No Experience Necessary? Foundationalism and the Retreat from Culture in Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Many of the leading contributors to the field of environmental ethics demonstrate a preference for foundationalist approaches in their theoretical justifications of environmentalism. In this paper, I criticise this tendency as it figures in the work of Holmes Rolston III, J. Baird Callicott, and Eric Katz. I illustrate how these writers' desire for philosophical absolutes leads them to reject the moral resources present within human culture; a move that carries with it a number of troubling philosophical and political problems. I conclude that environmental theorists would be better served by taking a more contextual, social, and pragmatic approach to justifying their moral projects regarding nature, and that this mode of inquiry will ultimately lead toward a more philosophically sound and democratically authentic environmental ethics.

KEYWORDS: environmental ethics, foundationalism, pragmatism, contextualism

I.

In 1931, John Dewey concluded that '...the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to the neglect of context' (Dewey 1985: 5). Dewey's concern was that the engagement of social and situational considerations in discussions about knowledge and the moral life is of central importance, yet this approach to understanding how people support their beliefs (both moral and nonmoral) has been historically neglected in philosophical practice. Specifically, the implication is that moral claims are not made in the abstract realm of philosophical reasoning removed from lived human experience, but rather are located and shaped within the real lives of individuals in cultural systems – the messy, intertwined, and often frustratingly indeterminate mass of community norms, traditions, and practices.

I believe that Dewey's criticism of anti-contextual philosophical practice has lost none of its currency or intellectual force as we approach the end of the

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century. Indeed, I would suggest that in the field of environmental ethics, his observation both poses a great challenge and provides a powerful inspiration for our thinking about the justification of environmentalism. To date, Dewey's worry has here been met most effectively by Bryan Norton, who has developed his own form of contextualism as it applies to the formulation of environmental policy.[1] Simply put, Norton's thesis is that decisions surrounding environmental management must recognise the complex, multi-scalar nature of ecological systems – a structure which suggests that environmental policy needs to be sensitive to shifting biophysical and social contexts if it is to be effective in maintaining the 'health' of the ecosystem in question. The variety of these ecological and human settings, Norton argues, demands that we entertain a pluralistic accounting of our moral positions, as no single ethical programme is up to the task of meeting the multiple requirements of managing nested ecological systems as we move across both natural and human communities. What's good for the goose in the Canadian wilderness might not be good for the gander of the New Jersey farm, Norton believes, and environmental ethicists should take heed of such situational diversity in their moral projects. At a more philosophical level, Norton's contextualism suggests that the justification of moral claims about the natural world, rather than being a matter of reasoning back to a class of immutable first principles which enjoy a universal currency in the resolution of environmental problems, is instead a process of supporting ethical judgements in terms of specific environmental settings and social values.

Norton's approach is one of the few projects in environmental ethics that doesn't dismiss the value systems of human experience out of hand. On the contrary, his attention to contextual circumstances represents an embrace of the human as well as the natural; a stance in environmental philosophy that has not enjoyed widespread support. Many, if not most writers in the field have been tempted by various foundational positions that promise unshakable epistemological or metaphysical mooring for their ethical arguments for protecting nature. For these contributors, leaving environmental preservation up to the existing value arrangements of human communities is to give the wheel to the venal, the corrupt, and the exploitative; values commonly assumed to be typical of everyday human experience in this work. As I will go on to argue, the flight from human experience by foundationalists in environmental ethics is unfortunate, and it leads to regrettably narrow and inflexible arguments for respecting the natural world. To illustrate my position, I will first demonstrate how several leading environmental ethicists are beholden to foundational thinking in their ethical projects, focusing on the work of 'biocentric/ecocentric' theorists J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston III, and the 'community based holist' Eric Katz. Although Katz claims to be a 'pragmatist sympathiser,' I believe that his writing exhibits the common foundationalist's attitude of suspicion toward the values arising from within lived human experience. The fact that a less doctrinaire biocentrist like Katz feels compelled to reject the moral resources found in

experience underscores the pervasiveness of the quest for 'first principles' in environmental ethics.

