

# Contemporary Environmental Ethics

## An Overview and Pragmatic Alternative

Andrew Light

Department of Philosophy and School of Public Affairs  
University of Washington, Seattle

alight@u.washington.edu

## Contemporary Environmental Ethics

1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism
2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy
3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatic Alternative

### 1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism



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- Two Primary Questions: (1) How has philosophy contributed to the creation of environmental problems? (2) What could philosophers contribute to the resolution of those problems commensurate with their talents?
- In answer to (1): Anthropocentrism in ethics.
- In answer to (2): Nonanthropocentrism.

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- Two Primary Questions: (1) How has philosophy contributed to the creation of environmental problems? (2) What could philosophers contribute to the resolution of those problems commensurate with their talents?
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- In answer to (2): Nonanthropocentrism.
- **As much theoretical as applied, possibly more so.**

## 1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

anthropocentrism: The restriction of direct moral obligations only to humans.

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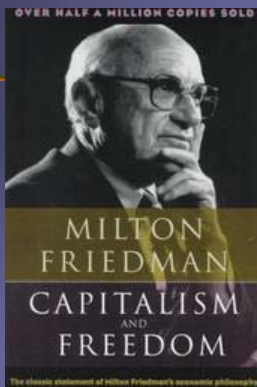
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intrinsic value: The worth objects have in their own right, independent of their value to any other end.

instrumental value: The worth objects have in fulfilling other ends.

## An Economist



## 1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

"It is increasingly said that civilization, Western civilization at least, stands in need of a new ethic (and derivatively of a new economics) setting out people's relations to the natural environment, in Leopold's words, 'an ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.' It is not of course that old and prevailing ethics do not deal with man's relation to nature; they do, and on the prevailing view man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, i. e., his relations with nature, insofar at least as they do not affect others, are not subject to moral censure."

Richard Sylvan, "Is there a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" *Proceedings of the XV World Congress of Philosophy*, 1973, 1.

## 1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

"... the question of whether environmental ethics is distinctive [Sylvan's question] is taken as equivalent to the question of whether an environmental ethic must reject anthropocentrism. . . . Environmental ethics is seen as distinctive vis-à-vis standard ethics if and only if environmental ethics can be founded upon principles which assert or presuppose that nonhuman natural entities have value independent of human value. (. . .) Anthropocentrists are therefore taken to believe that every instance of value originates in a contribution to human values and that all elements of nature can, at most, have value instrumental to the satisfaction of human interests."

Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), 182-183.

## 1. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

### Alternative Views

#### Stewardship

Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974)

#### • "Weak" Anthropocentrism

Norton (1987) and Hargrove (1992)



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- Methodological Environmental Pragmatism (Light '96, '02, '03)
- Civic Environmentalism vs. Ecological Identity (Light '03, Dobson '05, '06)

## 2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy



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### General Problem with classical environmental ethics:

"Natural resource managers and the general public take an overwhelmingly anthropocentric approach to the assessment of natural values. To not appeal to that audience is to give up on having an effect on the formation of better policies."

*The Environment Between Theory and Practice*  
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- Policy Relevance Problem

- Time Horizon Problem

## 2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy

**Example:** Eric Katz and Lauren Oechlsli, "Moving Beyond Anthropocentrism: Environmental Ethics, Development, and the Amazon," *Environmental Ethics* Spring 2003.

**Overview:** Presentation of an "indirect" case for nonanthropocentrism by showing that anthropocentrism cannot provide a fair or just argument for why the Brazilian rainforest should be preserved.

- Problems of "utility."
- Problems of "justice" and "imperialism."

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- Problems of "utility."
- Problems of "justice" and "imperialism."
- Alternative: **Assuming** the existence of a nonanthropocentric moral theory, "questions of the tradeoffs and comparisons of human benefits, as well as questions of international justice would no longer dominate the discussion." Embracing such a view makes "questions of human benefit and satisfaction irrelevant."

## 2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy

### 3 Problems with Katz/Oechsli argument.

- **Politically suicidal:** Adopting an approach that permits environmentalists to ignore the issues of human needs and welfare that are always part of these discussions will either make the environmentalist position unnecessarily caustic or justify elimination of them from discussions.

## 2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy

### 3 Problems with Katz/Oechsli argument.

- **Politically suicidal:** Adopting an approach that permits environmentalists to ignore the issues of human needs and welfare that are always part of these discussions will either make the environmentalist position unnecessarily caustic or justify elimination of them from discussions.
- **Nonanthropocentrism could be seen as imperialistic.**

## 2. Nonanthropocentrism and Environmental Policy

- **Ignores the empirical evidence** that anthropocentric motivations have been most effective in this case.  
Example: Chico Mendes' Brazilian Rubber Tappers Union.

