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# Environmental Philosophy and the Public Interest: A Pragmatic Reconciliation

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## ABSTRACT

Most environmental philosophers have had little use for 'conventional' philosophical and political thought. This is unfortunate, because these traditions can greatly contribute to environmental ethics and policy discussions. One mainstream concept of potential value for environmental philosophy is the notion of the public interest. Yet even though the public interest is widely acknowledged to be a powerful ethical standard in public affairs and public policy, there has been little agreement on its descriptive meaning. A particularly intriguing account of the concept in the literature, however, may be found in the work of the American pragmatist John Dewey. Dewey argued that the public interest was to be continuously constructed through the process of free, cooperative inquiry into the shared good of the democratic community. This Deweyan model of the public interest has much to offer environmental philosophers who are interested in making connections between normative arguments and environmental policy discourse, and it holds great promise for enhancing environmental philosophy's role and impact in public life.

## KEYWORDS

Environmental philosophy, public interest, pragmatism, John Dewey

## INTRODUCTION

J. Baird Callicott has lamented the fact that environmental philosophy is ‘something of a pariah’ in the mainstream philosophical community (Callicott 1999: 1). Callicott offers a number of reasons – from the moral to the political – to explain the intellectual and institutional banishment of the field to what he provocatively refers to as the ‘applied ethics barrio’ (Ibid.). Yet Callicott still holds out hope that environmental philosophy will ultimately triumph over conventional moral philosophy and reconstruct the latter along more nonanthropocentric (or nature-centred) lines. I sympathise with Callicott’s frustration over the status of the field in the academy, though I believe that environmental philosophers share some of the blame for this state of affairs. The field’s historically sharp rebuke of the claims and commitments of conventional (i.e., anthropocentric) moral and political thought is, I would submit, the main reason why it is treated so shabbily by the mainstream philosophical community. To the extent that such received ethical and political concerns motivate citizens, legislators, and decision makers, this rejection of the mainstream tradition may also be viewed as one of the primary reasons why environmental philosophy has not made significant and lasting inroads into environmental policy discussions.

For philosophers like Callicott, such scholarly marginalisation is simply the price that has to be paid for advancing what he sees as radical intellectual and social reform. I believe, however, that it is too dear. In fact, over the long run I would suggest that the rejection of traditional philosophical and political theories and concepts only impoverishes environmental philosophy as a scholarly field and as an effective participant in the formation of environmental policy arguments. I think that many environmental philosophers have been far too hasty in their abandonment of the traditions of mainstream Western thought, and that the time is ripe for a reconsideration of the value and utility of this inheritance for current normative and policy discussions in the environmental realm.

In this paper, I will examine how a return to a particular established political and normative concept with great policy resonance – the notion of the ‘public interest’ – can expand environmental philosophers’ conceptual tool kit. In doing so, I draw on the thought of the American pragmatist John Dewey, whose work is lately receiving much attention in a number of areas in philosophy and political theory, including environmental philosophy (e.g., Fensteinstein 1997, Eldridge 1998, Caspary 2000, Kestenbaum 2002, Hickman 1996, Minteer 2001, McDonald 2002, Bowers 2003, Reid and Taylor 2003). One of my primary objectives in this paper is to build a small, but hopefully useful bridge between the public affairs and environmental philosophy communities. I also will attempt to show that nonanthropocentrists and theorists of a more pragmatic bent can both support appeals to the public interest in environmental philosophy and environmental policy discussions.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

## THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND ITS ECLIPSE IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Whether defined boldly as ‘the ultimate ethical goal of political relationships;’ (Cassinelli 1958: 48) or somewhat more prosaically as a term ‘used to express approval or commendation of policies adopted or proposed by government’ (Flathman 1966: 4), the public interest carries an unmistakable air of political legitimacy and moral authority when evoked as a justification for public policy. Indeed, it seems woven into the very fabric of political and administrative ethics. It is difficult to imagine a successful public policy proposal that openly flouts the public interest; likewise, it is hard to think of one that does not at least implicitly incorporate a notion of the interest or good of the public in its supporting arguments. Even cynical uses of the term as an ethical ‘fig leaf’ covering more narrow or ‘special’ interests, affirm the power of the concept in public life.

Yet despite its estimable bearing in political culture, over the course of its short history the field of environmental philosophy has strangely pitted itself *against* the concept of the public interest, at least as ‘public interest’ has been come to be understood. In a sense, this is somewhat surprising. One would think that environmental philosophers would have by now developed a fairly robust concept of the public interest as an important normative standard in their projects, an understanding directly tied to the promotion of core environmental values. After all, if the field has a consensus goal, it is surely the improvement of human-nature relationships by advancing compelling and well-reasoned arguments for valuing the environment and, by extension, for choosing good environmental policies. Given the potential influence of the public interest as a widely recognised standard for policy choice and decision making, one would have expected the language of public interest to be widely spoken in environmental philosophy; if not the native tongue, then at least one of its more popular dialects.

The eclipse of the public interest in environmental philosophy is explained, I believe, by the nature of the field’s professional founding. In the early and mid-1970s, first-generation ethicists such as Richard Routley and Holmes Rolston set forth what would become highly influential arguments suggesting that a radically new environmental ethic – one that found value in nature directly rather than in its contribution to the good or interests of humans – was required if humanity was to find a defensible moral footing in the environmental crisis (Routley 1973, Rolston 1975). An earlier version of this argument for a new philosophical relationship to the environment had been unfurled in the pages of *Science* by the medieval historian Lynn White Jr., who in many respects set the agenda for much of the subsequent decades in environmental philosophy with his now infamous analysis of the negative environmental attitudes found within Western culture, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition and the creation story depicted in Genesis I (White 1967).

