PRAGMATISM AND THE VALUE(S) OF NATURE

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Historically, few Anglo-American environmental philosophers have considered John Dewey's pragmatic moral theorizing a useful resource for ethical evaluation of environmental issues. There are several reasons for this lack of interest. First, pragmatists, like John Dewey, have typically been anthropocentrists in virtue of their contextualism about values. Second, pragmatists are typically welfare consequentialists who evaluate things, acts, and persons in terms of their functionality in promoting individual and social welfare. Third, pragmatists are pluralists about values, holding that human welfare has many, incommensurable constituents that defy reduction to any single value or principle of value.

While all these claims are true as far as they go,[1] why should their being true of Dewey's moral theorizing make it a non-starter for so many in the environmental ethics community? The reasoning runs as follows. First, because Deweyan pragmatists can never rationally exclude the human context of her evaluations, it must follow that they can never value nature as it is in itself, independent of its value for furthering human ends. Second, because Deweyan pragmatists are consequentialists who assess things, acts, and persons in light of their contributions to individual and social welfare, one may presume that Deweyan pragmatists would feel morally obliged to sacrifice the stability or integrity of natural systems or entities whenever doing so would tend to maximize the satisfaction of human interests. Third, because Deweyan pragmatists believe values are plural and incommensurable, pragmatic practical reasoning must be liable to produce

incoherent and conflicting prescriptions for our conduct generally and so prove self-defeating in practice. As a result, pragmatic normative theorizing is supposed to be unable to offer a viable strategy for resolving environmental policy disputes.

To avoid the supposed defects of pluralist welfare consequentialisms (pragmatic and non-pragmatic), leading figures in Anglo-American environmental philosophy have argued that what we need is "an adequate monistic theory" of intrinsic value for non-human natural entities and for nature as a whole," independent of their roles in human life, as a foundation for principles of obligation that would require nature's preservation, even at the expense of human interests. (Callicott (1985): 257-275.) [2] While there is as yet no agreement about which intrinsic properties of natural entities or systems the relevant sort of value supervenes upon (e.g., sentience, consciousness, life, etc.) bio-centrists, eco-centrists, deep ecologists, and animal rights theorists have agreed that any theory that rejects this proposal may itself be rejected as a non-starter whatever other merits the theory may have.

But to a Deweyan pragmatist, like myself, this proposal and much of the theoretical work based upon it appears hopelessly confused and indeed misdirected. It is hopelessly confused because it starts from a conflation of two distinct ways of categorizing values, neither of which entails the other. And it is misdirected, because value pluralism and consequentialism do not have the problematic implications used to justify their rejection. Pragmatic pluralistic consequentialism need not generate incoherent decision procedures nor refuse to assign intrinsic value to natural entities or systems. As pragmatic moral theorizing suffers from none of the three defects attributed to it, its continuing rejection by environmental philosophers is both unwarranted and unwise. In what follows, I shall defend these claims and briefly sketch the outlines of a pragmatic approach to deliberation about the values of nature.

Conflating Intrinsic and Final Values:

Students of moral philosophy are often surprised to learn that Dewey rejected the intrinsic/instrumental value distinction.[3] But when one reflects upon the conflations of value claims central to that distinction one can readily understand why he did so. Pick up almost any text in environmental ethics (or applied ethics generally) and one will find the author elucidating his or her concept of *intrinsic* value, the value a thing is said to have in virtue of its own inherent properties independent of relations to other things, by distinguishing it from *instrumental* value,

the value a thing has a means or instrument for the achievement of other ends or objectives. But a moment's consideration reveals the conflation at work here.[4]

A claim that a thing is intrinsically valuable is a *metaphysical* claim about the properties of the thing upon which value supervenes (or attaches.) Specifically it is a claim that these are properties the thing possesses in itself independent of any extrinsic properties it has in virtue of its relations to things external to it.   By contrast, a claim that a thing is valuable instrumentally is not a metaphysical claim. It says nothing about the status of the properties to which that value attaches. It is instead a claim about the *end value* or choiceworthiness of the thing in question – whether the thing is choiceworthy as a end or goal of some action or rather as means to some further end or goal. Neither sort of value claim entails the other.[5]

Consider a few examples: an instance of pleasure, a work of art, and an endangered species, such as the wild forest reindeer living in the old growth forests of Finland's Kainuu region, whose numbers are declining through the combined impacts of commercial logging and the increased wolf predation that logging operations make possible. Each of these might be said to be valuable either intrinsically or extrinsically. Does anything follow about the *kind* of value that we must assign them in either case?

