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# What's In a Name? Pragmatism, Essentialism, and Environmental Ethics

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## ABSTRACT

Essentialists like J. Baird Callicott have argued that one cannot have an environmental ethic unless one adopts the nonanthropocentric principle, which holds that things other than humans can be morally considerable in their own right, typically because they are thought to be intrinsically valuable. Pragmatists like Bryan Norton reject this; they claim that environmental ethics has no core or essence, and hence that the nonanthropocentric principle is not essential to an environmental ethic. Norton advances as an alternative the Convergence Hypothesis, which says that there are many different ways of justifying environmental principles and policies. In this paper I show that pragmatists and essentialists are arguing past one another because they fail to note two crucial points. First, they often propose different accounts of which principles constitute an environmental ethic and so they disagree about which principles must be justified. The nonanthropocentric principle may be required to justify the principles that Callicott believe to be constitutive of an environmental ethic, but it may be unnecessary to justify those principles that pragmatists think are constitutive. Second, essentialists and pragmatists often overlook the distinction to be made between the adequacy of a justification and its epistemic or rhetorical preferability. The nonanthropocentric principle may not be needed to provide an adequate justification of the constitutive principles and judgements, but a justification that contains the nonanthropocentric principle might nevertheless be epistemically preferable.

## KEY WORDS

Intrinsic value, pragmatism, nonanthropocentrism, environmental ethics

## I.

Are there any principles, policies or theories that a person must affirm if she is to have an environmental ethic? One group of environmental philosophers who will be referred to here as essentialists argues that there are.<sup>1</sup> J. Baird Callicott is often associated with this position, which holds that a person cannot be said to have an environmental ethic unless she maintains the principle that things other than humans are directly morally considerable, typically because they are thought to be the loci of intrinsic value.<sup>2</sup> Essentialists claim that this nonanthropocentric principle is an ineliminable component of an environmental ethic. A second group, which often refers to its view as pragmatism and which draws much of its inspiration from the work of Bryan Norton, rejects this claim. They hold that an environmental ethic has no core or essence. There is no principle, including the nonanthropocentric one, which must be adopted if one is to have an environmental ethic.<sup>3</sup>

There are two distinct levels at which the essentialist-pragmatist debate may be joined, however. Some relatively concrete moral judgements concerning how we ought to treat ecosystems or species or living things are usually understood by both essentialists and pragmatists to be essential components of an environmental ethic. For example, a person who thinks it is morally permissible to drive a species to the brink of extinction just to satisfy some frivolous human want has ethical views and may even have a sophisticated moral theory which justifies those views, but she does not have an environmental ethic. Judgements like this make up the core of an environmental ethic. Thus a limited version of essentialism is correct but relatively uninteresting and trivial, since pragmatists themselves accept a core at this ground level. The real source of the disagreement between pragmatists and essentialists is revealed when we ask whether there is any reason to accept the core judgements, to think that they are true or justified. Essentialists argue that any set of moral principles that can adequately justify the core judgements will necessarily include the nonanthropocentric principle. The pragmatist position is captured by Norton's Convergence Hypothesis, which holds that there is more than one adequate justificatory set, and that some of these do not include the nonanthropocentric principle. If that is right then no one justificatory set or individual principle is essential for an environmental ethic, and pragmatism at the justificatory level is correct.

These two views are in direct conflict, however, only if they agree on which principles are in the core and so are looking to justify the same core. If we suppose to the contrary that pragmatists and essentialists have distinct accounts of which principles are in the core and how that core is to be determined, then they will fail to join argument with one another over the issue of whether or not the nonanthropocentric principle is an essential justificatory principle, since they will be trying to justify two different sets of principles. In that case the debate between them will be otiose; they must first resolve the problem of how to

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determine the core of an environmental ethic before they can ask whether there is more than one way to justify it.

## II.

Are there any moral principles or 'ought' judgements that one must hold to have an environmental ethic? Ordinary language suggests there are, in contrast with other areas of applied philosophy. It would be unusual to say that someone *had* a business or medical ethic. One *does* business ethics or medical ethics, one works in those areas, but one *has* an environmental ethic. These are not just linguistic accidents but rather mark out an important asymmetry between how we think about environmental ethics in contrast to these other fields, which are neutral in the sense that they do not require any particular moral commitments. For example, in medical ethics one encounters a problem set concerning how we ought to treat fetuses and neonates. One would only be said not to do medical ethics if his overall ethical theory had no implications for these sorts of issues, or if he just had nothing to say about them. As long as a person tries to figure out whether or not it is morally permissible to allow severely disabled new-borns to die, he is doing medical ethics, whatever answer he gives. His answer indicates *what sort of* medical ethic he has, not *whether* he has one. The same holds true of business ethics. One does business ethics as long as one thinks about and morally evaluates business practices. *How* he evaluates those practices does not determine whether he has a business ethic. Someone might think that providing safe work places is not morally obligatory, or that employers have a right to hire and fire at will. Many would argue that such a person had a mistaken business ethic, but he has a business ethic nonetheless.

