

## **Is Nonanthropocentrism Anti-democratic?**

Mark Alan Michael

### ABSTRACT

Environmental pragmatists such as Ben Minteer and Bryan Norton have argued that there is an anti-democratic strain to be found in the work of some nonanthropocentrists. I examine three possible sources of the pragmatists' concern; the claim that nonanthropocentrists know the political truth, the claim that those who disagree with their basic principle should be excluded from discussions of policy, and the claim that their basic principle is self-evident. I argue here that none of these claims are objectionably anti-democratic when understood properly.

### KEYWORDS

Pragmatism, nonanthropocentrism, democracy, political truth, self-evident truths

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental pragmatists such as Ben Minteer and Bryan Norton have argued that the views of nonanthropocentrists such as Holmes Rolston, Baird Callicott, Eric Katz, and Laura Westra are not conducive to and even implicitly hostile to the use of democratic processes in resolving environmental issues. Ben Minteer for example says:

In my view, this purist form of ethical argument [nonanthropocentrism] runs counter to the kind of experimental and democratic attitude toward the values and beliefs of citizens that I think is critical for philosophers and activists to hold in an era shaped by the complex forces of global environmental change, especially given the ecological dynamism and ethical diversity that characterizes our historical moment.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Minteer, 2011: 21. The sources for Minteer's critique are passages in Callicott, 1999a, Katz, 1996: ch. 12, and 2009, and Rolston, 1994 and 2009.

Bryan Norton makes an even more provocative claim; ‘In the end, I guess, we all face a choice. We must decide whether we are first and foremost environmentalists or first and foremost democrats....For my part, given these alternatives, I choose democracy’.<sup>2</sup>

On the surface the claim of inconsistency between nonanthropocentrism and democratic theory is puzzling, as the two views seem to be answering very different sorts of questions. Nonanthropocentrism is a response to the question of what sorts of things are intrinsically valuable, and while there are many variants of nonanthropocentrism, they all offer the same broad answer- some non-human natural objects are intrinsically valuable. I will refer to this as the basic principle of nonanthropocentrism. This answer *is* inconsistent with anthropocentrism, which holds that only humans and their well-being are intrinsically valuable. But the contrast that pragmatists want to draw concerning a theory’s commitment to democracy is not between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism. That is, the pragmatist’s claim is not that anthropocentrism is democratic in a way that nonanthropocentrism is not. Rather the claim is that pragmatism offers a third way that both minimizes the importance of the distinction between anthropocentrism and nonanthropocentrism, and that makes pragmatism democratic in a way that nonanthropocentrism is not.<sup>3</sup> But how a view about what sorts of things are intrinsically valuable can be at odds with democratic thinking is not immediately obvious.

The concept of democracy is contested. But since we will need a working account of what one must believe to be a democrat, and since there are many different substantive

---

<sup>2</sup> Norton, 2005: 251. The occasion for his critique are Callicott, 1999b, and Westra, 1998: ch.3.

<sup>3</sup> Norton for example now allows that since some people value nature for its own sake (and not for its contribution to human well-being), and since having intrinsic value is simply and nothing more than a matter of valuing nature in this way, nature has intrinsic value in this sense (2005: 187). He has also suggested that the anthropocentric/nonanthropocentric distinction rests on a kind of dualism which he wants to reject (2005: 507-510). Minter says, ‘But pragmatism, we should remember, is not Promethean. It is more accurately described as a midpoint on a continuum between strongly nonanthropocentric and anthropocentric poles in environmental thought (2017: 536). All this confirms that the source of the pragmatists’

accounts, we should look for some minimalistic account that almost all democrats can accept, rather than try to argue for some specific, thick account. One such account can be found in the work of David Copp. He takes democratic theory to be answering the question, who should have the right to rule; in whose hands does political authority or sovereignty lie? Copp says that democratic theory's answer is that 'Society's formal procedures for determining the decisions of government, or the membership of government, ought to give (most of) the adult membership of the society power over those decisions or over the membership, power equal to that enjoyed by any other qualified member'.<sup>4</sup>

Since the nonanthropocentrists' basic principle and the core principle of democratic thinking are not logically inconsistent, the tension between them must be the result of some other claim associated with the basic principle that is typically advanced by nonanthropocentrists. In what follows I look at three possible candidates for this associated claim, all suggested by Minter's and Norton's critiques, that would explain why they think that nonanthropocentrism is anti-democratic: the claim that nonanthropocentrists know the political truth about environmental matters, the claim that they may justifiably exclude those who reject the basic principle from deliberations about policy, and the claim that the basic principle is self-evident.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that none of these claims, when properly understood, are objectionably anti-democratic.

---

worries must be some aspect of the nonanthropocentrists' method and not the basic principle itself.

<sup>4</sup> Copp, 1993: 102.

<sup>5</sup> My focus in this paper is whether these methodological principles are anti-democratic, so I will not be looking at passages in which nonanthropocentrists have seemed to express a dismissive or cavalier attitude towards democracy generally. Some of those passages may be best understood as internal criticisms of actually existing democracies (in the spirit of Churchill's account of democracy as 'the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'), and others as being directed not against democracy at all but against a kind of cultural relativism. For a possible example of the former see Westra's discussion of democracy in 1998: 53-70; for the latter see Rolston's reply to Minter in Rolston, 1998: 354-56). But I do not pursue that issue here.