"While Chico Mendes was certainly the best-known of the rural organizers, there are hundreds of them. And many, like him, are assassinated – not because they want to save the Amazon forests or are concerned about the greenhouse effect, but because they want to protect the resource base essential to the survival of their constituents."

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**Conclusion:** To insist on nonanthropocentrism as the preferred approach is to make a general metaethical claim absent an understanding of the context of the policy problem. As such it is likely to incur the **Policy Relevance Problem** and extend the **Time Horizon Problem**.

## 3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatist Alternative



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### What do environmental ethicists disagree on?

Mid 1970s-'80s Environmental Ethics splits in two:

**animal ethics: individualists**      **land ethics: holists**

**individualists:** Extension of moral consideration beyond humans should be limited to other individuals, namely, those individuals who could be argued to have interests (or with sentientism, are sentient) otherwise there is no coherent basis for ascribing value to non-human entities.

**holists:** Extension of moral consideration beyond humans should not be limited to individuals because individualism fails to offer direct reason for moral consideration of collective entities, e.g., ecosystems, wilderness or endangered species.

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**Leads to debates over therapeutic hunting, moral status of farm animals, etc.**

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#### What do environmental ethicists disagree on?

Example of Peter Singer and the rabbits. "Australian farmers and environmentalists are united in attempting to reduce the number of rabbits from Australia. From the point of view of an ethic of concern for all sentient beings, rabbits are beings with interests of their own, capable of feeling pain and suffering."

Still, no attempt by Singer to justify saving rabbits at the expense of the ecosystem. Argument seems to be more over who can provide a **direct vs. an indirect** argument for the moral consideration of an entity.

### 3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatist Alternative

**Claim 1:** Direct claims for why something is valuable may not be the most important in practice.

"Consider a more holistic picture according to which values are connected in a weblike way, so that any value can be justified by referring to those 'adjacent' to it. On this model there is no ultimate reference or stopping point simply because the series of justifications is ultimately, in a sense, circular: to justify or to explain a value is to reveal its organic place among our others. ( . . . ) If sometimes I value the mountain air because in it I feel healthy, other times I value health because it enables me to reach the mountains. If sometimes I value the melancholy glory of the autumn because it mirrors the closure of my own year, other times I value the rhythms of my yearly schedule because they mirror the glories of the seasons."

Anthony Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value."

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**Claim 2:** Ethical Practice in a Democratic Context Requires Pluralism.

- **Ethical monists** in environmental ethics argue that our goal should be similar to traditional ethics -- find the one true foundation to reconcile all competing obligations to others.
- *Environmentalists* must at some point reconcile themselves to the democratic context in which decisions are made.
- If environmental ethicists are to help in that project this gives us a practical warrant for pluralism over monism.

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**The methodological challenge for a policy relevant environmental ethics then is how to structure this warrant. . .**

### 3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatist Alternative

"Methodological Environmental Pragmatism"

- Assumes **pluralism**: goal is not only to find the one single reason for why nature has value but to describe the many different reasons that people can value nature.

### 3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatist Alternative

#### "Methodological Environmental Pragmatism"

- Assumes **pluralism**: goal is not only to find the one single reason for why nature has value but to describe the many different reasons that people can value nature.
- Adopts a **strategic anthropocentrism**: (1) use weak (or broad) anthropocentric arguments in order to persuade a broader array of people to embrace better policies, because (2) **indirect** anthropocentric justifications for environmental protection can plausibly speak to our ordinary moral intuitions more persuasively than nonanthropocentric justifications, e.g., **Obligations to Future Generations**.

### 3. The Policy Turn: A Pragmatist Alternative

See studies by Minter and Manning, *Environmental Ethics* 21 1999, and Kempton, et. al. *Environmental Values in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997):

"We found that our informants' descendants loom large in their thinking about environmental issues. Although our initial set of questions never asked about children, seventeen of the twenty lay informants themselves brought up children or future generations as a justification for environmental protection. Such a high proportion of respondents mentioning the same topic is unusual in answering an open-ended question. In fact, concern for the future of children and descendants emerged as one of the strongest values in the interviews." (95)

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- Begins with ends converged upon by the environmental community and translate those ends to a broader public = "public environmental philosophy".

"Provided anthropocentrists consider the full breadth of human values as they unfold into the indefinite future, and provided nonanthropocentrists endorse a consistent and coherent version of the view that nature has intrinsic value, all sides may be able to endorse a common policy direction."

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- Without convergence takes up more traditional philosophical tasks = "first environmental philosophy."