

Metastandards in the Ethics of Adam Smith and Aldo Leopold

Recently, Adam Smith has gained attention as a resource for environmental ethics. As early as 1987, J. Baird Callicott mentioned Smith along with David Hume as part of a philosophical tradition that led through Darwin to the environmentalist thought of Aldo Leopold.¹ But in a few recent articles—“How Green is the Theory of Moral Sentiments?”²—“Applying Adam Smith” and “Adam Smith and the Possibility of Sympathy with Nature”²—Smith has been highlighted as a thinker distinct from Hume who has unique resources to offer environmental philosophy. In this essay, I add to this growing attention to Smith by highlighting one aspect of Smith’s moral theory that can serve environmental philosophy well: Smith’s account of metastandards in ethics.

This aspect of Smith’s philosophy can shed important insight on the role of anthropocentric considerations in supporting non-anthropocentric ethical standpoints. The problem of reconciling ethical ecocentrism with apparently species-centered considerations goes back at least to Aldo Leopold. Leopold emphasizes in *A Sound County Almanac* that “a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided,”³ but justifies this claim in part on the grounds that “we have learned...that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating.”⁴ In other words, it is bad for *us* (human beings) to be so anthropocentric. J. Baird Callicott has drawn attention to the tension here: “Is the land ethic...a matter of enlightened (collective, human) self-interest [as the “self-defeating” quote suggests], or does it genuinely admit nonhuman natural entities and nature as a whole to true moral standing [as Leopold explicitly insists]?” Smith provides the resources for answering this question in a way that is similar to, but richer than, the answers so far offered by Callicott and others.⁵ Smith does this through providing a rich account of the role of utilitarian metastandards in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

1. Why Metastandards Should Matter in Ecocentric Ethics

A metastandard, as I use the term, is a standard for evaluating moral or ethical standpoints. Metastandards are not ethical in themselves. Ethical standpoints often include standards within them. Kant's ethics has consistency and universality as ethical standards, Aristotle's includes moderation, and Mill's is the principle of utility. But at least for Aristotle and Mill (and arguably for Kant as well), these standards are not standards by which each philosopher defends his ethical standpoint. Aristotle does not claim that his ethics is the best because it is moderate (an ethical standard), but for other reasons, such as its consistency with human teleology. The fact that a standard is a good one for evaluating ethical standpoints need not imply that it is a good standard for making ethical *decisions*, or for ethically evaluating human character. Logical consistency, for example, might be an important standard for an acceptable ethical standpoint, but this need imply neither that being logically consistent confers any moral merit nor that one ought to be consistent. Again, the fact that a standpoint is "realistic" in that it fits with human nature might be a reasonable metastandard, but this need not imply that one considers how realistic particular ethical demands of the standpoint are in each case. In general, the standards for *adopting* a particularly ethical standpoint are simply not the same as the standards provided *by* that standpoint, standards for being a morally good action, intention, attitude, character trait, or person.⁶

This distinction between ethical standards and ethical metastandards helps refine a point that J. Baird Callicott makes in defending the land ethic:

From an objective, descriptive, sociobiological point of view, ethics evolve because they contribute to the objective fitness of their carriers...; they are expedient. However, the path to self-interest...is not discernable in the participating individuals.... Hence, ethics are grounded in instinctive feeling—love, sympathy, respect—not in self-conscious, calculating, intelligence.... One can only secure self-interest by putting the interests of others on par with one's own.⁷

Callicott's explanation of the relationship between expedience and other-directed interest here is more descriptive than normative. That is, he explains different ways of describing altruism, rather than different normative standards. But his distinction between objective and subjective perspectives tracks a distinction between metastandards and properly ethical standards. From within the land ethic, one's focus is and ought to be on the biotic system as a whole, not primarily on the interests of individuals or even species within that biotic system. But as a reason for adopting the land ethic—an ethical metastandard—one might attend, and properly so, to one's own welfare or that of one's species.

The distinction between metastandards and ethical standards allows environmental philosophers to admit the normative force of anthropocentric arguments in favor of the land ethic without needing to admit the legitimacy of anthropocentric arguments *within* ethics. Providing a context for explaining the normative force of these anthropocentric arguments in a way that does not undermine the ecocentrism of the land ethic is important for historical reasons, since Leopold, despite his explicit statements to the contrary, did make use of arguments that are “homocentric, appealing to the human stake in preservation.”⁸ More importantly, philosophers seeking to convince anthropocentrists to adopt a more ecocentric perspective do well to offer at least some arguments that appeal to anthropocentric metastandards since their interlocutors will accept these standards. And finally, there has been an increasing emphasis lately on pluralistic approaches in environmental ethics, approaches that make use of both anthropocentric and ecocentric arguments. Many ecocentrists⁹ resist these pluralistic approaches, but admitting anthropocentric metastandards provides a way to include at least some pluralism in philosophical argument while maintaining a purely ecocentric ethic.

In order to make use of the distinction between metastandards and ethical standards in the ways that I have suggested, however, ecocentrists need a way to explain and defend the legitimacy of anthropocentrism as metastandard while retaining a commitment to ethical non-anthropocentrism. In the next section, I show how Smith's ethical theory negotiates a similar

tension between a utilitarian metastandard and a nonutilitarian ethics, emphasizing that Smith explicitly rejects making the metastandard an ethical standard in its own right. I then outline, in sections three through six, four roles that Smith's utilitarian metastandard nonetheless plays in Smith's ethical theory. Throughout, I connect Smith's own integration of his ethics and his metastandard with the similar integration needed within ecocentric environmental ethics.

