

# Pragmatism, Environmental World Views, and Sustainability

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## Introduction: Environmental Pragmatism

Over the last several years, there has been an emerging discussion among environmental philosophers over the question of whether philosophical pragmatism can have a place of value in the environmental movement. Pragmatism is the distinctively American philosophical school which, roughly, holds that our ideas, theories, and worldviews should be examined and evaluated in the light of their impact on lived experience, according to how well they enable us to maneuver through experience successfully. Some worry that pragmatism's tendency to root all values in subjective human experience undercuts the environmentalist's claim that all of us *ought* to care about nature, because nature has an intrinsic value independent of the human activity of valuing. (Katz 1987) Others insist that pragmatism's tendency to view individuals as inextricably connected to their field of experience--to their environment--can serve as the basis for environmental concern. (Parker 1996) What has not been explicitly noted in these discussions is that one of the key ideas advocated in current environmental theory--specifically, the idea that the contemporary consumerist worldview is largely to blame for our current environmental crisis, and any solution to that crisis must be driven by a change in worldview-- is itself an essentially pragmatic idea. I would like to explore the significance of this fact for those environmental theorists who embrace this idea. My suggestion is that, while not committed to all the traditional aspects of philosophical pragmatism, theorists who insist on the importance of cultivating a new worldview are implicitly committing themselves to some core pragmatic principles, and that the environmental movement will be strengthened by paying explicit attention to these principles and what they mean for environmental theory and practice.

## The Environmentalist Push for a New Worldview

One of the most recurring themes in contemporary environmental theory is the idea that, in order to create a sustainable human society embedded in a flourishing natural environment, we need to change how we *think* about our relationship with nature. A simple change in public

policy is not enough. Modest social changes--such as increased use of public transportation or a growing commitment to recycling--are not enough. Nor is environmental education that stresses the dangers of current practices and the prudence of caring for the earth. Even appeals to moral duty--obligations to future generations and to the fellow creatures with whom we share the planet--are insufficient.

What is needed is a change in our worldview. More specifically, we need to change our view of nature and of our relationship with nature. Again and again, environmental thinkers press home this point. Aldo Leopold, one of the seminal figures of the environmental movement, advocates the adoption of a "land ethic" which "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to just plain member of it." (Leopold 1949) Deep ecologists such as Arne Naess advocate a process of deep questioning of our basic assumptions about nature and our relationship to nature, and they argue that unless we move away from "anthropocentric" conceptions of nature, and towards a more ecocentric view which accords value to all parts of the ecosphere, we will not *want* to do the things which need to be done to live sustainably in the natural world. (Naess 1988) Fritjof Capra, a research physicist and environmentalist, holds that the hope of the earth lies in a "new vision of reality," a "new ecological paradigm" currently emerging among scientists, philosophers, and other thinkers--one which views humans as part of a larger, interrelated whole. (Capra 1987) Thomas Berry insists that "to be viable, the human community must move from its present anthropocentric norm to a geocentric norm of reality and value." (Berry 1987) Psychologist Chellis Glendinning believes that Western culture imposes on us a mechanistic worldview that is fundamentally unsatisfying, leading to a "Techno-Addiction" that can be overcome only if we "integrate into our lives a new philosophy" that is "earth-based, ecological, and indigenous." (Glendinning 1992)

While not all environmentalists embrace this clamoring for a new worldview, the trend is clear and unmistakable. Driving this trend is a growing suspicion that the prevailing modern worldview--a consumerist vision of life which denigrates nature to the status of property--is largely responsible for inspiring the unsustainable social and individual practices which threaten the health of our planet and ourselves. Thus, the only viable path to sustainability is the adoption of a new, environmentally friendly worldview.

### **The Pragmatic Basis of Environmentalism**

The fundamental assumption here is that there exists an essential link

between our outlook on the world and our behavior, one so strong that how we look at the world--our worldview--will largely determine what we do. The fundamental justification for changing our worldview, then, is that making such a change is the only realistic way to sufficiently change our harmful behavior.