It is important to remember, however, that White's much pored over essay was by no means simply a one-note condemnation of the anthropocentrism of the Western philosophical and religious tradition. Indeed, his paper also raised questions about the ability of modern democratic societies to curb what White suggested were possibly inherent tendencies towards environmental exploitation. As he put it, 'Our ecologic crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture. The issue is whether a democratised world can survive its own implications'. White followed this provocative question with an equally radical conclusion: 'Presumably we cannot', he wrote, 'unless we rethink our axioms' (White 1967: 1204).

This call for revisiting and rethinking the philosophical roots of Western culture, which for White were the techno-scientific worldview and its underlying religious and secular foundations in the medieval period, implied nothing less than an overhaul of the tradition, a foundation-raising process in which a new philosophy of science, technology, and nature – and perhaps a new, less arrogant relationship to the natural world – would be unearthed and absorbed into the modern worldview. Early environmental philosophers such as Routley and Rolston, then, apparently following White in their call for a new ethic able to account for the independent value of the natural world, assumed that the anthropocentric worldview (and its destructive instrumentalisation of nature) had to be replaced with a new, nonanthropocentric outlook. Here, White's thesis about the anti-environmental implications of the Judeo-Christian religion, particularly his sweeping claim that the latter was 'the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen', offered a point of departure for environmental philosophers, who would respond in subsequent years with a series of influential criticisms of the moral humanism of the Western philosophical inheritance (e.g., Taylor 1986, Rolston 1988, Callicott 1989, Westra 1994, Katz 1996). As the field matured in the 1980s and 1990s, an exclusivist nonanthropocentric agenda established itself as the dominant approach in the field, with a few notable exceptions (of the latter, see Norton 1984, 1991; Weston 1985, and Stone 1987).

The result of these developments is that the public interest never became part of the agenda of environmental philosophy in the same way, for example, that it appears to have made lasting impressions in other branches of applied philosophy such as business, engineering, and biomedical ethics. Concerned with what it perceived to be more pressing and fundamental questions of moral ontology – that is, with the nature of environmental values and the moral standing of nonhuman nature – environmental philosophers pursued questions self-consciously cordoned off from parallel discussions in mainstream moral and political theory, which were apparently deemed too anthropocentric to inform a philosophical field preoccupied with the separate issue of the moral considerability and significance of nonhuman nature. As a consequence, instead of (for example) providing a conceptual or analytic framework for evaluating cases, practices, and policies from the perspective of ostensibly 'human-centred' con-

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

cepts such as the public interest, many environmental philosophers preferred to focus exclusively on the independent status of natural values. I would argue that this original failure to link environmental values and claims to recognised moral and political concerns also helps to explain the relative inability of environmental philosophy to have a significant impact within public and private institutions over the years, again, especially when compared with other applied ethics counterparts. Environmental philosophy is and always has been concerned with 'nature's interest', not that of the public.

This situation has also produced a number of unfortunate consequences for the contribution of environmental philosophy to policy discussion and debate, not to mention more concrete and on-the-ground forms of social action. One example here is the largely missed opportunity for philosophers to study and contribute to some of the more important environmental reform movements and institutional initiatives of the past three decades. Chief among these developments, perhaps, is the public interest movement that developed alongside environmental ethics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which united consumer protection with environmental advocacy through organisations like Ralph Nader's Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs). This list of emerging direct-action environmental movements would also have to include the growing number of grassroots organisations and groups, commonly lumped under the 'environmental justice' banner, which have sought to link the concerns of public health, safety, and community well-being to environmental protection through the language and tactics of social justice and civil rights (Gottlieb 1993, Shutkin 2000, Shrader-Frechette 2002). Had environmental philosophy worked a serious notion of the public interest into its agenda, it doubtless would have been (and would now be) much more engaged with these influential movements in citizen environmental action, not to mention a range of discussions in areas such as risk communication, pollution prevention and regulatory reform, public understanding of science, and so on.

Part of the larger problem here stems from what I suspect is an incomplete apprehension of the concept of the public interest by environmental philosophers, a view which has in many cases resulted in theorists advancing intrinsic value of nature claims as a normative standard for environmental policy that *competes* with the public interest in the battle for environmental protection. Environmental philosophers, when they do acknowledge the public interest, seem to assume that it is little more than aggregated individual preferences. In this strong 'Benthamite' reading, environmental protection is therefore viewed as effectively being held hostage to the preponderance of exogenous and unquestionable consumer demand values. But this rather one-dimensional utilitarian understanding is not the only, nor the best account of the public interest as an authoritative standard for public policy. Environmental philosophers are not entirely to blame for this limited view, however, since the liberal utilitarian version of the public interest (and its corollaries) has shaped public thinking about

the concept in the modern period. We therefore need to examine the concept of the public interest a bit more closely if we are to accurately gauge its utility in environmental philosophy and policy discussions.