My discussion of Smith focuses on his account of the relationship between a utilitarian metastandard and a non-utilitarian ethical standpoint. Although this distinction is not identical to the distinction between an anthropocentric metastandard and an ecocentric ethics, it is closely related. First, the general structure of the problem that Smith must address—how to reconcile his ethics with a metastandard that is different from the standards dominant within it—is a problem faced by ecocentrists such as Callicott and Leopold who give anthropocentric defenses of their ethical standpoints. Second, there is a close connection between Smith's particular conflict and that of contemporary ecocentric ethics. As has been argued in detail elsewhere,¹⁰ Smith's non-utilitarian ethics is conducive to the development of an ecocentric ethic. And Smith's utilitarianism tends to be an anthropocentric, or, more accurately, a sentientist, utilitarianism. Smith claims, "The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature" (III.5.5, p. 165),¹¹ suggesting a sentientist approach to utilitarianism. Elsewhere, though, Smith defends a "universal benevolence" (VI.ii.3, p. 235), arguing, "We cannot form the idea of any innocent and *sensible* being, whose happiness we should not desire" (VI.ii.3.1, p. 235, my emphasis). When discussing utilitarian metastandards, Smith generally focuses on the utility of his ethical standpoint for human beings, but there is no reason to think that Smith would not also be interested in its utility for all sentient beings. Smith's reconciliation of his ethical standpoint with this sentientist utilitarianism thus not only provides a model for understanding the role of anthropocentric arguments in ecocentric approaches to environmental ethics, but also suggests a basis for

rapprochement between animal rights utilitarians such as Singer and Regan and ecocentrists such as Callicott and Rolston.

2. Distinguishing Ethical Standards from Metastandards in Smith

A full discussion of Smith's ethics is beyond the scope of this paper, but Smith saw his rejection of a utilitarian foundation for ethics—especially for justice—as one of the most important features distinguishing his ethics from that of his contemporary and friend David Hume. As Smith explains,

The same ingenious and agreeable author [Hume] who first explained why utility pleases, has been so struck with this view of things, as to resolve our whole approbation of virtue into a perception of this species of beauty which results from the appearance of utility. No qualities of the mind, he observes, are approved of as virtuous, but such as are useful or agreeable either to the person himself or to others; and no qualities are disapproved of as vicious but such as have a contrary tendency..... But still I affirm, that *it is not the view of this utility or hurtfulness which is either the first or principal source of our approbation and disapprobation.* (IV.2.3, p. 188, emphasis added)

For Smith, sentiments are proper insofar as an impartial spectator can sympathize with them.¹²

This propriety test is direct: one imagines oneself in the place of another and responds to that imaginative change of place. One's feelings in this imaginative change of place, as long as one is attentive and impartial, indicate the proper attitudes to hold in that place. And Smith emphasizes that this sympathy, although it often and perhaps always lines up with what is most useful, is not *based* on considerations of utility:

The utility of those qualities, it may be thought, is what first recommends them to us....

Originally, however, we approve of another man's judgment, not as something useful, but as right, as accurate, as agreeable to truth and reality: and it is evident we attribute those qualities to it for no other reason but because we find that it agrees with our own..... The

idea of the utility of all qualities of this kind, is plainly an after–thought, and not what first recommends them to our approbation. (I.i.4.4, p. 20)

Rather than considerations of utility, propriety is determined by immediate sympathy with another.

Smith illustrates this direct, non-utilitarian moral evaluation in a vivid description of our condemnation of murder. For Smith, murder is an unjust action, something with “demerit” and therefore worthy of punishment, because one sympathizes with the imagined resentment of the murder victim.¹³ And Smith emphasizes that one does *not* consider the utility of condemning murder in these cases.

The injury which he has suffered demands...a principal part of our attention. We feel that resentment which we imagine he...would feel, if in his cold and lifeless body there remained any consciousness of what passes upon earth. His blood, we think, calls aloud for vengeance....And with regard, at least, to this most dreadful of all crimes, Nature, *antecedent to all reflections upon the utility of punishment*, has in this manner stamped upon the human heart...an immediate and instinctive approbation of the sacred and necessary law of retaliation. (II.i.2.5, p. 71, emphasis added)

Unlike his contemporary Hume and his predecessor Hobbes, Smith rejects the model according to which murder and other crimes are condemned *because* they are connected with disutility, to individuals or to society.

Nonetheless, Smith emphasizes a connection between condemnation of murder and social utility. And Smith goes further, arguing that precisely the *non*-utilitarian condemnation of murder is what is in society’s best interest.

The very existence of society requires that unmerited and unprovoked malice should be restrained by proper punishments.... Though man, therefore, be naturally endowed with a desire of the welfare and preservation of society, yet the Author of nature has not entrusted it to his reason to find out that a certain application of punishments is the proper means of

attaining this end; but has endowed him with an immediate and instinctive approbation of that very application which is most proper to attain it. The economy of nature is in this respect exactly of a piece with what it is upon many other occasions. With regard to all those ends which, upon account of their peculiar importance, may be regarded...as the favorite ends of nature, she has...not only endowed mankind with an appetite for the end which she proposes, but likewise with an appetite for the means by which alone this end can be brought about, for their own sakes, and independent of their tendency to produce it. Thus self-preservation, and the propagation of the species, are the great ends which Nature seems to have proposed in the formation of all animals. Mankind are endowed with a desire of those ends, and an aversion to the contrary.... But though we are...endowed with a very strong desire of those ends, it has not been intrusted to the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason, to find out the proper means of bringing them about. Nature has directed us to the greater part of these by original and immediate instincts. Hunger, thirst, the passion which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure, and the dread of pain, prompt us to apply those means for their own sakes, and without any consideration of their tendency to those beneficent ends which the great Director of nature intended to produce by them. (II.i.5.9n, p. 77)

Like hunger and the “passion which unites the two sexes,” humans have an instinctive sense of justice that prompts them to disapprove of unprovoked malice and to approve of punishments for such malice. This disapproval is based on considerations not of utility, but simply of the inherent wrongness of the act and inherent propriety of the punishment. But this disposition of human nature is of great use to human society. And the utility of this non-utilitarian ethical disposition provides a metastandard on the basis of which Smith can defend that disposition.

