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L. Pippa Callanan
info@ubiquitypress.com

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Intrinsic Value for the Environmental Pragmatist

L. Pippa Callanan
Portland State University

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Introduction

Motivated by the disconnect between the seeming impossibility of resolving deep metaphysical disputes, and the pressing need for environmental action, many environmental philosophers have embraced environmental pragmatism. Environmental pragmatists focus on the practical effects of philosophical arguments. With this as their agenda, environmental pragmatists have consistently endorsed anthropocentrism as the value system for discussing environmental issues, in order to achieve efficacious results. This is based on the notion that appeals to human goods are the best means for motivating humans to action. This essay will show some conceptual and empirical problems with this pretense, to argue that true environmental pragmatists ought to supplement anthropocentric values with nonanthropocentric value of the non-human world.

One of the most influential environmental pragmatists, Andrew Light, provides a valuable distinction between metaphilosophical and philosophical pragmatism. As Light describes it, the task of metaphilosophical pragmatism is to “treat pragmatism as providing the rules and principles within which environmental philosophy should be conducted.”¹ This means that the pragmatist must have a “willingness to give up past prejudices against certain forms of theorizing... and to embrace some form of pluralism in the assessment and communication of normative issues in environmental concerns.”² Ultimately, environmental pragmatists wish to engage in theoretical discussions that bring about positive real world results. In this spirit, shouldn’t everyone have some form of metaphilosophical environmental pragmatism in mind? Arguably, some philosophers do not hold any of the metaphilosophical concerns of pragmatism, such as Callicott.³ However, if philosophers are reacting to environmental crises, their philosophy must return to the empirical problem that initiates their concern. Otherwise,

it appears that philosophers are simply enjoying a problem. Enjoying a problem is not morally acceptable given the imminent and potentially dire consequences of inaction.

Yet metaphilosophical environmental pragmatism provides no philosophical content. The philosophical content of environmental pragmatism is an empirical question: what do people value and what motivates people to action? Environmental pragmatists have largely assumed that they can fill the metaphilosophical framework with the philosophical content of anthropocentrism.

The contributions of Norton and Light have significantly shaped the character of philosophical pragmatism. Norton is a fierce proponent of weak anthropocentrism as the value system most conducive to motivating people to protect the environment. The reasons for this commitment are largely due to metaphysical concerns and the fact that intrinsic value is too far reaching of an abstraction to be useful.⁴ Norton thinks that this warrants not only support of anthropocentric value but also the exclusion of nonanthropocentric value.

Norton's support of anthropocentrism and exclusion of nonanthropocentric value has significantly shaped other pragmatist's attitudes. For example, Light frequently aligns himself with Norton's efforts in supporting anthropocentrism. Like Norton, Light claims that nonanthropocentric value "betrays" the metaphilosophical goals of pragmatism.⁵ Furthermore, Light argues that we should abandon nonanthropocentrism given "the overwhelming ethical anthropocentrism of most humans (amply demonstrated by studies like Kempton et al.)."⁶

We find that the contemporary environmental pragmatists' move to favor anthropocentrism is a mistake given the conceptual issues and the available empirical evidence. Thus, let us turn to Kempton's salient empirical study from which Light bases his commitment to anthropocentrism. Kempton highlights both the conceptual and empirical problems we wish to address.

How to Read Kempton: Finding a Consensus and Plurality

Kempton's study of American environmental values is important for several reasons. The study is widely considered to be authoritative because its findings are supported by an unusually rich and rigorous methodology, adapted from the methods of cultural and cognitive anthropology. The study design combines open-ended personal interviews with fixed-form quantitative surveys for diversity in data collection methods. Kempton's method combines the freedom of the open-ended response with the systematicity of the fixed-form survey. Additionally, this method is strengthened by drawing on a large sample population, to establish public opinion, and from carefully selected specialist groups that were deliberately chosen to exhibit a wide range of environmental views.⁷

What makes Kempton's study particularly interesting is that he finds *consensus* in a *plurality* of American values. This study shows that Americans value the environment in many different ways, thus there is a plurality of values. Kempton analyzes the most prominent values into three different yet interrelated value systems: religious, anthropocentric and biocentric values. His finding that there is a plurality of values is not surprising given the disparity of social, economic, gender, and racial backgrounds and varying proximity and relationship to nature of many Americans. What is interesting about his study is that the plurality of values is endorsed in similar ways among Americans, forming a kind of consensus among seemingly disparate groups. This supports his claim that there are such things as American environmental values.

