Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments for Environmental Protection

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Abstract

Environmental ethicists have devoted considerable attention to discussing whether anthropocentric or nonanthropocentric arguments provide more appropriate means for defending environmental protection. This paper argues that philosophers, social scientists, and policy makers should pay more attention to a particular type of anthropocentric argument. These anthropocentric indirect arguments (AIAs) defend actions or policies that benefit the environment, but they justify the policies based on their beneficial effects on humans (e.g., new jobs, cost savings, stronger communities) that are not caused by their environmental benefits. This paper argues that AIAs have numerous strengths and that the potential objections against them do not appear to be compelling.

1. Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments

   Environmental ethicists have put a great deal of effort over the last thirty years into debating the merits of anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric value systems (see e.g., Callicott, 1989; Norton, 1991; Norton, 2005; Rolston, 1988). The present paper takes these debates over anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism in a new direction. It contends that if environmental ethicists want to analyze ethical arguments that are central to contemporary environmental debates, they need to start paying closer attention to a distinct form of anthropocentric argumentation that has become increasingly important in recent years—namely, anthropocentric arguments that do not explicitly appeal to environmental benefits.

   These anthropocentric indirect arguments for environmental protection (or AIAs) are different from the anthropocentric direct arguments (or ADAs) that have been the bread and
butter of most anthropocentrists. Figures like Bryan Norton have argued for years that ethicists can justify very robust protections for the environment by appealing to its aesthetic qualities, the ecosystem services that it provides, the genetic information stored there, the contributions it can make to our moral lives, and the range of opportunities that it provides to future generations (Norton, 1991; Norton, 2005). But these anthropocentric arguments all appeal directly to benefits that accrue to humans as a causal consequence of benefits to the environment. In other words, they appeal to the top two causal arrows shown in Figure 1; they contend that particular actions or policies should be pursued because they produce benefits to the environment that in turn benefit human beings. So, we can offer the following definition:

**Anthropocentric Direct Arguments** defend actions or policies that benefit the environment and justify those actions by appealing to benefits that accrue to humans as a causal consequence of the actions’ beneficial effects on the environment.

But one can sometimes argue in an indirect manner for the same policies based on benefits that accrue to humans as a result of other effects caused by the policies. These arguments appeal to the bottom two causal arrows shown in Figure 1; they are indirect in the sense that, while the policies under consideration do produce benefits to the environment, the policies are justified based on other causal effects of the policies. In other words:

**Anthropocentric Indirect Arguments** defend actions or policies that benefit the environment and justify those actions by appealing to benefits that accrue to humans as a result of the actions but that are not a causal consequence of benefits to the environment.
This sort of argumentation should be familiar to anyone listening to contemporary political discourse. When the U.S. House of Representatives passed a carbon emissions trading bill in 2009, it was called the American Clean Energy and Security Act in order to emphasize how it could promote national security by reducing dependence on foreign sources of energy. Van Jones, former Special Advisor for Green Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation at the White House Council on Environmental Quality under President Obama, is famous for emphasizing how efforts to promote energy conservation can provide jobs that help lift people out of poverty (Judkis, 2009). The U.S. military is aiming for increased energy efficiency in part because it wants to save the lives and money lost by hauling fuel over long supply lines (Pew Project, 2011). Social scientists are exploring how actions to mitigate climate change (e.g., making cities friendlier to bikers and walkers) can be defended based on their potential to lower obesity rates, thereby promoting public health (Maibach et al., 2010; Remais et al., 2014). In all these cases, policies that protect the environment are being defended (at least in part) based on other
beneficial effects of the policies that are separate from the benefits directly derived from having a healthier environment.