As with any meta-standard, the principle of utility does not enter here into ethical deliberation itself. When considering whether or not someone deserves punishment, one ought not focus on the utility of such punishment, but rather on whether one can sympathize with the

resentment of the victim. But when reflecting on this non-utilitarian ethical standpoint, Smith does consider it relevant that the standpoint itself has utility. That is, utilitarianism functions as a metastandard on the basis of which Smith justifies a non-utilitarian ethics. Similarly, ecocentrists can point out that an ecocentric ethical standpoint is something that is in the interests of the human species, but this anthropocentric metastandard is compatible with thoroughgoing ecocentrism *within* ethics.

Smith's utilitarian metastandard plays several roles in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, all of which provide models for how anthropocentric meta-standards might function within an ecocentric ethic, whether or not that ecocentric ethic is Smithian in other respects. First, Smith's utilitarian metastandard supports his theodicy, justifying human nature and thereby God. The most direct theodicy arises in Smith's descriptions of "Providence" and the "Author of Nature" (III.5.6, p. 165). But theodicy also arises in a less direct way in Smith's proto-evolutionary account of the origin of human morality, and this is one area within which recent environmental philosophy builds (and improves) on Smith's use of meta-standards. Here, rather than justifying the goodness of God, a utilitarian metastandard makes plausible claims about the non-utilitarian nature of ethics by showing how such ethics is consistent with the survival of the (human) species. Second, Smith's metastandard helps defend his non-utilitarian ethics against those who appeal to either human benevolence or self-interest as an argument against the non-utilitarian dictates of conscience. Tension between utility and propriety can sometimes compromise one's commitment to propriety. By showing that there is no real conflict between the two, Smith lends extra support to ethics, both in terms of justification and motivation. Third, Smith uses his metastandard for ethical persuasion, and the way that he does this provides a valuable model for ecocentrist who seek to persuade anthropocentrists while still respecting nature. Finally, Smith argues that the utility of his non-utilitarian ethic has a distinctive beauty, one that can "enliven" one's commitment to that ethic. This beauty is due in part to natural benevolence, but it is primarily due to the beauty of a "system" that promotes ends in surprising and ingenious ways.

Smith's account of this beauty fits well with ecological accounts of nature in a way that can provide inspiration for environmental ethics.

3. Metastandards, Theodicy, and Evolution

Smith's metastandard fits into a general theodicy, a defense of the goodness of God mediated through a defense of the goodness of human ethical dispositions. Smith shows that human ethics—the “governing principles of human nature...which are to be regarded as the commands and laws of the Deity” (III.5.6, p. 165)—are not destructive for us. Far from showing any conflict between God's laws and God's love, the nature of moral approbation fits with what is best for us overall. The conformity of moral sentiments with the best interests of humans and sentient creatures generally is important not primarily for selfish reasons but because “universal benevolence,” which is a crucial human virtue,

can be the source of no solid happiness to any man who is not thoroughly convinced that all the inhabitants of the universe, the meanest as well as the greatest, are under the immediate care and protection of that great, benevolent, and all-wise Being, who directs all the movements of nature. (VI.ii.3.2, p. 235)

Without confidence that God-given moral norms fit with the best interests of sentient creatures, one has no basis for belief in an all-wise Providence, and this threatens to compromise one's universal benevolence.

Smith thus insists that moral sentiments, even those that do not immediately *seem* to promote human or animal welfare, in fact work together for good.

The happiness of mankind, as well as of all other rational creatures, seems to have been the original purpose intended by the Author of nature, when he brought them into existence. No other end seems worthy of that supreme wisdom and divine benignity which we necessarily ascribe to him; and this opinion...is...confirmed by the examination of the works of nature, which seem all intended to promote happiness, and to guard against misery. But by acting

according to the dictates of our moral faculties, we necessarily pursue the most effectual means for promoting the happiness of mankind, and may therefore be said...to co-operate with the Deity, and to advance as far as in our power the plan of Providence. (III.5.6, p. 165)

Smith does not simply declare that acting according to the dictates of our moral faculties promotes the “happiness of mankind.” He offers a detailed defense of this claim on the basis of “examination of the works of nature.” Smith’s most detailed defenses of natural moral sentiments come in his discussion of the “irregularity of sentiment” that leads people to judge actions in part based on consequences, even when the actors did not intend those consequences. (The clearest current example would be the disparity between punishments for drunk driving and for alcohol related vehicular homicide.) In accounting for irregularities of sentiment, Smith not only shows how each irregularity arises but also “the end which it answers, or the purpose which the Author of nature seems to have intended by it” (II.iii.intro.6, p. 93).

Without getting into its details, Smith’s general approach here can be made clear. Smith explains that “Nature,...when she implanted the seeds of this irregularity in the human breast, seems, as upon all other occasions, to have intended the happiness and perfection of the species” (II.iii.3.2, p. 105). In other words, human ethical responses are designed for the good of the species. This utilitarian (and speciesist) claim is consistent with Smith’s insistence that human ethical responses are not *focused on* the good of the species. From the perspective of an ethical evaluator, the good of the species might never arise. But this non-utilitarianism in our sentiments, and even an ecocentric outlook in those sentiments, is ultimately for our own good. In this way, God’s love for us is reconciled with the laws God gives to regulate our actions and attitudes, and God’s goodness is vindicated.

