How to Argue like an Anthropocentrist: Human-Oriented Environmental Advocacy beyond the Language of Interests and Rights

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In Toward Unity among Environmentalists, Bryan Norton memorably implored nonanthropocentrist s to give up their distinctive forms of political advocacy in favor of human-oriented rhetoric that conforms better to mainstream ethical intuitions.\(^1\) As Norton saw it, nonanthropocentric arguments are politically unviable in a society comprised primarily of humanists, often serving to undermine environmentalists’ goals rather than to promote them. Further, Norton contended that the most sophisticated human-oriented analyses typically lead to the same concrete policy propositions as non-anthropocentric arguments do, making the latter essentially irrelevant in practice. As such, he suggested that “Perhaps the idea of independent value in nature should fall to Occam’s razor.”\(^2\)

Although Norton’s position has attracted a small following over the last two decades,\(^3\) it has not been completely persuasive to non-anthropocentrist s, who continue to demand the expansion of moral consideration to the non-human world. According to those non-anthropocentrist s who have explicitly addressed Norton’s view, the notion that rejecting human chauvinism makes no practical difference is “dead wrong”:\(^4\) in fact, non-anthropocentrist s are committed to different policy prescriptions than even the most enlightened humanists, and only arguments that push beyond human-oriented concerns can effectively support them.\(^5\)

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2 Ibid., p. 237.
4 This phrasing comes from J. Baird Callicott, “Environmental Philosophy Is Environmental Activism: The Most Radical and Effective Kind,” in Don E. Marietta and Lester Embree (eds.), Environmental Philosophy and Environmental Activism (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 19-36; p. 22.
Accordingly, these non-anthropocentrist s allege that abandoning their distinctive rhetoric in political domains would mean abandoning their most deeply-held ethical ideals.

On what I take to be a relatively standard understanding of what counts as a human-oriented policy justification, non-anthropocentrist s’ resistance to Norton’s proposal is eminently reasonable. On the standard understanding, human-oriented arguments revolve around the goals of promoting human flourishing and ensuring that the rights of particular groups are satisfied. The common theme in all of these arguments is that nature plays a significant instrumental role in the promotion of human ends, and it should be treated accordingly. However, it seems quite plausible that even if environmental protection really does contribute instrumentally to human ends in the great majority of cases, the political forcefulness of arguments based on this fact will be importantly variable.

Sometimes environmental protection will have clear and significant impacts on human interests and rights, and so arguments focusing on these considerations will suffice to generate desired protections. But sometimes environmental protection will have only nebulous, uncertain, controversial, or small impacts on human interests and rights, and in these cases non-anthropocentrist s may find themselves on shaky ground if forced to rely exclusively on human-oriented rhetoric. It might ultimately be correct to say in such cases that enhanced protections would be best from a human-oriented perspective, but these arguments might be lacking in the sort of decisiveness that drives actual political decision-making. Without non-anthropocentric

arguments to draw upon, it might be difficult to justify many environmental reforms that seem only weakly grounded from a human-oriented point of view.\textsuperscript{6}

Non-anthropocentrists have regarded concerns like these as powerful reasons to resist a shift to more human-oriented rhetoric. In this paper, however, I will suggest that this reaction has been too hasty. It is admittedly plausible that a discourse focused exclusively on the instrumental contributions of nature to human interests and rights will prove insufficient to justify many of the protections that non-anthropocentrists demand. However, human-oriented environmental advocacy needs not be limited to these kinds of considerations alone. Environmental protection can also be defended on the grounds that it is seen as morally imperative by non-anthropocentric environmentalists, and that ignoring the moral demands of a sizeable subset of the general public can constitute a threat to the long-term peace, stability, and order of society.

As I will show, the goal of preserving the integrity of the political order in the face of non-anthropocentrists’ moral commitments enables us to argue directly from non-anthropocentric ethical beliefs to concrete policy prescriptions. Even so, it can nevertheless be seen as a completely human-oriented concern, and one that anthropocentrists have good reason to acknowledge. By embracing this additional strategy for human-oriented environmental advocacy, I suggest that the case for divorcing explicitly non-anthropocentric rhetoric from

\textsuperscript{6} Similar points have been raised by Callicott, “Intrinsic Value in Nature;” Laura Westra, “Why Norton’s Approach is Insufficient for Environmental Ethics,” \textit{Environmental Ethics} 19 (1997): 279-97; Callicott, “The Pragmatic Power and Promise;” Rolston, “Converging versus Reconstituting.” See also Warwick Fox, “What Does the Recognition of Intrinsic Value Entail?,” \textit{The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy} 10 (1993): 101. In a particularly helpful passage, Rolston writes, “My ancestors lost the Civil War; they lost their slaves, they lost the war. But then again, they did not really lose. Without this loss, ‘the South would not be anywhere close to the prosperous society that exists today, where whites and blacks have more genuine and productive relationships, trade flourishes, people are autonomous, human rights defended, and so on. The South may have lost the war, but it did not really lose, because the war was wrong. When the right thing was done, things turned out win-win in the long term.’ But I would not have said to the slave-owning whites: Free your slaves because you will get a benefit” (Rolston, “Converging versus Reconstituting,” p. 115).
environmental politics can be made much more worthy of non-anthropocentrists’ support than it is currently taken to be.