Anyone at all familiar with the history of American philosophy will recognize this assumption, and its concomitant justification of the environmental agenda, as essentially pragmatic--by which I mean that this mode of thinking received a central place in the American philosophical school known as pragmatism. In his 1906 lectures on pragmatism, William James (one of the central figures in American philosophical pragmatism) opened his remarks with the following quote from G.K. Chesterton:

There are some people--and I am one of them--who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them. (James 1991)

The principle here, embraced by James as a starting point for his discussion of philosophical pragmatism, is that our worldview (or overall philosophy) has more direct impact on how we live our lives than any other single thing. And it is this principle which undergirds the current trend in environmental philosophy: according to a plethora of environmentalists, the only realistic way to move from the current unsustainable practices in human society to genuinely sustainable ones is to abandon the worldview that drives our unsustainable consumerist lifestyle and replace it with a worldview that inspires a caring and nurturing relationship with nature. To this extent at least, the majority of environmental theorists writing today are pragmatic in the philosophical sense.

But if the ultimate justification for a shift in worldviews is pragmatic in this sense, then the various candidates for an "environmentally friendly" worldview should be evaluated in terms of their pragmatic effect, and the theoretic discussions that emerge among these rival worldviews should be mediated by pragmatic considerations. It is here that pragmatic philosophy can be especially helpful to environmentalism, by

way of giving us criteria for evaluating worldviews and mediating theoretic discussions in terms of their pragmatic significance.

### **Pragmatic Criteria for Evaluating Worldviews**

There are two principal pragmatic criteria for evaluating worldviews, both of which are articulated by James in his lectures on pragmatism. The first is what I will call the *Criterion of Meaning*, and it is expressed by James as the "pragmatic method," in the following way:

The pragmatic method... is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right. (James 1991)

In short, the meaning of a worldview is to be evaluated in terms of the *way of life* which it tends to produce. From the standpoint of environmental philosophy, which calls for new worldviews in order to promote a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, this criterion asks us to examine explicitly the effects of alternative worldviews on the sustainability of human-natural systems, and to distinguish them according to their practical impact on these systems. If two environmental worldviews have the same impact on the human-nature relationship, they have the same *environmental* meaning (although they may have a different meaning in some other sphere of human endeavor).

The second pragmatic criterion, what I will call the *Criterion of Truth*, is expressed by James in his pragmatic account of truth, in the following way:

(Truth) means ... nothing but this, *that ideas ... become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience....* (James 1991)

In other words, the ultimate test of a worldview's truth is how well it enables us to function in the world of experience--not only how well it enables us to passively interpret our experience in a consistent way, but also how well it guides us through the active dimension of our lives. When evaluating a worldview, we must evaluate how well it works out in *lived experience*. Does it enable us to sustainably act in ways that are

compatible with the dictates of the worldview itself and the rest of our experience? For example, a worldview which defines success as the accumulation of material wealth might be viewed as self-defeating, and hence false, if the pursuit of wealth destroys the natural resources on which wealth-accumulation depends. A worldview that cannot be lived out without running into contradictions or--as in the case above--without undermining the very preconditions for the possibility of living it out, is pragmatically false. (It is worth noting that according to this pragmatic criterion of truth, the label of "truth" is never final, since a belief that works in one experiential setting might no longer work given the advent of new experiences.)

### **The Pragmatic Failure of the Modern Worldview**

Implicit in the widespread critique of the modern worldview is the observation that it has proven itself to be pragmatically false. While the modern consumerist worldview may have "worked" in the past, at least to some degree, it does not work anymore. The approaching environmental crisis can be solved only if we begin to act in ways that bring us into harmony with the ecosystems around us. We can realize such harmony only if we stop consuming more than nature can replenish--but the modern worldview defines success in terms of consumption, and thus inspires ever-increasing rates of resource depletion. We can find such harmony only if we stop contaminating natural systems more quickly than those systems can cleanse themselves--but the modern view of happiness is directly tied to the technological and industrial artifacts that are largely responsible for that contamination. We are likely to find such harmony only if harmony really matters to us--but the modern worldview is built upon a paradigm of dominating nature, of transforming and controlling nature to suit human preferences, not on realizing harmony with it.

