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OPEN PEER COMMENTARY

The Accidental Environmentalist: Elliott on Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments

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As Kevin Elliott notes in his introduction, his piece emerges from and contributes to a debate in the literature concerning the role of public philosophy. Should environmental philosophers carry on the tradition of developing theoretical moral frameworks, particularly of the nonanthropocentric variety, or should they instead focus primarily on influencing policy and thus appeal to the public using more effective anthropocentric justifications? Elliott not only supports the latter, he takes it a step further in extolling anthropocentric *indirect* arguments (AIAs)—ones that drop all reference to environmental harm or welfare and instead refer only to human benefits that accompany ('correlate' with) the policy that also happens to benefit the environment.

In so far as Elliott's conclusion is simply that AIAs 'have much to recommend them, and scholars would do well to explore the situations in which they can most effectively and justifiably be employed' (p. 244), his argument is convincing but not controversial. It is simply better, more effective, to deploy a range of arguments, targeted at a range of audiences, when trying to motivate political concern and action. This is a great strength of Andrew Light's proposals for Pragmatic Environmentalism that Elliott is building upon; methodological pluralism allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints reflecting the plurality of interest groups that may coalesce around and strengthen the likelihood of effective lobbying and action. And especially in those cases where there is a convergence of human and environmental benefit, there need be no agreement on underlying ethical views or motivation, making one's stance on whether the environment and its organisms have value in themselves irrelevant. Hence Elliott is also explicitly building on Bryan Norton's well-known convergence hypothesis which is similarly used to show that policy is primary, and since policies supported by appeal to environmental or animal welfare are highly likely to be supportable by appeal to human welfare, we can forgo theoretical questions such as whether nature has intrinsic value.

But, like Light and Norton, Elliott sometimes points toward a stronger claim: not merely that AIAs should be *one among many* types of arguments that will be especially helpful in certain situations, but that AIAs are so effective and needed that they eliminate any use for explicit or direct reference to the environment at all. While Elliott is careful to maintain an explicitly moderate account—acknowledging that AIAs will typically be strengthened by

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direct and nonanthropocentric arguments (p. 249) and so encouraging philosophers to 'avail themselves of the full range of arguments' (p. 257)—precisely to the degree that his view is more radical than mere convergence and fosters a 'reframing' of policy objectives in a way that bypasses any mention of environmental welfare, it suggests the stronger position that we should adopt AIA justification as the *primary* conceptual tool of political and moral suasion. This more extreme argument is controversial, but I offer two main reasons for finding it unconvincing.

When he first introduces the direct/indirect distinction, Elliott emphasizes that there are significant structural differences between 'causal consequences' and 'correlated benefits'. In this respect, AIAs offer almost an inverse of the Principle of Double Effect. Where Double Effect removes blame from an actor for unintended but foreseeable consequences, AIAs allow us to praise an actor for them: in supporting the American Clean Energy and Security Act, I intended to bolster National Security, but as this incidentally results in the development of alternatives to fossil fuels, I am a supporter of policies that benefit the environment. Yet Elliott later acknowledges that the more 'crucial issue involved in distinguishing AIAs from ADAs is to determine what counts as an effect on the environment' (p. 246). Thus the difference turns on content rather than form and depends upon categorizing a consequence as 'environmental,' which is a conventional and changing category rather than a metaphysical and stable one.

What AIAs and ADAs share is that both are clearly utilitarian in structure. While AIAs are more causally complex and messy, they are squarely consequentialist and framed wholly by costs and benefits. Hence, the call to activists and philosophers to make AIAs the primary tool of analysis: (1) threatens pluralism—it seeks to limit or constrain rather than multiply the range of argumentative support and interest groups available for any particular policy. Elliott's stronger view advises us to forgo not only biocentric argumentation, it also marginalizes Kantian justifications referring to duties and motives, Aristotelian virtue based accounts which are not act or policy centered, as well as the host of other approaches from Ecofeminism and Religious Ethics to Eco-phenomenology and Socialist Critique that disagree with the utilitarian account of value. And (2) to the degree that utility approaches are often criticized for conflating prudence and morality, for directing us towards smooth efficiency rather than what is good or right, AIAs are similarly liable to charges of being politically strategic rather than moral arguments at all.

More to the heart of the issue, to the degree that Elliott insists his view is more radical than Norton's, the objections he examines are more pressing against AIAs than ADAs: does prevalent use of AIA decrease the public's openness toward the environmental movement, is the use of AIAs counterproductive, and could AIAs corrupt people over an extended period of time. Yet Elliott speculates that reliance on AIAs will 'gradually soften up citizens' and 'may increase the public's openness toward the environmental movement' (p. 251). In contrast, I agree with those who suspect psychological inconsistency here.

To set these questions a bit differently: according to Elliott, we should not be troubled by the differences between a *genuine* environmentalist who supports policies A through P in order to protect the environment, and the *accidental* environmentalist who supports policies A through P to protect nonenvironmental and/or human welfare, because the outcome is the same. Nevertheless, I doubt the entire scenario whereby the aims of the genuine and accidental environmentalist substantially overlap in the first place, and even if the genuine and accidental environmentalist are currently in agreement about policies,

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their different underlying principles will likely result in diverging future paths. Elliott is absolutely right that these assumptions deserve careful scrutiny from social scientists.

But I'm worried that in highlighting the work of Social Intuitionists like Jonathan Haidt, who question the existence and efficacy of habits, character traits or dispositions that influence behavior across different contexts, Elliott prejudices us in favor of the irrelevance of motivation to strengthen his case of sameness between the genuine and accidental environmentalist. I would imagine that indeed, as a result of working to support policies that incidentally help the environment, a few 'converts' may show up; but it seems psychologically implausible that failure to explicitly acknowledge and be motivated by environmental concern would inculcate 'direct concern.'

While we wait upon more social scientific research, we might consider possible analogies. Although it may be true that feminists would get much farther convincing others to adopt policies by appealing to profit, self-interest, or even patriarchal well-being, such appeals would offer women little by way of protection in future cases and would serve to harden rather than soften commitment to practices that routinely ignore women's welfare. While it may be true that if certain nations stopped the practice of female genital circumcision and mutilation, then their international reputation would improve and this would help their tourist industry, relying on reasoning referring to the damage or harm suffered by local businesses rather than the damage and harm suffered by the females being cut fails to establish a disposition or motive for protecting young women in future cases. Similarly, appealing to individualistic free-market ideology, which prizes continuous growth through expanding markets and consumerism, to justify environmentally beneficial policies is more likely to 'harden' a commitment to profit rather than 'soften' one to push for environmental policies that necessitate consumer sacrifice.

In the end, while I agree with Elliott's goals to promote more effective environmental policy making and to inspire social scientific studies to help us do so, he and I anticipate different research results. First, there is the disagreement over convergence: Elliott and others maintain it is fairly rare for human and environmental interests to diverge. Is this so? The over-used case of protecting (economically worthless) endangered species should be deemphasized in favor of exploring a more full range of pressing current issues, from E-waste and fracking to overconsumption and food desserts. Second, it will require very clever social scientists to measure how justifications and worldviews impact behavior and politics, to determine whether theory fires up or retards our moral imagination, to detect the degree to which novel theoretical vocabulary and discourse changes our attitudes and behavior. While we wait for the evidence to come in, public environmental philosophy should continue to strategically use direct and indirect anthropocentric justifications, but should give up neither the exploration of a full array of environmental theories nor the Leopoldian project of cultivating love and respect for the land and its beauty directly and for its own sake.

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