On the other hand, a person who thinks that it is morally permissible to bulldoze a pristine wilderness area and thereby drive a species to the brink of extinction just to build another shopping mall would be said to have not merely a false or mistaken environmental ethic; she would have no environmental ethic at all. Thus, having an environmental ethic commits one to accepting some views and rejecting others. If that is right, then the essentialist point is correct at the ground level. Having an environmental ethic entails affirming or endorsing certain 'ought' judgements concerning our treatment of nature. I will refer to these as the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic.

How do we determine which principles are constitutive? Perhaps the pragmatists' point is not that there is no core but rather that there is no way to determine what goes into it. But again our intuitions and ordinary usage suggest otherwise. Surely we can say that the principle that it is morally permissible to cut down an old growth forest to produce luxury toothpicks is not in the set of judgements that is constitutive of an environmental ethic. The pragmatist point might then be further weakened to the claim that reliance on ordinary usage and

intuitions will not get us very far in determining what goes into the set and what doesn't, and that there is no criterion over and above our linguistic intuitions for determining this. Pragmatists might add that for any proposed criterion there will always be an alternative that will serve equally well and that consequently no criterion can be privileged over any other.

The challenge then is to find some criterion for determining which principles are constitutive of an environmental ethic and to show that there is good reason to prefer it to others. In an extremely influential early paper Bryan Norton offers some remarks that turn out to be very helpful here. Norton (1984: 132) notes that

all environmentally sensitive individuals believe that there is a set of human behaviors that do or would damage the environment. Further, I assume that there is considerable agreement among such individuals about what behaviors are included in that set. Most would decry, for example, careless storage of toxic wastes, grossly overpopulating the world with humans, wanton destruction of other species, air and water pollution, and so forth.

The organising principle here, what these judgements all have in common, is that they are affirmed by 'environmentally sensitive individuals'. We might then adopt the following claim in light of Norton's remarks; a principle will be a constitutive principle of an environmental ethic if it is affirmed generally by people who care about and have a concern for the environment. Admittedly this criterion is neither precise nor rigorous. Some judgements will be controversial within the community of environmentally sensitive individuals. But those individuals will agree on some judgements, including presumably those on Norton's list, and so the criterion is neither empty nor impractical but rather provides a framework for determining whether a principle or judgement is constitutive. For example, the judgement that it would be wrong to allow a significant increase in air pollution just to save a penny or two on a gallon of gasoline would in all likelihood be endorsed by environmentally sensitive people and so counts as a constitutive principle.

Two points must be stressed here, for they are important for the subsequent discussion. First, inclusion in the set of constitutive principles is not determined by whether or not they can be derived from broader, more general moral principles, either deductively or in some looser way. The reason for their inclusion is far simpler and more pedestrian; they are those beliefs shared by people who have exhibited care and concern for the environment. Second, one's answer to issues which are controversial *within* the community of those who care about the environment cannot be decisive in determining whether or not one is an environmentalist or has an environmental ethic. Since the constitutive set is determined by beliefs that are largely shared by those who care about the environment, there is a guarantee that the constitutive principles will be uncontroversial and thus that one's views on controversial issues will not disqualify one from holding an environmental ethic.

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If Norton's list is roughly accurate then the constitutive principles will have certain characteristics. First, they will occupy a mid-level position in terms of their generality. That is, the class of actions that they govern will be neither excessively broad nor narrow. This distinction is hard to pin down with any precision, but it is exhibited in the relation between the three moral injunctions, 'causing unnecessary pain and suffering is wrong', 'punching someone in the nose is wrong', and 'punching Joe Smith in the nose today is wrong.' Based on the sample provided by Norton, the constitutive principles will make moral claims about actions such as preserving species and wilderness, reducing air and water pollution and so forth.<sup>4</sup> They will not invoke broad concepts such as intrinsic value or generic 'harm' to any living creature. On the other hand, they will not be narrowly specific. They will not be judgements about how we ought to treat particular species or wilderness areas, they will involve no proper names, and they will not be policy recommendations. 'We ought not to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge' then will not count as a constitutive principle (although if other relevant facts hold then of course it follows from the constitutive principles just as readily as the claim that one ought not to punch Joe Smith in the nose today follows from the claim that punching someone in the nose is wrong).

Furthermore, as a rule, given their need to receive broad-based support among environmentalists, the constitutive principles are unlikely to be exceptionless, universal judgements. Or if they are intended in that way, they will probably be meant as *prima facie* principles with an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause. For example, most environmentalists who believe that species should be preserved take this to be a *prima facie* judgement. People who care about the environment would allow for the sacrifice of a species now and again if such sacrifice were necessary for the survival of a significant number of humans and if there were policies in place to make sure this sort of either/or dilemma was unlikely to occur in the future.

