if they are to have any influence over them” (Franks et al. 2018, 13). But more should be said (e.g., see Hourdequin 2014, ch. 8).

The most notable feature of environmental pragmatism, as represented for example by Norton, Light, McKenna (2018), Thompson (2015), Minter (2005, 2011, 2018), and Weston (1991), is rejection of the mainstream attempt to find a single defensible paradigm with which we must align ourselves. Specifically, whatever their own eco-ontologies, pragmatist environmental ethicists do not respond to anthropogenic climate disruption by prioritizing a revolutionary attempt to convince doubters that natural systems have intrinsic value. Instead, they tend to focus more than monists on ameliorative processes for resolving disagreements, on making workable, ecologically-informed decisions (Minter and Collins 2005). Fellow pragmatists may or may not additionally concur with Norton’s controverted “convergence hypothesis” that broad-scope anthropocentric arguments usually justify the same policies as ecocentric arguments (1991).

This does not imply that environmental pragmatists sidestep the evaluation of principles, such as tensions between the precautionary principle and cost-benefit analyses (see Gardiner 2011; Broome 2012, ch. 7) or debates underlying the discount rate (Broome 2012, chs. 6-8). Ignoring principles would, as Broome argues, undemocratically leave the consequences of following divergent principles solely to those with technical expertise and would fail to shed any light on what citizens should demand of their governments. Nevertheless, whereas Broome's "expected value theory" seeks "the correct principle for coping with uncertainty" (11), environmental pragmatists tend to focus less on debates about the right general principles to think about and govern human relationships with nature. Or rather, to the frustration of earnest utilitarian and Kantian applied ethicists seeking to justify crisp prescriptions about how we should act, pragmatists take the good and right to be determined experimentally and democratically—about which more below—rather than primarily by ciphering aggregate well-being or conforming with antecedently determined law. If this pragmatist turn appears evasive, perhaps even happily so (West 1989), it is at any rate neither mealy-mouthed nor muddled.⁵

Given its influence, I should clarify that specific positions in the Breakthrough Institute's 2011 report titled "Climate Pragmatism" stand or fall independent of environmental pragmatism as a general orientation. Their "ecomodernism"—inspired in 2003 by Nordhaus and Shellenberger, of "The Death of Environmentalism" fame—is explicitly pragmatist in its foxlike approach, but there is nothing inherent in environmental pragmatism from which one can deduce cautious support for technologies such as agricultural intensification, GMOs, and nuclear energy, or from which one can deduce whether our emphasis should be more on adaptation to climate change rather than abatement of it (see Gardiner's critique, 2011, 257).

Social Learning and Dewey's Democratic Ideal

In *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change* (2015), Norton studies the cultural shift in the Chesapeake region of the U.S. away from object-focused “thinking like an estuary/bay” toward multi-scalar “thinking like a watershed” (250-257). This change has affected the ecological imaginations of millions, yet it did not require a victor in the prize fight over foundational environmental values. Nor did it require a prior commitment to a view about the moral standing of natural systems. However, learning to “think like a watershed” *did* minimally involve what Norton characterizes (via Kai Lee and Albert Bandura) as Deweyan “social learning.” The process exhibited a regional cultural shift away from narrow and short-term thinking toward long-term, broad-range thinking. This is the sort of thinking that Norton argues can be developed as we grapple together with environmental problems. Most importantly, this shift in values occurred *through* public processes rather than as a prerequisite to participation.

Dewey argued that to be workable for social problems, we should see how far it may be practicable to conduct deliberation democratically, through the give-and-take of open dialogue and back-and-forth communication. Suspicious of being told what to do, he also criticized decision-making based on detached expert calculations of optimal welfare (e.g., 1922, MW 14:139-145), or by how forcefully you can drive home your point or sell it in the marketplace of ideas (cf. 1942, MW 8:443-445).

In Dewey's view, democratic communication maximizes the chance that we might find paths that respect legitimate interests, evaluations, and evolving identities of different individuals, institutions, and groups. When “the decider” ignores stakeholders, this raises suspicions about aims, interests, and background assumptions. It also raises issues of transparency and accountability, and it predictably leads to myopic, unworkable policies (LW

2:235–372). When a decision-making process is more than nominally democratic, it seeks out tensions and divergent voices, and it gains legitimacy and direction by evaluating, criticizing, and incorporating them. Dewey consistently warned against overreliance on top-down, expert-driven decisions, and where possible he advocated participatory processes that engage communities in social learning, fostering a public spirit of consultation to uncover troubles and to organize the expertise to deal with them. “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches,” Dewey wrote in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), “even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (LW 2:364).

If perceiving the need for radical changes makes one a radical, then as Dewey wrote in the middle of the Great Depression, “today any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed” (1935, LW 11:45). But Dewey’s was a radicalism for grown-ups with the courage and patience to secure the “democratic means to achieve our democratic ends” (332). Or as Addams earlier made the point in her 1922 book *Peace and Bread in Time of War*: “Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as upon the result itself” (quoted in LW 15:195).

