Environmental Pragmatism

1707 words (main text)

Abstract: Environmental pragmatists argue that it is defeatist to declare in advance that the *only* effective way to deal with environmental problems is to usher in a complete cultural paradigm shift that radically transforms human value systems. Hence, they do not place a high priority on revolutionary attempts to convince doubters that natural systems, living beings, or sentient beings have intrinsic value. Instead, they prioritize creating a democratic context for adaptive decision processes, which of course includes the evaluation of vying principles. This approach reflects John Dewey's distinction between a plann*ing* society and a plann*ed* society. Whereas incommensurable values are an inherent problem for any planned society, such as Plato's *Republic* or the former Soviet Union, they are irreducible frictions within a planning society. This focus on plann*ing* is illustrated by pragmatist philosopher Andrew Light's work on climate diplomacy as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Energy for International Affairs. The Kyoto Protocol began with an abstract principle of equitable emissions. But its top-down, punitive approach precipitated a race to the bottom when it came to agreeing on binding targets. In contrast, the Paris Agreement's bottom-up "pledge and review" approach fronts adaptive *processes* through which countries intra-nationally decide what to do, take stock, and reconvene to pressure each other. Such continuous cooperative planning makes it more likely that evolving situations will be met creatively and with higher ambition.

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). According to Franks et al., 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" (2017, 13). These definitions are accurate as far as they go, but more should be said to distinguish environmental pragmatism from other approaches and to clarify what is meant by "open-ended inquiry" and "open-minded engagement."

Environmental pragmatists are ethical naturalists. That is, they argue that we can deal intelligently with problems and direct ourselves toward desirable goals without transcendental standards or *a priori* deductions that hide from inspection even as they pretend to guarantee the validity of judgments. They are also strong pluralists, who affirm multiple values that cannot be reduced to a single value. Hence, they are not ethical monists, who appeal to a supreme moral principle, value, standard, law, concept, or ideal that foreshortens whatever is morally relevant in a situation. Pragmatists have long regarded the old quest in moral theory for the single central and basic source of normative justification as outdated. The moral theorist's job, pragmatically understood, is to systematically work through, generalize, and guide inquiry into situations in which the way forward is not well lit, when multiple paths beckon, and when incompatible goods,

colliding duties, and competing virtues are at cross purposes with each other.

Accordingly, a standout feature of environmental pragmatism is rejection of the mainstream attempt in environmental ethics to find a single defensible paradigm with which we must align ourselves. Monistic standpoints are not dismissed, but they are recast as tools to open up inquiry, thereby compensating for their tendency to be unidimensional. They are at least a counterweight to a do-nothing attitude. Nevertheless, whatever their own philosophies of nature, pragmatist environmental ethicists do not place a high priority on revolutionary attempts to convince doubters that natural systems, living beings, or sentient beings have intrinsic value. Instead, they tend to focus more than monists on ameliorative processes for resolving disagreements and on making workable, ecologically informed decisions. Without staking out an anthropocentric, sentientist, biocentric, or ecocentric position in the foundational values debate that has typified environmental and animal ethics since the 1970s, environmental pragmatists struggle to create a democratic context for adaptive decision processes. These cooperative processes are informed not only by well-vetted principles, but also by wise

ecological perception of the complex nature of problems such as climate change and other anthropogenic drivers of rapid global disruption.

Their rejection of the monistic quest clarifies the sense in which environmental pragmatism is an "open-ended" approach to making better moral and political decisions that bear on situations that implicate humans and the rest of nature. Some representatives include Norton (1991, 2015), Weston (1991), Minteer (2011), Thompson (2015), Light (2017), Fesmire (2020), and McKenna (2020).

Self-identified pragmatists may or may not additionally concur with the strong version of Norton's "convergence hypothesis" (1991) that broad-scope anthropocentric arguments usually justify the same policies as ecocentric arguments. But they agree with Norton that it is defeatist to declare in advance that the *only* effective way to deal with our most urgent environmental problems is to usher in a complete cultural paradigm shift that radically transforms human value systems. On the pragmatist view, we do not generate much general willingness to act together when we insist that others first convert to our value framework. This is not always avoidable, as with the history of Jim Crow segregation in the U.S., but the pragmatist urges democratic colloquy to go as far as it can instead of *starting* from an ideal standpoint that autocratically sidelines discord and

dissent. For this reason, environmental pragmatists hypothesize with Norton that, so long as our view of human interests is suitably long term and ecologically contextualized, it may motivate policies that converge with those that would be adopted by reasonable environmental theorists despite their conflicting values.

Norton's hypothesis applies to what pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) called a planning society rather than a planned society. "There is a difference between a society which is plann*ed* and a society which is continuously plann*ing*—namely, the difference between autocracy and democracy, between dogma and intelligence in operation, between suppression of individuality and that release and utilization of individuality which will bring it to full maturity" (1933, 76). Whereas incommensurable values across individuals, groups, and countries are an inherent problem for any planned society, such as Plato's *Republic* or the former Soviet Union, these values are irreducible frictional factors of a continuously planning society.