## IS POLITICAL TRUTH THE ISSUE?

Of the work of the nonanthropocentrists mentioned at the outset Minter says:

They assume the moral truth of this position [nonanthropocentrism] and believe that this should compel the political community to convert to them and consequently to pursue those policies they believe are entailed by the commitment to nature's intrinsic value (and the rejection of anthropocentric values).<sup>6</sup>

Minter here attributes to nonanthropocentrists a view which David Copp refers to as 'the political truth principle'. He explains; 'Suppose there are truths about what society ought to do, or "political truths" as I shall call them. Suppose, that is, that many of the significant problems faced by society have morally correct solutions and that there are corresponding true propositions to the effect that society ought to implement these solutions'.<sup>7</sup>

If Minter is right, nonanthropocentrists believe that there is a correct answer to questions concerning whether or not some environmental policy or legislation ought to be adopted and that these truths are consistent with and inferable from the tenets and principles of nonanthropocentrism. They also think that sometimes, perhaps often, they know what this political truth is. For example, most nonanthropocentrists would claim that it is a political truth that that we ought to adopt policies that make us less reliant on fossil fuels or that we ought not to weaken the Endangered Species Act.

Is this the problem- is an embrace of the political truth principle anti-democratic?<sup>8</sup>  
The claim that there is a political truth *is* one component of a more comprehensive view, which David Estlund refers to as Normative Epistemic Authoritarianism (NEA from here on), and which does have anti-democratic implications. NEA holds that since there is such a thing as the political truth and since some people are in possession of it, then political authority

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 20.

<sup>7</sup> Copp, 1993: 101.

<sup>8</sup> That the problem is with *assuming* one's basic principle and *then* deriving the political truth and not merely the belief that *there is* a political truth is discussed in the final section on self-evidence.

should not be in the hands of all the members of a society, as required by democratic theory, but rather should reside only with those who know this truth.<sup>9</sup> As Estlund notes, ‘If such judgments (about the common good) can be objectively correct or incorrect, then some might have better knowledge than others of these matters, and that would seem to give some people a special claim to political authority’.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps then, this is Minter’s concern- by embracing the claim that there is a political truth, nonanthropocentrists are also unknowingly committed to NEA.

But simply maintaining that there is a political truth cannot be the source of Minter’s worries, since a commitment to the political truth leads to NEA only if one also believes that expertise or political wisdom provides a conclusive reason for placing political authority in the hands of experts rather than the full adult membership of a society. As Copp notes,

If we want to reject Plato’s ideal, then I think we must not rest our support for democracy on a belief in its epistemic virtues. We must not rest our support for it on the belief that no other system of government could be known to be better at identifying the political truths. Instead, as I shall briefly suggest, our support for democracy should rest on familiar arguments either about the justice or fairness of democracy or else about its beneficial indirect effects.<sup>11</sup>

Copp’s suggestion is that the ability of a group of decision makers to get at the political truth is at best a secondary value in any attempt to justify political authority, so that this value must give way to other more important ideals such as fairness and equality. If democratic political institutions turn out to be the best way to treat people fairly and equally, then the belief that there is a political truth and that some people are more likely to know it would not have anti-democratic implications, since what justifies political authority is primarily a matter of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Estlund, 1993: 71-72.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 73.

<sup>11</sup> Copp, 1993: 102-103

fairness and equality of the system and not whether the one, the few, or the many are more likely to get at the political truth.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the fact that nonanthropocentrists think that there is a political truth and that they sometimes have it entails nothing about their views about where political authority should reside nor about whether a decision procedure which sometimes fails to get at it nevertheless is politically authoritative- it has no anti-democratic implications.

Nonanthropocentrists could agree with Copp and hold that the justification of political authority depends on which sort of political system treats people fairly and with equal respect and not on which one is more likely to get at the political truth. Admittedly a commitment to the primacy of democracy over the political truth does entail that there will be policies which should be pursued and adopted, even when they are mistaken in the sense of failing to reflect the political truth. While that may have the ring of paradox, it simply follows from the fact that the majority can fail to get at the political truth, just as they may fail to get at any other kind of truth.

The failure to appreciate that there is no paradox here seems to be at the heart of this passage from Norton's;

Either philosophers have some special means to determine morally correct policy outcomes or they don't. If they don't, then it seems obvious that within a diverse, democratic society in which multiple viewpoints and interests are expressed, philosophers should participate on the same basis as other members of the public, through speeches, writings, discussions, and advocacy of their views. Their special skills should not trump the ideas and arguments of other participants. If philosophers give their best arguments...and yet they do not prevail, philosophers should accept the outcome, and perhaps go into retreat to reconsider how their can be made more persuasive for the next go round.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Estlund proposes an alternative route for avoiding Normative Epistemic Authoritarianism. That view requires not only that there are experts, but also that it is possible to reliably pick them out, and Estlund argues that this condition cannot be met. See Estlund, 1993: 84-89.

<sup>13</sup> Norton, 2002: 25.

Norton is right that nonanthropocentrists will argue that their claims about which policy to adopt get at the political truth, that they are ‘morally correct policy outcomes’.<sup>14</sup> But they can also agree that their knowledge warrants no special treatment or consideration, given that they think that what justifies political authority is equal treatment of others and not political expertise. In that case they would agree that they should participate in actual political discussions and decisions concerning policy on the same basis as everyone else. And they will accept the outcome- they will think that they and everyone else have a prima facie reason to follow the policy, namely because it was the outcome of a process that treats everyone in the society with equal respect. They can think it was the wrong decision, because it fails to get at the political truth, but that they nevertheless have a reason to follow it. Of course *if* they also buy into the claim that the possession of the political truth gives them the right to rule, then Norton’s criticism goes through. Whether or not they accept that claim is discussed in the following section.

If that is right, then treating others fairly and with equal respect gives us a reason to act on what the majority decides; it does not require that I match my beliefs with those of the majority, nor that I take the majority to have gotten at the political truth. Acting on mistaken policies is a regrettable but necessary cost of treating people fairly and with equal respect.