Pragmatists ought to seize the idea of consensus on environmental issues; it partly eases the pragmatists' burden of knowing how to appeal to public interest. This is not to say that the pragmatist should cater his efforts to appeal to the majority opinion, for it is often necessary to persuade minority groups to enjoin in efforts that the pragmatist sees as valuable or worthy. Rather, the range of values that form an American consensus ought to be understood for achieving the pragmatists' metaphilosophical goals.

Environmental pragmatists have rightly noticed a consensus on importance of the concern for future generations. For example, Kempton concludes that the "concern for the future of children and descendents emerged as one of the strongest values in interviews."⁸ A landmark study conducted by Minter and Manning demonstrates very similar findings: the concern for future generations ranks highest among American environmental concerns in terms of frequency and importance.⁹

Unfortunately, Pragmatists have focused on this value to the detriment of implementing other values. Furthermore, because Kempton classifies the concern for future generations as an anthropocentric value, pragmatists have taken this as evidence to support a vow of fidelity, even monogamy, to anthropocentrism. However, the concern for future generations is not such a simple value. Kempton notes that the concern and emotional force for future generations consistently begins with a concern for one's own children. From here, many abstract to future generations. Thus the concern for future generations has an underlying ambiguity that, once realized, shows that there are two types of valuation occurring. One classification is consistent with Kempton's taxonomy and the pragmatists' interpretation: concern for future generations is an anthropocentric value. However, the second way that the concern for future generations should be understood is egocentric. Impetus to preserve nature out of a concern for future generations is not only, perhaps not even primarily, for the sake of continuing humanity in the abstract, but in continuing one's own blood.

We do not discount the consensus and importance of anthropocentric value, for it has many appeals. Anthropocentric value obviously appeals to an overwhelming majority of people. It is also a versatile value in that it is inherently pluralistic. For example,

anything that counts as benefiting humanity is anthropocentric. From a pragmatic perspective, pluralistic values are useful; they can more effectively reach a wider audience. Typically, pragmatists commit themselves to pluralism, as opposed to monism.

However, it is not clear how or why this has resulted in the exclusion of nonanthropocentric value. McShane's comments to Norton serves as a valuable remark to other pragmatists, "that it would be an open-empirical question as to which things in the world can have preferences of the kind that the theory says are relevant to the existence of value."¹⁰ This is another way of saying that the pragmatists ought to be flexible enough to use and include any available empirically important value in their philosophical pragmatism. Why not be pluralistic in the types of value we admit? Admitting of nonanthropocentric value does not mean that it is at all able to trump anthropocentric value, and thus push us into monism. Instead, nonanthropocentrism as a type of value can add to a fuller pluralism.

Furthermore, Kempton's findings do not allow anthropocentrism to be the only value pragmatists utilize, no matter how important it is. Since philosophical pragmatism requires an empirical investigation, ignoring the empirical evidence of Kempton's studies is unwise for the pragmatist. We find that many pragmatists today attempt to reduce all values into anthropocentrism, blind to the empirical fact that intrinsic valuation is already meaningful. Even if the ordinary person does not know what the philosophical term "intrinsic" means, Kempton's findings show that the ordinary person widely ascribes intrinsic value to nature. Most often, this intrinsic valuation is demonstrated by a spiritual or religious connection to nature and a sense of a land ethic.

The Religious Value of Nature

A portion of Kempton's study investigates potential religious or spiritual value Americans attribute to nature. For those that are religious, most notably in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Kempton finds that there are primarily two incompatible interpretations of scripture that influence people's valuation of nature. The first is a strong anthropocentrism that man is warranted to exploit nature because of his "transcendence of, and mastery over nature".¹¹ However, this valuation of nature is not widely held. Furthermore, the informants who expressed this value did not believe it to constitute permission to destroy nature. This leads us to the second interpretation of scripture: that humans have a duty to protect nature as inherently valuable because it is God's creation.¹² More than 75% of people agreed that it is wrong to abuse the natural world because God created it. This moral evaluation cannot be captured by anthropocentrism. The religious value of nature is nonanthropocentric because it is not about benefiting man in terms of economic profit, use of resources, aesthetic appreciation, or as a means of salvation. Instead Kempton shows that people articulate this religious value of nature as a respect for the sacredness of nature as God's creation.