**Alienation and the Maintenance of Political Society**

In his contribution to the Worldwatch Institute’s *State of the World 2013*, Bron Taylor asks, “Has the time come for a massive wave of direct action resistance to accelerating rates of environmental degradation around the world—degradation that is only getting worse due to climate change?”7 To Taylor, the question is mostly rhetorical and the answer is straightforwardly yes:

Since current laws and political activities have failed to redress the situation and appear unlikely to do so, it is incumbent to ask what strategies and tactics might be successful. Such an assessment should include determining whether strategies and tactics must be constrained by existing laws and prevailing assumptions about what constitutes acceptable political action. Put more simply: anthropogenic environmental decline in light of life-affirming values and political inaction demands analysis of the obstacles to effective action, including laws and mores that might constrain it. Given the urgency of the situation, extralegal tactics should be on the table, as they were in earlier causes where great moral urgency was properly felt.8

Taylor’s suggestions are undeniably radical, but they should not particularly surprise us either. Given the prevalence of deep moral concerns about the degradation of the natural world, and given the relative lack of progress in slowing that degradation in recent decades, we should expect to find that some people like Taylor have begun to contemplate actions that most of us

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would see as subversive or seditious. Indeed, it might be more surprising if we did not find people entertaining these sorts of ideas. Taylor therefore can be seen as instantiating a relatively predictable feature of moral movements: when their most central concerns are systematically trodden upon by the primary political mechanisms of their societies, we should expect that some of their members will – not entirely unreasonably – begin to contemplate the abandonment of existing rules, institutions, and norms that stand in their way.

Some environmental theorists have interpreted this possibility as a source of potential theoretical tension between currently dominant liberal political ideology and non-anthropocentric environmentalism itself – a tension that could only be resolved to the satisfaction of non-anthropocentrists by abandoning liberalism altogether. However, it is actually a straightforward implication of standard liberal theory that when grounds for rejecting basic social structures accumulate in the minds of reasonable groups of citizens, then the continued hegemony of those structures will appropriately be called into question. For example, John Rawls insists that a just society can only be built on principles that can be seen as the subjects of an “overlapping consensus” among reasonable persons – a consensus that can be made harmonious with each citizen’s comprehensive conception of the good, presumably including those of non-anthropocentrists. T.M. Scanlon, meanwhile, explicitly acknowledges that “impersonal” values like environmental integrity can potentially provide environmentalists with reasons to reject social rules and practices that bar them from appropriately honoring the value of nature. It is on the basis of considerations like these that Gerald Gaus writes that “a publicly justified morality would see as subversive or seditious. Indeed, it might be more surprising if we did not find people entertaining these sorts of ideas. Taylor therefore can be seen as instantiating a relatively predictable feature of moral movements: when their most central concerns are systematically trodden upon by the primary political mechanisms of their societies, we should expect that some of their members will – not entirely unreasonably – begin to contemplate the abandonment of existing rules, institutions, and norms that stand in their way.

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11 T.M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 218-23.
must take account of the environmentalist’s value judgment, even when those values are not shared by others.”\textsuperscript{12} The long-term and systematic failure to address environmental degradation in a society populated by non-anthropocentrists is thus precisely the sort of thing that liberals should expect to generate problems for the prevailing political order.

This means that if instrumentalist arguments for protecting nature prove regularly insufficient to ground the policy reforms that non-anthropocentrists seek, then we should expect to see sentiments like Taylor’s becoming increasingly common, with worrisome implications for the long-term peace, stability, and order of our societies. Non-anthropocentric radicals facing the prospect of continued ecological destruction might turn to political disobedience and subversion, or they might take up more destructive and violent forms of direct action. Either outcome would be lamentable, but we should not be surprised to see such responses arise in a world where non-anthropocentrists’ deepest moral concerns are systematically marginalized.