It might be thought that there is still an air of paradox surrounding this view, since it seems to suggest that we *ought to* adopt a policy or enact legislation which fails to capture the political truth. Doesn’t that mean that we ought to adopt the policy that fails to be the correct or best one, or even worse, that we should adopt some policy (because it is the will of the majority) that we shouldn’t adopt (since it is not the political truth, which means we are making a mistake by not adopting it)?

---

<sup>14</sup> But they do not, on the other hand, claim to have ‘some special means’ to apprehend this truth, unless Norton is referring to claims about self-evidence; that is addressed in the final section.

But there is no paradox here as long as these ‘oughts’ and the reasons they give us are understood to be *prima facie* rather than conclusive. That is, the fact that the majority supports some policy is a *prima facie* reason to adopt it; the fact that it fails to reflect the political truth is a *prima facie* reason to reject it. Being a democrat does not require that we must always take the ‘ought’ provided by the will of the majority as a conclusive reason. It requires only that we take it to be a *prima facie* reason, and generally but not universally a conclusive one.<sup>15</sup>

### THE EXCLUSIONARY CLAIM

The belief that there is a political truth and that one sometimes knows it leads to NAE (and the rejection of democratic theory) only if one also believes that expertise or political wisdom provides a conclusive reason for placing political authority in the hands of those who possess the truth. So pragmatists like Minter and Norton need to show that the nonanthropocentrists who are the target of their critique hold this additional premise- they think that their possession of the political truth gives them a right to rule. But inasmuch as neither Norton nor Minter cite an explicit avowal of that claim from nonanthropocentrists, they must think that these nonanthropocentrists hold some associated principles or beliefs which implicitly commits them to a view about who has the right to rule, whether they are aware of it or not.<sup>16</sup>

Minter suggests this in the following:

But one of the most distressing aspects of this mode of environmental ethics- and a problem that I believe has not disappeared from the literature- is the highly ideological and potentially undemocratic character of the strong version of the nonanthropocentric program. In particular, I am wary of the common epistemic and rhetorical move in which some prominent writers in the field argue that a ‘true’

---

<sup>15</sup> The will of the majority may not be a conclusive reason if, for example, the decision involves the violation of a right. See Dworkin, 1978: ch. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the closest claim is Westra’s view that there are times when laws enacted by a majority may violate rights and so justifiably be broken or ignored. But a commitment to the justifiability of civil disobedience is very different from a commitment to the claim that only those who know the political truth have a right to rule. See Westra, 1998: 53-71.

environmental ethic, and an ethically defensible environmental policy agenda, *must* be justified by nonanthropocentric arguments.<sup>17</sup>

My main objection to this way of thinking [nonanthropocentrism's justificatory exclusiveness] is that the ethical and policy projects of such writers as Rolston, Callicott, and Katz seem to include very little space for meaningful public discussion, debate and critical analysis that could inform, and possibly challenge, their claims about the necessity of adopting a nonanthropocentric world view. That is, these interlinked and (very generalized) normative policy arguments offer little room for inquiry into the merit of those dogmatic intrinsic value of nature claims and scrutiny of the parallel directive that we must adopt a nonanthropocentric worldview (and jettison our anthropocentric beliefs) before we can make proper environmental decisions....' *In seeking to narrow the frame of value to a singular program of nonanthropocentric ethics, philosophers ethically and politically disenfranchise individuals who hold different (yet appreciative) normative views about the value of nonhuman nature and the obligations we may have to conserve and protect it, now and in the future* (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

Minteer's suggestion here is that the anti-democratic tendencies of nonanthropocentrists are to be found in the claim that the only way to arrive at the truth concerning questions of policy is to derive those answers from the basic principle of nonanthropocentrism, and its corollary, that any view that is inconsistent with the basic principle must be mistaken and so should be excluded from such discussions. Since nonanthropocentrists think that the only way to get the right answer about policy matters is to start from their basic principle, they will also think that anyone who fails to accept it or who starts from other principles or premises can be excluded justifiably from discussions, deliberations, and decision making about such matters. I will refer to this claim, that the rejection of the nonanthropocentrists' basic principle justifies excluding those who disagree with it from discussions and decision-making concerning policy and legislation, as the exclusionary principle.

Perhaps more should be said about how exactly the exclusionary principle flows from the purported truth of the basic principle. Where one thinks that one is in possession of a

---

<sup>17</sup> Minteer, 2011: 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 19-20.

basic truth or principle, one must also think that the way to determine what the truth is when questions arise about what policy or legislation should be adopted is to derive the answers from those foundational principles. And if one starts out from what, by the nonanthropocentrists' lights, are mistaken or incorrect principles, such as that species or ecosystems have no intrinsic value, her policy recommendations are bound to be tainted by the original epistemic sin of not acknowledging the truth, that natural objects like these have intrinsic value, and consequently will either arrive at the wrong policy, or at best get the right policy but get it accidentally, for the wrong reasons. And since those who do not accept the correct starting point will not wind up with the right policies, or if they do, their doing so is a matter of luck, they should be excluded from discussions and decision making about which policies to put into place. Only those who accept and deploy the basic principle concerning the intrinsic value of nature should be allowed to deliberate and decide about matters of environmental policy, because only they will get the correct answer- hence the charge that nonanthropocentrism is anti-democratic.