Take an instance of pleasure. Assume its value supervenes upon its intrinsic properties. Does this tell you anything about whether or how someone might find it choiceworthy? Certainly not. Someone might value that instance of pleasure for its own sake or alternately might value it solely as a means of quieting a crying child. The properties that make it an end in itself in one context, are the same properties that make it instrumentally valuable in the other.

Or consider a work of art. Imagine a very rough pencil sketch of man playing an upright piano, unremarkable either for its execution or formal composition. Such a sketch might have some slight aesthetic merit in virtue of its purely intrinsic formal qualities, though too little for many of us to value it highly on that account. Now assign it some extrinsic qualities: suppose that the subject of the sketch is the composer Jean Sibelius and its creator, his brother-in-law, the artist Eero Järnefelt.[6] In light of these extrinsic properties, most of us would now value it highly: some for what it would fetch at an auction and others as a memento of a favorite artist or composer to be cherished for its own sake. That its value supervenes primarily upon its extrinsic properties does not determine which sort of value any of us must assign it.

Finally consider the wild forest reindeer. We might value them in virtue of their intrinsic properties as either sentient or living organisms, or, alternately, in virtue of their extrinsic properties: their evolutionary history or their roles in Finnish and/or Sami culture. Does the metaphysical status of the salient properties determine the sort of values supervening upon them? Again, the answer is no. We may cherish and try to preserve them for their own sakes, value them instrumentally as means to our ends, or both.

So now let us reconsider the first concern environmental philosophers have had with pragmatic moral theorizing: that because pragmatists are contextualists who always consider the extrinsic properties of the things, acts, or persons they evaluate (including their relations to their human evaluators), pragmatists cannot value nature as an end in itself. Clearly the argument is flawed. Pragmatists can indeed cherish nature and natural entities for their own sakes, not merely as means to other ends.[7]

Pragmatic Consequentialism and Practical Reasoning:

The near hegemony of utilitarian forms of consequentialism probably explains why so many suppose that if pragmatists are consequentialists then the pragmatists must assess our choices and actions as utilitarians have classically done, in terms of their utility in maximizing the end value assigned to certain inner mental states of sentient beings (e.g., pleasure, happiness, or preference satisfaction)[8]

Dewey is what we would now call a 'welfare' consequentialist.[9] But unlike his utilitarian counterparts, Dewey did not see the goal of morality as concerned primarily or exclusively with the subjective inner states of sentient beings.[10] Welfare, as Dewey would understand it, is *faring well* over time in adapting ourselves and our projects to our ever-changing social and physical environments. It is not an inner subjective state we experience but an objective *functional relationship* we maintain between our abilities, resources, and environment, on the one hand, and our interests, ends-in-view, habits, and desires, on the other.[11] Given the facts of human life, certain conditions must in fact be met if this functional relationship is be maintained over time: we must avoid threats to our lives, our capacities, and our access to the resources objectively necessary for faring well; we must create and maintain cooperative social communities essential to distinctly human life; and we do so in ways that provide harmonious outlets for our habits,

interests, tastes, and desires.

From these facts, we can generate what may be termed 'thin,' abstract generalizations about the necessary constituents of welfare, the good, right, and virtue that hold cross-culturally, with which to begin evaluating our choices, personal and social. Whatever one's subjective tastes or cultural practices, one cannot fare well if one fails to obtain the objectively desirable goods essential for humans to fare well: e.g., food, shelter, security, education, and cooperative social relationships. No human being, whatever his or her projects or preferences, can fare well without such goods.[12] Likewise no human being can fare well except through participation in norm-governed social practices that determine what individuals owe one another.[13] And no human being can fare well if the dispositions he or she must acquire in the course of pursuing objective goods in accordance with norms for right conduct are incoherent and/or inherently distasteful.[14]