From this pragmatic framework, then, environmentalists are right to critique the prevailing modern worldview. The practical meaning of this worldview is activity that radically transforms the ecosphere, constructing human communities and habitats that are isolated from natural ecosystems and which disrupt not only the local ecosystems which they about, but also the atmosphere and hence the whole planet. That such practices are unsustainable is clear from the growing preponderance of scientific evidence. Human beings evolved in the natural environment that we are presently transforming. We evolved to be dependent upon that natural environment for our physical as well as psychological sustenance. Our actions amount to a destruction of much upon which we depend, and are therefore self-defeating in a very

straight-forward way. The worldview that impels such actions is therefore pragmatically false.

What I would like to do here is demonstrate, by way of an example, the value of pragmatic principles not only for the critique of the modern worldview, but also for guiding the on-going process of developing new, environmentally friendly alternatives. Perhaps the most useful role of pragmatism for current environmental philosophy lies in its capacity to identify *which* theoretic debates really matter, and to mediate these debates in terms of shared pragmatic goals--in particular, the goal of cultivating sustainable human-natural systems. With the urgency of the current environmental crisis, we cannot afford to get bogged down in theoretic disputes that mask a common mission and get in the way of making the practical changes that are so pressing.

### **Pragmatic Mediation of Deep Ecology and Christian Stewardship**

The example I have chosen to discuss is the theoretic debate between two environmental philosophies that have emerged in the last few decades: the philosophy of stewardship that has evolved in Christian communities, and the philosophy of deep ecology. I choose these two not on the basis of any special status they have, but rather because they are the two environmental perspectives with which I have the most personal acquaintance, and because the nature of the debate between them usefully illustrates the value of using pragmatic principles to guide theoretic environmental discourse.

Before applying pragmatic principles to this example, some preliminary comments may be helpful. First, it is important to keep in mind that complex worldviews or philosophical systems may impact more than one domain of human life, and that they may have radically opposing pragmatic implications in one or more of those domains while implying substantially the same behaviors in the domain of the human-nature relationship. In such a case, we can say that while the worldviews do not have the same pragmatic meaning overall, they have the same *environmental meaning*. As such, it is important not to let the real differences in other areas mask the genuine agreement in the environmental domain.

Second, it is worth noting that there is almost certainly more than one human social arrangement that harmonizes sustainably with the natural environment. Put another way, there is more than one set of human practices that *works* in terms of promoting a healthy human-natural system. And it follows from this observation that more than one

worldview can be pragmatically true: while two worldviews may imply environmental behaviors that are different, and hence have a different pragmatic meaning, insofar as they both promote sustainable behaviors they are both true from a pragmatic standpoint. Pragmatic truth is not monistic, but pluralistic. Given the urgent pragmatic goals of environmental philosophy, sustained theoretic debates about meaning differences of this sort appear to be unwarranted, and should be put aside in favor of the task of finding practical ways of integrating and accommodating those alternative social arrangements which serve the common goal of sustainable human-natural systems.

With these ideas in mind, let us turn our attention to Christian stewardship and deep ecology. Both articulate environmental worldviews that were developed in response to the perceived inadequacy of prevailing contemporary views. We begin with Christian stewardship. It is no secret that Christianity has been blamed, at least in part, for the emergence of our present environmental crisis--and not without reason. Themes prevalent among Christians have contributed to creating the modern worldview which environmentalists see as so disastrous. Most notable is the idea that human beings were singled out in God's creation to have a special, privileged place, and that the rest of creation--the rest of nature--was given to human beings for their use. The concept of stewardship has emerged as a corrective to this idea, and is built on several key assumptions. The first is that every part of the created order has value insofar as it proceeds from God, and that this value is not dependent on its usefulness for human beings. After all, in Genesis God declared his creation to be good even before human beings were made. Thus, in addition to having instrumental value for human beings, nature has an inherent value that needs to be respected. The second key assumption turns on a different reading of the concept of dominion. While it is true that biblical language speaks in terms of human dominion over nature, the central Christian model for dominion is the person of Jesus, who exercises dominion over all things through a practice of service and sacrifice in the name of God. Christian dominion is comparable to the dominion that a shepherd has over his flock: he has been entrusted with the flock by the flock's owner, and must, out of respect for the owner of the sheep, serve and protect the sheep. As Larry Rasmussen puts it, " the human exercise of power should be patterned on (Jesus') kind of lordship--a servant stance in which the last are made first... and even the sparrow is cherished, so that all might be gathered into covenantal intimacy on equal terms." (Rasmussen 1996)