After setting out their positions, I will discuss why I believe the environmental foundationalism in these writers' projects is problematic, including, among other things, how their devotion to fixed premises hamstrings their ability to engage the value pluralism of human experience and situational diversity in environmental decision making. Finally, I will conclude with a few remarks about how a more pragmatic spirit in understanding human environmental commitments – a style of environmental philosophy which places human cultural experience into the foreground in discussions about environmental values – offers a much more appealing position than the foundationalist stances described here. My intent in this essay is thus to add to the pragmatic conversation presently taking place in environmental philosophy, primarily through an exegesis of the justificatory weaknesses of many foundationalist positions in environmental ethics. I also offer a suggestive proposal for a more culturally-occupied and experience-based approach to environmental philosophy.

The upshot of my argument in the following pages is quite simple: environmental ethics is in the grip of the desire for universal principles and fixed notions of moral 'truth,' and this predilection significantly detracts from a fuller and ultimately more useful understanding of our environmental commitments as part of larger cultural systems. The value systems arising from human experience are not 'second best' grounds for supporting environmental protection, but are instead the greatest resources environmentalism (philosophical and otherwise) has in promoting its endeavours. In the words of the early 20th century cultural critic Randolph Bourne, 'We may not know much, and can never know the most, but at least we have the positive material of our human experience to interpret … it is only when we try to interpret the world in terms of pure thought that we get into trouble.' (Bourne, quoted in Schlissel 1965: xix). I believe that environmental ethicists would do well to follow Bourne's admonition, as it demonstrates the kind of caution, humility, and fondness for the complexity and depth of human affairs that should be defining features of the personality of environmental philosophy.

II.

Most environmental philosophers have traditionally been concerned with one major intellectual task: devising a persuasive, defensible nonanthropocentric environmental ethic to guide humans in their interactions with the natural world. Finding a 'vulgar' instrumentalism in the typical value schemes of human society, a majority of environmental ethicists have worked toward constructing moral programmes around the recognition of value in the natural world independent of humans. This quest has led some, like Paul Taylor, to locate 'inherent

worth' in individual organisms that are 'teleological centres of life,' and others, like J. Baird Callicott and Holmes Rolston, to find intrinsic value in the more holistic notion of the 'ecological community' (Taylor 1986; Rolston 1988; Callicott 1989). Besides their emphasis on the location of intrinsic value in nature, what many of these approaches and numerous others in environmental ethics share is a commitment to foundational justification regarding moral claims about our responsibilities toward individual animals, species, and ecological systems. Moral justifications are foundational if they posit the existence of certain basic or privileged beliefs which are supported non-inferentially. Such premises are generally claimed to be a priori, self-evident, or directly justified in some manner; they do not depend upon any other beliefs for their support. As Herzog (1985) writes, the appeal of foundational justifications is obvious and hard to resist: 'Only a foundational argument, we want to say, could possibly provide a justification' (p. 21). This 'quest for certainty,' as Dewey succinctly put it, has cast a powerful spell over many environmental ethicists currently working in the field. But foundational philosophical positions have serious flaws; drawbacks which render claims about our moral commitments to the natural world questionable, if not totally untenable in the theoretical stances of these writers.

Foundationalists in environmental ethics are generally more prevalent within nonanthropocentric theory, as the search for intrinsic value in nature typically leads ethicists toward the fashioning of immutable moral principles designed to engender respect and protection of the environment independent of human values. One of the great fears of this type of environmental philosophy, and a concern typical of foundationalist philosophy in general, is that without some kind of epistemically basic justification for our moral stances toward the natural world, we will slip into the morass of relativism and its accompanying seductions. Such a position, these contributors argue, is doomed to failure; it is incapable of providing firm, unimpeachable support for environmental protection.