Sacredness seems to ring of intrinsic value, or at the very least, nonanthropocentric value.¹³ Kempton himself characterizes this appreciation of the sanctity of nature as intrinsic value by showing that people infrequently express this relationship as “a vehicle for humans to experience God’s presence, peace and healing energy” and more often as a direct relationship to nature.¹⁴

Interestingly, Kempton finds that the religious or spiritual value of nature is widely held even among people who do not consider themselves religious or spiritual. Furthermore, he finds that “religious discourse can be useful to scaffold moral arguments even among the agnostic”.¹⁵ Even people who claimed no religious or spiritual orientation appealed to God to articulate their moral valuation of nature. From this Kempton observes that a person “who would not invoke God in other contexts, does so in order to talk about (and think about) the meaning she gives to nature.”¹⁶

The religious value of nature should not be underestimated among environmental pragmatists for the American population is widely and often deeply religious. Not only is a large portion of our population religious or spiritual, there is strong evidence to show that the religious community is an unusually important part of our policymaking. This may be because the religious community has an unusually well united voice, and is often very active in making their beliefs match their actions. When this united voice is conjoined with the finical power of the church, the religious sector constitutes an important piece of our democratic process. Furthermore, Kempton shows that the religious community widely consider themselves environmental advocates. For these reasons, environmental pragmatists should attempt to make the values they promote compatible with religious values. Some secular philosophers might balk at adding the consideration of religious value to the pragmatist’s toolkit. However, if religious value is already meaningful to a large and influential population, as Kempton has shown it is, these concerns about accommodating religious value are not coherent with pragmatism. Furthermore, it is important not to confuse the religious value Kempton finds with what Norton calls transformative value. While Norton is correct that nature does have spiritual value in so far as nature provides transformative experiences, Kempton’s study shows that people care about nature independently of their own transformations.

Biocentric Value

Kempton also studies the potential biocentric value of nature and concludes that it plays an important role in our moral consideration of nature. One of his significant findings is that people commonly ascribe intrinsic value by acknowledging that nature has rights. This belief in intrinsic value is most commonly expressed by valuing the survival of other species, even when it comes at a cost to humans. Kempton finds that 77-87% of the three moderate subgroups believe that “all species have a right to evolve without human interference”. When pitted against the interests of human interests, 83-87% of the three moderate subgroups disagreed with the claim that there is no reason to worry

much about a species going extinct if there is no economic, aesthetic or other human use in the species survival. This statistic shows that Americans distinguish between anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric values. As a matter of basic logic, in order for there to be a distinction, there must be two types of things. This means that ordinary people do in fact believe in nonanthropocentric value as different, and at least unreflectively irreducible to anthropocentric value.

The high level of agreement reflected in this statistic shows that Americans quite uniformly value nature in nonanthropocentric ways. This is made more dramatically evident in that, according to Kempton's study, 40-50% of the three moderate subgroups humans would rather see a few humans suffer or even be killed than see a species go extinct. If a person is willing to have people suffer or even die for the continuation of nonhuman species, it shows that anthropocentric value cannot be the only value that enters into our consideration of nature. Even though it falls short of a majority view, it shows that a large number of Americans believe strongly enough in nonanthropocentric value that they are willing to make human sacrifices in order to respect the intrinsic value of nature.

Intrinsic Value Makes Sense of Love and Awe

Properly understanding the plurality of environmental values is important to appreciating the shortcomings of excluding nonanthropocentrism. In addition to the evidence that Kempton's provides, Katie McShane powerfully captures something that anthropocentric value misses: a proper account of love, affection and awe. McShane shows us that any sense of love cannot be adequately understood in a purely anthropocentric value system. Environmental pragmatists, particularly Norton, have worked to refute her arguments, by showing that love, affection and awe can be understood within anthropocentrism.

On the face, Norton's response looks more like an attempt at salvaging a theory at the cost of altering our ordinary conception and use of the term love. People do have a sense of awe and wonder when they see the Redwoods for the first time, when they see a particularly brilliant sunset or when have love for their pet dog. As McShane shows, when a person expresses love for their dog, the direction of affection points to the object of affection, not back toward their own self. If the expression of affection were not pointed toward the object, would the object be incidental to the emotion? This would be like saying that anything that induced a similar effect on the lover would be "loved". While this may not sound absurd initially, it fails to explain why people do not claim to love their anti-depression medication. If anti-depressants can induce a kind of pleasant emotion, then why not love them? What if there was an even more powerful drug that could induce a stronger emotion than the affection one has for one's dog or wife? On an anthropocentric account, why would we not substitute the pill for our dog- or put stronger yet- our spouse?