Many people are overwhelmed today by momentarily exciting yet unfathomed information that is pre-prepackaged for consumption—e.g., through the “echo chamber” and ideological silos of social media. As was already evident to Dewey 75 years ago, we like prepared ideas as much as we like prepared foods (LW 13:95–96). In our dispersive age of globalization and connectivity, environmental pragmatists are considering with Dewey whether the disruptions and transitions we face might be better navigated with a democratic citizenry that has *also* and perhaps first learned to deal with vexing problems at a more manageable scale, beginning with our families, neighborhoods, markets, and local communities. When dealing

with social matters at a local and regional scale, or via technological stand-ins for physical proximity, we may imagine more concretely and extensively the situations at hand, exchange and assess relevant information and observations, and confer about ways to mediate conflicts to converge upon solutions. Parochialism abounds, but communal ties and interactions can potentially expand and reinforce our perceptions and judgments by enabling us to draw on a cumulative wealth of experience, which is preparatory for reforming wider affairs and institutions. Dewey proposed that such communication, when scientifically informed, offers a participatory medium for awakening our slumbering democratic imaginations.

Conclusion

Returning to Jamieson's observations about harm, any adequate climate ethics must perceive and respond to a wide range of harms, the causes of which are frequently systemic, not just individual. Climate ethics must extend perception deeper into the socio-cultural, natural, and interpersonal relationships in which we are embedded. Whether this means the basic alternatives we call "morality" have failed, as Jamieson argues (2014), is an open question. What is clear is that, even amid rising global awareness of the unplanned systemic effects that radiate from our actions—climate disruption, alienated work, resource depletion, massive animal suffering, institutionalized discrimination—many retain a cultural tendency to think of themselves as "contained" in the world like a marble in a box. Concurrently, as utilitarians such as Jamieson and Singer (2015) have long argued, people too rarely imagine consequences beyond the ones in which they, or those near-and-dear, feature as the central figures. This leaves us ignorant of the environmental, social, and inter-species hazards posed by our business-as-usual behaviors.

Without insisting on Singer's sentientist or Callicott's ecocentric position in the winner-take-all values debate that has typified environmental and animal ethics since the 1970s, environmental pragmatists urge that we are greatly in need of wise ecological perception of the complex nature of problems, cultivated empathy for those affected by our choices, imaginative probings for technical and communal solutions, sensitivity to cultural traditions, and rich aesthetic responses to natural and cultural landscapes. We need a sort of "relational virtuosity" (Ames 2007, 55ff.) to navigate entanglements (Fesmire 2010).

There is a familiar accusation that pragmatism, as in Light's approach to climate diplomacy, is too compromising and conciliatory to guide action, with the implication that theorists must fall back on their customary defense of antecedent principles as their overriding focus. But might such principles better inform decision-making if we shift moral theory's priorities? Some priorities that may help contemporary moral theorizing meet wicked problems and recover from moral jetlag include: (1) Lay bare and analyze the sorts of conflicts that constantly underlie moral and political action. This includes opening communication across diverse elements of moral and political life instead of unifying what may be independent variables (Fesmire 2018); (2) Place these elements in a wider context in which norms—such as Dworkin's focus on responsibility and self-respect (2011)—gain practical traction in the entanglements of non-ideal conditions (Pappas 2018; Minter 2018); (3) Assess the hypothesis that we can experimentally work out together what is progressive and regressive (Kitcher 2014; Johnson 2014); and (4) Expand prospects for social learning and convergence on policy and action (Light 2017; Norton 2015; Thompson 2015; McKenna 2018; Minter 2011).

If we are going to deal more intelligently with environmental entanglements, then we must cultivate better conditions for dialogue, debate, and persuasion. Moral fundamentalist

habits, and the monistic one-way assumption that unintentionally—but not blamelessly—exercises and unduly reinforces them, are obstacles to fostering habits of moral and political inquiry better suited to responding to predicaments rapidly transforming our warming planet. A critical focus on pragmatic pluralism would be salutary.

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Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works*:

EW *The Early Works* (1882–98)

MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924)

LW *The Later Works* (1925–53)

Citations of Dewey’s correspondence are to *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-2007*, published by the InteLex Corporation under the editorship of Larry Hickman. Citations give the date, reference number for the letter, and author followed by recipient.

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² Cf. Anderson 2009.

³ Andrew Light, January 2016 videoconference with my Middlebury College class “The Pragmatists and Environmental Pragmatism,” and March 2017 videoconference with my Green Mountain College class “Climate Justice.” What follows is also drawn in part from personal communication.

⁴ This is perhaps ironic for a former student of Rawls to say of the father of contemporary theories of distributive justice, hence father to the main line of argument against cost-benefit analysis as the main tool for climate policy.

⁵ Norton’s and Light’s articulations of pragmatic pluralism differ somewhat from those developed by philosophers who work more overtly in the American tradition that included Dewey. McDonald’s edited volume *Pragmatism and Environmentalism* (2012) offers a good representation of the latter. Cf. McKenna and Light’s edited volume *Animal Pragmatism* (2004).