For starters, we can look to the work of one of environmental philosophy's leading voices, Holmes Rolston III; a theorist for whom the quest for an objectivist intrinsic value theory linked to ecological systems leads toward an especially strong foundationalist position. Rolston justifies his ecological holism with an appeal to a kind of supra-consciousness intuitionism wrapped around the 'visitation' of ecological value into our belief systems. Flatly rejecting the anthropocentric outlook towards nature, Rolston argues that we are better off transforming our worldview into a more biocentric cast:

> Conversion to a biological view seems truer to world experience and more logically compelling. Something from a world beyond the human mind, beyond human experience, is received into our mind, our experience, and the value of that something does not always arise with our evaluation of it. Here the order of knowing reverses, and also enhances, the order of being (Rolston 1991: 94)

Whatever one makes of Rolston's curious notion of 'a world beyond,' his belief that our environmental values arise from some kind of extrasensory intuition commits him to an unmistakable foundationalist stance. Rolston is dismissive of the potential sentiments and values that might arise from human cultural activity within nature, and his mystical notion of experience in this passage only underscores his aversion to the practical moral resources of the human community. For Rolston, it is the natural world that 'projects' its 'systemic' values onto our culture forms, and instils an ecological duty in individuals:

> When humans awaken to their presence in such a biosphere, finding themselves to be products of this process [systemic value projection] – whatever they make of their cultures and anthropocentric preferences, their duties to other humans or to individual animals and plants – they owe something to this beauty, integrity, and persistence in the biotic community (Rolston 1988: 188).

By 'following nature' in Rolston's understanding, we act in an ethical way toward the biotic community – a relationship which represents the heart of his foundationalist project. The recognition of our membership in the ecosystem, laid bare in Rolston's view by the insights of ecological science, somehow implants an ethical imperative to protect natural integrity in our evaluative thinking. Rather boldly, Rolston views his own elaboration of this ecological duty as part of the epic and eternal philosophical quest. 'Is not the ultimate philosophical task the discovery of a whole great ethic that knows the human place under the sun?' Rolston asks, erasing any doubt about his epistemological goals (Rolston 1991: 96). Rolston's search for ethical Truth is perhaps the purest statement of foundationalism in environmental philosophy.

Perhaps the most troubling dimension of Rolston's approach, and what I believe is a direct product of his foundationalist stance, is the uncharitable and reductionistic view his work often displays toward the worldviews and intellectual sets of everyday citizens. For example, writing about the recent timber controversy in the Pacific Northwest, Rolston paints in very broad strokes when he describes the value transformation he believes might lie in the region's shift toward 'ecological sustainability':

> They once lived in a community with a worldview that saw the great forests of the Northwest as a resource to be taken possession of, exploited. But that is not an appropriate worldview; it sees nature as a commodity for human gratification and nothing else. The idea of winning is to consume, the more the better. When the goalposts are moved, these 'losers' at the exploitation game will come to live in a community with a new worldview, that of sustainable relationship with the forested landscape, and that is a new idea of winning. What they really lose is what it is a good thing to lose: an exploitative attitude toward forests. What they gain is a good thing to gain: a land ethic (Rolston 1994: 221-222).

Rolston's analysis of the 'worldview' of citizens of the Northwest is incredibly simplistic and one-sided; it's difficult to imagine that any social scientist would attempt to get away with such a breezy and generalised characterisation of community life. Of course, Rolston is free to think such thoughts in the privacy of his office, but to set them down in giddy prose declaring 'winners' and 'losers' is intellectually irresponsible and does a disservice to the lives of hardworking people. Worse, the fallout from this kind of view of cultural and social life is that the moral traditions of communities are deemed incapable of handling environmental protection, inasmuch as they demonstrate an exploitative outlook on nature. It's up to environmental ethicists to deliver the 'real' moral foundations for preserving the natural world, and to turn these 'losers' into 'winners' with a new, philosophically-approved land ethic.