This stewardship stance towards nature is neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric, but rather theocentric: it introduces a third being--God--into

the relationship, who serves to mediate and define the human-natural system. We have been entrusted with God's creation, not to exploit it, but to serve it as part of an overall loving relationship with God. The outcome of faithful and respectful service to the created order is the promised "peaceable kingdom" of God, the world where alienation and sin are transcended by love.

This philosophy of stewardship has been widely critiqued, not only by environmental theorists outside the Christian tradition, but also by Christian ethicists who worry that this philosophy does not go far enough. In particular, the stewardship model preserves a special place for humans in the natural order, and is anthropocentric in at least this respect: humans have been singled out for a unique role in creation, as God's elected custodians of the planet. Nature is still subordinate to humans, much as a family heirloom is subordinate to the family members who reverently preserve it for subsequent generations. It is still the people who matter most. Nature is still just a thing, and a thing apart from us.

Christian Stewardship thus exhibits some sharp theoretical contrasts with deep ecology, the environmental perspective that has emerged in recent years as one of the premiere alternatives to the modern worldview. Deep ecology advocates a radical shift in how we conceive our relationship with nature. Deep ecologists recommend that we conceive ourselves as part of a complex and interconnected web of living and nonliving things, a web that has value in itself and not merely for the humans or organisms who are a part of it. Further, most deep ecologists reject the idea that we can clearly distinguish *self* from *other* within this web. The reality of that global interdependence calls for a new conception of self as extending beyond the borders of the narrow ego. A fully realized Self, in fact, identifies with the whole ecosphere, so much so that self-interest dovetails with notions of duty to the natural world. (Naess 1988)

Central to the deep ecology perspective is that people have no special, privileged place in the natural order. The chief problem with the modern worldview is its anthropocentrism, which should be replaced by an ecocentrism that accords value not only to other living organisms, but even to non-living members of the ecological system, such as rivers and mountains. The alienation between humans and nature is overcome by a monistic conception of reality in which the categories of "self" and "other" lose their meaning, washed away by a new holism that inspires harmonious, sustainable living as its automatic and immediate outcome.

The deep ecological worldview is clearly different from that of Christian stewardship on a number of indices: first, deep ecology makes no mention of God and need not posit a divine creator as the basis for environmental action; second, deep ecology does not accord any special place to human beings in the natural order; third, deep ecology introduces a new conception of the self, while the stewardship model does not. These are only some of the differences, meant to highlight the fact that from a purely theoretical standpoint the two perspectives are radically different. There are countless points at which debate between the two is possible.

But what about from a pragmatic perspective? First of all, there is no question that the two worldviews inspire different patterns of behavior. To give a mundane example, adherents to the stewardship model are likely to attend church, whereas there is nothing in the deep ecological perspective that would specifically motivate church attendance. The important question for environmentalists is not whether these two perspectives have the same pragmatic meaning overall, but whether they have the same *environmental* meaning. What are their practical implications for the sustainability of human-natural systems?

When this question becomes central, many of the theoretic differences between the two perspectives evaporate. Clearly, an ecocentric perspective of the sort advocated by deep ecologists, if genuinely adopted by human beings, would inspire a spontaneous interest in cultivating sustainable practices. Thus, the replacement of the kind of anthropocentrism expressed in the modern consumerist worldview by deep ecology's ecocentric alternative will have significant pragmatic effect. Ecocentrism and that kind of anthropocentrism have different pragmatic meanings. But it does not follow that ecocentrism has a different pragmatic meaning from every contextually-embedded variant of anthropocentrism. Clearly, whatever anthropocentrism means within the setting of Christian stewardship, this meaning is very different from what we find in the modern consumerist worldview.