President Obama himself demonstrates how these AIAs can be employed alongside other arguments. In his second inaugural address, he provides a variety of arguments for addressing climate change (Obama 2013). First, he employs ADAs that highlight the ways climate change will alter the environment and thereby affect humans; he notes the potential for “raging fires, and crippling drought, and more powerful storms,” and he emphasizes our responsibilities to alleviate negative effects on future generations. Second, he appeals to precious aspects of the environment that will be damaged by climate change: “our forests and waterways, our crop lands and snow capped peaks.” This could be elaborated into either a nonanthropocentric or an anthropocentric argument. Third, Obama formulates an AIA; he claims that “We cannot cede to other nations the technology that will power new jobs and new industries.” Here, Obama is defending clean-energy technologies not explicitly because of the ways they will benefit the environment (and thereby benefit humans) but rather because of the beneficial impact that those technologies can have on the national economy.

Perhaps the most crucial issue involved in distinguishing AIAs from ADAs is to determine what counts as an effect on the environment, as opposed to other effects that a policy has. Unfortunately, the “environment” is not a well-defined concept. Once one recognizes that the environment involves more than just endangered species and wilderness areas, the boundaries of the concept become difficult to establish. For example, while environmentalists have not typically focused significant attention on urban areas, the urban environment is surely important to consider. Moreover, the urban environment involves not just the presence of trees and parks but also the arrangement and design of buildings and spaces. And one needn’t draw
the line at the “built” environment; interactions with other human beings are also central to the “environment” of each individual. But once one starts considering urban, built, and social environments, the “environment” begins to seem like a concept that can encompass almost everything.

There are two (compatible) ways of addressing this worry. One way is to acknowledge that the concept of “the environment” is a conventional one. Thus, while the environment does not refer to a strict metaphysical category, it still has relatively stable content in contemporary Western culture. Second, one can acknowledge that the concept can gradually change. In fact, a potential strength of employing AIAs is that they can gradually soften up citizens toward conceptualizing environmental issues in new ways. For example, to the extent that major contemporary problems like climate change cut across a vast array of human institutions, policies, and behaviors, conceptualizing these problems narrowly as “environmental” issues may in fact inhibit the development of innovative, cross-cutting solutions (Maibach et al., 2010; Nordhaus and Shellenberger, 2007). Thus, employing AIAs could in some cases be a temporary step toward abandoning the distinction between “environmental effects” and “other effects” altogether.

It is also worth emphasizing that AIAs will sometimes be sufficient on their own to justify an environmentally friendly action or policy, whereas in other cases they may be compelling only in conjunction with additional ADAs or nonanthropocentric arguments. For example, the fact that taking measures to increase energy efficiency in the military could save soldiers’ lives may be adequate by itself to justify pursuing those efficiency measures. However, the fact that pursuing renewable energy technologies will create new jobs may not be sufficient by itself to justify the development of renewable energy technologies, because there might be
cheaper or easier ways to create jobs if there were no other reasons to support those technologies. But AIAs can still be valuable and legitimate even when they are not sufficient by themselves to justify particular policies. From the perspective of this paper, it is often valuable to provide combinations of ADAs, AIAs, and nonanthropocentric arguments, much as President Obama did in his State of the Union address. Indeed, the subsequent sections of the chapter suggest that these arguments may have the potential to be synergistic, in the sense that AIAs may gradually soften people up toward ADAs and nonanthropocentric arguments.

2. Strengths of AIAs

Assuming that AIAs can be usefully distinguished from other forms of argumentation in favor of environmental protection, a pressing question is whether and to what extent environmentalists should be employing them. This section elucidates a number of benefits and advantages associated with employing these AIAs, while the following section considers and responds to some of their weaknesses (see Table 1). The message that emerges from these sections is that AIAs can often play a valuable role in advancing the goals of the environmental movement and of ethics in general.