A desire for this sort of foundational security can also be found in the work of Rolston's fellow biocentric holist, J. Baird Callicott. In a widely read and cited essay criticising the merits of ethical pluralism, Callicott accuses moral pluralists of an unprincipled 'moral promiscuity' in their rigging of a situation where individuals may choose those moral programmes that suit their self-serving preferences from a catalogue of potential ethical principles. Besides the fact that Callicott seems to adopt a rather cynical view of human nature, he exhibits the tendency of many, if not most foundationalists – the intuitive demand for generality in moral justification. His preoccupation with the constraint of consistency, a key component of his foundationalist project, is especially telling:

> Consistency is not just a shrine before which philosophers worship. There is a reason for wanting consistency, insured by organization around or derivation from a 'master principle,' among one's practical precepts. Attempting to act upon inconsistent or mutually contradictory ethical principles results in frustration of action altogether or in actions that are either irrelevant or mutually canceling (Callicott 1990: 110).

In Callicott's view, our moral judgments regarding nature must ultimately be derived from a basic epistemological position which respects the integrity of the ecological community – the 'master principle' formulated through his own reading of Leopold's land ethic. For Callicott, Leopold's thought provides support for an especially strong ecological holism. 'The land ethic not only provides moral considerability for the biotic community per se, but ethical consideration of its individual members is preempted by concern for the preservation of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community' (Callicott 1989: 84). Callicott thus takes Leopold's famous 'A thing is right...' phrase as an ethical dictum, and, after making Leopold philosophically palatable by linking his thought to Humean subjectivism and Darwinian theory, offers an elaborated version of it as the philosophical foundation for the moral treatment of nature.

It is revealing, I think, that Callicott demonstrates unswerving fidelity to this general biocentric program. Many observers have noted that much of moral thinking has been driven by such a demand for consistency; a predilection which often masks a more pervasive desire for generality and universality in ethical theory. Yet consistency is, at best, a weak constraint on moral principles. As Loeb (1996) points out, it is always possible to avoid the charge of inconsistency by making a distinction between the cases one is considering. So, for example, we could argue that wildlife preservation matters, but not as much as ensuring a level of basic human subsistence – they are simply different cases and do not demand that we judge them under a single moral geometry. Again, I can't help but be reminded by Dewey's admonitions here, especially his frank appraisal of philosophical preferences for 'law-like' ethical algorithms:

> 'Morals is not a catalogue of acts nor a set of rules to be applied like drugstore prescriptions or cook-book recipes … the need in morals is for specific methods of inquiry … the pragmatic import of the logic of individualized situations, each having its own irreplaceable good and principle, is to transfer the attention of theory from preoccupation with general conceptions to the problem of developing effective methods of inquiry' (Dewey 1957: 169-170).

Callicott, of course, is not willing to make these kinds of contextual distinctions between the varying norms and judgments at play in particular situations. His distaste for any form of pluralistic accounting of environmental ethics, and his advocacy for a strong foundational biocentric project which covers all cases of environmental concern, leads him to reject the claim that different contexts put pressure on our moral thinking, especially the justification of our moral beliefs regarding the natural world. To do so would be to play a game of 'metaphysical musical chairs,' he laments, leading to an unpredictable and therefore unacceptable moral chaos.

While the foundationalism of Rolston and Callicott is troubling, its manifestation in the work of Eric Katz is perhaps more so. Given Katz's admitted discomfort with many moral monists' cherished positions, including their emphasis on intrinsic value claims and their tendency to exhibit a lack of concreteness in ethical discussions about the nature, one would expect him to reject the kind of foundationalist thinking that appears in the work of more resolute biocentrists like Rolston and Callicott. Unfortunately, however, Katz seems to share these writers' opinion of the moral sensibilities contained within human experience. As he writes:

> If environmental protection is morally correct, it is so regardless of the experiences produced by interacting with nature. If some people do not respond to nature in a 'positive' environmental way, that is no excuse for them to violate the obligation to protect the environment. Similarly, the dislike of monogamous marriage does not

> justify promiscuous adultery; the dislike of truth telling does not justify telling a lie. Ethical obligations do not derive their force from favorable experiences (Katz 1987: 238-239).