Of course, these 'thin' generalizations about the objective constituents of welfare over time do not alone amount to a complete account of welfare, because they necessarily neglect the particularity of the social situations in which we find ourselves. The terms of social cooperation within any particular society, the roles available by which we can pursue our objective needs, are culturally specific, as are the rights and duties that go with them.[15] To fare well, we must adapt ourselves to the particular social situations in which we find ourselves. Further, we must develop the virtues of character required for fulfilling our roles: especially loyalty, justice, temperance, compassion and generosity. And what precisely these culturally 'thick' general conceptions involve cannot be determined without reference to specific social contexts.[16]

Moreover, faring well isn't simply a matter of identifying one's basic needs and the roles and virtues necessary for fulfilling them in a particular cultural setting. Faring well is as seriously threatened by unrelieved boredom, loneliness, frustration and despair as it is by an inability to obtain food or shelter or to escape oppressive social practices. We do not fare well unless we can enjoy our occupations and practices, develop sustainable projects that engage our interests, find specific persons, objects, activities, and places we can cherish for their own sakes as well as for their instrumental value in helping us meet our basic needs and fulfill our social roles.

Thus for a Deweyan pragmatist, the constituents of human welfare are irreducibly plural and the values of their respective contributions to individual and social welfare differ in kind and not merely degree. Many are neither interchangeable with nor commensurable with one another.

This thorough-going value pluralism has important implications for the conceptions of rational choice that pragmatists can endorse. But incoherence is not necessarily one of those implications.

Broadly speaking, there are three goals towards which practical reasoning may be directed: maximizing, optimizing, or 'satisficing.'[17] If one is a value monist, if, for example, one thinks of the 'global' or overarching objective of practical reasoning as promoting just one kind of valuable quality or state of affairs, of which more is always better than less, then one will naturally suppose that rational choice is choice that maximizes what one values overall. Pluralists, who hold that the global goal of practical reasoning is to realize a plurality of valued qualities or states of affairs, arrive at a different conclusion: that the practically rational choice is the choice that achieves the brings about the optimal set of what is valued.

The difference is due to the fact that maximization is practical only in situations where just one value is at stake. When playing chess, for example, one's overall objective is to avoid losing to one's opponent, so one can reasonably choose moves with a view to maximizing this outcome. But when multiple values are in play a different strategy is required. If the values in play are few, optimization may be a practical possibility. Say, for example, you have only one day to obtain a birthday gift for a friend and only 75 euros to spend. Your friend is an avid collector of first editions of Tove Jannson's famous series of children's books, comic strips, and toys, whose one desire is to expand her collection.[18] Here it is possible to optimize for the three values you are concerned with: time, money, and 'moominalia.' You find the best equipped shop you can reach within one day and buy as many items as you can afford.

Now on either understanding of the global goal of practical reasoning, a third strategy, satisficing, will at least sometimes be rational strategy for resolving particular problems. Satisficing is a simplified form of practical reasoning, first proposed by an economist, Herbert Simon, as way of modeling decision-making in real-world situations where decision-makers typically lack full-information both about what their options actually are (and the respective long-term consequences of adopting any one) and about the time they would need to expend to identify and assess them all.(Simon 1955, 1959)   It is an important feature of the decision contexts for which Simon proposed satisficing as a rational strategy that the selection process is, as David Schmidtz puts it, dynamic rather than static. (Schmidtz 1995, Byron 1998, Byron, ed., 2005) Because our options are not readily apparent to us, we must actively seek them and must

do so without assurance that the benefits of an extended search will outweigh the costs involved. In situations of radical uncertainty, Simon argued that it is rational to simplify our decision-making by (1) setting minimum 'aspiration levels'[19] for the benefits we wish to obtain, prior to commencing our search for options by which to achieve them, and (2) stopping our search upon discovery of the first option that meets one's aspiration levels without unacceptable costs.[20]

As Simon originally presented it, satisficing is rational for the speedy realization of 'local' objectives in the service of maximizing or optimizing the individual's or organization's longer-term or 'global' projects. That is, it is rational to settle for a sub-optimal or merely 'good enough' solution of a particular problem when doing so allows us to pursue our global objectives more efficiently. But it would not necessarily be rational to opt for sub-optimal outcomes at the level of our more global objectives of leading a good life, individually or collectively. That is, satisficing is a rational strategy for practical reasoning, not as a general rule, but only in special cases where attempting to maximize or optimize local objectives would be counter-productive (or sub-optimal.) This view of the rationality of satificing is wildly held. But it is this order of priority which pragmatic consequentialism reverses. For a pragmatic consequentialist, it is satisficing which is rational both globally as well as locally, and maximization and optimization which are rational only locally. This is a direct consequence of the pragmatic conception of welfare that Dewey advocates.