| Table 1: Overview of strengths and weaknesses of AIAs discussed in Sections 2 and 3 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Strengths of AIAs**                        | **Objections to AIAs**                         |
| (1) They can motivate people who would not otherwise be highly motivated to address environmental problems | (1) They could encourage morally wrong actions |
| (2) They can be very politically effective, both by generating alliances and promoting local action on global threats | (2) They could degenerate into political rhetoric, encouraging acceptable actions for questionable reasons |
| (3) They may promote more public openness toward environmentalism | (3) They might be counterproductive, preventing concern for the environment |
| (4) They can encourage more action by private companies | (4) They might work only in relatively few cases |
| (5) They promote attention to a broader range of social issues | (5) Their effectiveness can vary over time if they are based on mere correlations |
The first and most obvious reason for employing AIAs is that, all else being equal, one can motivate a greater range of people to address environmental problems by providing a greater range of arguments for doing so. For any given set of actions (e.g., implementing better public transportation systems), some people will be motivated to defend the actions based on nonanthropocentric considerations (e.g., protecting nonhuman species from the effects of climate change), some people will be motivated by anthropocentric direct environmental considerations (e.g., less serious impacts to humans from climate change), and some people will be motivated by anthropocentric indirect environmental considerations (e.g., creating more appealing cities and assisting low-income residents). Moreover, some people who are partially motivated by nonanthropocentric arguments and ADAs will be much more motivated to defend and implement beneficial actions if there are also AIAs in their favor.

But it is important to recognize that the motivating power of AIAs may not be solely a consequence of their rational force. There is a fascinating body of social scientific literature on “cultural cognition,” which suggests that when problems threaten people’s deep-seated cultural views, they tend to deny the existence of the problems or minimize their significance (see e.g., Kahan et al., 2006; Kahan, 2010). According to the cultural cognition hypothesis, people tend to interpret ambiguous information about risks in ways that reinforce their connections to others with whom they share social or cultural commitments. For example, if the major solutions to climate change seem to require significant government regulations, it appears that those who are committed to an individualistic, free-market ideology are less likely to accept the scientific evidence indicating that climate change is a genuine problem (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Therefore, social scientists argue that it may be easier to convince “individualists” to give credence to environmental problems if one emphasizes solutions that are compatible with their
cultural views (Kahan, 2010). For example, they might respond well to AIAs that show how market-based technological innovations can promote the economy while also helping to solve environmental issues. If this is in fact the case, then AIAs can help to motivate action on environmental problems by “softening up” those who would otherwise consciously or unconsciously dismiss the significance of the problems.

A second and closely related set of arguments in favor of employing AIAs is that they are likely to promote much more success for environmentalists in the public-policy realm. For one thing, successful policy making requires forging strategic alliances among a range of interest groups (Edwards, 2005, p. 137; Minteer, 2012). By employing AIAs, environmentalists can better highlight the wide range of beneficial effects associated with their preferred policies, so other political actors can also see the benefits of supporting the environmentalists’ agendas. AIAs can also assist in the policy realm by motivating local actions to address global problems like climate change. It is often surprisingly difficult to motivate people to address these sorts of global environmental issues (e.g., Betsill, 2001; Gardiner, 2006; Spence et al., 2012). People have a tendency to regard the harmful effects of climate change as “distant,” not only in a spatial sense but also in temporal, social, and epistemic senses (Spence et al., 2012). In response to this difficulty, Michele Betsill (2001) has argued that it is easier to motivate local city governments to address climate change by reframing the discussion to focus on the local benefits associated with climate-change mitigation efforts. Many of the local benefits that she mentions are precisely the sorts of considerations emphasized in AIAs; they include cost savings, job creation, and increased “liveability” of cities (Betsill, 2001, p. 397-398).

A third reason for employing AIAs is that they may increase the public’s openness toward the environmental movement. A common reason for objecting to environmentalism is
that it tends to get in the way of pursuing other social goods, such as economic development. But if the public can see that actions to protect the environment often have a wide range of other beneficial effects (perhaps even including economic development), this objection to environmentalism loses much of its force.

A fourth reason for employing AIAs is that they are likely to be more compelling to private companies than more direct environmental arguments. It is important to enlist the assistance of the business community in addressing environmental problems, partly because the private sector contributes to a great deal of environmental degradation (Sukhdev, 2012) and partly because many citizens are more sympathetic toward private-sector activities than public-sector activities. However, given that businesses are primarily focused on maximizing profits in the near or possibly medium term, it is often difficult to motivate them to take serious action against environmental problems. It is much more compelling if environmentalists can offer AIAs that appeal to economic considerations (e.g., reduced shipping costs, lower energy costs, and increased consumer enthusiasm for environmentally-friendly products).