What Katz seems to be worried about is that nonfoundational justifications for ethical obligations – those that are rooted in variable human preferences and experiences in the natural world – do not provide an adequate grounding for an appropriate environmental ethic. In an exchange with Anthony Weston over the merits of a pragmatic approach to environmental values, however, Katz claims that he is not a foundationalist in any 'strong' sense. Yet this is a curious denial in light of his apparent endorsement: 'Foundations are often worthwhile; and they need not be absolute. To build a house one starts with a foundation. It is prudent to do so...' (Katz 1996: 323). Katz, it seems, wants to have it both ways – he wants to reject the strong absolutist or infallibilist stance associated with foundationalist philosophy in favour of something less fixed and more revisable. But precisely how one might have both the benefit of basic moral truths Katz desires *and* the ability to break free from privileged beliefs in supporting particular moral claims is puzzling, and he takes little notice of this paradox. While Katz's hedging on this count reveals his ambivalence about the status of foundational value claims, his attempt to finesse the issue by endorsing a watered down absolutism is, in the end, wholly unsatisfying. By dismissing the resources available within lived experience in favour of a more objectivist, ecologically based 'community holism,' Katz makes an unmistakable philosophical move away from culture and toward a foundational position that transcends the value systems present in human social, political, and moral life.

What is most distressing here is the deep pessimism Katz apparently holds toward the ability of human experience to produce and promote values that foster a strong respect for the natural world. Katz concludes that cultural experiences in the natural world are merely whimsical 'preferences' – those that ultimately reduce to the satisfaction of base human desires and commodity impulses. But egoistic subjectivism is not the only alternative to moral foundationalism, and here Katz seems to be falling into the trap described by Clifford Geertz: 'To suggest that 'hard rock' foundations for cognitive, aesthetic, or moral judgments may not, in fact, be available, or anyway that those one is being offered are dubious, is to find oneself accused of disbelieving in the existence of the physical world, thinking pushpin as good as poetry, regarding Hitler as just a fellow with unstandard tastes…' (Geertz 1984: 264). Geertz's point, and one that Katz seems unwilling to entertain, is that the stuff of human cultural lives, including the meanings and sentiments associated with our notions of normative concepts like good and bad, and obligation and commitment, does not reduce to a cacophony of fragmented preferences and desires when we leave the security of philosophical foundations behind. This is because moral judgements are fundamentally social; as part of intricate cultural systems constructed within communities, they are built, refined, and transmitted through the process of communication and

education – the lived experience of individuals within a moral universe. As Charles Taylor likes to put it, individuals are embedded in 'horizons of significance'; matrices of meaning that owe their character to our membership in families, social institutions, and the traditions of the larger community. 'Reasoning in moral matters is always reasoning with somebody,' Taylor reminds us, and this dialogic and cultural character of moral judgements is different from the solipsistic preference-based view of morality that Katz finds beneath the rubble of crumbled philosophical foundations (Taylor 1991: 31).

Not only is Katz's depiction of non-foundational justification too limited and narrow, he assumes that a pragmatic approach toward environmental commitment means that only special, 'profound' types of human experiences would be up to the task of environmental preservation. 'The insistence that an environmental ethic is grounded on the experiences felt in interacting with nature leads inevitably to a kind of subjective relativism: those agents who do not feel 'awe' and 'respect' and 'wonder' of nature will have no good reason – no reason at all?!? – to protect it.' (Katz 1987: 239). Katz's conclusion is simply begging too many questions; he offers no support for his position that human experience – rich and varied community traditions, histories, arts, recreation, etc. – is not capable of generating from within itself the means for environmental preservation. Likewise, he seems to limit the sentiments that commit people to strong environmental protection to feelings of 'awe' and 'wonder.' Apparently, Katz believes that in order for environmental protection to be based on the values of human experience, it's necessary to always find the sublime in the local beaver pond and state campground; an admittedly tough order to fill for even the most ardent nature enthusiast. But one only has to consider the values associated with the preservation of American national parks to find evidence of how less 'heroic' cultural sentiments – e.g. the aesthetic appreciation and recreational enjoyment experienced in natural settings – have led to strong justifications for environmental protection. In the end, I believe that Katz's fear that pragmatic environmentalism implies a perverse and wholly unacceptable subjectivism is, to use his own terminology, too despairing by far. And his position here clearly flows out of his commitment to the notion that there must be a set of basic epistemological beliefs that justify our moral obligations to the environment – obligations that are 'morally correct' by virtue of their location in foundational bedrock.