One worry about Norton's criterion is that it is circular. We determine whether a principle is constitutive by asking whether it is generally affirmed by people who care about the environment. But if we then go on to identify 'people who care about the environment' as 'those who affirm the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic' then we have a tight, objectionable circle, since it makes the questions of what constitutes an environmental ethic and who is an environmentally sensitive person logically interdependent. So we need some other way of identifying environmentally sensitive individuals that does not introduce the question of whether or not they hold certain beliefs about the environment. One possibility is to identify environmentally sensitive individuals as those who exhibit their care for the environment by acting regularly in ways designed to protect the health of the environment. People show themselves to be environmentally sensitive by joining and participating in groups dedicated to environmental protection or by writing to their legislators in support of policies

and legislation designed to maintain a healthy environment, for example. We can then hold that the beliefs of such people concerning how we ought to treat the environment are the determining factor in which judgements are constitutive of an environmental ethic.

### III.

Once we have identified the set of constitutive principles that defines an environmental ethic, we need to ask whether these principles can be justified, whether there is any reason for thinking they are true. Certainly in the absence of some justification it is difficult to see how people who behave in ways that are harmful to the environment and wildlife might be rationally persuaded to alter their beliefs and behaviour, and even why they should do so. Since these principles are moral judgements concerning our treatment of the environment, the suggestion that there is no justification for them would entail either that they are self-evident, which aside from being a difficult position to maintain is certainly one that pragmatists would not endorse, or that for some reason the whole project of justifying moral judgements is suspect. Now pragmatists have sometimes said things which appear to endorse this latter view. But a closer look shows that they should not be understood as rejecting the goal of justifying one's normative beliefs but rather the view that an acceptable justification must take a specific form, namely that it must be foundational rather than coherentist, and that the foundational principles are somehow knowable *a priori*. For example, Ben Minteer (1998: 334) says approvingly of Norton's view that,

At a more philosophical level, Norton's contextualism suggests that the justification of moral claims about the natural world, rather than being a matter of reasoning back to a class of immutable first principles which enjoy a universal currency in the resolution of environmental problems, is instead a process of supporting ethical judgements in terms of specific environmental settings and social values.

This raises questions about the form moral justifications must take, but not about whether such a justification is necessary. Norton recognises the need for some justification of the constitutive principles. He says (1984: 132),

I take it the initial task of constructing an adequate environmental ethic to be the statement of some set of principles from which rules can be derived proscribing the behaviours included in the set which virtually all environmentally sensitive individuals agree are environmentally destructive.

What is crucial, as Norton notes, is that

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An ethic will be adequate, on this approach, if its principles are sufficient to entail rules proscribing the behaviours involved in the noncontroversial set. My arguments then are not directed at determining which principles are *true*, but which are *adequate* to uphold certain shared intuitions. (1984: 132).

Norton's 'shared intuitions' concerning the 'noncontroversial set of behaviours' are the constitutive principles that make up an environmental ethic. To have a complete theory of environmental ethics then one must not only endorse the constitutive principles but also have on hand a set of presumably more general principles, which I will refer to as justificatory principles, which 'entail rules proscribing the behaviours involved in the noncontroversial set'. The only revision that might be offered to Norton's account is that it is not necessary for the justificatory principles to deductively entail the constitutive principles. They rather must simply be inferentially related in proper ways; the inferential relation need not be deductive.

Many questions could be raised about the various justificatory sets that have been offered for the constitutive principles, but the one that divides pragmatists and essentialists is whether there is only one or a multiplicity of adequate sets. Norton's Convergence Hypothesis addresses this question.<sup>5</sup> It says that there is more than one adequate set of justificatory principles, and that some of these sets will not contain the nonanthropocentric principle. If that is correct, then pragmatism holds at the justificatory level, since there is no particular principle which must be adopted in order to justify the constitutive principles. Of course these inconsistent justificatory sets may yield different answers to controversial issues, since after all they are inconsistent. In some sense that is what makes these issues controversial within the environmentalist community. While two sets of justificatory principles may both be able to adequately justify the core of an environmental ethic, they are not equivalent and so in all likelihood will yield different answers to whether a given controversial policy ought to be adopted or to how a thought experiment such as the 'last person' thought experiment is to be resolved. But if Norton is right about this it is not reasonable to claim that to have an environmental theory or to be a 'true' environmentalist one must subscribe to one particular set of justificatory principles based on the fact that this set yields a particular answer to some controversial issue. Rather, what determines whether one has an environmental theory is simply whether one's justificatory set can justify the non-controversial, constitutive principles.

It must be stressed that the adoption of the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion to determine the set of constitutive principles does not automatically entail that the Convergence Hypothesis is correct. It might turn out, once we have identified the constitutive principles by using that criterion, that there is only one set of adequate justificatory principles. Alternatively, while there may be alternative sets, there may be one justificatory principle that they all contain, such as the nonanthropocentric one. If either of these is the case, then



the Convergence Hypothesis and pragmatism are false at the justificatory level, since there would be at least one principle at that level which one would have to hold were one to have a complete theory of environmental ethics. Norton's *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* provides a fairly convincing argument however that in fact neither of these possibilities is the case, and rather that those policies that are agreed upon by environmentally sensitive individuals can be justified both by a justificatory set that contains the nonanthropocentric principle and by one that is weakly anthropocentric and so lacks it.