That this concern is central to the pragmatist's critique is suggested by the following passage by Minter:

Appeals to the intrinsic value of nature, environmental rights, or various other ontological arguments about the status of natural values carry no overwhelming political weight or transcendent policy status; they certainly are not moral trumps that can silence all citizens who disagree with them. This may be a hard pill for environmental ethicists to swallow, but I know of no other way to maintain a meaningful political commitment to democracy in environmental ethics.<sup>19</sup>

Here Minter explicitly ascribes the exclusionary principle to nonanthropocentrists- they think their theory carries 'overwhelming political weight,' so that they serve as 'moral trumps that can silence all citizens who disagree'. That suggests that they accept something like the view that having political wisdom gives them a special status in terms of political deliberations and decision-making, a status that is not accorded to the average person who

---

<sup>19</sup> Minter, 2011: 55.

rejects the foundational starting point of nonanthropocentrism. And that certainly is inimical to democratic theory.

This same charge is levelled by Norton in his critique of Callicott,

What bothers me is that when philosophers emphasize general, meta-ethical theories, and claim too much for these ‘foundations’ these theories identify, they must turn their attention away from policy details and away from efforts to resolve differences by ongoing dialogue and deliberation involving an open public discourse. In the worst case, philosophers carry this elitism to an extreme, claiming special privilege to override, rather than trying to repair, democratic processes. This extreme viewpoint strikes at the very heart of democratic thought by creating a ‘priesthood’ or ‘kinghood’ of philosophers.<sup>20</sup>

So whether nonanthropocentrists realize it or not, their views about the nature of their core principle entail that they are justified in behaving like a moral elite or vanguard, like Plato’s philosopher kings. Those not enlightened enough to accept nonanthropocentrism will get things wrong and so should stand aside while those who are competent to derive policy from the basic, nonanthropocentric principle make decisions for the entire society.

The response I want to offer here turns on making a distinction between two different contexts in which the exclusionary principle might be applied- an epistemic context and a political context. One can hold consistently that her basic principles are true, and that these allow her to get at the political truth concerning policy, without thinking that people who disagree with these principles should be disenfranchised or excluded from actual political debates and from decision-making generally. In the epistemic context, however, those views do lead to a kind of exclusion. But first, since it is beliefs and not people who are being excluded, it is not objectionably anti-democratic to do so. And second, excluding and rejecting beliefs is simply what occurs in the epistemic context- there, the question is ‘what should I believe,’ and raising that question means that there are some statements that I should not believe. Or so I will argue.

## TWO DIFFERENT DELIBERATIVE CONTEXTS

The question ‘which policy we should adopt’ can be asked in two very different contexts. We might refer to the first as the epistemic context (EC) and the second as the political context (PC). The goal of the EC is to uncover the truth, political or otherwise- we want to know which policy encapsulates the political truth, or gets at the correct answer, broadly speaking. In the PC the question is practical and political- what decision should we make as a group, what should we actually do (as opposed to, ‘what policy should I believe captures the political truth?’). The answer to this political question is supposed to have normative force- it enables us to say to others, ‘you (and I) ought to accept and abide by this decision concerning what we should do’. The shape of this context will then be a function of the fact that the answers it provides have normative force. So the rules for determining how decisions are to be made, and any constraints on deliberation in this context, will be informed by one’s answer to the question of how political authority is to be justified. If we continue with the line of thought initiated earlier, that the justification of political authority and decision making depends on its treating all members of a community fairly and with equal respect, then the PC needs to be structured in a way that is consistent with that kind of treatment. Crucially, the justification of the process and procedures in this context, unlike in the epistemic context, is *not* that they are more likely than any competing process to get at the political truth.

Treating all citizens fairly and equally requires that they all be allowed to engage in the political life of the community. This requires not only that all be allowed to vote, but additionally that debate and discussion be open to all- all political views, along with the reasons offered for those views, must be tolerated. No one should be prevented from voting, regardless of how well or ill-informed he is, even when his votes and views are grounded in

---

<sup>20</sup> Norton, 2002: 27.

epistemically questionable world views and based on reasons that are frivolous or just plain bad. No one should be threatened with legal punishment for expressing those views (with some exceptions for views that would lead to violence against some members of the community). In the PC flawed people bring forward reasons, some good and some not, for their views about whether some policy or legislation should be adopted, and everyone gets to have their say and then vote. Sometimes the result will be decisions which do not reflect the political truth, but again, that is the price of democracy and treating people fairly and equally.

If nonanthropocentrists intend the exclusionary principle to apply as a constraint in the PC, then nonanthropocentrism is clearly anti-democratic. If they believe that a commitment to their framework is a prerequisite for participating in deliberations and decision-making about which environmental policies should be adopted, then anthropocentrists would be disenfranchised and their rights to free speech would be curtailed. In the PC the exclusionary principle amounts to a claim about the legitimate limits of free speech ('moral trumps that can silence all citizens who disagree with them') and about who should be allowed to vote. Anthropocentrists should be kept on the sidelines because they fail to understand the 'transcendent policy status' carried by claims about the intrinsic value of natural objects; they fail to know how to get at the political truth.

But is that what nonanthropocentrists really want to say? Given the radical and controversial nature of such a proposal, one would have expected nonanthropocentrists to discuss and defend these claims. But at no point do nonanthropocentrists openly propose to disenfranchise people or to limit speech or to make a commitment to nonanthropocentrism a precondition of running for political office. Perhaps nonanthropocentrists have simply failed to notice that their views have this implication. But this would be a very uncharitable interpretation of nonanthropocentrism.

But then how else to understand what nonanthropocentrists are up to? The most plausible understanding takes them to be making claims about what should go on in the EC

rather than the PC. The primary goal of the EC is to get at the truth- the political truth, given our concerns here. When we ask the question, ‘what should we do?’ in this context, we are really asking a question about what we ought to *believe* we should do- which answer to the question ‘what ought we to do’ captures the truth? Crucially here, the answer to this question entails nothing about actual decision-making procedures for a group of people. That question gets asked in the political context when there is disagreement among actual people about which policy to adopt.