III.

If my arguments up to this point are valid, Rolston, Callicott, and Katz all share, to varying degrees, a common longing for foundational principles in their environmental theories. I have briefly tried to illustrate why I believe these approaches are problematic from the standpoint of pragmatist theory and why they should be avoided in environmental ethics. On a more concrete level,

however, I believe that there are additional reasons to be concerned about the implications of foundational environmental ethics for discussions about environmental policy and the place of environmental ethical inquiry in the democratic community. I would argue that on these counts, foundational approaches to environmental ethics also possess flaws serious enough to sink the ethical projects of theorists like Rolston, Callicott, and Katz.

First of all, there seems to be a kind of intellectual slipperiness at work in these approaches, or at least a backpedalling when it comes to matters of specific environmental policy. While theorists like Callicott and Rolston do not evade the fact that their philosophical programmes for environmental protection will often conflict with moral commitments to fellow human beings (e.g. Callicott's tree ring metaphor of moral obligation), this recognition does not penetrate their epistemic programmes in any significant sense. Instead, and much like Katz's quandary, this acknowledgment works to seriously undermine their philosophical projects to the extent that Callicott, Katz and others want to affirm foundational edifices in their environmental theories while at the same time they seek to slip the bonds of these fixed beliefs in their discussion of the practical applications of their environmentalist programmes. Even when Callicott writes about the intimate obligations to family members being more powerful than those we might have for ecological systems, for example, the philosophical core of his biocentrism remains sealed off from the kind of revision and alteration that might attend to these considerations. The closed nature of fixed ethical principles to the plurality of human experience is a condition that plagues foundationalist philosophy generally. Callicott clearly desires the security and 'consistency' of his ecological holism, but the price is an unwillingness to open environmental theory to the full value systems of human communities. In the final analysis, I believe that when these writers admit that we have to make choices and tradeoffs when it comes to real world environmental issues, they partly betray their own foundationalist principles, making them appear something less than confident in their philosophical projects.

But there are further problems. As Norton has begun to argue, there is no room in these sorts of foundationalist positions for the accommodation of biosocial variability – for the admission of a diversity of ecosystemic and cultural variables which render general demands for moral justification misguided. The social and ecological setting of a legally designated wilderness area is different from an urban green, which is different from a pastoral countryside. In other words, Yellowstone is not Central Park, and this speaks to specific ecological, social, and ethical circumstances; factors of central importance to the justification of our commitments to the natural world. The discussion about what this variability means empirically and normatively renders the field of environmental ethics meaningful and useful, both as a scholarly enterprise and as contributor to public environmental understanding and concern. Landscape, cultural, and

ethical diversity are critical parts of the context of environmentalism, but a devotion to philosophical first premises only leads environmental ethicists' attention away from these concerns in moral inquiry.

There also appears to be an unmistakable ideological atmosphere hanging around foundationalist environmentalism. I think James Gouinlock has cut to the bone in his description of this tendency in moral philosophy generally: 'What garden-variety absolutists are really thirsting for, I suspect, is dedicated allegiance to the values they regard as indispensable to a precious form of life, and they are alarmed when they see the allegiance eroded or ridiculed' (Gouinlock 1993: 26). When we follow something like Callicott's or Rolston's biocentrism for example, we are forced to arrive at all of our moral decisions regarding nature through a linear process of reasoning to ground, justifying our ethical commitments in each circumstance by their structural relationship to a theory of intrinsic value – a 'master principle.' Such positions slip all too easily into naturalised ideologies, regardless of the apparent sophistication of the appeal to ecological science. Robert Kirkman has noted this kind of ideological agenda at work in much of environmental philosophy: 'This might not be such a bad thing,' Kirkman generously observes, 'but if someone were to disagree with those [foundational] principles, for whatever reason, there could be no further rational or intuitive appeal on the basis of which to resolve the dispute: one either does or does not believe' (Kirkman 1997: 205). Foundationalist approaches, it seems, discourage open discussion and serious moral inquiry, making democratic debate over the moral dimensions of policy a complete non-starter.[2]