This focus on plann*ing* through adaptive and generative decision processes may be clarified by contrasting the Kyoto Protocol with the Paris Climate Agreement. The Paris Agreement illustrates cooperative planning across the incommensurable values of diverse communities. At risk of

oversimplification, the Kyoto Protocol took a top-down, punitive approach tethered to an abstract principle of equitable emissions. According to Light (2017), who was confirmed in 2021 as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Energy for International Affairs, by emphasizing *ends fixed in advance*, with penalties attached, Kyoto precipitated a race to the bottom when it came to agreeing on binding targets. In contrast, the Paris Agreement took a bottom-up, "pledge and review" approach (aka "shame and blame"), which Light regards as exemplifying a pragmatic emphasis on adaptive action, making it more likely that evolving situations will be met creatively *and* with higher ambition.

    As a model for climate diplomacy, Light thus focuses pragmatically on a decision process to elicit the generative possibilities of an international community shackled by an overly legalistic approach that was insensitive to seemingly intractable tensions, no matter how equitable it was in the abstract. Light adds that Paris is ameliorative and encourages the celebration of intermediate progress as part of five-year plans in which countries convene (beginning November 2021), report out, and pressure each other to be more ambitious. In this way, unlike the plann*ed* Kyoto Protocol, Paris can strategically navigate discordant values *as long as* countries keep planning together.

Light, like Dewey, concurs that there must be quasi-definite, albeit revisable, agreed-upon goals to focus our ambitions. But both reject 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 (Dewey 1922, 197-198).

Norton (2015) clarifies this pragmatist approach to decision making, planning, and goal-setting in the playful spirit of Isaiah Berlin's "The Hedgehog and the Fox" (1953), with a binary heuristic that would amount to caricature if applied *in toto* to any individual moral or political theorist. There are two kinds of intellectuals, Berlin proposed in his tongue-in-cheek riff on Archilochus: monistic hedgehogs and pluralistic foxes. He contrasted the "centripetal" (centralized) actions and ideas of the hedgehog with the "centrifugal" (decentralized) ones of the protean fox. Norton picks up the image here. The monistic hedgehog asserts that its job as a theorist is to show which antecedently defended, (relatively) static principles should govern choice. So the incorrigible hedgehog focuses first on getting the

theory all worked out and then impersonally deciding whose values measure up to its supreme or "optimal" metric. Start with getting the theory right, and the rest follows! Meanwhile, the participatory fox, at home in wickedly complex systems and spotlighting the fallibility and incompleteness of any decision or policy, attends to adaptive *processes* through which we may *interpersonally* or intra-nationally decide what to *do*, listen, pursue creative leads, take stock, critique choices, and correct our mistakes.

Returning to climate diplomacy as an example of environmental pragmatism at work, hedgehog processes (akin to Kyoto) are expert-governed to predetermine a metric that will yield the right, optimal, or ideal outcome. Meanwhile, foxlike processes (akin to Paris) strive to engage communities or their proxies in what Norton characterizes as Deweyan "social learning," which Norton (2015) understands as a scientifically informed procedural feedback loop for intelligently adapting policies to situations by incorporating representative stakeholders. Foxlike processes may thereby increase ambition toward achieving superordinate goals and, at least potentially, foster growth in the public imagination as both means and end.

There are promising signs that Paris's "foxlike" pledge-and-review approach to one-upmanship among countries is working, and is moreover helping to scale up public-private partnerships that will be required to radically reconstruct markets. The April 2021 Earth Day international climate summit hosted by U.S. President Biden was distinguished by countries boasting about their accomplishments and green economy innovations (e.g., carbon pricing). Countries competed with each other's greenhouse emission targets to mitigate climate change, and there was unrelenting pressure placed on wealthy nations to increase their financial commitments to climate justice to help poorer countries adapt. "The theme of this conference is raising ambition," said U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry in his wrap-up to the first session, and "raising ambition" was indeed the leitmotif used throughout by heads of state, NGOs, and corporate executives. For example, French President Macron announced at that conference that "2030 is the new 2050" for achieving the agreed-upon goal of net-zero carbon emissions, positioning France ahead of Germany in its goals, even as German Chancellor Merkel announced 55% reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, thereby outpacing President Biden's relatively aggressive new target of halving U.S. emissions by the same date.

Environmental pragmatists' emphasis on continuous cooperative planning does not imply that they sidestep the evaluation of principles. For example, there are tensions between the precautionary principle and welfare-based cost-benefit analyses, and there are debates in climate ethics underlying the discount rate. It is perilous to ignore principles, not least because this undemocratically leave the consequences of following divergent principles solely to those with technical expertise. Nevertheless, pragmatists focus less on debates about which general principles are the all-encompassing "right" ones for thinking about and governing human relationships.

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Suggested Readings

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