Theodicy in this strict sense may no longer have a dominant role to play in philosophical ethics. Most contemporary moral philosophers eschew religious elements of traditional moral theories, and religious theodicy, insofar as it is discussed within contemporary philosophy, is

primarily an issue for philosophers of religion. Within environmental ethics, there has long been suspicion about the Western religious tradition, exhibited most vividly in Lynn White Jr.'s famous "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," in which she argues that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."¹⁴ Nonetheless, environmentalists and environmental philosophers continue to find religion in general and even Christianity in particular valuable for environmental ethics. Robin Atfield, for example, argues that "Christianity, despite well-publicized claims to the contrary, upholds the independent value of natural creatures, and is committed to an ethic of responsible care and stewardship of the natural world."¹⁵ Religious approaches to environmentalism, like more secular approaches, sometimes divide over whether environmental "stewardship" should be anthropocentric, sentientist, or ecocentric. But any Abrahamic (Jewish, Christian, or Muslim) religious approach must reconcile concern for the environment with the goodness of God. And Smith's theodicy provides a valuable way of doing this, one that preserves ecocentrism in ethical deliberation even for those who want to limit *God's* benevolence to sentient creatures.

Still, religious approaches in ethics (including environmental ethics) are not widely accepted among philosophers. Fortunately, Smith's approach to theodicy is well suited for application to the post-Christian, neo-Darwinian context in which most philosophers find themselves today. Sam Fleischacker has helpfully pointed out that although "Smith saw God as providential," Smith's "invocation of God [consistently] goes along with an entirely naturalistic, secular account" of relevant phenomena.¹⁶ Smith's theodicy takes the form of showing that an ethical standpoint that is apparently counter-productive is actually conducive to "the happiness and perfection of the species" (II.iii.3.2, p. 105). This species-emphasis is already Darwinian, but elsewhere, Smith makes his proto-Darwinism even clearer. At the end of a discussion of the corrupting influence of custom on moral evaluation (in which he focused on the Greek approval of infanticide), Smith insists that moral sentiments can never become *wholly* corrupted by

custom. His reason is that “no society could subsist a moment, in which the usual strain of men’s conduct and behaviour was of a piece with the horrible practice I have just now mentioned” (V.2.16, p. 211). Combined with the overall strategy of his theodicy, this suggests that Smith’s depictions of the “final cause” (II.iii.3.1, p. 104) of our ethical standpoint, the “end that it answers” (II.iii.intro.6, p. 93), is as much the *survival* as the “happiness” of the species.

And this suggests both a neo-Darwinian *need* for theodicy and a Smithian response to that need. Within the context of Darwinian biology, claims about human moral responses must be consistent with the survival of the human species. To claim that humans have non-utilitarian (or non-speciesist) moral convictions, in other words, is plausible only if those convictions could coexist with our survival and fitness in a Darwinian world. And Smith shows just how to answer this requirement. One might think that looking out for the species would be the best way to preserve it, or that looking out for overall utility is the best way to promote that utility. But Smith shows that an ethical code that is *not* utilitarian—and hence *not* focused on the survival, happiness, or perfection of the species—is actually the ethical code most conducive to species fitness.

A similar strategy has been used in contemporary environmental ethics, and this is one area where contemporary work can substantially improve on Smith’s own proto-Darwinian theodicy. Aldo Leopold’s use of an anthropocentric metastandard in “The Land Ethic” turns on this sort of Darwinian analysis. He argues against a purely anthropocentric model of conservation on the grounds that “it assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts.”¹⁷ Even Holmes Rolston III describes his “naturalized ethics” in terms of a desire to “optimize human fitness on Earth.”¹⁸ Environmental ethicists today, however, have resources for Smithian natural theodicy of which Smith was only barely aware. Darwinian biology shows that human instincts and culture evolved to fit with the natural world in which we find ourselves. Ecology has clarified just how complex and interdependent that natural world is. This interdependence supports ecocentric

moral claims with an anthropocentric metastandard. Given the complexity of nature, a purely self-centered relationship with nature is ultimately self-defeating. This interdependence is, in large part, what turned Leopold the ecologist into Leopold the land ethicist. And this interdependence provides a fundamental, and scientifically rich, meta-defense of a Smithian ecocentric ethic.

It is important to recognize, however, that evolutionary self-interest is *not* an ethical standard in its own right. Simon Blackburn describes the inference from an evolutionary metastandard to an ethic of self-interest as the “biologist’s fallacy.”¹⁹ Blackburn illustrates this fallacy using “the idea that homosexuality is a way of helping your brothers and sisters to raise more children” (149). This explanation of homosexuality is consistent with evolutionary explanations of human behavior, and it implies that the welfare of one’s siblings is a metastandard that can help explain the (biological) legitimacy of homosexual tendencies. The inference from metastandard to standard, however, would imply that the *intention* of the homosexual person is to promote the welfare of one’s siblings. And this implication, as Blackburn points out, “is of course crazy, and especially tough on those homosexuals who might be supposed...to have the project of helping their siblings and nephews and nieces, although in fact they know they have no such relations” (149). The point is that one cannot infer from the *effects* of a propensity or ethical code, nor even from the use of those effects as a *metastandard* for evaluating the propensity or ethical code, to the *content* of that propensity or ethical code. The fact that an ethical standpoint (or a propensity such as homosexuality) is good for the species does *not* imply that concern for the species is *constitutive* of that standpoint (or propensity).

It is also worth pointing out at least one important *difference* between the use of ecological awareness by environmentalists like Leopold and Callicott, and its use for theodicy in Smith. Smith’s anthropocentric-utilitarian metastandard does not function as a justification for a new and improved ethical standpoint. As with theological theodicy, Smith’s goal is to show the

fitness of an ethical standpoint that is justified on other—more common-sensical and less utilitarian—grounds. Whereas Leopold and Callicott hope to show, in part on the basis of an anthropocentric metastandard, that humans should *extend* the scope of moral regard to include nonhumans, Smith uses metastandards more conservatively, to show that what he takes to be humans' natural moral sentiments are *consistent with* evolutionary and theological metastandards.

4. Metastandards and moral conflict

Beyond either theological or evolutionary concerns, a more personal sort of concern highlights the second key use of Smith's ethical meta-standard. Regardless of how they morally evaluate situations, humans have a tendency to act selfishly. Even human benevolence, which can curb selfish tendencies, is usually focused on other humans. Even humans who are ecocentric in ethical outlook will often be tempted to stray from this ecocentrism in practice. And both selfishness and narrow benevolence can surreptitiously influence moral judgments as well, such that people underrate or ignore moral demands that conflict with self-interest or narrow benevolence. In this context, a concern for overall utility can seem to be an overriding moral concern.