Not only does a philosophical commitment to fixed principles preclude discussion and the engagement of varying ecological conditions at local levels, it also makes the understanding of the value bases of environmental ethics a very exclusive and territorial affair. I believe that this kind of intellectual parochialism in environmental ethics regarding the legitimacy and authenticity of the justification of environmentalism is counterproductive and smacks of elitism in many places. For example, in a recent essay Callicott writes that even though we might appeal to nonphilosophers' (specifically, the general public, but presumably also applying to fellow academics) religious and intellectual commitments in fostering environmental protection, we should not expect such beliefs to comprise the 'truth' in these instances. The 'real reasons' for protecting nature – i.e. the epistemic foundations of some sort of intrinsic value theory for the environment – are the sole purview of philosophers, Callicott says, and anything else is a lesser form of knowledge that, while useful to environmental philosophers in serving their own agendas, does not get at the heart of the matter when it comes to 'correctly' valuing the natural world (Callicott 1995). At the very least, Callicott's design denies the contributions of other disciplinary perspectives in elucidating the character of public environmental commitments. Perhaps more distressingly, it demonstrates an apparent disrespect for democratic values as well.[3]

IV.

What is needed in environmental ethics is a more ecumenical, open, and interpretive spirit regarding how we might go about investigating the bases of moral knowledge and the support for moral claims about the natural world. I would suggest that environmental philosophers would be better off regarding ethical justification from a perspective which places the social setting of moral stances toward the environment in the foreground. As my discussion here has attempted to illustrate, however, many environmental ethicists have simply rejected the everyday moral resources of human communities root and branch, preferring instead the pure and philosophically insulated realm of ethical certainty. Writers like Rolston, Callicott, and Katz, proclaiming the cultural values of human experience to be ethically bankrupt when it comes to environmental protection, feel the only recourse for the academic environmentalist is to take on the task of philosophical founding, inventing justificatory principles which logically guarantee their own preferred form of preservationism.

Lurking within this tendency is, I believe, the longstanding philosophical aversion to human experience identified by Dewey: 'Gross experience is loaded with the tangled and complex; hence philosophy hurries away from it to search out something so simple that the mind can rest trustfully in it, knowing that it has no surprises in store, that it will not spring anything to make trouble...' (Dewey 1929: 25-26). It is easier and more philosophically 'neat' to construct a set of ethical first principles than it is to look within the richly textured moral traditions of real communities when it comes time to justify ethical arguments about the natural world. But the currency and social meaningfulness of this invented morality is weak at best, especially when it is compared with the thickness of moral life as part of a cultural system. As Michael Walzer puts it, 'Morality is something we have to argue about … no discovery or invention takes precedence…' (Walzer 1987: 32). Moral inquiry is thus at its core a process of sociocultural interpretation; a critical activity best performed through the thoughtful and creative engagement of existing community norms and traditions.

In light of this characterisation, I believe that environmental ethicists need to roll up their sleeves and dig into the layered and fertile soil of moral life, to abandon the ethical quest for certainty and the fixed moral maxims of foundationalist philosophy that have shut out the particular and contingent in favour of the general and absolute. When we start to look at the shape of existing human environmental obligations and duties from a variety of methodological perspectives across scholarly disciplines, we begin to thicken and deepen our understanding of the role of context in framing moral claims, both environmental and otherwise. This sort of approach requires an ongoing dialectical process of vigilance and criticism; inquiry into community moral traditions is never finished, settled, or exhausted. Therefore, we need to be confident in our ability as cultural selves and citizens to discuss and argue about the meaning of our

moral traditions and the resources they provide for respecting both natural and human communities. To the extent that we are able to do so democratically, I believe that the returns of this sort of interpretive moral inquiry will be culturally revealing and practically significant. What's more, they will be authentic parts of the moral universes of actual communities of people instead of the fabricated principles of foundationalist philosophers. 'Nothing in the universe is great enough or static or eternal enough not to have some history,' William James tells us, and I would argue that the elucidation of this 'history' – the lived experience of people valuing the world in multiple, and often unpredictable ways – is the most profitable activity environmental ethics can perform (James 1996: 49).