The process of discovering the truth, political or otherwise, requires rules and constraints, and their justification will be their truth conduciveness- following these rules and constraints makes it more likely that we will get at the truth. These rules will run the gamut from those that almost everyone will accept, such as the rules of first order logic (‘don’t affirm the consequent’), to more controversial ones about what counts as evidence and how to weigh it. Different sorts of theories will specify the rules of the EC in different ways, but the constraints and requirements, norms and rules of this context will all be justified because they are thought to contribute to uncovering the truth.

Suppose then we take the exclusionary principle as a claim about a rule in the EC- one must work within the nonanthropocentric framework if one is to uncover the political truth concerning environmental laws and policies. But that still leaves us with a puzzle. Why would nonanthropocentrists think that such a constraint makes it more likely that we will discover the political truth?

One higher order rule of the EC should be acceptable to everyone- all and only good reasons should be considered when trying to get at the truth. This constraint concerning reasons is a minimal one which will appear in any account of the EC. The alternative is to suppose that when we are trying to get at the truth it is permissible to omit good reasons and to accept bad reasons. It’s unclear what to even make of such a claim. So for example both scientists and astrologers can agree that, in trying to determine whether to bring an umbrella

when they leave for work, they should look at all and only good reasons to answer that question. Of course they will have a substantive disagreement about what counts as a good reason.

Now Minter says, 'It would be equally difficult to argue that a nonanthropocentric environmental ethic is *essential* to making progress in such discussions and that we must adopt this moral position before we can address these policy issues fairly and effectively'.<sup>21</sup> But it isn't difficult to argue that way at all, if these discussions are occurring in the EC rather than the PC. The main goal of the EC is to get things right. Since nonanthropocentrists believe that some natural objects are intrinsically valuable, this value will provide good reasons which need to be taken into account when discussing which policy gets at the political truth. Anthropocentrists, who do not countenance those reasons, are more likely than nonanthropocentrists to get things wrong, since they will have omitted legitimate reasons and considerations from their reasoning. So we need to carry out our investigations within the framework of nonanthropocentrism, since that is the only one, according to nonanthropocentrists, that countenances *all* good reasons.

It sounds highly provocative to suggest that deliberators must be nonanthropocentrists and that those who fail to see that nature is intrinsically valuable should be excluded from discussions about the political truth. This kind of talk creates a misunderstanding- assertions about who is and who is not allowed to participate in a deliberation in the EC takes the metaphor of a deliberation too literally. It suggests that the claim is being made about actual people conducting real deliberations in the PC, thus giving rise to Minter's worries. If we are discussing whether it will rain tomorrow and whether in light of that we should bring umbrellas to work, I might say something like, 'We shouldn't ask people who think that the position of the planets provides a good reason to take one course of action rather than another about what we should do; they shouldn't be included in our discussion.' It does not follow

---

<sup>21</sup> Minter, 2011: 21.

that I think that people who believe in astrology should not have the right to express their views. Rather, I just think that we shouldn't take astrological beliefs and claims seriously when we are trying to figure out what to do. I can think this while also thinking that everyone, including astrologers, is morally equal, and that everyone, including astrologers, should be allowed to contribute to our actual political deliberations and to vote when we are trying to make a decision about what to do that is normatively binding on us all. Thus when nonanthropocentrists say that certain people should not participate in the EC, they are not saying that there are real people who should be excluded from the political process because of their beliefs, or that anyone who holds those beliefs are somehow morally inferior or should not be treated with equal respect.

Of course the anthropocentrism will disagree with the nonanthropocentrism on the substantive point about what counts as a reason. She will believe that one need not think that nature has intrinsic value to get at the truth, since she believes nature has no such value- in fact those who mistakenly think it has such value will themselves contribute to getting the wrong answer by countenancing bad reasons ('we should forego this economic development project because it threatens the snail darter species, which has intrinsic value'). The only way to resolve this substantive disagreement concerning which views should be rejected from the EC is what we thought all along- plausible and compelling arguments need to be advanced for the view that nature has intrinsic value, or that it doesn't. Shifting the debate to whether or not anthropocentrism or nonanthropocentrism is most consistent with democracy will not help to answer *that* question, since whether or not some claim or theory is true (in this case anthropocentrism or nonanthropocentrism) is not something that gets considered and decided in the PC, but rather in the EC; it is the upshot of an epistemic process and not a political one.

Perhaps Minter's worry is that nonanthropocentrists cannot know that anthropocentrism fails to consider all relevant reasons without allowing anthropocentrists to participate in the discussion and hearing what they have to say. Without such a discussion,

one is merely assuming one's own views to be correct. Doesn't that issue, whether or not the reasons countenanced by nonanthropocentrists really are reasons, need to be discussed openly, with no restrictions on who participates, without requiring that one must adhere to one or the other of the broader theories that are under discussion? Isn't it dogmatic and hence objectionably anti-democratic to simply assert that one's basic principle is correct?

The answer must be a resounding yes. But this doesn't mean that the exclusionary principle itself, or that its application to the question of what is the political truth when we are looking at policies and legislation, is somehow circular or permits making unjustifiable assumptions. To think that it does is to conflate two distinct questions or problems. If in the EC we ask, 'which environmental policy or legislation should we adopt, which one reflects the political truth?', then, according to nonanthropocentrists, nonanthropocentrism is the price of admission to *that* discussion, since anthropocentrists fail to countenance some good reasons and so may get the wrong answer.