#### IV.

But is Norton right about this? J. Baird Callicott has criticised both the Convergence Hypothesis in particular and pragmatism in general. The problem with Callicott's critique, however, is that it is unclear exactly where Callicott thinks the Convergence Hypothesis goes wrong. There are three possible points at which pragmatists like Norton and essentialists like Callicott might disagree. First, Norton and Callicott might agree that the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic are to be determined by looking at the shared views of environmentally sensitive individuals, and additionally agree on exactly which principles this criterion will yield, and yet disagree over whether or not any set of justificatory principles that fails to include the nonanthropocentric principle can justify them. If this is the point of contention, then Callicott's disagreement with Norton concerns merely whether or not a given set of justificatory principles is sufficient to justify what they both identify as and agree are the constitutive principles. Given agreement on the constitutive principles, this garden variety sort of disagreement should not be particularly intractable and should be resolvable in a fairly easy manner. But because their debate has become intractable, it is unlikely that this is what is at the bottom of it.

Second, then, Callicott might disagree with Norton's Convergence Hypothesis because he thinks that environmentally sensitive individuals would endorse a different range of principles than Norton thinks they would, and that this alternative, 'correct' set of constitutive principles cannot be justified by Norton's weak anthropocentrism or any other justificatory set that fails to include the nonanthropocentric principle. Here again Callicott and Norton are in agreement about how one determines the constitutive principles, but as opposed to the previous case, they disagree about what principles that criterion will yield, and hence also disagree about which justificatory principles are necessary to justify an environmental ethic, and specifically whether the nonanthropocentric principle is necessary. Again, this should not be an intractable debate, given that they agree on the criterion for determining the constitutive principles.

But, finally, Callicott may disagree with Norton not just about which principles are in the constitutive set, but also about the criterion that should be

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used for determining which principles are constitutive. Specifically, Callicott may tacitly be employing a view I will call implication essentialism. Implication essentialism holds that there is a core to environmental ethics, that there are certain ground level principles which a person must hold if she is to have an environmental ethic, but it rejects Norton's environmentally sensitive individuals criterion for deciding what goes into the core. For Norton the role of 'deeper' justificatory principles is to show how those beliefs might be justified, or why it is reasonable to accept them. But these justificatory principles are logically independent in terms of determining which beliefs go into the set that is constitutive of an environmental ethic. On the implication essentialist account, however, we cannot independently fill in the set of constitutive principles that characterise an environmental ethic. Rather, we need to have in hand first a set of fairly general and abstract principles, such as 'all species have intrinsic value', or, 'nothing that has been intentionally altered by human beings can have intrinsic value'. Then whatever principles, policies and ought judgements can be derived from these is just the set that constitutes an environmental ethic. Thus these general and abstract principles do double duty; they both determine which principles constitute an environmental ethic, and having done that, they are offered as a justification of these same principles.

The disagreement I am trying to get at here is not a dispute about whether the constitutive principles require justification; Norton and implication essentialists agree that they do. Nor is *this* the dispute concerning the truth of the Convergence Hypothesis, whether there is only one way or a multiplicity of ways to justify what both agree are the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic. Rather, the disagreement I am trying to point out here turns on *how we are to determine* which principles belong to the set of constitutive principles.

Thus Callicott might disagree with Norton about the truth of the Convergence Hypothesis because he is an implication essentialist. Since the implication essentialist model is unlikely to yield the same set of constitutive principles as the 'environmentally sensitive individuals' criterion, it would hardly be surprising if no version of anthropocentrism were able to justify the principles that turn out to be constitutive when using the implication essentialist model. Additionally, if this were the nature of their disagreement, it would explain its intractability; it is intractable because it is based on a conceptual rather than a substantive issue. That is, Norton and Callicott disagree about the Convergence Hypothesis because they are working with different notions of the term 'constitutive principles of an environmental ethic'. They cannot agree on whether the Convergence Hypothesis is correct, because they cannot agree on what a justification must converge on. If that is the correct analysis of what is going on between Norton and Callicott then in some sense their dispute is 'merely' verbal. Specifically, Norton is willing to refer to the set of principles which would be endorsed by most environmentally-sensitive individuals as the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic, whereas Callicott is unwilling to do so. He

will refer to something as an environmental ethic, perhaps, only if it contains the full complement of principles that can be derived from more general principles, perhaps such as Leopold's claim that 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community'. This does not mean that the disagreement is unimportant or trivial, since how we categorise things, how they fit into our conceptual scheme, affects how we think about them and what we do with them.

