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Convergence, Divergence and the Complex Nature of Environmental Problems

A lively discussion has been taking place among the students that both I and our Editorial Assistant, Dave Littlewood, teach. At the heart of the discussion is a plea that all our thinking about the environment should actually go somewhere, should have some impact on the world and the problems we face. Too much thinking/talking and not enough action could summarise the view being expressed. The pragmatist turn in environmental philosophy, spearheaded by Bryan Norton in *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*[1] is seen by many as the perfect solution. Its convergence hypothesis – the claim that whether we take an anthropocentric or a nonanthropocentric view we want the same outcome: a healthy ecosphere – means that we should shape our arguments to fit with the views of those best placed to bring about the necessary changes, the policy makers. The fact that policy makers and indeed the public are concerned about human survival and not contested philosophical claims about the intrinsic value of natural entities or systems means that we are best placed to 'make a difference' by putting our energies into supporting an enlightened form of anthropocentrism. However, nonanthropocentrism has neither perished under the pragmatist's knife nor passed merely into the realms of cherished dogma; rather, this debate continues to be productive of fresh thinking. Katie McShane's recent paper,[2] which asked ethical questions about a purely anthropocentric approach, has sparked a useful and enlightening exchange between herself and Bryan Norton in the form of a comment and reply in this issue.[3] For McShane, what seems to be missing from the anthropocentric view, no matter how enlightened its formulation, is the place for such emotional connections to nature as care, love and awe. That people have such responses is evident in Van den Born's paper in this issue, 'Rethinking Nature: Public visions in the Netherlands'. The people interviewed appeared to be working with an idea of nature as mainly instrumentally valuable, but they were also keen to see their relationship as one of participation with nature plus responsibilities of care. The respondents themselves did not like the idea of mastery over nature or even, for some, stewardship, as this was still seen as hubristic. Interestingly, however, they thought that others would have a mastery over nature attitude.[4] This pessimism about the views of others reminded me of the results of two other studies that have appeared in these pages. Butler and Acott[5] showed that people working in the area of nature conservation often held intrinsic value views but presented instrumental value justifications for their work to their work colleagues and in their dealings with the public. Campagna and Fernandez[6] in their study of environmental organisations' own mission statements also showed the predominance of instrumental views in the public face of these organisations. The kind of emotional qualities that McShane discusses do seem to fit with personal rather than public views.

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Although McShane doesn't contest the convergence hypothesis as such, the technological developments outlined in Christopher Preston's paper in this issue might give us pause for thought.[7] Preston explores the distinction between synthetic biology and other developments such as nanotechnology and genetic modification in order to make the striking claim that only synthetic biology makes a significant break with evolutionary processes. Thus, arguments against nanotechnology and GM that rest on some kind of ethical or onotological claim do not work in the way philosophers such as Keekok Lee expect. However, it could also be argued that developments such as synthetic biology could offer just the kind of resource benefits that the convergence hypothesis relies on being deliverable *only* by the kind of healthy ecosphere that is the holy grail of both nonanthropocentrists and, currently (i.e., in the absence of a well developed synthetic biology), anthropocentrists. If the new nano- and biotechnologies can deliver the resources humans require (including those broader human values based on the kinds of preferences to which Norton refers), then the convergence hypothesis is undermined, because we would no longer need a healthy ecosphere as valued by nonanthropocentrists in order to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. This possibility, distant though it might be, does seem to indicate more than a theoretical separation of goals. The weekend nonanthropocentrist who wears a 'respectable' anthropocentrist mask at work might not only be missing the opportunity to speak to other closet nonanthropocentrists but could end up working towards a very different goal from the one to which they are actually committed.

Environmental thought could be characterised by the constant pressure to solve real problems while also thinking deeply about the roots of those problems. This has created a diverse field in which discussions and debates range across traditional disciplines and draw upon many different approaches and ways of thinking. Freya Mathews'[8] paper throws into sharp relief any too quick rush to solve problems. She does this by critiquing the very processes and tools that have shaped our thinking and arguably created environmental problems in the first place. Mathews suggests ways we can realign ourselves in order to develop moral thinking that is sourced out of a feeling for the inner reality of others including non-humans and even systems. The complex nature of the problems we face is also unpacked by Michael Carolan,[9] who focuses on the debate regarding genetic modification as a site of rich contestation.

As always in these pages there is a rich mixture of views and approaches and although each paper has distinct qualities there is also a lot to be gained from reading them together.

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NOTES

[1] Norton 1991.

[2] McShane 2007.

[3] Norton 2008; McShane 2008.

[4] Van den Born 2008.

[5] Butler and Acot 2007.

[6] Campagna and Fernandez. 2007.

[7] Preston 2008.

[8] Mathews 2008.

[9] Carolan 2008.

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