This example brings to light two important issues of our ordinary concept of love. First, most people would not imagine the above scenario as even a possibility; the substitute would be a hollow replacement. However, anthropocentrism cannot explain the common intuition that this is a hollow replacement. A more intuitive explanation is readily available to the nonanthropocentrist: the love of the pill is empty because the object of affection matters, whether it is for a spouse, dog or tree. As McShane indicates, the object of affection is not incidental to our ordinary use and experience of love. Part of what happens when we experience love for someone or something is a recognition of and respect for the qualities and character of the loved. This is not only in respect to bettering or benefiting one's self, but rather an intrinsic appreciation for the loved. Because there is nothing intrinsic to the pill to love or respect, the concept of pill-love is entirely vacuous. Norton may refute this argument through a reduction of love into anthropocentrism, but this project makes no sense from a pragmatic perspective. If people's use of "love" seems to indicate an intrinsic appreciation of the loved, if the emotion is a relatively unreflective one, then attempts to show a "hidden" nature to love has no clear pragmatic payoff. This suggests that Norton's tactic of incorporating love into anthropocentrism is not an adequately pragmatic approach to McShane's findings. Instead, Norton's intellectual fight looks like a dogmatic commitment to anthropocentrism when considering the philosophical flexibility of pragmatism.

While McShane's arguments provide a powerful case to the shortcomings of anthropocentrism, she does not offer an account of how a pragmatist can use her findings. We propose that a proper pragmatic response to McShane is to figure out how to make McShane's findings useful. The immediate consequence of this is that the pragmatists' agenda is best fulfilled by ceasing projects that attempt to reduce nonanthropocentrism into anthropocentrism at the cost of making certain concepts- or emotions- unintelligible to the ordinary person.

The cost of making concepts fit into an anthropocentric framework is too high in that it obscures our ordinary experience and use of emotions. Furthermore, emotions are too valuable to lose because emotions often are as powerful a motivating force to action as intellectual reasons. We agree that obscuring terms and concepts are not conducive to achieving practical ends. The pragmatists' project of reducing nonanthropocentrism into anthropocentrism results in unnecessary and abstractions to otherwise accessible values. In this way, environmental pragmatists have not been pragmatic enough.

How the Pragmatist Can Use Nonanthropocentric Value

So how should a pragmatist use intrinsic value? One option becomes clear when understanding McShane's and Kempton's findings together. Kempton finds that 97% of responders consider themselves an animal lover.¹⁷ If McShane is correct, as we believe she is, then Americans nearly universally attribute intrinsic value to the nonhuman

world. If McShane is right, intrinsic value is not only extremely common but also an important value in explaining how people relate to their environment and the creatures within it. For even if people do not explicitly recognize it, their love, awe and respect rely on a nonanthropocentric value of the nonhuman world. Furthermore, the presence of intrinsic value seems to be quite unproblematic for the ordinary person, even if they are not familiar with the philosophical term “intrinsic,” people seem to be widely ascribing it to nature without difficulty. This suggests that intrinsic value is a meaningful concept in making sense of our relationship to nature and its creatures. Finally, if people care about the object for its own sake, as is consistent with McShane’s account, this seems to be a very easy and effective way for a pragmatist to motivate people into action that is in line with their values. In other words, being limited to anthropocentrism seems to only hinder the pragmatist in accessing an already meaningful source of value.

Though McShane’s account seems to have more pragmatic payoff and seems to better account for our unexamined experience of love, awe and affection, what if Norton is really correct? Even if Norton were correct, his account results in a theory that is too abstract and disconnected to be very useful. Perhaps Norton’s findings might salvage anthropocentrism as the only source of value, but it seems to limit our ability to make sense of people’s ordinary experience of love. As Norton admits, pragmatists don’t care about what is true, but what is useful.¹⁸ We have shown that McShane’s account can be made entirely useful for understanding the widely held values of many Americans. Not only is Norton’s reduction of love into anthropocentrism not useful, but it also fails to recognize the potential use of intrinsic value to his practical ends. We ask that Norton better adhere to the principles he claims to be committed to.