When we turn to Callicott's work we get only a few clues that would help to determine what accounts for his disagreement with Norton and the Convergence Hypothesis, and some of those clues point in different directions. At one point (1995: 23) he says,

Norton seems to think of environmental policies in the same way. We environmentalists just happen to have a policy agenda – saving endangered species, preserving biodiversity in all its forms, lowering CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, etc. To rationalise these policies – to sell them to the electorate- is the intellectual task, if there is any ... but starting with a policy and looking for persuasive reasons to support it is not how sincere environmentalists outside the beltway actually think. People just don't adopt a policy like they decide which color is their favorite. They adopt it for what seems to them to be good reasons. Reasons come first, policies second, not the other way round.

Now if we understand this to be an account of how one decides which policies are constitutive of an environmental ethic, then Callicott is an implication essentialist. On this interpretation, Callicott is claiming that we start with reasons, or what I have been calling justificatory sets, and that what can be derived from these, Callicott's policies, are those that are constitutive of an environmental ethic. This interpretation is bolstered by his claim that people don't just adopt a policy. Callicott indicates rather that higher level principles come first, and one derives one's mid-level views from these. I have suggested to the contrary that in some sense most people do just adopt a policy; they care about the environment and so happen to believe that some policies ought to be pursued. Only then do they cast about for some justification for their caring attitudes and the policies that are suggested by such attitudes.

On the other hand, in a very recent paper (2002: 13–14) Callicott criticises the Convergence Hypothesis for its inability to justify the claim that we ought to preserve all species. He argues that weak anthropocentrism cannot justify the preservation of all species because

...it is hard to believe that all earth's myriad species, for example, are in some way useful to human beings. Many may represent unexplored potential new pharmaceuticals, foods, fibers, and fuels. But many more may not. Many species that have no actual or potential resource value are critical agents in ecological processes and/or perform vital ecological functions or services. But many more

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do not. Many non-resource, non-ecological service provider species are, nevertheless, objects of aesthetic wonder and/or epistemic curiosity to the small percentage of the human population that is aesthetically cultured and scientifically educated. But such amenity values that endangered non-resource, non-ecological-service-provider species have for a tiny human minority afford them little protection in a world increasingly governed by market economics and majority-rule politics. In short, conservation policy based on anthropocentrism alone – however broadened to include potential as well as actual resources, ecosystem services, and the aesthetic, epistemic, and spiritual uses of nature by present and *future* people – is less robust and inclusive than conservation policy based on the intrinsic value of nature.

Here it looks as if the disagreement between Callicott and Norton turns out to be the garden variety sort after all. They agree that the principle, ‘all species should be preserved’ will be in the constitutive set. But while Norton believes this can be justified without introducing the claim that all species have intrinsic value, Callicott argues that it cannot. It is not clear however that Callicott’s and Norton’s understanding of the principle is the same after all. Norton probably takes the principle to be a *prima facie*, all things considered principle, rather than the claim that all species ought to be preserved come what may, because the prior interpretation is what would be endorsed by environmentally sensitive individuals. Callicott on the other hand appears to take the principle as an (almost) exceptionless rule, that species must be preserved no matter what. In that case their disagreement is not the garden variety sort. Either they disagree on what environmentally sensitive individuals will assert – Callicott thinks they will assert the principle as an (almost) exceptionless principle, whereas Norton thinks they will hold it as a *prima facie* principle –, or they disagree on whether the *prima facie* or (almost) exceptionless interpretation of the principle is part of the core, because Norton thinks that the core is to be determined by what environmentally sensitive individuals think and that they would endorse the *prima facie* interpretation whereas Callicott thinks it is to be determined by its relation to some more abstract principle such as Leopold’s dictum and that the (almost) exceptionless principle follows from that dictum. If Norton is correct, then the inability of weak anthropocentrism to justify the almost exceptionless interpretation of the principle does not undermine the Convergence Hypothesis, since that interpretation is not one of the constitutive principles that an adequate justification must justify.

## V.

Rather than pursuing this kind of textual analysis to determine Callicott’s views, a more substantive issue should be addressed. The disagreement concerning whether or not pragmatism and the Convergence Theory is correct at the

justificatory level cannot be resolved until some agreement is reached concerning how to determine the constitutive principles of an environmental ethic. That is, some way of resolving the impasse between implication essentialists (of whom Callicott *may* be one) and Norton and others who would advocate the 'environmentally sensitive individuals' criterion must be reached before determining whether or not there is only one or a plurality of adequate justificatory sets. But the resolution of this impasse is difficult because the dispute is conceptual or verbal. That is, Norton will call something an environmental ethic as long as it incorporates principles agreed to by environmentally sensitive individuals, whereas the implication essentialist will use that term only for the set of principles and policies that follow from her more abstract principles and theories. Since the question is *not* whether the core principles in environmental ethics are true, but rather what criterion is to be used to determine the core, the reasons that are advanced for adopting one criterion rather than another will be unrelated to whether one of the two criteria is more likely to include only true principles in the core. Rather, whatever reasons are offered will focus on linguistic considerations, such as which thesis captures what we ordinarily mean by an environmental ethic, and similar practical considerations. That is the best that can be hoped for in such disputes.