#### THE PUBLIC INTEREST: A PRAGMATIC RETRIEVAL

It is common for observers of the public interest to note its association with two broad traditions in political thought (Benditt 1973). The first, and clearly the dominant notion of the public interest in contemporary public life (and the one held, I think, by most environmental philosophers), is the 'Benthamite' or liberal utilitarian tradition mentioned above. Here, the public interest is thought to be derived directly from the mechanical or mathematical aggregation of individual interests. In this understanding, the community or 'public' is not real in any meaningful sense and thus cannot properly be said to have any interest or good apart from the sum of the interests or preferences of its distinct individuals (but see James 1981). Contemporary versions of this view may be found in various public interest 'proxies' such as economists' renderings of individuals' 'willingness to pay', the presuppositions and decision logic of social choice theory, and in pluralist models of interest politics focused on the bargaining and competition between multiple interest groups.

The second, and historically less pervasive, view is a more socialised and communal accounting of the public interest as the shared, common good of citizens comprising a recognisable political community. This notion, typically associated with thinkers such as Rousseau and Edmund Burke – and earlier, with figures like Aristotle and Aquinas – focuses more on the moral and even metaphysical notion of common good (often in an objective sense) and thus stands in stark relief from the individualist and subjective account of interests and preferences in the liberal model (Flathman 1966, Benditt 1973, Diggs 1973). This communal reading of the public interest as common good has, however, largely been clouded over by the Benthamite understanding in modern life, although recent revivals of this tradition among political theorists and policy scientists (such as the civic republicanism advanced by Michael Sandel) suggest that change is perhaps in the air. Douglass (1980) traces the historical ascendance of the liberal utilitarian public interest over communal notions to the crumbling of medieval feudalism and the capture and transformation of the idea of the common good by 'Royalist' monarchs as an instrument for political power. According to Douglass, the claim to a 'public interest' arose in this environment as a liberal democratic argument of the people agitating for freedom from the exploitation and abuses of the Crown (Douglass 1980: 106). The public interest thus became thoroughly entangled in the moral language of individualism; in the process it was effectively purged of its earlier communal aspects and the notion of a shared good among citizens.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Contemporary treatments of the public interest that have attempted to shine analytic light on the concept have generally met with mixed results. The problem is that the idea of the public interest has been plagued by an inordinate amount of ambiguity in its popular and academic usage. Are we, for example, to take the notion of ‘interest’ referred to in the ‘public interest’ to be an objective good independent of the will of individuals? Or does it refer to the subjective desires and preferences of individuals qua citizens (or perhaps qua consumers)? Or is it something else altogether? Can a policy (action, decision, proposal) be said to be in ‘the public interest’ and yet nevertheless be *rejected* by the majority of the citizenry? Related to these questions are a host of epistemic issues, among them: how is the public interest (however it is defined) to be known? Is it indeed something that may be discovered by identifying and then aggregating hundreds, thousands – perhaps millions – of individual expressed preferences? If so, how meaningful (and feasible) can it really be as a substantive normative standard? Can the public ever be mistaken about its interests? These are just a few of the thorny questions that work to make the public interest a vexed concept in political and moral discourse. This conceptual fuzziness and, in particular, the ‘nonscientific’ character of the public interest led Arthur F. Bentley, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, to memorably declare it an ‘idea ghost’, one that right-thinking political scientists would do well to avoid (Bentley 1908: 167).

In spite these difficulties, a distinct scholarly literature on the public interest began to form in the 1950s and 1960s as political scientists grappled with many of the questions listed above and attempted to cash out the significance of the public interest as both an analytical tool and a normative standard for public policy and administration (e.g., Cassinelli 1958, Barry 1965, Flathman 1966, Held 1970). Some observers, following in the sceptical footsteps of Bentley, criticised the public interest for its perceived conceptual incoherence and meaninglessness as a rational standard for public policy. Writing in this vein, Souraf (1957) concluded that the various and conflicting definitions of the public interest rendered it mostly useless as a tool of political analysis, though he did acknowledge its ‘hair shirt’ value as a symbol of the interests of the underrepresented and voiceless in power politics (Souraf 1957: 639). Souraf even proposed an acceptable ‘minimalist’ association of the public interest as the democratic method of orderly settlement of citizen conflict. Still, concerns about the imprecision of the concept of the public interest and its inability to be operationalised are fairly commonplace in this early literature. Glendon Schubert (1960), after considering the meaning and function of the public interest within several bodies of administrative theory, determined that the concept was in the end too general, too vague, and too inconsistent to be of much use in shaping the course of public affairs.

Other scholars, however, were more receptive. The political philosopher Brian Barry devoted several chapters to a discussion of the public interest in his



1965 book *Political Argument*. There, Barry concluded that the public interest was directly attached to the social role of the citizen, describing it as ‘those interests which people have in common *qua* members of the public’ (Barry 1965: 190). More recently, and following Barry’s lead, the political theorist Robert Goodin has suggested that a policy or action is in the public interest ‘if and only if: (1) It is an interest that people necessarily share (2) by virtue of their role as a member of the public (3) which can best or only be promoted by concerted public action’ (Goodin 1996: 339). The public interest in Goodin’s view is therefore not contingently public, but rather necessarily so; it arises out of shared public roles and requires deliberate and coordinated collective action to secure and promote.