Since extralegal tactics like the ones envisioned by Taylor are anathema to any civil society, it seems that we can draw an important argumentative upshot from the predictability of non-anthropocentric extremism in a society that fails to sufficiently protect nature. This upshot is that if we really care about human beings, then we should seek to foster the sorts of conditions in which a significant subset of our fellow citizens are not predictably pushed into radicalism by our collective choices. We will rather seek to accommodate the concerns of our non-anthropocentric citizens – at least when the costs are acceptable – so as to preserve the long-term peace, stability, and order of our society. This disposition will tend to lead us to endorse greater environmental protection than would be warranted on strictly instrumentalist grounds, but it will nevertheless do so on purely human-oriented grounds.

Dodging the Charge of Appeasement

From the perspective of non-anthropocentrists, the argument that I have just offered should sound like a step in the right direction for the project of human-oriented environmental advocacy. But I suspect that this gain in attractiveness to non-anthropocentrists may come with corresponding resistance from more ideologically committed anthropocentrists. The rhetorical strategy that I have just described, it might be argued, is not really one of appropriate accommodation to non-anthropocentrists as I have portrayed it to be: rather, it is one of mere appeasement, capitulating to the demands of potentially destructive and violent extremists when what we really ought to do is repudiate and control them. On this view, my suggestion would be on a par with giving in to the demands of terrorists or criminals – something that often has intuitive pull in the face of imminent threats, but that should nevertheless be resisted in any enlightened society.

While I agree that societies should not give in to terrorists and criminals, I do not believe that this objection creates serious problems for the view that I have articulated here. For the people about whom I have been worrying are not clearly terrorists or criminals in the pejorative senses of these words: rather, they are reasonable people who are earnestly seeking to ensure that their most deeply-held moral values are respected by the societies in which they live. To see the difference, consider the following imaginary scenario:

**CALLOUS JERUSALEM:** In the distant future, Jerusalem has come to be populated mostly by atheists who care little for religion or its traditions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have found themselves in the roles of small minority groups, while the bulk of public policy decisions are dictated by the preferences of the atheistic majority. As a result, the sacred Old City has mostly been converted into a tourist
trap, managed by the city government in line with the prevailing mores of its residents. The plaza alongside the Western Wall has been converted into a parking lot, while the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been repurposed into an elaborate gift shop with an array of low-cut novelty shirts emblazoned with each of the seven deadly sins. Recently, a barbecue chain specializing in smoked pork dishes has entered negotiations with the city government for the right to set up a restaurant in the Temple Mount.

Even for those of us who are atheists ourselves, the sort of insensitivity shown to religious citizens in CALLOUS JERUSALEM should leave us feeling seriously uncomfortable. Part of the reason is that we are not so insensitive ourselves and we would adamantly oppose the actions of the atheists of my example. But I submit that another part of the reason is this: if things continue in that way that I have just described, then the religious citizens of CALLOUS JERUSALEM will likely do something ugly before too long. Further, I submit that most of us would not particularly blame them. These would not be the acts of mere terrorists or criminals: they would be the regrettable responses of reasonable people put by their inconsiderate neighbors in situations that they regard as unthinkable. Even if we were skeptical that any rights of these citizens were being violated by the use of what I have described as city property in line with the city’s judgments; 13 and even if we became convinced that in fact the use of the Temple Mount for a barbecue restaurant would actually be a boon for the aggregate well-being of the citizens of CALLOUS JERUSALEM (despite the loss of important “existence,” “cultural,” and “historical” values); we might think that the defilement of the sacred sites of the Old City is something that

13 See, along these lines, the reasoning employed in Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association, 485 U.S. 439 (1988).
should be avoided if at all possible, in part because allowing it to continue would threaten the
ability of citizens of faith to go on living peaceably as members of Jerusalem society.

In my own country of the United States, most states actually have laws on the books to
prohibit desecration, whether of venerated objects, religious sites, or burial grounds. In most
cases, these laws are characterized specifically as intending to preserve peace and order amongst
the citizenry. Alabama, for example, treats desecration as a Class A misdemeanor,\textsuperscript{14} punishable
by up to a year in prison and a fine of $6,000\textsuperscript{15} – a rule that can be found in the part of the state’s
code that deals with “Offenses against Public Order and Safety.” In Hawaii, meanwhile, the fine
for these kinds of “Offenses against Public Order”\textsuperscript{16} can be up to $10,000.\textsuperscript{17} Arizona’s law
concerning the abuse of venerated objects even contains a specific provision mentioning acts that
are “likely to provoke an immediate physical retaliation.”\textsuperscript{18} In CALLOUS JERUSALEM, we might
be inclined to say that the uses of the Old City that I have described should similarly be
prohibited by law, regardless of their instrumental ramifications for the interests and rights of the
population. And unsurprisingly, in actual Jerusalem they \textit{would be} prohibited, under that part of
the Israeli Penal Law covering “Offenses against Religious Sentiment and Tradition.”\textsuperscript{19}