One straightforward advantage of the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion is that it more accurately captures what we ordinarily think of as being necessary for holding an environmental ethic and how that term is used. While having an environmental ethic certainly commits one to a set of beliefs that are pro-environmental, and to that extent essentialism is correct, the term does not seem to be restricted in any more partisan sort of way. Implication essentialism holds that one cannot have an environmental ethic unless one endorses the full range of principles that can be derived from a specific justificatory set, and many of those are likely to be controversial even within the environmental community. But ordinary usage suggests that one can have an environmental ethic without committing one way or the other to views that are controversial *within* that community.

Aside from its coherence with current usage, there are significant practical reasons for adopting the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion. Perhaps the most significant is that it recognises and allows for the possibility of a divergence of beliefs concerning controversial issues within the environmental community. We have already noted that the 'environmentally sensitive individuals' criterion entails that one's position on controversial issues cannot be made a litmus test of whether one has an environmental ethic. This in turn makes it impossible to question another environmentalist's credentials or to wonder whether she is a 'true' environmentalist merely because she happens to disagree with one's views on some controversial issue. Implication essentialism, on the other hand has the effect of regimenting the environmental community, inasmuch as it holds that if one is to be an environmentalist or have an environmental

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ethic one must buy into all the ground level judgements, including the answers to controversial issues, that are entailed by the preferred set of justificatory principles. Thus one's views on controversial issues becomes a litmus test of one's environmental commitment. It will lead to presenting environmentalists with a dilemma; take the 'right' position on this controversial question or fail to be a 'real' or 'true' environmentalist.

The problems with this sort of divisiveness are two-fold. Given that environmentalism has a practical dimension, that at least part of its point is to change the world, it is less likely to accomplish this when there is infighting about who is really an environmentalist or who has or lacks an environmental ethic within the ranks of those who really do care about the environment and are trying to change things for the better. Second, the possibility of making this sort of distinction between those who are 'real' or 'true' environmentalists and those who are not can encourage people to not take ideas seriously, to not give them a fair hearing, because they do not come from 'true' environmentalists. Thus it can lead to cutting off debate and critical discussion.

A final practical advantage depends on the presumption that Norton's argument in *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* is correct. There he argues that the Convergence Hypothesis is correct, given that the core principles are determined by the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion. Suppose on the other hand that if the core is determined by the criterion offered by implication essentialism it would contain both more principles and ones that are more idiosyncratic because they are derived from 'partisan' moral principles. In that case it is more likely than not that the Convergence Hypothesis will be false. But there are reasons for thinking that the Convergence Hypothesis itself has practical advantages. The most important of these is that it does not require those who hold an environmental ethic to put all their eggs in one justificatory basket. Suppose, given the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion, that the Convergence Hypothesis is true, so that two justificatory sets, one including weak anthropocentrism, the other including the nonanthropocentric principle, can both justify the constitutive principles. Suppose additionally that the nonanthropocentric principle is subject to a series of significant criticisms, so that there are some fairly convincing reasons for rejecting it. That need not be terribly troubling to environmentalists, since *ex hypothesi* there is an alternative justificatory set, and it may fare better in terms of its coherence with some well-supported, broader ethical theory. So the implausibility of one justificatory set does not infect the constitutive principles of environmental ethics, since there will be alternative justificatory sets which can equally well justify the constitutive set.

Things look very different if the implication essentialist model is adopted. Given the supposition that the Convergence Hypothesis is more likely to be false on that model, environmentalists would have to ground their core principles on one specific justificatory set. If that set is shown to be false, either because of

internal problems or because of its failure to cohere with a broader moral theory which we have reason to think is acceptable, then environmental ethics must be given up as implausible. Of course this consideration provides good reason to prefer the environmentally sensitive individual criterion to the implication essentialist account only if the Convergence Hypothesis is correct with respect to the set of principles that would be agreed on by environmentally sensitive individuals but incorrect with respect to the set that would be derived from the implication essentialist's favoured higher level and abstract principles. But initially there is at least some reason to think that this is the case.

## VI.

If the foregoing is correct, then we should adopt the environmentally sensitive individuals criterion. And once we have adopted that criterion, if we also accept the argument from *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* that the Convergence Hypothesis is true given that criterion, then pragmatism about environmental ethics is correct: there is more than one adequate justificatory set. There is however one final potential area of disagreement between pragmatists and non-pragmatists. Suppose we go on to ask whether, of all the adequate justificatory sets, one is epistemically preferable or truer than another, or is preferable in some other way. One might be a pragmatist with respect to the question of their adequacy (there is a plurality of justificatory sets, each of which shows the core to be justified, some of which do not contain the nonanthropocentric principle) and yet be a non-pragmatist when answering this new question. And it may be that some of the dissatisfaction felt for the Convergence Hypothesis is based on a misreading of it which takes it to be the claim not just that there is more than one adequate justificatory set but additionally that all these adequate sets are equally preferable or true.