One of the most nuanced and extensive studies of the public interest in the literature may be found in political scientist Richard Flathman’s important 1966 book on the subject. While Flathman agreed with many of the concept’s critics that there probably was no all-inclusive and universally valid descriptive meaning of the public interest, he argued that descriptive meaning could nevertheless be determined in specific contextual situations as reasoned discourse worked to ‘relate the anticipated effects of a policy to community values and to test that relation by formal principles’ (Flathman 1966: 82). These formal principles included a utilitarian principle that directed inquirers to look for the full consequences of proposed policies, and a ‘universalisability’ principle by which individual interests were to be generalised and subsumed under rules or maxims that flowed from shared community values. As Clark Cochran (1974) observes, Flathman’s approach, while largely procedural in nature due to its reliance on the method of vetting community values through formal principles, is not aggregative à la the Benthamite model. It is also more than a procedural account of the public interest since, as Cochran notes, Flathman’s definition serves as ‘a reminder to decision-makers to remember moral considerations, to abide by formal principles, to employ community values as well as individual interests, and to give reasons in terms of these values for their decisions’ (Cochran 1974: 351).

One rarely evoked name in the historical development of public interest theory is the American pragmatist philosopher and democratic theorist John Dewey. I believe, in fact, that Dewey held an intriguing notion of the public interest that was an alternative to both the liberal aggregationist rendering and the classical conceptualisation of the ‘common good’. Dewey’s understanding of the public interest may be seen as sharing several features with Flathman’s approach, including the emphasis on the role of community values and the contextual, situationally constructed nature of the public interest. He also anticipated Souraf’s (and others’) later association of the public interest with the democratic method of dispute resolution. Yet Dewey’s work adds at least two additional critical elements to public interest theory: 1) a method of democratic social inquiry modelled after the ideal workings of the scientific community;

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

and 2) a focus on the key role of deliberation, social learning, and interest transformation in this process.

Given these contributions, as well as the fact that Dewey is gaining increasing prominence in environmental philosophy, I would like to devote the rest of this section to a brief discussion of his understanding of the public interest. I will follow this with a consideration of what a Deweyan retrieval of the public interest might have to offer environmental philosophers.

Dewey's best-known treatment of the public interest takes place in his landmark work in political philosophy, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). There, he described the pressing political and intellectual challenge of the public in the age of industrial capitalism: to organise itself so that it might intelligently control and attain its shared interests. According to Dewey, this proved to be a difficult task, mostly because of the fragmenting economic, technological, and social forces of modern life:

Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling these consequences. But the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences, has formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself. And this discovery is obviously an antecedent condition of any effective organization on its part. Such is our thesis regarding the eclipse which the public idea and interest have undergone. (Dewey 1988[1927]: 314)

On the surface, Dewey's understanding of the public interest here sounds analogous to what we might refer to today as 'market failure'; that is, the situation in which private transactions produce externalities that spill over onto non-transacting individuals – a state of affairs commonly thought to require some sort of government intervention in the private realm. Yet there is more at work in Dewey's notion of the public interest than this, and his conceptualisation is not properly reducible to a purely economic reading. Indeed, Dewey demonstrates a commitment to a strong normative notion of the public interest in his discussion of the interest of citizens in securing desirable social consequences, suggesting that where many share a particular good there is an especially compelling reason to realise and sustain it (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 328). For Dewey, the common awareness of this shared interest ultimately defines the social and moral aspects of the democratic ideal, and it is through public talk and participation in the affairs of the local, face-to-face community that this consciousness is formed and solidified (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 368).

But how does a community go about identifying its shared good or public interest? For Dewey, this involved experimental social inquiry into actual public problems and conflicts, a process modelled after the method of the natural

and technical sciences. As he wrote in his 1935 book, *Liberalism and Social Action*:

Of course, there *are* conflicting interests; otherwise there would be no social problems. The problem under discussion is precisely *how* conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of the widest possible contribution to the interests of all – or at least of the great majority. The method of democracy – inasfar as it is that of organized intelligence – is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately (Dewey 2000 [1935]: 81).

By holding narrower special interests up to the scrutiny of the wider community, Dewey believed, their merits could be assessed from the perspective of the emergent ‘more inclusive interests’ of the public, identified through open discussion and free debate. This in turn would reveal the true public interest partially embedded within a particular problem solution or policy proposal. The glare of publicity would expose private interests masquerading as public ones, and through this process of debate and deliberation the community could test alternatives, ascertain social consequences, and identify the most widely shared good among citizens. Indeed, Dewey thought it is one of the virtues of democracy that it ‘forces a recognition that there are common interests, even though the recognition of what they are is confused; and the need it enforces of discussion and publicity brings out some clarification of what they are’ (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 364).

For Dewey, effective democratic participation in the affairs of the community, however, requires that individuals come to such public deliberations with an open mind. They must be willing to listen to others and accept the possibility that their own preferences may be misinformed or short-sighted, and that they may change (perhaps dramatically) in the process of engaging in reasoned and respectful argument with their fellow citizens. As Matthew Festenstein writes, these Deweyan norms of inquiry, read off of the practices of the scientific community, also condition participants to look for ways in which to establish common interests as they make meaningful personal and psychological connections with others:

In Dewey’s presentation, the epistemic virtues of tolerance and open-mindedness shade into imaginative sympathy with the travails of others ... The commitment to participate, to offer arguments and to hear the views of others, has the psychological corollary of leading participants to think in terms of possible criticisms and alternative views, and to conceive of their own interest in a way which takes account of the interests and views of other participants. Traditions of shared communication tend to establish bonds of trust and sympathy and to lead individuals to identify their interests with those of the broader community.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Moreover, in the process of communication, the interests of separate persons and groups are harmonized with one another. (Festenstein 1997: 89).

