

Sahotra Sarkar and Ben A. Minteer (eds.)

A Sustainable Philosophy: The Work of Bryan Norton

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'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' (Norton 2005, p.205).

Let me start as do Sahotra Sarkar and Ben A. Minteer in the opening to *A Sustainable Philosophy: The Work of Bryan Norton*, with the voice of the philosopher whose life and work is celebrated by the edited volume. Norton pens not only the forward to the volume but also a closing reflection on his correspondence with Carnap (included as the Appendix); and the penultimate chapter shares an interview of Norton by Curt Meine of the Aldo Leopold Foundation. These instalments record what Norton hopes to bestow upon future generations of environmental philosophers; his pragmatist commitments to working from concrete problems, his emphasis on languages as tools for rendering perspicuous the significance of empirical science, his experimental proceduralism about decision-making and adaptive management. If we take Sarkar and Minteer's provocative title seriously, then a sustainable philosophy would be one that passes on these normative ideals – and certainly, many of the chapters rigorously engage particular situations in order to mobilise better vocabularies for structuring deliberative procedures. Yet, as Keulartz and Sarkar respectively note, sustaining Norton's environmental pragmatism confronts a persistent challenge – having 'consciously ignored the role of political and economic power relations' (p. 204), environmental pragmatists are sustainably 'negligent of issues of environmental justice' (p. 231). This negligence sets up the antinomy that Norton has in mind in the epigraph to this review; power warps deliberation such that it strays from ideal procedures, and far from converging, plural values fracture communities. *A Sustainable Philosophy* can be read much like the trajectory of Norton's work from *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* to *Sustainable Values*, *Sustainable Change*, as an investigation of the conditions under which plural values do converge through a procedure inclusive of difference but committed to concerted action.

The investigation starts with chapters by Paul B. Thompson, J. Baird Callicott and Clark Wolf, who help to situate Norton's project against rival approaches to environmental philosophy. Callicott maintains his distrust of pragmatism, questioning its underlying ontology of 'place' that undergirds its implicit bioregionalism. Place-based environmental management cannot be counted on to solve third-generation environmental problems such as climate change, which instead require, per Callicott, a transformation in our ecological sensibilities that recognises the intrinsic value of planetary systems. (If this critique sounds scathing, the volume is interpolated with mutual insistence by Callicott and Norton that the two are *friends*, exemplifying what Hirsch later calls agonism and offering some hope that dialogue can be sustained across fundamental differences.) Wolf is more sanguine, characterising Norton's view as a framework for contextualising sustainability in different problematic situations, and thus distinguishing Norton's conception of sustainability from philosophical accounts of intergenerational equity. Thompson has reservations though, noting that Norton's conceptions of sustainability (especially strong sustainability) owe a lot to the resource development paradigm initiated by the Brundtland commission. These traces suggest 'limitations to the conceptualization of justice' (p. 24) that one might locate in

Norton's programme, with Thompson in particular positing social dimensions of ecological resilience that are frequently mistranslated when discussing capital, natural or otherwise.

In keeping with environmental pragmatism, many of the subsequent chapters engage richly contextualised cases, reflecting on adaptive management efforts in places as diverse as Hawai'i (Jennifer M. Chirico), Peru, Tanzania and Vietnam (Asim Zia), and upstate New York (Evelyn Brister) and countenancing issues from invasive species management (Bruce Warburton and Dean Anderson) to zoo education and conversation (Minteer and Christopher Rojas). Here the political dimensions of adaptive management begin to surface; in Peru, for instance, Zia recounts stakeholders' refusal to engage in the formal decision-making procedures that ecological modellers use to 'tame' wicked problems. These participants rejected fundamental assumptions that multi-criteria decision analyses rely on in formulating decision contexts in light of plural values, instead demanding recognition of human and non-human animals' rights. Wicked problems were tamed in Tanzania and Vietnam by explicitly bounding and scaling the environmental problems, thus settling disputes that arise due to 'stakeholder power asymmetries, conflicting values, politics of scale across different space time horizons and institutional inertia' (p. 168). This accords with Sarkar's faith that formal decision-making procedures can facilitate rational environmental management, provided that key assumptions are deliberated over prior to formalisation and modelling.

These upstream deliberations, however, are not without their vulnerabilities. Paul Hirsch warns about the discursive inequality that inflects 'the ways in which problems and publics are themselves contested categories, and often get constructed in ways that gloss over important differences' (p. 88). This is a problem only worsening in increasingly partisan and ideological environmental disputes, for which Hirsch offers critical reflexivity and agonism as concepts that might forge community across distrust. As R. Bruce Hull details, the praxis of such community-building can find resources in the leadership literature, which sheds light on how skilled facilitators can discover synergies and not just common ground among the plural, fickle and constantly changing values of diverse communities. In their respective contributions, Keulartz and Evelyn Brister look to the respective philosophies of Jurgen Habermas and John Dewey for processes that might guide democratic deliberation. These are among the most pertinent chapters of the volume, since Norton himself is ambiguous in his allegiance to the two figures despite, as these authors show, principled and practical differences in their proceduralisms. Keulartz levels that Norton 'has a too narrow view on the role of ethical discourse in political will-formation: he only focuses on conceptions of the good life *within* single communities and neglects the plurality of often incompatible conceptions *between* different communities' (p. 191). Since much of our political life involves negotiating or bargaining between constituencies, environmental pragmatism requires a more robust account of how to achieve equal and peaceful coexistence. Brister explicitly rejects Habermas's idealistic proceduralism in favour of the adaptive process recommended by Dewey. Here social learning and community engagement inform inquiry, or a policy making process 'of gathering up knowledge from experience and of using knowledge to effect change in the world in order to live well' (p. 155). This knowledge may warrant overruling the deliberative process, such that forestry experts might reasonably embark on the reversible process of cutting invasive maples despite dogmatic refusal by some stakeholders to engage in inquiry and adaptive management.

In Brister and Keulartz we find, then, the aforementioned tension – do we defer to a democratic process when its verdict appears unsustainable, or do we act on our best

sustainability science even when it contradicts the public will? These are old problems, as Piers H.G. Stephens points out when noting that Leopold was perhaps most influenced by republican theorists ‘all renowned for reflections on the tensions between individual and society, altruism and egoism, and the role of the virtuous citizen’ (p. 128). Though Norton suggests that the environmental pragmatist is first and foremost a democrat, he characterises his recent work as aspiring toward a procedure where inclusion, fallibilism and experimentalism dissolve the dualism. *A Sustainable Philosophy: The Work of Bryan Norton* brings into dialogue diverse perspectives on how better democratic deliberation can and does produce sustainable environmental management.

REFERENCES

Norton, B. G. 2005. *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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