As an example we might look again to Callicott who has said some things recently which indicate that his dissatisfaction with the Convergence Hypothesis does not turn on the *adequacy* of alternative justificatory sets that do not contain the nonanthropocentric principle but rather on their truth or epistemic preferability, or their rhetorical and pragmatic power. That is, Callicott may understand the Convergence Hypothesis to be a claim not about whether there is more than one set of justificatory principles which is adequate to justify the core, but rather whether these are all equally good or true or pragmatically valuable. His current view may accept the possibility that a justificatory set which fails to include the nonanthropocentric principle can nevertheless be part of an adequate environmental ethic, but adds that such a justificatory set will be inferior to or less correct than a set which contains it; justificatory sets which lack the nonanthropocentric principle are simply implausible or untrue. For example, in a recent paper (2002: 24) he says,



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A maximally stretched anthropocentrism may, as Norton argues, rationalise the environmental policy agenda, but anthropocentrism may no longer ring true. That is, the claim that all and only human beings have intrinsic value may not be consistent with a more general evolutionary and environmental worldview. I should think that contemporary environmental philosophers would want to give voice and form to the still small but growing movement that supports environmental policies for the right reasons.

Here Callicott allows for the sake of argument that the nonanthropocentric principle is not a necessary component of an environmental ethic. It is just that a set which includes it is preferable because alternatives which omit that principle 'no longer ring true'. In another passage (1999b: 244) he again grants that weak anthropocentrism may be adequate, but then adds, 'one wants to offer the right reasons for doing the right thing-as well as get the right thing done-irrespective of pragmatic considerations'. It is clear from the subtitle of this section of his paper ('Moral Truth') that by 'right reasons' he means something like 'epistemically good reasons'.

If this is Callicott's current position, then he is a pragmatist on the question of adequacy but a non-pragmatist on the issue of whether, of all the adequate justifications, some are epistemically superior to others. That is, although he has said (1992: 131), 'going back to 1979, I have also affirmed the importance of the value question in environmental ethics and early on endorsed the postulate of nature's objective, intrinsic, value', he now seems to think that the nonanthropocentric principle is important not because an environmental ethic cannot do without it but because it is epistemically superior. If that is Callicott's position, then he has dropped his opposition to pragmatism with respect to the issue of whether or not intrinsic value is an essential component of an environmental ethic. His opposition to pragmatism now appears to be with respect to the issue of the epistemic preferability of the various justificatory sets. That is, he now opposes the pragmatic claim that just because more than one justificatory set is adequate or capable of justifying the core, that all those justificatory sets are equally epistemically preferable.

In a passage quoted earlier Norton makes the same distinction between the adequacy of a justificatory set and its truth. And like Callicott, Norton may very well be a non-pragmatist with respect to the question of whether one justificatory set is epistemically preferable. For in many of his papers he argues that weak anthropocentrism is preferable to a justificatory set which contains the nonanthropocentric principle. The failure to fully appreciate this distinction may have caused Callicott to offer a criticism of Norton which in fact misses the mark. Callicott notes that Norton has argued that weak anthropocentrism is the best way to justify the core principles of an environmental ethic. And then (1999a: 509) Callicott says, 'So much, then, for Norton's vaunted pluralism; his commitment to anthropocentrism excludes an indefinite number of "value



systems” – all that are other than anthropocentric.’ But Norton’s ‘pluralism’, (what I am calling his pragmatism) applies only to the question of whether more than one set is *adequate* for justifying the core principles of an environmental ethic. His point is that there are plural justificatory sets, some of which do not include the nonanthropocentric principle, so that one need not accept that principle to have an environmental ethic. The question of which of this plurality of justificatory sets is epistemically preferable is a separate question, and Norton can think that the ones that are weakly anthropocentric are epistemically *preferable* while at the same time maintaining that a plurality of sets, including some which include the nonanthropocentric principle, are *adequate* for justifying the core.

Additionally, the failure to be clear about this distinction leads Callicott to attribute a view to Norton that he does not actually hold. Callicott (1992: 131) says, ‘Norton defuses the issue with a neo-pragmatist gloss. If two theories “converge” on the same practical payoff, they differ only verbally.’ Now if the question is the adequacy of two theories, then Callicott is right; Norton might be said to hold that if two theories both support all the constitutive policies of an environmental ethic, they are both adequate (although Norton does not say the difference is only verbal). However, Norton does not say that two equally adequate justificatory sets are really equal, since one could be true but not the other, or one could be better supported epistemically than the other.

Finally, the issue of whether all the adequate justificatory sets are equally preferable from a practical or rhetorical standpoint might be raised. That is, we might wonder whether there are non-epistemic reasons, reasons not relating to truth, for preferring one of the adequate justificatory sets to the others. For example, Callicott argues (1999: 245) that justifying the constitutive principles by appeal to the nonanthropocentric principle ‘makes a huge practical difference. Were we to do so, the burden of proof would be lifted from the shoulders of conservationists and shifted onto the shoulders of those who, pursuing other values, are – intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or inadvertently – destroying nature’. Here again Callicott appears to reject the view that one must accept the nonanthropocentric principle if one is to have an environmental ethic or to be an environmentalist. His claim is more modest; the non-anthropocentric principle puts the burden of proof on those who are engaging in practices that might have deleterious consequences for the environment to show that in fact their actions will not have those effects, or are not inconsistent with the constitutive principles of environmentalism. If that is the case, there is a good strategic, rhetorical reason for preferring justificatory sets that include the nonanthropocentric principle. But that shows only that justificatory sets containing the nonanthropocentric principle are better than those which lack it, and not that those sets are the only ones that are adequate for justifying the constitutive principles.