While Dewey's notion of the public interest is partly procedural in nature, it is clear that his conceptualisation was not grounded in simple utilitarian methods of preference aggregation or the mechanical balancing of individual interests. Dewey's approach also avoided the pluralist conflation of the public interest with the outcome of interest group struggle. In some situations, he concluded, conjoint activity may produce such a significant and large public interest that it requires organised intervention in and 'reconstruction' of the affairs of a group (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 281). This is a far cry from the traditional pluralist view of the state as little more than an 'umpire' among competing interest groups.

Yet neither was Dewey's understanding of the public interest premised on pre-political or metaphysical notions of the 'common good' in a classical sense. Instead, in Dewey's model, the public interest was to be discerned through the workings of social inquiry and democratic discussion and deliberation; it was thus a political, rather than an economic, construction. As indicated above, consumer sovereignty was rejected: individually held preferences and private interests bearing on the public good were not taken as given but were to be submitted to the test of free and open debate among citizens, a process in which they could be challenged, enlarged, and transformed as citizens engaged and learned from each other in deliberative settings. Dewey defended this process in 1939:

Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation – which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition – is itself a priceless addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises – and they are bound to arise – out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree – even profoundly – with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends. A genuinely democratic faith in peace is faith in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself ... (Dewey 1991 [1939]: 228).

For Dewey, this educative potential of democracy and democratic deliberation in particular suggested that citizens could not only broaden their interests and moral outlooks to take in the larger public good, but that they could also sharpen and improve the intellectual and communicative skills necessary to participate in this process over time (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 366).

This faith in the intellectual capacities of the common citizen, and the potentially enlightening and ennobling power of education distinguished Dewey from democratic realists such as his colleague and frequent critic Walter Lippmann, who took a much less sanguine view of the political and administrative capacities of the public. Whereas Lippmann memorably defined the public in-

terest as ‘what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, [and] acted disinterestedly and benevolently’ (Lippmann 1955: 40) – and came to the elitist conclusion that citizens were intellectually incapable of effectively governing themselves in such a manner – Dewey retained an unyielding faith in the educability of citizens and their ability to develop the necessary ability and motivation to identify and secure their shared interests through democratic deliberation. Noting that such social and political knowledge was not an innate possession but rather a ‘function of association and communication’ (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 334), Dewey believed that the institutionalisation of the scientific spirit in education and public life would foster the kind of democratic diffusion of knowledge of social consequences that would allow citizens to chart their own political and policy course. This knowledge would also promote the intelligent control and direction of economic and other social forces for the greater public benefit:

Economic agencies produce one result when they are left to work themselves out on the merely physical level, or on that level modified only as the knowledge, skill and technique which the community has accumulated are transmitted to its members unequally and by chance. They have a different outcome in the degree in which knowledge of consequences is equitably distributed, and action is animated by an informed and lively sense of shared interest (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 333).

We must remember, however, that the public is fallible in Dewey’s understanding; it can be mistaken about what is in its interest at any point in time and in any given situation. Incomplete information about the causes and consequences of particular social problems, and widespread commitment to beliefs that subsequent inquiry determines to be false can lead communities astray, as can more insidious forces such as ideological bias, political secrecy, and the ubiquitous corrupting influence of economic power. Yet, like the ideal of scientific inquiry (even if it may at times fall short in practice), for Dewey this democratic social intelligence is potentially self-correcting, progressively rooting out error by casting its epistemological net out to the widest possible range of alternative beliefs and experiences and vigilantly maintaining its open and transparent character:

It is of the nature of science not so much to tolerate as to welcome diversity of opinion, while it insists that inquiry brings the evidence of observed facts to bear to effect a consensus of conclusions – and even then to hold the conclusion subject to what is ascertained and made public in further new inquiries. I would not claim that any existing democracy has ever made complete or adequate use of scientific method in deciding upon its policies. But freedom of inquiry, toleration of diverse views, freedom of communication, the distribution of what is found out to every individual as the ultimate intellectual consumer, are involved in the democratic as in the scientific method (Dewey 1989 [1939]: 81).

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The public interest, on Dewey's view, is thus not an absolute, universal, or ahistorical good. It is constructed in each policy and problem context as conjoint activity produces indirect social consequences that the democratic public wishes to direct into collectively identified and validated channels. It follows, then, that there will be many 'publics' just as there will be many public interests in various times and places. The designated public interest on any given policy question, that is to say, cannot be stated in advance of the democratic appraisal of causes and consequences and the contextual, cooperative search for a wider shared interest in a specific problematic situation. For Dewey, it is therefore always a good to be discovered by a public motivated to secure its shared interests as a democratic community, a commitment which not only ensures the identification and maintenance of such interests, but also the development of individuals as fully self-realised and enriched citizens (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 328). Conflict is not ignored; rather, deliberation within the method of democratic social inquiry can promote the discovery of new courses of action and reveal underlying shared interests. In Dewey's understanding this process could in fact result in the transformation of the underlying conditions that produced such conflict among individuals and groups, making it possible for a common political culture to be established and maintained (Casparly 2000: 17).

It must be said that Dewey offers no final answer or universal substantive standard for judging, once and for all, *what* is in the public interest. To do so would have gone against his historical-evolutionary view of moral and political life, as well as the overall contextual nature of his epistemology and ethics. But Dewey's view of the public interest, while largely procedural, is also not the kind of thin 'proceduralist liberalism' premised on the imposition of hypothetical abstracting devices, conversational constraints, or 'neutralising' conditions on the deliberative process (e.g., Rawls, 1971, Ackerman 1980, Guttman and Thompson, 1996). It is instead shot through with the norms of 'good' inquiry, including reasonableness, openness, tolerance, and respect for other participants in common conversation and debate. As Dewey put it in his 1920 book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: 'Wide sympathy, keen sensitiveness, persistence in the face of the disagreeable, balance of interests enabling us to undertake the work of analysis and decision intelligently are the distinctively moral traits – the virtues or moral excellencies' (Dewey, 1982 [1920]: 173–4).