How Should Pragmatism Now Direct its Efforts?

The study of people’s values of nature is an entirely relevant pragmatist question because it can reveal people’s relationship to and moral evaluation of nature. However, valuation does not equal motivation, which does not equal action, and pragmatists care about action. Though this presents a worry, understanding value and supporting a philosophy that is conducive to people’s values is a start toward practical ends. The next pragmatic course of action is to assimilate the plurality of values demonstrated by Kempton into a pragmatic framework. Once this has been achieved, the empirical question of how to convert these values into motivation and subsequent action is necessary. This is a slightly different question that many pragmatists have been asking.

Conclusion: Intrinsic Value for the Environmental Pragmatist

Whether or not people are in fact motivated by intrinsic value is an empirical question. This essay has used Kempton’s studies to show that intrinsic and nonanthropocentric value is an important and widely held environmental value. Without doubt,

nonanthropocentrism does not exclude the prominence of anthropocentrism in contributing to people's moral consideration of nature. Though anthropocentric value is nearly universal, Kempton finds that "Americans overwhelmingly reject statements that nature's only function is to serve man".¹⁹ Instead, anthropocentrism is expressed as one of many environmental values: religious, anthropocentric and biocentric.²⁰ Environmental pragmatism strives for a worthy goal of affecting practical results as a response to pressing environmental crises. However, based on the empirical evidence, environmental pragmatist's sole commitment to anthropocentrism betrays their metaphilosophical commitments. Based on the empirical evidence, giving up on intrinsic value means giving up on pragmatism.

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¹ Light, "On the Weston-Katz Debate" p 330

² Ibid. Light makes it clear that he is not *necessarily* committed to a pluralism, but only in so far as it is pragmatically advantageous.

³ For example, Callicott's project of ethical foundationalism and monism is not driven by metaphilosophical pragmatism.

⁴ Weston further develops a concern for the abstract character of intrinsic value. cf. Weston, Anthony. "Beyond Intrinsic Value". pp 288-289.

⁵ Light, "On the Weston-Katz Debate" p 332

⁶ What is Pragmatic Philosophy p 345

⁷ Kempton, Willet. et all. *Environmental Values in American Culture*. MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1995. p 19. Forty-six people participated in the open-ended interviews: twenty lay informants and five from four chosen specialties (grassroots environmentalists, coal industry workers, congressional staff working on environmental legislation, and automotive engineers). The lay informants were selected from various socio-economic backgrounds and two of the lay informants were selected because they expressed anti-environmental sentiments, so as to insure that a range of views were represented. The semistructured informant's had an average age of forty-three, median income of \$35,000, 67% were male, 46% were republican and had on average completed fifteen years of school. The fixed-form survey was constructed by extracting frequently represented views from the interview into a survey format. Five groups were selected for the survey sample. Two environmentalist groups, Earth First!, The Sierra Club; two groups whose business was hurt by environmental legislation, saw-mill workers and dry-cleaners, and a general public in California. Each of the five groups consisted of twenty-five to thirty informants. The sample drew from 142 people, who on average were 67% male, had fourteen years of school, and 32% belonged to an organized religion.

⁸ Kempton, Willet. et al. *Environmental Values in American Culture*. MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1995. p 95

⁹ Minter and Manning. pp 199

¹⁰ McShane “Reply to Norton” p 20

¹¹ Kempton, Willet. et al. p 89. This quote cites White 1967.

¹² Ibid. p 90. The individual referenced is “Marge”. When she was asked to justify her disapproval of species extinction, she said: “Just because they’re here. I mean, I don’t know. Because God put them on this earth... I don’t really believe in God in the sense that I don’t go to church... I definitely have scientific view of how we got here, but... I don’t see why we should be able to decide what species live and which die. I don’t see what makes us superior.”

¹³ Though it may be a funny kind of intrinsic value because it requires god to put it there.

¹⁴ Kempton, Willet. et al. p 92

¹⁵ Ibid. p 90

¹⁶ Ibid. p 91

¹⁷ Ibid. p 106

¹⁸ Norton, Bryan. “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism”. p133.

¹⁹ Kempton, Willet. et al. p 102

²⁰ Ibid. p 88