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Another way in which one adequate justificatory set might be practically preferable to an equally adequate one is because of the likelihood that it will be taken seriously and acted on by both the general public and those who are in a position to enact environmental legislation and administer environmental policies. In a recent paper Callicott tries to show that the non-anthropocentric principle has, as he puts it, 'pragmatic power'. Callicott compares the nonanthropocentric principle with the principle that there are human rights, which justifies our views about how human beings may and may not be treated. He says (2002: 18), 'It is the general idea under philosophical discussion that fires up the imaginations of lay people, morally inspires them, and reorients their perception of the world – the social world in the case of human rights, the natural world in the case of nonanthropocentric environmental ethics'. Callicott offers some examples and cites the work of Christopher Preston to show this. Of course making this distinction between pragmatic power and epistemic preferability leads to significant issues concerning which justificatory set should be accepted if these two regulative ideals come apart and point to two different justifications. But I am less concerned here with Callicott's substantive claim about the pragmatic power of nonanthropocentrism than I am with the general point which lies behind it, namely that where two justificatory sets are equally adequate we can nevertheless have reasons to prefer one to the others.

## VII.

One lesson to be drawn from all this is that the partisan nature of environmental ethics has produced a significant amount of debate concerning the nonanthropocentric principle, much of which appears to be based on a misunderstanding, namely that something substantive is at stake when in fact what is at issue is 'merely' conceptual or verbal. Given the way the term 'environmental ethic' has come to be used, having an environmental ethic requires one to maintain certain constitutive judgements. But depending on how one fills in the set of constitutive judgements, one will get different answers to the question of whether or not one must also maintain the nonanthropocentric principle to justify the constitutive judgements. Thus whether or not the nonanthropocentric principle is essential for an environmental ethic depends on what one is willing to call an environmental ethic.

Perhaps the whole problem could be resolved then if we were simply to change our usage. We might use the term 'environmental ethic' as the term 'medical ethic' is used, to mark out a field of inquiry rather than a partisan position. In this neutral sense one would do environmental ethics rather than have an environmental ethic, just as one does medical ethics. There would be no question or debate about whether or not one had to adopt a certain principle such

as the nonanthropocentric one to justify the constitutive principles, because like medical ethics there would be no constitutive principles. Environmental ethics would then simply mark out a field of study and enquiry rather than a specific view about the environment. Perhaps this should be understood as what the pragmatist has wanted to urge all along.

But taking up this recommendation is only going to shift the location of the argument. For we need some way to mark out various positions within an area of inquiry. Suppose the suggestion proposed here is adopted so that one will be said to do environmental ethics as long as one writes and thinks about issues and topics that relate to our treatment of the environment. Someone who proposed that it was morally permissible to drive a species to the brink of extinction to build another shopping mall would be said to do environmental ethics. But then undoubtedly someone would coin a term such as 'environmentally friendly environmental ethic' for the set of principles that would be adopted by those who care about the environment and whatever principles are needed to justify that set. And then the debate re-emerges, this time over the essence or nature of an environmentally friendly environmental ethic. Thus although the terms in which the debate is couched appear to be merely verbal, it is not an empty debate. It is rather a debate about who gets to use certain words which carry both positive and negative connotations to refer to their position. And given that most who work in the field of environmental ethics hope to change the world and not merely interpret it, this is no insignificant issue.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here I am using both 'essentialism' and 'pragmatism' to refer to these very limited views. Obviously both terms have additional, alternative meanings in other contexts.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Callicott (1989, 1999b), Regan (1981), and Rolston (1975). Katz and Oeschli (1993) argue that some form of the nonanthropocentric principle is essential, although in an earlier paper Katz (1987) suggests that nonanthropocentrism is not necessary for an environmental ethic.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Norton (1984, 1991, 1996), Andrew Light (1996), and Anthony Weston (1985).

<sup>4</sup> It might be noted here that policy prescriptions follow from these moral claims. If we morally ought to preserve wilderness areas, then absent any countervailing claims, as a nation we ought to adopt a policy which ensures that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will remain in its current, relatively pristine condition. Much of Norton's most recent work focuses on management policy and on how policy decisions should be made. See for example Norton (1995) and Norton and Stedmann (2001).

<sup>5</sup> In *Toward Unity among Environmentalists* Norton frames the issue as whether or not the justificatory sets will converge on the same policies rather than constitutive principles. But if policy recommendations are at least partially derivable from the constitutive principles, then in terms of the issue I am interested in pursuing here it comes to the same thing.

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