In fact, if we consider the anthropocentrism of Christian stewardship carefully, it becomes apparent that in its pragmatic meaning, it is far closer to deep ecology's ecocentrism than it is to the much-critiqued consumerist version of anthropocentrism. Consider each of the three perspectives below, in terms of the behavior patterns which they are likely to spontaneously evoke:

1. "I am a special creature in the world, set apart from nature, and the natural order exists to provide me with resources to satisfy my desires."

(Consumerism)

2. "I am a being who cannot be separated from the complex web of life which makes up this planet. The body which is the locus of my experience is not the limit of my Self; rather, I extend to every part of that system upon which I depend, and an effect on any part is an effect on me. Each part has value in itself and value for me, but the distinction disappears when I realize that my personal flourishing cannot be separated from the flourishing of the whole system." (Deep ecology)

3. "I am a special creature in the world, set apart by God to be a loving caretaker of everything which God has made, the whole natural order which is good and valuable apart from me; in caring for this natural order I help to create the kind of peaceable kingdom in which I and every other being can flourish in a harmonious community linked together by bonds of divine love." (Christian stewardship)

In terms of pragmatic environmental meaning, 3 is far closer to 2 than it is to 1. Both 2 and 3 would spontaneously inspire a commitment to harmonious relations with nature. Both lend themselves to sustainability. In perspective 1, actions aimed at preserving the natural order would be perceived as sacrifices of personal success, albeit perhaps necessary sacrifices. In both 2 and 3 actions aimed at preserving the natural order would be an integral part of a successful life. In perspective 1, the central objective of environmental policies would be to maximize our capacity to use nature as a resource for personal gain--a goal that could involve the creative use of technology to continue transforming and taming nature, albeit with more care and prudence than has been done in the past. In both perspectives 2 and 3, the central objective of environmental policies is to find ways for humans to survive and flourish within a thriving natural system. The chief pragmatic difference between 2 and 3 is that adherence to 3 would be more likely in all circumstances to inspire an active *caretaker* role, whereas 2 would in many circumstances inspire a "hands-off" policy--but in the current environmental crisis, where leaving nature alone amounts to ignoring the damage we have done to it, caretaking is a pragmatic outcome of adherence to 2 as well.

The chief differences between 2 and 3 come not in terms of their central practical implications for the human-natural relationship, but rather in terms of how humans relate to each other in their pursuit of harmony with nature. Adherents to the Christian stewardship model may be more likely to approach the task in terms of communal enterprise, working cooperatively to pursue the common, divinely appointed mission. While

deep ecology does not rule out cooperation (and may call upon it when the health of the ecosystem requires it), it paradoxically leaves open the possibility of a far more individualistic approach to human-natural relations: individuals living their lives in harmony with nature, with a clear consciousness of their connectedness to the ecosphere but with less of a need to make environmental protection a communal mission. Christian stewardship is also far more likely to inspire an evangelical approach--a tendency to exhort and cajole others into taking part in the sacred task of caring for the planet; deep ecology, although not opposed to such ecological evangelism, will not necessarily give it the same centrality.

## **Conclusions**

The emerging environmental crisis creates an urgency to make changes in how we live, and there is considerable merit to the claim that we cannot make the changes that are required if we do not alter how we think about the human-natural relationship. But the urgency for change does not afford us the luxury of pursuing academic debates that lack a clear pragmatic significance. Because the incentive driving the development of new environmental worldviews is a pragmatic one, it is important for the theoreticians who construct these new worldviews not to lose sight of the pragmatic meanings of what they build. When two worldviews have pragmatic environmental meanings as close as what we find between Christian stewardship and deep ecology, the appropriate response is mutual support and collaboration, and the discussion should concern how best to integrate the efforts of adherents to either view. To the extent that environmental theorists can keep these pragmatic meanings in mind, we will see increased cooperation among theorists who emerge from alternative perspectives, and we will see a greater real-world impact of the work they do.

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