But if we ask the more basic question, whether anthropocentrism, nonanthropocentrism, or some other approach to environmental ethics is correct, then, although the rules of the EC will be the same in general terms and will include the principle, "all and only good reasons must be considered", what counts as a good reason now must be independent of claims internal to any of *those* theories, and rather will be determined by much broader considerations such as the theory's coherence with our deepest and most considered moral judgments, logical consistency, explanatory power, consistency with known scientific views, and so forth. And nonanthropocentrists will argue that their theory fares much better on those counts- that is why they are nonanthropocentrists. If nonanthropocentrists were to simply assert the truth of their basic principle and refuse to discuss it, effectively excluding all other views from *that* discussion (whether nonanthropocentrism is true), then they might be charged with being undemocratic. But Callicott for one claims that he has argued for the basic principle and does not simply assert it

or claim that it is self-evident.<sup>22</sup> So nonanthropocentrists, at least those like Callicott, do not demand that others simply accept the basic nonanthropocentric principle on the sole basis of their asserting it- that would be blatantly circular and should be rejected for that reason, regardless of whether or not it is anti-democratic.

An example may be helpful here. Suppose climatologists claim that we need not listen to astrologers if we are wondering about what *policies* to adopt in response to climate change, because they offer bad reasons. Astrologers object and ask how climatologists know that their reasons are bad; what justifies their exclusion from that discussion? They are right to ask that question. When the question concerns the epistemic legitimacy of astrology generally, we *would* need to include astrologers and their reasons in *that* discussion. Astrologers must have their say and be able to offer their reasons- they claim predictive success, for example. Predictive success would be one good reason to accept astrology and in turn to suppose that their reasons for their views on what to do about climate change, such as the specific alignment of the planets, are good reasons. The problem with astrology, and derivatively why we think that the reasons offered by astrologers are bad reasons, is its lack of predictive success, among many others. Once that is resolved, we don't have to consider reasons based on astrology when asking what to do about climate change, or other policy matters.

None of this is meant to suggest that nonanthropocentrists are right, that the evidence and arguments they provide for their basic views are so overwhelming that nonanthropocentrism is akin to climatology and anthropocentrism to astrology. The point is rather that excluding or rejecting beliefs is just what goes on in epistemology, so that there is nothing anti-democratic about that, as long as the proponents of rejected beliefs have had their say- their beliefs go through the evidentiary process and are found wanting. And it is

---

<sup>22</sup> Callicott 1999b: 504-06. He says 'Both Rolston, another inveterate foundationalist exposed by Minter, and I elaborately and richly support our very different theories of environmental ethics by appeal to the natural sciences; in my case, especially ecology and the theory of evolution, which are hardly a priori or self-evident.' See Callicott 2013, especially chs. 3 and 5, in support of his claim, or Rolston 1988, ch. 6.

absolutely crucial to note here that nonanthropocentrists like Callicott believe *they have* made a compelling case for their view. They do not think that people should accept the claim that nature has intrinsic value merely on their say-so, or that there should be no debate or that people should be forced to adopt this view. Nonanthropocentrists like Callicott do argue for their view, and they do not claim that anthropocentrists should be excluded from engaging in this *logically prior* discussion. The literature on intrinsic value is so vast and contentious just because nonanthropocentrists offer arguments for their views which anthropocentrists respond to while offering their own views.<sup>23</sup> Of course nonanthropocentrists may very well be mistaken; the reasons they have advanced for their basic principle may not be nearly as conclusive as the reasons there are for adopting a contemporary meteorological framework rather than an astrological one when trying to predict the weather. But showing that in turn requires some counter-argument.

As long as nonanthropocentrists think that they have answered convincingly the logically prior question concerning the plausibility of nonanthropocentrism, and as long as they did (and continue to) include anthropocentrists in that more basic and general discussion and take their views seriously enough to respond to them, then, since by their lights the question is settled, their basic principle may be used to exclude theories like anthropocentrism which, again by their lights, are implausible as a result of having fared poorly in the evidentiary process, when the discussion circles around to which policies to adopt. Of course, Norton and Minter will think that nonanthropocentrists are mistaken to have so much confidence in their view, so that they are mistaken to exclude these other theories from discussions of policy. And they may be correct. But that would show only that nonanthropocentrists are misapplying the exclusionary principle in this instance, and not that

---

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Rolston, 1981 for one of the earliest arguments for the claim that things other than humans can be intrinsically valuable. Callicott 1985, 1989 offers an alternative account and defense of the claim that nature has intrinsic value. Then see Norton 1984, 1992, and 1995 for critiques of various forms of that claim. This is of necessity, only the briefest of samples of the relevant literature.

the exclusionary principle itself is somehow objectionably anti-democratic. The general claim that beliefs that are inconsistent with one's theory may justifiably be excluded from consideration, when one's own theory has been submitted to an evidentiary process which takes into consideration counterclaims from opposing theories and which is then found to be highly plausible, is not anti-democratic. It is just what goes on in the epistemic context.

## SELF-EVIDENCE

Finally then, perhaps the issue is not that the nonanthropocentrist takes her basic moral principle to be true on the basis of having provided overwhelming evidence for it (by her reckoning), nor her consequently excluding principles and beliefs inconsistent with this basic principle when trying to determine what policy to adopt, but rather that she believes the basic principle is *self-evidently* true. The claim that the basic principle is self-evident is one very short step removed from simply asserting it, and the upshot appears to be the same; no alternative will be heard or countenanced. While it is not anti-democratic to exclude a view *after* it has been through an evidentiary review and found wanting, perhaps it *is* anti-democratic to exclude a view simply by claiming it is inconsistent with a principle which is self-evident or self-justifying.