Dewey's commitment to the cooperative search for the wider interest in all manner of public issues, to the intelligent analysis and weighing of evidence and options, and to the humane and peaceful resolution of problems may sound a bit naïve, perhaps even utopian. But what are the alternatives? Are we to make appeals to timeless truths said to exist outside the political community? Should we acquiesce to the unchallenged wisdom of authority? Or are we simply to demonstrate a stagnant allegiance to tradition? I think Dewey reminds us that we will always wrestle with the question of the public good, with the question of what represents the true collective interest of the citizenry. This is only to

be expected: new and unanticipated problems always arise and old values and interests evolve in dialogue with changing empirical considerations. But there is no external standard for judging what the public interest is apart from the workings of social inquiry in the context of free and open deliberation among citizens.

#### THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND ITS PROMISE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

In light of the preceding discussion, and given the widely acknowledged normative and rhetorical heft of public interest discourse in constitutional, administrative, and public policy circles (an influence that exists despite the lack of consensus on its descriptive meaning), I think environmental philosophers would be well advised to link environmental value claims to a pragmatic, Deweyan notion of the public interest in their scholarly and public projects. Not only would this join the specialised and fairly private discourse of environmental philosophy to a powerful public ideal, but I believe that environmental philosophers' advocacy of the pragmatic model of the public interest sketched above would offer a potentially formidable – though not impervious – defence of environmental values and goals in the public realm.

For example, under this approach, corporate and private interests advanced as justifications for particular policy goals (or as reasons against them) would be held up to intelligent and discriminating public scrutiny, their claims tested and weighed in the forum of public reason and judged from the vantage point of the wider public interest. Ideally, as a result of this process of open social inquiry, special interests and biases – where and when they exist – would be revealed rather than left to masquerade as bearers of the 'public interest'. Indeed, as proponents of such special interests advance their policy proposals in the public sphere, the logic of their arguments and the validity of their supporting evidence would be subjected to open debate and public evaluation, and they would be required to justify their claims and proposals to the democratic community in the language of the public good.

For a brief illustration of this process, consider the case of the corporate and political manipulation of the issue of scientific uncertainty in discussions over global climate change policy in the United States. Global heating as a result of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions produced by burning fossil fuels, forest clearing, and other activities has been confirmed with progressively greater certainty during the course of the twentieth century, to the point of near complete scientific consensus today (Weart 2003). Yet despite the overwhelming strength of this scientific consensus, and despite the increasing likelihood of a host of potentially devastating environmental, economic, and human health impacts due to an unnaturally warming earth – from catastrophic floods, desertification,

and biological impoverishment to intense heat waves and the spread of vector-borne infectious diseases – key decision makers in the United States continue to publicly offer the uncertainty of climate change science (among other economic and political considerations) as one of the main justifications for backing away from international climate agreements like the Kyoto Protocol (Brown 2002).

In a Deweyan search for the public interest, however, policy actors would be held publicly accountable to the preponderance of scientific evidence supporting the human forcing of climate change and its likely future human and environmental impacts. This is not to say that Deweyan inquiry into the global climate change problem would ignore real scientific uncertainty where it exists (such as the lack of precision in estimating the timing and magnitude of climate change, the accuracy of general circulation models, and so on). In fact, it would acknowledge and seek to identify additional areas of scientific and social ignorance and work deliberately and efficiently to reduce them over time. In some cases, this inquiry may even require the scientific community to more effectively meet the informational needs of decision makers and the public, a responsibility that may challenge historical research priorities in climate change science (Pielke and Sarewitz 2002). This speaks to a linked and concurrent discussion of the role of a ‘public interest science’, in which university and professional scientific researchers self-consciously focus on solving urgent public environmental and human health problems rather than on commercial or narrowly professional interests (Krimsky 2003). But getting back to the main point, a pragmatic search for the public interest in the global climate change debate would not take corporate or various political interests at face value. It would insist on an open, deliberative process of practical reasoning over the claims of variously interested parties, including scientists, decision makers, and citizens; and it would be respectful rather than dismissive of the cumulative weight of scientific evidence in policy arguments.

This model of inquiry into the public interest in global climate change policy would work to expose pernicious forms of undemocratic distortion of the results of scientific investigation through various forms of corporate media manipulation and other practices designed to mislead and misinform popular opinion and public understanding of climate change science (e.g., Beder 2002). Inasmuch as environmental philosophers want to ground their ethical claims for conserving or preserving parts and processes of the natural environment in the best science available, and to the degree that we want to appeal to decision makers (and the public) through well-reasoned normative arguments for specific policy goals, one would think that it would be to the field’s great benefit to support such democratic scientific inquiry under the banner of the public interest in environmental policy discussions. Of course, Lippmann did have a point; citizens are not always rational, or clear-thinking, or intellectually deft enough to understand all the scientific and technical nuances of environmental problems. Indeed, in a case as complex as global climate change, one would



need to have advanced training in atmospheric and other physical and natural sciences to possess a truly deep and comprehensive grasp of the scientific and technical nuances of the phenomenon (and even then, we can be assured that much would escape apprehension). But the alternative is to have the discussion be controlled only by scientific and technical experts, or leaving it to the jostling of interest-group politics and/or the logic of the marketplace. In my opinion, one of Dewey's most significant legacies is to remind us that citizens may at times lack the knowledge and skill to conduct certain aspects of public affairs themselves, but they are always educable, and, moreover, are able to consult experts and participate in the decision-making and administrative process if given the opportunity.