A fifth reason for employing AIAs is that they could help both environmental philosophers and ordinary citizens to become more interested in the wide range of problems facing society and to become more admirable moral agents as a result. There can be a temptation for environmentalists, like the members of any social movement, to focus primarily on their “own” issues and to neglect other social problems. Paying close attention to AIAs enables environmentalists to identify other problems that can be addressed with environmental issues.

3. Objections to AIAs

Despite the many strengths of AIAs, there are also a variety of potential concerns that need to be addressed (see Table 1). An initial worry is that these arguments could promote
morally wrong actions. By encouraging people to focus on short-term, local economic benefits, they have the potential to promote ethically dubious policies that promote only a relatively narrow range of goods. But one can evade this objection by distinguishing the process of identifying morally acceptable actions from the activity of arguing for those actions. As Andrew Light emphasizes, those engaged in public environmental philosophy must first decide what actions are morally permitted or required, and then they can identify the best arguments or strategies for motivating people to pursue those moral actions (Light, 2002b, p. 562). Thus, at least at first glance, this objection does not seem compelling as long as one is employing AIAs to defend actions that are, as best as one can discern, morally justifiable.

Those skeptical of employing AIAs might raise a second objection that is closely related to the first one. Even if the proponents of AIAs do not employ them to defend morally wrong actions, perhaps these arguments encourage the right actions for the wrong reasons. One response to this worry is that, although AIAs do (by definition) appeal to benefits that accrue to humans, those benefits need not involve shallow goods; they can involve legitimate and important benefits to humans. For example, given the social upheaval and suffering caused by problems like unemployment and poverty, it seems entirely legitimate to defend environmentally friendly actions based in part on their potential to alleviate these sorts of problems.

But some ethicists might still insist that some motives or reasons are more appropriate than others and that actions cannot be entirely praiseworthy if they are not performed for the very best reasons. For example, Katie McShane (2007) has argued that even if anthropocentrism provides appropriate norms for how we should act to protect nature, it may fail to provide appropriate norms for how we should feel about nature. At least two responses to this objection are available. First, given that intelligent and well-meaning people can legitimately disagree
about which motivations for environmental protection are most appropriate, it does not seem necessary to eschew effective arguments that raise legitimate moral considerations, even if one suspects that other arguments may be even better. Second, as will be discussed below, the use of AIAs could gradually alter people’s moral perspectives so that they develop more sympathy for other moral considerations, such as nonanthropocentric ones.

A third objection to the use of AIAs is that they might ultimately be counterproductive, insofar as they might keep people focused on non-environmental goods and prevent them from coming to appreciate the environment itself. One might even go so far as to say that AIAs are not only counterproductive but even morally problematic if they prevent people from coming to appreciate the intrinsic value present in nature. From a utilitarian perspective, one might respond to this objection by arguing that there is not enough time to employ more noble arguments; if we wait to protect biodiversity until people start valuing it for its own sake, we may not have much biodiversity left to protect. But another response to this objection challenges its assumptions about human psychology. Several strands of psychological research provide reasons for thinking that AIAs could sometimes increase people’s direct concern for the environment.

Consider, for example, the scholarship on cultural cognition that was discussed earlier in this paper. This research has already provided empirical evidence that people are more willing to acknowledge environmental problems when those problems are framed in ways that do not conflict with their deep-seated cultural views (Kahan et al., 2006; Kahan, 2010). Along these lines, it is plausible that people could become more open to valuing the environment intrinsically if they no longer see it as a threat to their cultural commitments. Moreover, according to the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, people tend to alter their beliefs in order to align them with their behavior (see e.g., Egan et al., 2010). Thus, if AIAs convince people to start
taking environmentally friendly actions, it is possible that they will gradually begin to value the environment in order to alleviate cognitive dissonance. This speculation falls in line with other psychological evidence that people formulate their moral judgments as intuitive responses to a range of largely unconscious cultural forces, and their moral reasoning is primarily a post-hoc effort to justify these intuitions (Haidt 2001). On this view, the best strategies for shifting people toward nonanthropocentrism might actually involve changing people’s practices, with the consequence that they are more likely to develop intuitive judgments that the environment is intrinsically valuable.