This concern is particularly powerful because overall utility *is* ethically relevant. When Smith claims that "man...[is] naturally endowed with a desire of the welfare and preservation of society" (II.i.5.9n, p. 77), he suggests the *propriety* of seeking the society's welfare. Likewise within environmental ethics, it is entirely proper to have concern for humans and other sentient creatures. When anthropocentrists draw attention to conflicts between human concerns and concerns of nature—as in the famous *People vs. Penguins*²⁰—they appeal to legitimate ethical concerns. The problem, however, is that anthropocentrists see these legitimate concerns as the *only* relevant concerns. Likewise, Smith emphasizes that the legitimate concern for happiness is improper when it becomes the *sole* focus of ethical concern.²¹

Although the theological and even evolutionary dimension is gone, this concern with utility can be seen as yet another version of classical arguments about theodicy. Rather than the question of whether God is good, here the question is whether a given ethical standpoint can be good when it seems to conflict with the interests of oneself or one's community. The strategies for dealing with this apparent conflict have varied, from Socrates's eudaimonism to Hobbes's contractarianism to Kant's anti-hedonism and appeal to God. Smith's quite different approach can serve environmental ethics particularly well. Smith admits that what is proper is not always in one's personal interest, nor even always, in each case, in the interest of humans as such. However, standards of propriety are in one's interest in two important senses: first, the standard of propriety itself—sympathy with an impartial spectator—derives from a natural and intense human interest in sympathy itself; and second, various standards of propriety support a *system* that is good for humans (and other sentient creatures). Finally, Smith points out that human beings are often *but not always* capable of understanding this system, if we put our mind to it. Smith illustrates the overall beneficial systematic effects of various counterintuitive moral judgments, the effect of which is to justify the natural moral reactions of impartial spectators while showing the error of those who try to improve upon those reactions with utilitarian calculation. Such calculation, Smith argues, generally misses out on important details that God/Providence/Nature put in place for our good, which is intricately linked to the good of the whole. As he explains,

Nature...seems to have so happily adjusted our sentiments of approbation and disapprobation, to the conveniency both of the individual and of the society, that after the strictest examination it will be found, I believe, that this is universally the case. (IV.2.3, p. 188, cf. II.i.5.9n)

Smith defends a non-utilitarian standpoint on utilitarian grounds by showing that the effort to improve upon that standpoint negatively effects the utility of the system of which it is a part.

This utilitarian justification of a non-utilitarian ethical standpoint serves to reconcile

human moral convictions. As noted earlier, Smith argues throughout the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that human beings do not make moral judgments on utilitarian grounds. But he also admits that human beings care, *and properly so*, about utility, the good of society as whole. There can appear to be a tension between the claim that one *rightly* judges that one ought to promote the good of human society and that one *rightly* approves of particular attitudes irrespective of their tendency to promote that good. But Smith reconciles our moral convictions by showing that there is no real conflict here, that approving of attitudes without regard to utility is useful to society.

Similarly in environmental ethics, ecocentrists need not admit that anthropocentrism is true to admit that concern for human welfare is important and morally legitimate. Once that is admitted, however, it can seem as though human welfare ought always be considered decisions relating to nature. Smith shows that this need not be the case. It might turn out, as Leopold suggests in “The Land Ethic,” that an ecocentric ethical standpoint is not only proper in its own right but also best supports human community. And this will be the case because humans are part of a system that is more complex than we imagined, and in which apparently counter-productive (from an anthropocentric standpoint) actions and attitudes are ultimately in our long term interest. For both Smith (with respect to utilitarianism) and ecocentrists (with respect to anthropocentrism), the appeal to an ethical metastandard provides a way to reconcile one’s fundamental ethical standpoint with another legitimate but merely partial ethical conviction.

5. Meta-standards and Ethical Persuasion

This reconciliation also serves an important rhetorical function for conversation with those who accept one’s metastandard but not one’s ethical standpoint. Smith discusses this role for metastandards in the context of hedonism. After explaining that Epicurean hedonism arises from treating what is only a partial good as *the* good, Smith goes on to say,

It [Epicureanism] is that which is most apt to occur to those who are endeavouring to persuade others to regularity of conduct. When men by their practice, and perhaps too by their maxims, manifestly show that the natural beauty of virtue is not like to have much effect upon them, how is it possible to move them but by representing the folly of their conduct, and how much they themselves are in the end likely to suffer by it? (VII.ii.2.13, p. 298-9)

Smith does not accept that Epicureanism is a proper ethical standpoint; this passage occurs in the context of arguments *against* Epicureanism. But Epicurus was correct that the life of virtue is also a life of great pleasure, and, Smith argues, this may be a proper stance to take in order to draw obstinate hedonists into a life of virtue.

Similarly, even if anthropocentrism is an improper ethical standpoint, it behooves ecocentrists to argue in anthropocentric terms with those who “by their practice, and perhaps too by their maxims, manifestly show that the natural beauty” of concern for nature as such “is not likely to have much effect on them.” Anti-environmentalists often portray environmentalists as people willing to put the welfare of non-humans or non-sentient beings ahead of sentient interests. Thus William Baxter famously poses the dilemma as “People or Penguins.”²² Tom Regan, describing the conflict between animal rights and environmental holism, likewise portrays ecocentrism as “environmental fascism” using a scenario in which one must “either kill a rare wildflower or a (plentiful) human being.”²³ These sorts of trade-off arguments are powerful, both ethically—since concern for other human beings is morally legitimate—and rhetorically. When people think that the choice is people vs. penguins, it is hard for them to listen seriously to ethical arguments in favor of penguins. A more anthropocentric approach to ethical persuasion can serve an important purpose here.