Besides the issue of the distortion of scientific knowledge regarding anthropogenic climate change, a Deweyan notion of the public interest, inasmuch as it relies on the deliberative process of a reasoned public debate and discussion (a process open to a diversity of human and environmental value claims and devoted to the search for a common ground among participants), gives us a normative counterpoint to economic and utilitarian renderings of the public interest. The public interest, for Dewey, is not the default philosophy of market individualism; that is, it does not take individual preferences as given, nor does it subscribe to an aggregative logic that chains public choice to the balance of individual consumer demands or willingness to pay. It is, to sound a theme keyed earlier, a political, rather than an economic concept (or a metaphysical one). As a result, arguments against U.S. policy responses to the problem of anthropogenic climate change that invoke the public interest understood in narrow economic terms – e.g., the argument that it is against the 'public interest' for government to impose new costly environmental regulations – have in essence co-opted and misapplied a normative political concept, rendering it as nothing more than preference satisfaction. In defining a priori the public interest through the language of economic individualism, significant and commonly held *public values* at play in such cases – e.g., aesthetic, moral, and cultural goods (which may include the intrinsic value of nature as well as long-term considerations of human interests and welfare) – are left out in the cold.

Furthermore, I would propose that claims made on behalf of the public interest (pragmatically understood) in global climate change and other environmental policy debates would have a greater motivational effect and would carry more legitimate political clout than many of environmental philosophers' heretofore preferred arguments, chief among them articulations of the intrinsic value of nature. On the one hand, this would be expected simply because of the widely acknowledged power and resonance of the public interest in political and administrative discourse. But it would also follow, I believe, from the strong association of the Deweyan version of the public interest with core democratic and epistemic values discussed above; commitments that elicit a wide and deep allegiance from citizens, decision-makers, and scientists. Last, while the

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

public interest is not a decision procedure in the sense that it can yield direct and detailed prescriptions for *specific* public policies (e.g. , should the United States reduce carbon emissions to 7% below 1990 levels? Or 15% below? Or perhaps 20 %?, etc.), it can direct public discussion and debate to broader policy goals (such as the general aim of reducing carbon emissions) as politically valid concerns, ones that in many cases also serve the narrower normative agendas of environmentalists.

The correct conclusion to draw here, however, is not that intrinsic value of nature claims are rendered irrelevant; rather, it is that they must be placed within a larger normative and policy context in order to be truly effective. While intrinsic value arguments can certainly be a part of the reasoning process that defines the public good in addressing serious environmental problems like anthropogenic global climate change, they will gain more salience and policy relevance, I believe, if they are advanced within the broader framework of public interest discourse. Among other things, this speaks to environmental philosophers' adoption of a more open and accommodating stance within environmental value discussions. Environmental philosophers should be prepared to make compelling and intelligent arguments for engaging in a truly democratic inquiry into the public interest in environmental policy debates, and these arguments should not entail an exclusivist or ideological endorsement of anthropocentrism or nonanthropocentrism as an absolutist metaphysical position. Moreover, there is ample room in the Deweyan model for environmentally-cast articulations of the public interest. For instance, environmental philosophers can inform public discussions of what is in the public interest by evoking environmental values that citizens share as a part of a common cultural inheritance, and to which large numbers of the public express loyalty (e.g., Sagoff 1988, Dunlap and Mertig 1992, Kempton et al. 1995). Philosophers, that is, can substantively flesh out the public interest by articulating widely shared environmental values in deliberative contexts as constituting the legitimate public interest in specific situations. Once more, there is no reason why this process is not open to claims supporting the intrinsic value of nature, since these now are properly viewed as reasons for the public interest in a certain context or issue, with the public interest offered as a normative justification for adopting a certain environmental policy. Although environmental ethicists (and environmentalists generally) cannot be guaranteed that our arguments will always carry the day, we should be supportive of efforts to give such claims a fair hearing, and confident enough of their validity and persuasiveness that we are willing to enter into public debate and 'take our chances'. Likewise, we should also be willing to consider the possibility that, as difficult as it might be for a scholarly profession that prides itself on 'getting it right', we might sometimes be wrong.

The pragmatic, democratic view of the public interest I am defending here departs from many current environmental philosophers' presumptions that appeals to the public interest are necessarily antagonistic to the promotion of

various environmentalist ends and the justification of robust environmental policy. For example, Holmes Rolston – perhaps the most prominent environmental philosopher writing today – suggested a few years ago that claims to democracy and public values in environmental cases will only result in a power struggle, one which may pretend to be democratic (or in the public interest) but will ultimately be determined by bargaining power and presumably, by unfettered economic might (Rolston 1998: 356). Rolston's apparent adherence to the pluralist, interest-group model of democracy here renders him incapable of seeing how an alternative process of open deliberation and cooperative social inquiry can transform preferences and reveal shared public values able to justify preservationist, or at any rate non-exploitationist, environmental policies.

