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"What's In a Name? Pragmatism, Essentialism, and Environmental Ethics"

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Essentialists like J. Baird Callicott have argued that one cannot have an environmental ethic unless one adopts the nonanthropocentric principle, which holds that things other than humans can be morally considerable in their own right, typically because they are thought to be intrinsically valuable. Pragmatists like Bryan Norton reject this; they claim that environmental ethics has no core or essence, and hence that the nonanthropocentric principle is not essential to an environmental ethic. Norton advances as an alternative the Convergence Hypothesis, which says that there are many different ways of justifying environmental principles and policies. In this paper I show that pragmatists and essentialists are arguing past one another because they fail to note two crucial points. First, they often propose different accounts of which principles constitute an environmental ethic and so they disagree about which principles must be justified. The nonanthropocentric principle may be required to justify the principles that Callicott believe to be constitutive of an environmental ethic, but it may be unnecessary to justify those principles that pragmatists think are constitutive. Second, essentialists and pragmatists often overlook the distinction to be made between the adequacy of a justification and its epistemic or rhetorical preferability. The nonanthropocentric principle may not be needed to provide an adequate justification of the constitutive principles and judgements, but a justification that contains the nonanthropocentric principle might nevertheless be epistemically preferable.

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