A fourth objection to employing AIAs is that, even if they appear to be helpful and legitimate in some cases, those cases may be relatively few and far between. In other words, there may not be many cases in which actions to benefit the environment also have independent beneficial effects to which environmentalists can appeal. This issue clearly deserves further exploration; one motivation for this paper is to stimulate further work on this topic. At first glance, however, it appears likely that there are numerous sorts of cases where AIAs can be formulated (see Table 2).

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<th>Table 2: A selective list of situations in which AIAs are particularly likely to be effective.</th>
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<td>• When environmentally destructive practices have a number of other negative effects</td>
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<td>• When environmentally destructive practices can be alleviated using affordable new technology that is available or relatively easy to develop</td>
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<td>• When government subsidies contribute to environmental destruction</td>
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<td>• When environmental resources cost money to consume</td>
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<td>• When environmentally destructive practices can be rendered costly by government or consumer actions</td>
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However, a fifth objection to the use of AIAs is that many of the cases where these arguments appear to be effective could be transitory or fleeting. The problem is that AIAs are based solely on a *correlation* between benefits caused by a healthy environment and other...
beneficial effects (see Figure 1); the environmental benefits are frequently not caused by the other beneficial effects of an action (although see Figure 2). Therefore, when circumstances change, the arguments may no longer be compelling, or they may even generate harm for the environment. For example, when oil prices are high, it is easy to use AIAs to argue that people should purchase more energy efficient vehicles, but the arguments lose their force when oil prices drop.

One response to this worry (i.e., that AIAs may change in effectiveness over time or in different circumstances) is that environmentalists merely need to remain vigilant when employing AIAs so that they can alter them as new circumstances arise. Another response is that those employing these arguments can acknowledge the conditions under which they are particularly compelling and the conditions under which they may fail. This approach is consistent with the goal of scientists to be “honest brokers” (Pielke 2007) and to enable the recipients of information to “backtrack” to the conclusions that accord best with their own values (McKaughan and Elliott 2013). A third response is that various policies, actions, or institutional structures can be implemented deliberately in order to create a tighter causal relationship between actions that benefit the environment and actions that have other beneficial effects. For example, when nations implement cap-and-trade programs for carbon emissions, their goal is to create economic incentives for businesses to lower their emissions. With an effective cap-and-trade policy in place, one can formulate AIAs in favor of lowering carbon emissions based on appeals to a company’s bottom line. Similarly, when consumers decide to buy environmentally friendly products, they create scenarios in which business decisions that benefit the environment also promote higher profits. In these situations, consumers are, in effect, creating scenarios in which AIAs can be more effectively formulated.
4. Conclusion

This paper has elucidated anthropocentric indirect arguments (AIAs) as a distinct way of defending actions or policies that benefit the environment. AIAs argue for policies that benefit the environment, but they appeal to benefits of the policies that are not caused by those benefits to the environment. AIAs appear to have numerous strengths, and their weaknesses do not appear to be compelling.

This paper suggests several lines of research. One question is whether the motivations for protecting the environment that AIAs encourage are less virtuous or noble relative to other motivations for protecting the environment. A second question is whether the use of AIAs alongside (or instead of) more direct arguments for environmental protection is likely to encourage people to care more or less about the environment over the long term. A third question is how often AIAs are likely to be available. Finally, assuming that AIAs are legitimate under at least some circumstances, an important question is how to employ these arguments in an ethically appropriate manner. Hopefully, this paper will encourage further attention to these questions so that policy makers and environmental philosophers can avail themselves of the full range of arguments—ADAs, AIAs, and nonanthropocentric arguments—for environmental protection.

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