Remember that welfare in this sense is a functional relationship maintained between a constantly evolving agent, constantly evolving projects, and a constantly evolving environment. As such it is not a quality or property which can be maximized or optimized. Life is another such relationship, a functional relationship maintained between and among an organism's component organs and processes. Functional relationships of these sorts either exist or they do not. This is why one can say literally of an organism that it is alive or dead, but speak only metaphorically of its being 'more alive' at a given moment (as a device for drawing attention to some striking feature of the way its life processes are being manifested.) Similarly, one can speak literally of an individual's faring or failing to fare well, but only metaphorically of its faring better at a given moment (again as a device for drawing attention to some striking feature of some component activity constitutive of the individual's faring well.) Organisms can fail to meet the minimum conditions for such relationships by measurable degrees (e.g., life processes can succumb to

injury, disease or deprivation gradually or abruptly, reversibly or irreversibly, and welfare can likewise fail gradually or abruptly, reversibly or irreversibly.) But if an organism is alive, it is as alive as it can possibly be (regardless of whether it has eaten, or drunk, or housed itself as it aimed to do.) And if a person is faring well in a pragmatic sense, he or she is faring as well as he or she can possibly be (regardless of whether one has fulfilled all one's desires as one aimed to do.)

As comparatives are inapplicable when speaking of welfare, whether individual or collective, so too is the use of superlatives. We cannot meaningfully speak of any one form of life as representing a human summum bonum: that maximally or optimally best life so often taken to be the global goal of practical reasoning. At the global level, decision-making is necessarily satisficing rather than maximizing or optimizing.

For satisficing practical reasoning, the goal is to achieve whatever counts as a satisfactory outcome, given the thresholds one has previously set. Once minimum acceptable threshold levels for the non-inter-substitutable values have been set for our individual or collective endeavors, we simply seek out options by which to move forward until we find one that comes up to the thresholds at which we are currently aiming.[21] Since there is no one optimum outcome which rationality obliges us to seek, many different outcomes may be 'good enough.' We need not second-guess the selection at which we have arrived out of fear that it was sub-optimal relative to some other choice we might have made in this or some other possible world. This leaves us free to get on with our immediate, non-empty problems of determining, individually and collectively, how we can meet the thresholds appropriate for the pursuit of welfare and predicting where the greatest threats to our welfare are likely to come. For this reason Dewey sometimes characterized his normative theory as 'ameliorating' consequentialism. Some may fear that 'ameliorating' or 'satisficing' consequentialism sets its goals too low. But when we consider how appalling are the conditions in which so many human beings still live, and how much will be required of us to set and reach suitable minimum thresholds, it should be clear that no 'moral holiday' is to be expected.

Valuing Nature: a Case-study

So how will a pragmatist deliberate about the value of natural entities or systems? First we have to determine the context: what decisions have to be made, what values are in play, and for whom.

Say for example that we are trying to decide whether or how to protect Finland's endangered population of wild forest reindeer in the Kainuu region. Logging has decreased the habitat available to them while simultaneously increasing predation by wolves. Logging operations create gaps in and roadways through the forest. These attract elk and deer, who then attract wolves, to regions deeper within the forest than any of these animals would otherwise travel. Wolf encounters with forest reindeer escalate to the reindeers' disadvantage. Options? Obvious ones include increased restrictions on logging, increased culling (hunting) of wolves, some combination of both, or simply allowing the herd to die out. Who should participate in the decision? Rationally speaking, we should include any one whose contribution will help us determine what values are at risk and where our thresholds for these should be set: Finns; Sami; members of neighboring states, such as Estonia and Sweden, the European Community, and, under the right circumstances, even visiting Canadian philosophers.

