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Book Review of Eco-Pragmatism: Making Sensible Environmental Decisions in an Uncertain World

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only interpretations of Mill but also significant analyses of contrasting kinds of "liberalism."

HENRY R. WEST
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Farber, Daniel A. *Eco-Pragmatism: Making Sensible Environmental Decisions in an Uncertain World*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 210. \$23.00 (cloth).

Much of the debate over environmental protection has been presented as a choice between conflicting alternatives: a choice, for example, between environmental quality and economic efficiency, between command and control regulation and private market approaches, and between endangered species and jobs. What often is missing from this theoretical and normative debate is a middle ground.

University of Minnesota professor Daniel Farber brings the middle ground into the debate in his book *Eco-Pragmatism: Making Sensible Environmental Decisions in an Uncertain World*. As the title suggests, Farber's *Eco-Pragmatism* takes a moderate approach to resolving the core issues involved in making hard environmental decisions. Instead of joining the battle between competing holistic theories being fought in the environmental arena, Farber advocates the adoption of a pragmatic approach to environmental problem solving. Basing his approach on legal pragmatism, Farber explains that a pragmatic approach draws on the "coherence of many sources, rather than . . . on a single unified foundation" and uses theories as "tools, not ends in themselves" (p. 10).

Much of the book is devoted to making the case for Farber's moderate, pragmatic approach. Farber uses key problems involved in making hard environmental decisions as his organizational tools. Those problems include deciding how to make trade-offs between conflicting values, deciding how to deal with the time dimension of environmental problems, and deciding how to respond to uncertainty about risk.

Farber examines the problem of making trade-offs by comparing the two principal methods for making social decisions: politics and the market. According to Farber, the current debate over these two methods has become bogged down in some "very deep philosophical waters" (p. 40). A more helpful approach, in Farber's view, would be to think of economic concepts as tools for resolving disputes over resource allocation. As Farber explains, both individual preferences and political choices should be important to environmental decision making. Because of the strong commitment to environmental protection already expressed through the political process, decision makers should begin with an environmental baseline, allowing environmental harm "only when avoiding it is infeasible or grossly disproportionate in cost" (p. 68). Farber proposes limiting the role of economic methods like cost-benefit analysis to assisting rather than controlling the decision-making process, in hopes that economic tools will act as a check on unreasonable regulation without overtaking the decision-making process.

Farber examines the time-dimension problem of environmental decisions by beginning with a simple question: should we spend \$10 million to save one life—one hundred years from now? After discussing how cost-benefit analysis deals with the problem of time lags through discounting, Farber recognizes some of the problems of discounting. In his discussion of the fable of the future-oriented grasshopper and the present-oriented ant, Farber effectively shows how discounting can make real costs disappear and how the effect of discounting varies according to the time span. In his discussion of nuclear waste disposal, Farber powerfully demonstrates how discounting can discriminate against future generations. To deal with these problems, Farber suggests the use of low discount rates and proposes that the current generation's feelings toward its own descendants be used as a baseline for defining intergenerational equity.

Finally, Farber deals with the problem of uncertainty about risk by advocating a dynamic, as opposed to static, approach to decision making that fosters "the ability of the regulatory system to engage in learning over time" (p. 165). Under this dynamic approach, certain coping strategies would be adopted to deal with the uncertainty about the scope and degree of environmental risks and to allow the system to adapt to new information. Those strategies include burden-shifting rules that require the polluter to show that its activities are harmless, adoption of a precautionary approach when irreversible consequences would result from a decision, and decentralization of environmental decision making to encourage quicker responses to new information.

Farber powerfully and systematically makes the case for his moderate approach. Some might find it easy to dismiss Farber's book precisely because his position is not revolutionary or pure. Those who do will be ignoring some important points made by Farber. First and foremost, he develops an approach to environmental protection that is grounded in the real world. Second, instead of just defining the problem of change and making the case for a flexible approach, Farber actually offers some suggestions for dealing with change. Third, at all times he recognizes the value of both economic decision making and the political process. Neither is exclusively in charge under Farber's approach. Fourth, Farber recognizes the need for politically acceptable approaches to environmental problems, offering a number of suggestions for tempering purist impulses under the environmental baseline. Finally, he compellingly ties the time dimension of environmental problems to the ethical question of intergenerational equity in a way that effectively makes the case for eco-pragmatism.

Eco-Pragmatism admittedly may trouble economists and environmentalists alike by making some key assumptions and purposefully ignoring some fundamental questions. Those who do not trust the Environmental Protection Agency will have difficulty with Farber's argument for greater reliance on agency expertise. Those who want to discuss fundamental moral questions raised by environmental problems will not be satisfied by Farber's dismissal of the philosophical debate. Those who understand ecological principles may question Farber's treatment of the problem of change as primarily an information problem and may wonder why Farber ignored problems of temporal and spatial scales, resilience, and ecological integrity. Those who recognize the importance of different legal contexts may question how Farber could treat regulatory and judicial actions together in talking about coping strategies for dealing with uncertainty. Perhaps Farber anticipated these difficulties when he admonished the reader not to ex-

pect perfection in such a complicated area as environmental protection. In any event, though Farber's book does not make any profound revelations, it can have a profound impact on the world of environmental decision making if readers recognize the masterful job Farber does of integrating theory and practice.

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Finnis, John. *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pp. xxi + 385. \$52.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

In some ways this study complements Finnis's *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980) and other writings on ethics and philosophy of law. Those are theoretical works which draw amply on Aquinas. Formally this one is history, but the dominant concerns remain theoretical.

This is not to say that we are given only reports or reformulations of Aquinas's thought. Indeed, the documentation is massive, almost overwhelming. But throughout, interpretation is intertwined with, and subordinated to, engagement over issues. I know of no other such full-scale rethinking of Thomas's political philosophy in the recent literature, and we should be grateful to Finnis for the hard work.

Politics in Aquinas is inseparable from ethics, and after a nice biographical sketch, Finnis dwells long on what he considers the salient general features of Thomas's moral philosophy. The first, which becomes a kind of refrain in the sequel, is that the subject of moral science is a genus of its own, with its own mode of intelligibility. The key text is the beginning of the commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*. There Aquinas divides science into four types, according to four orders, which Finnis calls "irreducibly distinct" (p. 21): the natural (the objects of the speculative sciences), the logical, the moral, and the technical.

The moral order is the order of things formed by deliberate choice. Its first principles are the ends, or reasons for choice, naturally ordained by practical reason in the primary precepts of natural law. These ends are the "basic human goods." This notion, like several of the more prominent ones in the book, will be quite familiar to readers of Finnis and Germain Grisez. Finnis tells us in the preface that writing this book has confirmed his understanding both of "the foundational principles" of their ethical theory and of "Aquinas' subscription to them" (p. ix).

Not surprisingly then, as he lays out the Thomistic moral landscape, Finnis is emphatic and constant in making practical reason the primary reference point. Even his scheme reflects this approach. Thus, chapter 4 brings together the themes of happiness, the common good, and morality. The link is evidently the constitutive role played in each by practical reason. Regarding happiness, the point is that practical reason directs not only to each of the basic goods but also to their coordination and integration. So it is as a sort of "synthesis" (p. 85) projected by practical reason that the one "last" end enters the human scene, at least as viewed by moral philosophy. (Metaphysics and theology get a brief say in the