There are dangers with an anthropocentric approach to ethical persuasion, however, as J. Baird Callicott has pointed out particularly acutely:

One wants to offer the right reasons for doing the right things.... Lincoln might have persuaded Southern plantation owners to voluntarily, even gladly, free their slaves, because to do so would be in [their] enlightened self-interest.... (Think for a moment about the repugnance of that argument.)²⁴

Enlightened self-interest as motive for showing ethical concern for those who rightly *deserve* that concern *is* repugnant. Ecocentrists must lead anthropocentrists to give up not only their practices, but the standpoint that makes those practices possible.

In that respect, Smith's use of metastandards is particularly important in two respects. First, Smith uses the metastandard of utility *not* as a basis for doing what is ethically required, but as a *defeater* of competing ethical claims. The purpose of showing the utility of a non-utilitarian ethical standpoint is not in order to provide justification for that standpoint. As Smith makes clear elsewhere (see section 2), a non-utilitarian ethical standpoint is justified on its own grounds, not simply because of its utility. But showing the utility of adopting that standpoint helps assuage natural and morally legitimate concerns about human welfare. As a defeater, this metastandard does not raise the same moral repugnance as the hypothetical self-interested arguments of Lincoln to the slaveholders. The equivalence would be Lincoln offering arguments based on the intrinsic worth of slaves, but adding self-interested arguments to show that abandoning slavery will not economically devastate the South, arguments needed not to support to abolition but to assuage social and economic concerns of slave-holders. Callicott himself admits something like this, saying, "there's nothing wrong with giving instrumental reasons, ancillary to the right reasons."²⁵ Callicott does not specify what ancillary function these reasons might play, but acting as defeaters for other concerns would be one important and morally legitimate ancillary role.

Second, appealing to anthropocentric arguments as *metastandards* rather than ethical standards proper alleviates the moral repugnance of using these arguments in philosophical debate and popular persuasion. One does not argue that hurting nature is bad for people, but

rather than focusing only on what is bad for people is bad for people. This approach requires that one admit that Baxter and Regan (and others) are, in a sense, correct; ecocentrism *does* imply that in ethical decision-making, the interests of humans or sentient animals are not the only relevant considerations. And that means that there may be cases in which what is good for people is sacrificed for the good of penguins, or where the good of penguins is sacrificed for the good of Antarctic plankton. What ecocentrists can point out, however, is that having an ethical code that makes precisely these sorts of trade-offs, that refuses to let human (or sentient) interests trump the good of ecological wholes, is itself good for humans and other sentient creatures. This does *not* mean that *in each case*, sacrificing human interests is good for humans. That would be both unrealistic and an implicit concession to anthropocentrism. What it does mean is that it is better for humans overall to have an ethical code that is not focused only on what is good for humans. And the point of *this* sort of anthropocentric argument is to move beyond anthropocentrism, forcing a change of perspective, not merely a change of action.

6. Metastandards, Beauty, and Moral Motivation

Largely because of the systematic connections between interests discussed in section four, metastandards help highlight a distinctive beauty that can foster greater commitment to a proper ethical standpoint. To some extent, this beauty is just the flip side of the concern raised in section four by our natural (and proper) interest in the welfare of society. There, I showed how metastandards can put to rest apparent conflicts between Smithian (or ecocentric) ethical standards and utilitarian (or anthropocentric) concerns. But because one puts this conflict to rest by showing a *cooperation* between Smithian ethics and utilitarianism (or between ecocentrism and human welfare), one actually turns the interest in human welfare into a further *support* for Smithian welfare (or ecocentrism). As Smith explains, “These sentiments [of approbation and disapprobation] are no doubt enhanced and enlivened by the perception of the beauty or deformity which results from this utility or hurtfulness” (IV.2.3, p. 188).

So far, this beauty is tied directly to our interest in the welfare of human society, and Smith's meta-analyses of his ethical standpoint certainly promote a feeling for that beauty. But the beauty of conformity between Smithian (ecocentric) moral sentiments and human utility is not primarily due to the direct interest that we take in society's welfare. When Smith shows that punishment based on sympathetic resentment is more useful than punishment based on a principle of utility, he is not primarily appealing to the beauty of human happiness itself. Instead, Smith argues that meta-ethical justification of an ethical standpoint helps to show a beauty of quite a different sort. In explaining the nature of ethical evaluation, Smith outlines four key sources of approval. The first three are properly ethical, and the last reflects the distinctive contribution of meta-analysis:

When we approve of any character or action, the [moral approbation] we feel [is] derived from four sources.... First, we sympathize with the motives of the agent; secondly, we enter into the gratitude of those who receive the benefit of his actions; thirdly, we observe that his conduct has been agreeable to the general rules by which those two sympathies generally act; and, last of all, when we consider such actions as making a part of a system of behaviour which tends to promote the happiness either of the individual or of the society, they appear to derive a beauty from this utility, not unlike that which we ascribe to any well-contrived machine. (VII.iii.3.16, p. 326)

Without analyzing this passage in detail, it is important to note, first, that considerations of utility do not enter into any of the *primary* bases for ethical approval. They come in only "last of all," almost as an afterthought. Equally importantly, the *way* in which utility affects our approval is indirect. It is not even the happiness of individual or society that dominates our attention, but the consideration of "such actions as making a part of a system." The beauty of these actions has a beauty "not unlike that...[of] a well-contrived machine."

Elsewhere in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith discusses this sort of beauty of well-contrived machines in the context of an argument against Hume's reduction of beauty to utility.