That self-evidence is the culprit is suggested by the following quote from Minter

Besides their emphasis on the location of intrinsic value in nature, what many of these approaches [Paul Taylor, Holmes Rolston, J. Baird Callicott] 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 (emphasis added).*<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Minter, 1998: 336

That self-evident foundations account for the charge that nonanthropocentrism is anti-democratic is also suggested in the following passages from Norton; he first offers an account of foundationalism; “Foundationalism, most basically, is the belief that knowledge has a two-tier structure in which *some beliefs are supported without inference and others are justified by inference from these noninferential beliefs* (emphasis added).”<sup>25</sup> He then goes on to note that Westra’s purported anti-democratic position can be attributed to her adopting this kind of foundationalism

The most striking aspect of the anti-democratic position is the confidence with which its advocates assert- based upon moral principles and moral reasoning- the superiority of their positions to the outcomes of democratic processes. How can they be so certain of their principles....A moment’s reflection on these questions makes it apparent that rather strong epistemological premises are necessary to support the view that individuals and small groups, once convinced that a harm is being perpetrated by the policies of a democratically legitimate government, can be justified in using coercive means to override democratic decisions.<sup>26</sup>

We have already noted that Callicott rejects the characterization of his views as being foundationalist in this way. But rather than seeking textual support for the claim that some particular nonanthropocentrist does or does not take the basic principle to be self-evident, it will be more profitable to tackle the substantive claim. Suppose some nonanthropocentrist were to assert that the basic principle is self-evident- someone who, for example, following G.E. Moore’s methodology, claims that it is self-evident that things other than humans have intrinsic value. Isn’t that anti-democratic?

But what does the claim of self-evidence involve? Robert Audi says,

I construe the basic kind of self-evident proposition as (roughly) a truth such that any adequate understanding of it meets two conditions: (a) in virtue of having that understanding, one is justified in believing the proposition (i.e. has justification for believing it, whether one in fact believes it or not); and (b) if one believes the proposition on the basis of that understanding of it, then one knows it.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Norton, 2002: 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid: 102.

<sup>27</sup> Audi, 1999: 206.

So if a statement is self-evident, it can be known simply by apprehending it, and any statement which is logically inconsistent with it is known to be false. But how are appeals to self-evidence anti-democratic? The problem here cannot be just that the claim that the basic principle entails that anthropocentrism and whatever arguments are offered for it are false, and that any policy that is derived from anything other than nonanthropocentrism will either be mistaken, or if correct, will be so as a matter of luck, and consequently excluded from consideration. That such a process is not anti-democratic was the upshot of the previous section. The point rather is that appeals to self-evidence appear to ignore the evidentiary process. Specifically, it makes the basic principle immune to challenge. Non-astrologers will argue that astrologers were given a chance, failed to prove their point, and as a result one need not accept reasons given by astrologers when considering whether or not to bring an umbrella to work today; their views and that broad framework can be excluded from *that* policy discussion. But the Moorian nonanthropocentrist will think that inasmuch as his basic principle is self-evident, he need provide no evidence for it, nor to consider alternatives which are inconsistent with what he knows on the basis of self-evidence, since the alternatives must be false. Unlike in the previous section, the basic principle is accepted not because it was shown to be highly plausible after having gone through an evidentiary process to which everyone contributed, even those who believed the principle was mistaken, but rather because it is simply asserted to be self-evident, without any discussion of its epistemic merits.

But this characterization of Moorian nonanthropocentrism gets things wrong, so that even here the anti-democratic charge misfires. Specifically, this characterization fails to note the distinction between some statement, say 'p', being self-evident, and the statement 'p is self-evident.' A self-evident statement can be known to be true simply by apprehending it. So, for example, given the self-evidence of p, say the law of non-contradiction, apprehending it in the right way is sufficient for knowing it, and, given the principle of closure, for

knowing everything that follows logically from it (such as ‘not-p’ is false.) But the claim ‘p is self-evident’ is distinct from ‘p’ and is not entailed by ‘p’, and there is no reason to suppose that that claim (‘p is self-evident’) is itself self-evident. Whether or not some proposition is self-evident typically is not itself self-evident. So while the law of non-contradiction does not need any evidence to support it or for it to be known, *given that it is self-evident*, and while anything derived from the rejection of that claim must be false, again given that it is self-evident, the claim *that* the law of non-contradiction is self-evident might be mistaken, and so it can be discussed, argued over, and reasons can be advanced for and against thinking it is self-evident.

Now what allows claims that are inconsistent with a self-evident statement, say p, to be excluded from deliberations about policy in the epistemic context is not just their self-evidence, but knowing that p is self-evident. And since that statement (p is self-evident) is not itself self-evident, the Moorian nonanthropocentrist will engage in a discussion of that claim, and provide reasons and evidence for thinking that the basic principle is in fact self-evident. And by engaging in this task, the Moorian nonanthropocentrist’s embrace of self-evident truths is not anti-democratic- even if his basic principle is self-evident, he will engage with those who think that p is *not* self-evident and try to show them otherwise. In order to exclude claims on the basis of self-evidence, he needs to show that the principle which allows him to exclude these other views is in fact one that is self-evident. And that, he will understand, requires discussion and deliberation.