What values are in play? How many and of what kinds? If there were only one kind of value, we could set a threshold for that one value and pick the option that is maximally efficient in reaching it. If there are several incommensurable values in play, we could at most aim for the optimally efficient strategy – but only if it is a relatively static situation in which our options are immediately apparent to us. However our situation is dynamic: we must expend time and effort to search out potential options. Thus even in this 'local' problematic situation, we will be constrained to satisfice: to identify and select the first option that meets our thresholds for success.

In the case at hand, where the situation is dynamic and many values in play, it is impractical to aim for either maximally or optimally efficient means of meeting the thresholds that matter here. This is in part because a multiplicity of incommensurable personal and social values supervene upon natural entities and systems. If wild reindeer are essential constituents of a healthy environment, they are objectively valuable. No rational individual could be wholly indifferent to them. To the extent that they are essential constituents of particular social or cultural systems, they are objectively valuable constituents of the welfare of those who are direct participants or stakeholders in those forms of social cooperation. Reindeer are also essential for many people to find the landscapes they inhabit aesthetically or emotionally fulfilling, and so objective components of welfare for these individuals in yet a third respect.

The ways that the reindeer, the wolves, and their forest home severally and collectively contribute to the welfare of these individuals will sometimes be in virtue of their intrinsic properties, sometimes in virtue of their extrinsic properties, and sometimes in virtue of both. Some people cherish these entities as ends, others as means, and still others as both. Given these facts, a pragmatist will argue that satisficing deliberation is the only rational strategy available by which to seek a resolution. But this conclusion is not, as some environmental philosophers have charged, either counsel of despair (Katz 1996) or an unholy compromise with human apathy, arrogance, or greed. It is simply a recognition of the rich complexity of the many *values* of nature.

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Notes:

1. In what respects I take these to be true will be developed in what follows, but I do not have sufficient space to provide detailed discussions of the texts supporting these claims in Dewey's corpus. I provide such arguments in my essay, "Dewey's Moral Philosophy," in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, edited by Molly M. Cochran.

2. J. Baird Callicott has taken the lead in arguing that some form of monism is essential for environmental ethics in articles attacking Bryan Norton's arguments for pragmatic pluralism (see Callicott 1990, 1994, 1999). (For Norton's reply see Norton, 1995.) This project has also been central to the work of influential figures such as Paul W. Taylor (Taylor 1986) and Holmes Rolston, 3rd. (Rolston 1988, 1989, 1994).

3. See, for example, his *Theory of Valuation* (Dewey 1981, vol 13, 189- 251.) C.I. Lewis offers a different but related set of reasons for rejecting the intrinsic/instrumental distinction as it is commonly employed in current environmental and applied ethics literature in Lewis 1946.

4. What follows is by no means the first critique of specific conceptions of intrinsic value employed by the sorts of environmental ethics and applied ethics texts I have in mind. The critique I am offering draws heavily upon Korsgaard 1996, Kagan 1998. See also Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 1999. I should add that of course I am not suggesting that every one in either the environmental ethics or applied ethics communities is guilty of the error I am critiquing. But it is no exaggeration to say that this kind of error is common place.

5. In *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey writes, "There is nothing in the nature of prizing or desiring to prevent their being directed to things which are means, and there is nothing in the nature of means to militate against their being desire and prized." (Dewey 1981, vol 13, 215.)

6. Some readers will know that the sketch I have just described actually exists. An electronic copy is online at http://web.abo.fi/fak/hf/musik/Sibelius/EN/3.htm.

7. Someone might object here that although pragmatists can certainly judge things choiceworthy for themselves as ends, their contextual precludes acknowledgment of any *end* as absolute or absolutely final. While this is true enough, it is not in itself a reason to reject pragmatism in environmental ethics. I do not have the time to discuss this objection or possible replies in detail here. In any case, I would argue that the burden is surely on the objector first to explain (1) what could or should motivate us to view anything as choiceworthy in itself independent of any context of choice and (2) why we should suppose normative theorizing requires the inclusion of absolute values.

8. This may also explain a curious reluctance to acknowledge Dewey's consequentialism sometimes evident in the secondary literature (most recently in Pappas 2008), apparently out of a vague fear that welfare consequentialism is somehow incompatible with value pluralism of the sort Dewey espoused. This fear is unfounded happily, as Dewey's various formulations of the object of moral inquiry (e.g., resolution of problematic situations, growth of meaning of our

life/activities, etc.) , together with his insistence upon experimental methods of confirmation, all clearly mark his theory of moral inquiry as consequentialist.