Smith agrees with Hume that utility plays some role in our estimation of the beauty of various machines and even that the fitness to promote happiness may be the dominant determining factor for whether something is beautiful. Smith points out, however, the curious fact “that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should frequently be more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist” (IV.1.3, pp. 179-80). Whereas Hume sought to reduce the beauty of machines to their utility, such that one ultimately values a machine simply because it is useful, Smith drives a wedge between beauty and actual utility. He illustrates this with several examples, but one is sufficient:

When a person comes into his chamber, and finds the chairs all standing in the middle of the room, he is angry with his servant, and rather than see them continue in that disorder, perhaps takes the trouble himself to set them all in their places.... The whole propriety of this new situation arises from its superior conveniency in leaving the floor free and disengaged. To attain this conveniency he voluntarily puts himself to more trouble than all he could have suffered from the want of it.... What he wanted therefore...was not so much this conveniency, as that arrangement of things which promotes it. (IV.1.4, p. 180)

The point here is that the *fittedness* to be useful is valued more highly than the actual *usefulness* of a particular arrangement.

And this curious fact leads Smith to the general claim that the “love of system” (IV.1.11, p. 185), more than any concern with utility as such, underlies these ascriptions of beauty. Smith then extends this general observation, explaining:

The same principle, the same love of system, the same regard to the beauty of order, of art and contrivance, frequently serves to recommend those institutions which tend to promote the public welfare. When a patriot exerts himself for the improvement of any part of the public police, his conduct does not always arise from pure sympathy with the happiness of

those who are to reap the benefit of it. It is not commonly from a fellow-feeling with carriers and waggoners that a public-spirited man encourages the mending of high roads. When the legislature establishes premiums and other encouragements to advance the linen or woollen manufactures, its conduct seldom proceeds from pure sympathy with the wearer of cheap or fine cloth, and much less from that with the manufacturer or merchant. The perfection of police, the extension of trade and manufactures, are noble and magnificent objects. The contemplation of them pleases us, and we are interested in whatever can tend to advance them. They make part of the great system of government, and the wheels of the political machine seem to move with more harmony and ease by means of them. We take pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system, and we are uneasy till we remove any obstruction that can in the least disturb or encumber the regularity of its motions..... From a certain spirit of system, however, from a certain love of art and contrivance, we sometimes seem to value the means more than the end, and to be eager to promote the happiness of our fellow-creatures, rather from a view to perfect and improve a certain beautiful and orderly system, than from any immediate sense or feeling of what they either suffer or enjoy. (IV.1.11, p. 185)

Like the beauty of an orderly arrangement of chairs, human society is often refined out of a concern for systematic convenience rather than a direct concern for utility as such.

In the context of these claims about beauty in machines and societal arrangements, we can better understand the beauty that Smith ascribes to moral sentiments that fit into a system that is, on the whole, useful. Insofar as Smith, or Leopold, or contemporary environmental ethicists can show that ecocentric sentiments help human beings to fit into a set of ecological relationships that is good for us (and for other sentient creatures), those sentiments gain a more beautiful hue. This beauty is especially vivid when the relationship between moral sentiments and human welfare is sufficiently complex to attract attention but sufficiently elegant and simple to appeal to lovers of system. When Smith shows in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* how

instinctive resentment can end up serving the interests of society, or in his *Wealth of Nations* how the self-interested actions of disparate actors can serve the interests of the whole, he gives those attitudes and actions a beauty that they would not otherwise have. Similarly, when Leopold shows how economic calculations eventually destroy the biota upon which all human economies ultimately depend, he shows the systematic disutility of those attitudes, and thereby makes them appear unattractive. And when ecocentrists show the systematic relationships between humans and the rest of nature, and especially when they show how ecocentric attitudes eventually work for the good of the system of which humans are a part, and how they thereby promote the good of human beings themselves, this gives ecocentric attitudes a beauty that surpasses the utilitarian interests of human beings. This ecological exhibition appeals to the human interest in systematic order.²⁶

The systematic nature of this beauty is important for environmental ethics for three reasons. First, Smith makes clear that the love of system can surpass the usefulness of the systematic arrangement. With chairs, this means that one will sacrifice some utility—immediate rest—for the sake of system. In government, this means that politicians often promote plans that make society run more smoothly, even when the cost of those plans is more than the benefit of a smoother society. In the case of environmentalism, this means that one can endorse ecocentric sentiments that fit into a beneficial systematic whole, even when those sentiments do not, in a particular case, serve human (or sentient) interests. The system itself has a beauty that surpasses the utility that the system helps to promote, and that beauty can—at least sometimes—trump the concerns of utility.

Secondly, because the beauty discovered through applying a utilitarian or anthropocentric metastandard is primarily *systematic* beauty, the range of people for whom metastandard-based arguments will be the most effective way of prompting a shift to an ecocentric ethical standpoint is narrower than the last section suggested. Smith, when discussing the advantage of his utilitarian metastandard for supporting moral sentiments, explains,

This utility...bestows upon them...a new beauty, and upon that account still further recommends them to our approbation. This beauty, however, is chiefly perceived by men of reflection and speculation, and is by no means the quality which first recommends such actions to the natural sentiments of the bulk of mankind. (IV.2.11, p. 192)

Something similar might be said about the proper place of anthropocentric metastandards in environmental debates. In general, people can best be moved to an ecocentric standpoint not by anthropocentric metastandards but by direct appeals to the propriety of attitudes of respect, awe, and cherishing of nature. These appeals might involve making the value of nature more vivid and helping people overcome hidden or explicit prejudices. In Smithian terms, they may involve making people more attentive and impartial spectators.²⁷ And for those not inclined to “reflection and speculation,” these direct appeals will be more important than systematic ones.

There will be some, however, who will respond to the systematic beauty revealed by showing the compatibility of ecocentrism with an anthropocentric metastandard. But, and this brings us to the third implication of this analysis, the nature of this beauty helps to temper some of the concerns about anthropocentric justifications in environmental ethics. In particular, when ecocentrism is shown to be beneficial to human beings, the beauty that is most attractive (to all but the most die-hard anthropocentrists) is not the beauty of human benefit but the beauty of systematic connections between humans and the natural world. It is a properly ecological beauty, just the kind of beauty in systematic interconnection on which ecocentrists properly focus. And this suggests that Callicott’s reservations about anthropocentric justifications for ecocentric conclusions (discussed in the last section) will be even *less* problematic for a Smithian use of anthropocentric metastandards.