All of this has been somewhat abstract, so an example might help. Suppose a student in an Introduction to Philosophy class claims that it is possible for a square to both have 4 sides and to not have 4 sides. I suggest that is false, because it violates the Law of Non-contradiction. He asks how I know that law is true, and I respond that it is self-evident. Yes, he says, if you know *that* it is self-evident, you can exclude or reject my claim about squares. But how do you know that it is self-evident? In order to answer that question, I will not claim

that it is self-evident *that* the Law of Non-contradiction is self-evident. Rather, I will try to get him to see that the principle is self-evident. I will explain more carefully what I mean by self-evident. I will suggest that he think longer and harder about the principle because he may be failing to completely grasp the terms or concepts involved in the principle, perhaps because it is an early morning class. I will challenge him to offer counterexamples. I will try to give him examples. I will ask him what it might look like for the law of non-contradiction to be false. I will give examples of principles we agree are self-evident and show him that there are similarities between these and the law of non-contradiction.<sup>28</sup>

So claims that some specific statement is self-evident can be challenged, and such challenges should not be dismissed out of hand, since reasons are required for showing that the purportedly self-evident statement is in fact self-evident. Pragmatists may very well be right to question whether the basic principle of nonanthropocentrism is self-evident. But as long as nonanthropocentrists or anyone else who asserts that some claim is self-evident also provide reasons for thinking *that* the claim is self-evident, the charge of being anti-democratic will be avoided.

Of course our Moorian nonanthropocentrist might think not only that the basic principle is self-evident, but claim that he knows it self-evidently; that is, he might claim that ‘the basic nonanthropocentric principle is a self-evident truth’ is itself a self-evident truth, and as a result not engage in any discussion or try to justify the claim that it *is* a self-evident truth. Such a stance, by refusing to offer justifications, would be dogmatic and in *that* very limited sense might count as anti-democratic. But first, it is unclear whether any nonanthropocentrists hold that view, and second, we are now in the depths of epistemology and have strayed quite far from the core notion of democracy. Any association that might

---

<sup>28</sup> Moore’s thought experiment arguing for the claim that it is a self-evident truth that ‘beauty is intrinsically valuable, independently of its perception or appreciation’ is an inventive example of the process. See Moore, 1976: 83-84.

obtain between holding the view that self-evident statements are themselves self-evident, and rejecting democratic thinking, would need to be made explicit.

I have argued here that there is no reason to suppose that nonanthropocentrists are anti-democratic in the primary, political sense. And their exclusion of principles in the epistemic context is not anti-democratic either, as long as, like Callicott, they take themselves to have provided strong arguments and thereby have sufficient reason for thinking their basic principle is correct. Of course they may be mistaken about this, in which case they are also mistaken to reject or exclude views which are inconsistent with their basic principle. Similarly nonanthropocentrists who think their basic principle is self-evident may also be mistaken. But then whether or not nonanthropocentrists are right about these claims is what needs to be discussed and argued for. Absent an assertion that their basic principle is true by *fiat*, their methodology is not tainted by anything recognizably anti-democratic.

## REFERENCES

- Audi, Robert. 1999. 'Self-evidence'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 205-229.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1985. 'Intrinsic value, quantum theory, and environmental ethics'. *Environmental Ethics* 7: 257-275.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1989. 'On the intrinsic value of nonhuman species'. In *Defense of the Land Ethic*, pp. 129-155. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1999a. 'Environmental philosophy is environmental activism: The most radical and effective kind'. In *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, pp. 27-44. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1999b. 'Silencing philosophers: Minter and the foundations of anti-Foundationalism'. *Environmental Values* 8: 499-516.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 2002. 'The pragmatic power and promise of theoretical environmental ethics: Forging a new discourse'. *Environmental Values* 11: 3-25.

- Callicott, J. Baird. 2013. *Thinking Like a Planet*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Copp, David. 1993. 'Could political truth be a hazard for democracy?'. In D. Copp, J. Hampton, and J. Roemer (eds.), *The Idea of Democracy*, pp. 101-117. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 1978. *Taking Rights Seriously*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Estlund, David. 1993. 'Making truth safe for democracy'. In D. Copp, J. Hampton, and J. Roemer (eds.), *The Idea of Democracy*, pp. 71-100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Estlund, David. 2008. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Katz, Eric. 1996. *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Eric Katz. 2009. 'Convergence and ecological restoration: A counterexample.' In Ben Minteer (ed.), *Nature in Common: Environmental ethics and the Contested Foundations of Environmental Policy*, pp. 185-195. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Minteer, Ben. 1998. 'No Experience Necessary? Foundationalism and the Retreat from Culture in Environmental Ethics'. *Environmental Values* 7: 333-348.
- Minteer, Ben. 2011. *Refounding Environmental Ethics: Pragmatism, Principle, and Practice*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Minteer, Ben. 2017. 'Environmental ethics, sustainability science, and the recovery of pragmatism.' In Stephen Gardiner and Allen Thompson, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, pp. 528-540. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, G.E. 1976 [1903]. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1984. 'Environmental ethics and weak anthropocentrism'. *Environmental Ethics* 6: 131-148.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1992. 'Epistemology and environmental values'. *Monist* 75: 208-226.
- Norton, Bryan G. 1995. 'Why I am not a nonanthropocentrist: Callicott and the failure of monistic inherentism'. *Environmental Ethics* 17: 341-358.
- Norton, Bryan G. 2002. 'Democracy and environmentalism: Foundations and justifications in environmental policy'. In Ben Minteer and Bob Pepperman Taylor, (eds.), *Democracy and the Claims of Nature*, pp. 11-31. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Norton, Bryan G. 2005. *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rolston, Holmes, III. 1988. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Rolston, Holmes, III. 1994. *Conserving Natural Value*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rolston, Holmes, III. 1998. 'Saving nature, feeding people, and the foundations of ethics'. *Environmental Values* 7: 349-57.

Rolston, Holmes III. 2009. 'Converging versus reconstituting environmental ethics.' In Ben Minteer (ed.), *Nature in Common: Environmental ethics and the Contested Foundations of Environmental Policy*, pp. 97-117. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Westra, Laura. 1998. *Living in Integrity: A Global Ethic to Restore a Fragmented Earth*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.