Accordingly, I would suggest that environmental philosophers can greatly benefit from exposure to the work of political theorists and policy scholars who, over the course of the past two decades, have considerably expanded our understanding of the character and potential of deliberative democracy and participatory political thought and practice (e.g., Barber 1984, Fishkin 1991, Benhabib 1996, Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Bohman and Rehg 1997, Dryzek 2002). Drawing from earlier foundations in the writings of Aristotle and Rousseau, and also from later thinkers such as Dewey, the deliberative conception of democracy is, as Joshua Cohen puts it, centred firmly on the idea that shared political power is justified 'on the basis of free public reasoning among equals' (Cohen 1997: 412). Many of its proponents argue (as did Dewey before them) that this sort of expansive and participatory model of democratic action can produce individual self-transformation along more public-spirited lines (Warren 1992). The democratic theorist Benjamin Barber, for example, defines his approach of 'Strong Democracy' around this transformative experience, writing that the strong democratic ideal is to be thought of as

Politics in the Participatory Mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods (Barber 1984: 132).

Barber's view clearly evokes Dewey's earlier insights about the function of social learning in democratic inquiry, as well as the ability of public deliberation to create a more inclusive and enlightened view of the public interest. It also restates a perhaps more controversial point: i.e., there is no 'independent ground' for political life; no metaphysical, pre-experiential, pre-political claim or foundation upon which we can confidently construct a robust democratic politics. There are only citizens committed to an ongoing civic dialogue and debate, one that Barber (and Dewey) are wagering on to produce a more expansive understanding of the public interest as private (e.g., consumer) interests are transformed through public talk.

## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

In the environmental realm, a growing analytic and empirical literature has identified a range of deliberative enterprises that evoke, either explicitly or implicitly, the Deweyan/Barber model of politics. From citizens' juries and watershed councils, to focus group discussions, community roundtables, and so on, we are gaining a clearer picture of the institutional possibilities for increased citizen participation and deliberation in environmental problem solving and decision making (e.g., Sagoff 1998, Burgess et al, 1998a, 1998b; Rippe and Schaber 1999, Aldred and Jacobs 2000, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). There is good reason to think that such participatory and deliberative democratic models can promote the expansion of meaningful environmental concern among citizens (see Gundersen 1995). Yet despite the promise of these emerging models of deliberative democracy, in practice, like any other political technology, they fall short of perfection. Indeed, many thoughtful observers have rightly noted that proponents of deliberative democracy must be attentive to a number of problems afflicting actual deliberative contexts, including the unequal possession of discursive skills and the undemocratic influence of political and economic power (Young 1996, Sanders 1997, Bohman 2000). These approaches may also face the additional question of legitimacy in the representation of the interests of future generations and nonhumans in deliberative contexts (O'Neill 2002). While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to examine these issues in sufficient detail, any defence of deliberative democratic methods must necessarily keep these concerns at the centre of discussions about the prospects for deliberative democratic institutions on the ground. As Dewey himself concluded, in a remark that has become popular among political theorists celebrating his recent revival as a deliberative democrat: 'The essential need...is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public' (Dewey 1988 [1927]: 365).

## CONCLUSION

I have tried to show in this paper that environmental philosophers have something to gain from a reconsideration of traditional 'anthropocentric' political and philosophical thought, and that doing so does not require sacrificing normative commitments to the intrinsic value of nature or support for protective environmental policy. While a Deweyan retrieval of the public interest can help to extend the political and ethical vision of the emerging 'environmental pragmatism' within environmental philosophy (e.g., Light and Katz 1996, Norton 1999), conceptually it works at a different and more generalised level than the pragmatist theory of value (see Weston 1985, Minter 2001). Therefore, the approach presented here is in theory open to multiple philosophical positions in environmental ethics – provided, that is, they do not seek to subvert or distort the larger process of free democratic inquiry into the public good.

I think there is good reason to believe that an open, deliberative search for the public interest will provide the best means for environmentalist goals to be successfully articulated in citizen debates and decision making situations. But again, there are no independent assurances that the environmentalist agenda will move forward in every case. Appeals to the intrinsic value of nature, environmental rights, or various other ontological arguments about the status of natural values carry no overwhelming political weight or transcendent policy status; they certainly are not moral trumps that can silence all citizens who disagree with them. This may be a hard pill for some environmental ethicists to swallow, but I simply know of no other way to maintain a meaningful political commitment to democracy in environmental ethics, a commitment that I believe is vital for both normative reasons (e.g., citizens really do 'count') and more conventional pragmatic ones (e.g., such a model offers the best hope for a self-correcting method of social problem-solving that is needed in environmental policy) (Minteer 2002).

I have suggested that the notion of the public interest in Dewey's work provides a useful link between environmental philosophy and the policy community. It therefore promotes the further development of the field's considerable, though still largely unrealised, practical potential. Despite J. Baird Callicott's claims to the contrary (Callicott 2002), many environmental philosophers (including non-pragmatists) are deeply concerned about the field's track record of policy irrelevance. Eugene Hargrove, editor of the journal *Environmental Ethics*, has recently proposed that graduate students in public policy be required to take environmental ethics courses to counterbalance the dominating force of economics in policy programs and the wilful exclusion of environmental ethical subject matter among the policy studies community (Hargrove 2003). While I am certainly all for this, I believe that this argument also needs to run in the other direction: graduate students of environmental philosophy should receive training in public policy and political studies, as well as in the field's traditional allied pursuits (i.e., the natural sciences). The reconciliation of environmental philosophy with the public interest hopefully represents one small step in this new direction.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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