These examples seem to illustrate the soundness – at least in principle – of a strategy of
defending environmental protection on the grounds that permitting continued ecological
degradation would constitute a grave offense to the moral concerns of non-anthropocentrists.
Such a strategy would not aim merely to appease non-anthropocentric extremists for the sake of
preventing violence. Rather, it would seek to preserve the grounds for many reasonable citizens’

\textsuperscript{14} Alabama Code, §13A-11-12.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., §13A-5-7.
\textsuperscript{16} Hawaii Code, §711.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., §711-1107.
\textsuperscript{18} Arizona Code, §13-3703.
\textsuperscript{19} Israel Penal Law, Article 8.
allegiance to prevailing social and political structures, and to thereby bolster the peace, stability, and order of society over the long run. Indeed, given that we already embrace similarly-motivated policies with respect to desecration today, I suspect that my proposal is not actually so revolutionary after all: on the contrary, it appears to fit quite comfortably with the way that we already behave with respect to our citizens’ moral sensibilities today.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out to show that human-oriented advocacy in environmental politics can be much more effective in achieving non-anthropocentric goals than has typically been appreciated. Like many non-anthropocentrists, I am skeptical that appeals to the instrumental value of nature will reliably prove decisive in human-oriented political discourse, especially in cases where the benefits of proposed policies are nebulous, uncertain, controversial, or small. Non-anthropocentrists are right to insist that something more will often be needed in order to make possible the achievement of the protections that they demand. Even so, I have tried to show that this does not necessarily imply a need for non-anthropocentric arguments in the arena of environmental politics. For the fact that non-anthropocentrists would themselves be alienated by a policy regime that systematically ignored their moral demands for environmental protection itself provides a kind of human-oriented reason for protecting the natural environment. If ignoring non-anthropocentrists’ concerns would undermine the long-term peace, stability, and order of political society, then even the most committed anthropocentrists would have reason to consider measures aimed at accommodating those concerns.

Of course, much more needs to be said about how the desirability of maintaining non-anthropocentrists’ allegiance to prevailing social and political structures would interact with other considerations in actual human-oriented political discourse – particularly including
considerations like the promotion of human interests and the protection of rights. Even if we grant that preserving the peace, stability, and order of society is a valuable goal, it does not follow that its value will generally be decisive in cases where identifiable interests and rights would need to be sacrificed in order to do so. To the extent that the new sorts of arguments I have identified would be consistently overruled in practice, the force of my thesis in pushing forward the case for human-oriented discourse in environmental politics would be importantly diminished. However, given that similar considerations have already led successfully to the enactment of laws against desecration in many places, it seems reasonable to think that they could be somewhat successful in this domain as well.

Ultimately, the most powerful argument advanced by Norton and his colleagues for shifting toward human-oriented forms of environmental discourse may emerge from the fact that non-anthropocentric arguments have often proven divisive and polarizing in politics, setting back environmentalists’ goals rather than pushing them forward. To the extent that non-anthropocentrists could be more successful in advancing their favored policies if they justified them on the basis of human-oriented considerations, this would seem like a reason to accept even an imperfect approach to environmental advocacy that avoids reliance on controversial non-anthropocentric concerns – that is, so long as such an approach would be tolerably capable of accommodating non-anthropocentrists’ demands.20 It is my hope that even if the strategy that I have laid out in this paper leaves open some probability that non-anthropocentrists will end up

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20 In this connections, Holmes Rolston III has mused in reflection on Norton’s view that “If he and I were on the floor of the Georgia legislature, defending the Georgia wetlands, or the floor of the U.S. Congress defending the Endangered Species Act, his position would be my fallback position. I would be trying to transform those legislators into becoming more enlightened environmentalists. I would stoop to conquer. But afterward I would be sorry I had to stoop to conquer” (Rolston, “Converging versus Reconstituting,” p. 106). On a different but related note, David Schmidtz has argued that in many contexts, non-anthropocentrists’ commitments to protecting non-human nature will require them to find ways to make environmental protection consistent with human interests, since it is often only by doing so that they will have a chance of seeing their goals achieved in practice (David Schmidtz, “When Preservationism Doesn’t Preserve,” Environmental Values 6 (1997): 327-39; David Schmidtz, “Natural Enemies: An Anatomy of Environmental Conflict,” Environmental Ethics 22 (2000): 397-408).
disappointed at times, it will nevertheless suffice to convince non-anthropocentrist that human-oriented approaches to environmental advocacy are worthy of their serious reconsideration.