7. Conclusion

Adam Smith was not an environmentalist. His *Theory of Moral Sentiments* makes little mention of non-human concerns, and his *Wealth of Nations* actually seeks to *increase* industrial

production in nation-states. But Smith articulated an ethical theory that is increasingly recognized as a fruitful source for environmental ethics. And in the context of that theory, Smith illustrates in a particularly valuable way the role that anthropocentric, utilitarian metastandards can play in defending non-anthropocentric, non-utilitarian ethical standpoints. I have described four roles that an anthropocentric metastandard can play in defending an ecocentric ethical standpoint. First, this metastandard helps reconcile ecocentrism with theodicy, either of the religious sort—showing that God is good—or of the evolutionary sort—showing that ecocentrism is consistent with human ethical dispositions as evolved through a process of natural selection. Second, using anthropocentrism as a metastandard helps reconcile our moral interest in human welfare with a thoroughly ecocentric standpoint. By showing that ecocentrism is actually best for human beings, one can deny anthropocentrism any role in ethical deliberation and still remain confident that one is thereby doing what is best for humans (in general and over the long term). Third, defending ecocentrism by appeal to an anthropocentric metastandard provides a way of swaying die-hard anthropocentrists to adopt a more ecocentric perspective. Finally, the systematic quasi-ecological connection between ecocentrism as an ethical standard and anthropocentrism as a metastandard has a beauty of its own, a beauty that is worth revealing in its own right and one that, for people “of reflection and speculation,” even provides additional motives to adhere to ecocentric ethical norms.

¹ J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 79, hereafter Callicott 1989.

² The first is by John Barkdull, in *Land, Value, Community: Callicott and Environmental Philosophy* (ed. Wayne Ouderkirk and Jim Hill, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), hereafter Barkdull 2002. The second and third are by Patrick R. Frierson, in *New Voices on Adam Smith* (ed. Eric Schliesser and Leon Montes, London: Routledge, 2006), hereafter Frierson 2006a; and in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006): 442-80, hereafter Frierson 2006b.

³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 251, hereafter Leopold 1949.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵ Callicott 1989: 98-99.

⁶ Ethical standards and metastandards *could* be the same, but they *need not* be.

⁷ Callicott 1989: 98-9.

⁸ Scott Lehmann, "Do Wildernesses Have Rights?" *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 131. Even in his most vigorous defense of Leopold on this point, Callicott admits that this claim "has some merits" (Leopold 1989: 98).

⁹ E.g. J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 143-83, hereafter Callicott 1999.

¹⁰ See Callicott 1989, 1999; Barkdull 2002, and Frierson 2006a. Gary Varner, *In Nature's Interests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) has challenged this account. For a response, cf. Frierson 2006b.

¹¹ References to Smith's works are to the Glasgow Edition of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, reprinted by Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982). References are to Part, Section, Chapter, and Paragraph number, followed by the page number in the Liberty Fund edition.

¹² For details on Smith's moral theory, see C. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J. Otteson *Adam Smith's Marketplace of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and T.D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals*. (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1971).

¹³ For Smith, actions have demerit (and are thus worthy of punishment) when the resentment of victims is proper (II.i.5, pp.74-8).

¹⁴ Lynn White Jr., "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," *Science* 155.37 (1967): 1203-7

¹⁵ Robin Atfield, “Christianity” in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (ed. Dale Jamieson, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 96.

¹⁶ Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 44-5.

¹⁷ Leopold 1949: 251, see too Callicott 1989.

¹⁸ Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 1988), p. xi, hereafter Rolston 1988.

¹⁹ Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 147. Citations in this paragraph are from this work. Blackburn also discusses a similar “economist’s fallacy.” Normative and psychological critiques of *homo economicus* have gained traction recently due to experimental work on actual human choice behavior. See Herbert Gintis, “Beyond *Homo economicus*,” *Ecological Economics* 35 (2000): 311-22; Daniel Kahneman and Robert Sugden, “Experienced Utility as a Standard of Policy Evaluation,” *Environmental and Resource Economics* 32 (2005): 161-81; Daniel Kahneman and A. Tversky, eds. *Choices, Values, and Frames* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why more is less* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁰ William F. Baxter, *People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), hereafter Baxter 1974.

²¹ Smith illustrates the problem of taking a part of ethics as the whole in his analysis of Epicurean hedonism:

Since the practice of virtue...is in general so advantageous, and that of vice so contrary to our interest, the consideration of those opposite tendencies undoubtedly stamps an additional beauty and propriety upon the one, and a new deformity and impropriety upon the other.... Epicurus appears in every virtue to have attended to this species of propriety only. (VII.ii.2.13, p. 298-9)

Similarly, anthropocentrists rightly recognize that promoting human interests is good, that most (if not all) that is good ends up promoting human interests, and that when something that is otherwise good promotes human interests, it is even better. They wrongly infer that promoting human interests is what *makes* things good.

²² Baxter 1974.

²³ Regan 1985.

²⁴ Callicott 1999: 244.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Compare Holmes Rolston III’s “systematic value” (Rolston 1988:188).

²⁷ The recent campaign against drilling in the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge, which pits a picture that beautiful landscape against the likely benefit to human beings of a single cent per gallon, directly appeals to people to respect unspoiled nature even at a cost to themselves (<http://www.arcticrefugeaction.org/newsroom/SC-ANWAR-BusAdFNL2.pdf>, accessed 12-05). The cost to human beings here is heavily deemphasized, but the consideration raised against it is not a direct cost to humans at all, but a purely ecocentric concern, the welfare of the wilderness. This sort of directly ecocentric appeal is the most appropriate for those not inclined to “reflection and speculation.”