9. Dewey does not use 'welfare' as a technical term, its contemporary use being an innovation which had not yet occurred. He used a variety of terms to signify the overall objective of moral inquiry, sometimes using the term ' happiness,' sometimes 'meaning,' but more frequently using the term 'good.' All were (and still are) multiply ambiguous even as technical terms, however, which perhaps explains his hesitancy to settle definitely upon any one.

10. Or perhaps I should say unlike 'standard' or 'classic' utilitarian counterparts. Utilitarianism has in recent years sprouted so many new and highly refined varieties that one can no longer safely assert generally. But my object here is not to try to critique utilitarianism, but only to highlight differences between pragmatic pluralist consequentialism and the 'standard' types of utilitarianism with which Dewey's approach has most often been confused or conflated.

11. Dewey's remarks about 'happiness' in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, provide one of many examples of this way of thinking. He writes, "Happiness is found only in success; but success means succeeding, getting forward, moving in advance. It is an active process, not a passive outcome. Accordingly it includes the overcoming of obstacles, the elimination of sources of defect and ill."(Dewey 1971, vol.12, 182.)

12. Dewey's analysis of "good" as the desirable is developed in texts such as "The Logic of Judgments of Practice," *Human Nature and Conduct*, *The Quest for Certainty*, and *Theory of Valuation* (Dewey 1971, vol. 8; Dewey 1971, vol. 14; Dewey 1981, vol. 4; and Dewey 1981, vol. 13, respectively.)

13. Dewey puts this particularly forcefully in *Human Nature and Conduct*, where he states "For right is only an abstract name for the multitude of concrete demands in action which others impress upon us, and of which we are obliged, if we would live, to take some account. Its authority is the exigency of their demands, the efficacy of their insistencies." (Dewey 1971, vol. 14, 223.) See also Dewey's "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (Dewey 1981,vol 5, 279-288.

14. See, e.g., "Three Independent Factors in Morals," (Dewey 1981, vol. 5:279-288.)

15. But they are not for that reason any less objective conditions of welfare than conditions such as food or water. As Dewey remarks "Since [our] social condition is a fact, the principles which are related to it are real and significant, even if they are not adapted to some other set and style of social, institutions, culture, and scientific knowledge. It is the insistence on a uniform and unchanging code of morals, the same at all times and places, which brings about the extreme revolt which says that they are all conventional and of no validity." (Dewey 1981, vol 7, 283.)

16. For an important locus classicus for contemporary talk of thin and thick concepts in ethics, see Williams (1985.)

17. Dewey of course never actually uses the term 'satisficing,' which was popularized only after

his death. For recent discussions of satisficing versus maximizing and/or optimizing, see Byron, ed. 2004. Bryan Norton employs a version in Norton 2005.

18. I am referring to children's books and comics (and toys based upon them) created by the Finnish author, Tove Jannson, about a family of creatures known as "moomins," Though not well known in North America, moomins and moominalia are wildly popular in many countries around the world.

19. Others have recast Simon's 'aspiration levels' as 'stopping rules' and as 'thresholds of expected utility,' as the motivation is to adapt satisfying to a utilitarian outlook, we can pass over these for present purposes. See, Schmidtz 1995, Byron 1998, 2004, and Pettit 1984.

20.As described here satisficing may seem equivalent to constrained optimizing, but there is an important difference. Constrained optimizers who seek optimal outcomes within the limits of accepted constraints (on time or other resources to be committed to the search for information about practical options), are rationally justified in stopping the search when they reach a point at which they can reasonably assume that benefits of continuing the search will not repay the costs of continuing it –at which point they select the optimal option discovered up to that point. Satisficers, by contrast, are justified at stopping their search as soon as they hit upon an option that meets their aspirations. They do not need to have reason to believe that continuing the search would have marginal returns in order to stop when they have found an option that is 'good enough.' For a very helpful discussion of the difference between constrained optimization and satisficing, see Schmidtz 1995.

21. In the language of contemporary debate on this topic, we can maximize and optimize 'locally' but not 'globally.'