Toward this, I believe that the emerging pragmatic turn in environmental ethics, led by Norton, Anthony Weston and Andrew Light, among others, possesses great potential for bringing this sort of contextualist and interpretive approach to moral life into sharper focus in environmental philosophy (Norton 1991; Weston 1992; Light 1996). The experimental, pluralistic, and resolutely anti-foundational spirit of the new environmental pragmatism is especially appealing, as all of these characteristics are positioned to make contributions to the elaboration of the social and cultural settings of human moral experience. Not only is a pragmatic environmental ethics *philosophically* attractive, as I have tried to partly demonstrate in this essay, but it is more *politically* desirable, inasmuch as it fosters a democratic disposition in the justification of moral claims and arguments. This dual moral and political quality of the pragmatist project, most fully elaborated in the thought of Dewey, is an especially valuable intellectual inheritance for environmental pragmatists. Indeed, I would argue that it offers the greatest potential for avoiding the troubling philosophical and undemocratic vices that result from foundationalist thinking in environmental ethics.

At the basic level, at stake in all this is the significance of the values placed upon human culture in discussions of our environmental duties and obligations. Lying beneath general philosophical foundationalists' traditional aversion to human experience is, I believe, many environmental ethicists' lack of esteem for the cultural realm, a condition the social theorist Alan Wolfe diagnoses with typical precision:

> If, in our zeal to protect nature, we reject as well the premises that undergird our efforts to understand and appreciate our meaning-producing abilities, human affairs become not especially noteworthy, their patterns and activities a by-product of majestic ecological laws, in comparison to which our own fears, desires, and needs seem puny. That is not a conclusion that most of us would want to reach, including those who want to protect the natural environment itself. For without the specifically human capacity to imagine alternative worlds and to guide our destiny to achieve evaluative objectives of our own choosing, we would have no basis for claiming that anything, including nature, is worthwhile and ought to be preserved (Wolfe 1993: 83).

A contextual and experience-centred environmental ethics has the resources to lead toward a better view of the full value richness of human moral sentiments tied to the natural world. When more environmental philosophers begin to realise that respect for nature does not vanish when we leave the certainty of moral foundations behind, they will have taken the first step toward a deeper understanding of the real extent of our environmental values as part of shared cultural traditions. As Richard Dees concludes, part of 'living with contextualism' requires that we become comfortable with the contingency of our values (Dees 1994). It is obvious that environmental ethicists are especially at ease with the values of the ecological community. I would suggest that environmental pragmatists, and other like-minded contributors to the bases of our environmental knowledge, are poised to help those interested in preserving the natural world reach a similar comfort with the values of the human community.

NOTES

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[1] Norton's contextualism is most fully articulated in *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (1991). See his 'Convergence and Contextualism: Some Clarifications and a Reply to Steverson' (1997), for a more recent discussion of this approach to environmental policy.

[2] An argument made by Bob Pepperman Taylor (1996) with respect to the ideological tendencies of much biocentric environmental theory. More generally, Michael Walzer (1981) has suggested that foundationalist philosophy runs counter to the workings of the democratic community, which rests upon the pluralistic, historically contingent dimensions of public life rather than the timeless universal absolutes of private philosophical reasoning.

[3] This seemingly undemocratic temperament of Callicott's work (as well as Rolston's) is troubling, especially given the fact that we have every reason to believe that a concern for environmental quality is widespread in American society, with a large percentage of the population expressing the desire to promote environmental protection even if great costs are involved (Dunlap 1992). Katz also appears to demonstrate an undemocratic suspicion toward the public's values with his dismissal of human experience in the quest for more 'objective' foundations for environmental policy. I would argue that the rejection of the values of social life by these and other environmental ethicists ultimately frustrates generation of the broad-based support needed for serious environmental protection, presumably undercutting these writers' own policy objectives.

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