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REJOINDER

A/Moral Vulnerability for Chet Bowers and Other EcoJustice Educators: A REJOINDER to “Rethinking Social Justice Issues”

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Abstract

The first part of my rejoinder is a contextual elaboration of Bowers’ ideas in “Rethinking Social Justice Issues,” and then, I question whether Bowers goes far enough to help individuals interpret justice issues. I begin with my experiences teaching science teachers about ecojustice and discuss several problem ideas. I highlight a significant a/moral ecological vulnerability (lack of premises) for Bowers’ ethical imperative, and conclude with the recommendation of why we ought to shift towards better democratizing ecojustice.

Introduction

I know of more than ten birds that have visited my Athens, Georgia, feeder this year. My favorites are the morning dove, blue jay, cardinal, tufted titmouse, black capped chickadee, red-bellied woodpecker, cedar waxwing, eastern blue bird, goldfinch, and summer tanager. I look up and observe a turkey vulture, or what Georgians call the buzzard, lazily teetering in the sky on tufts of rising heat. As I walk through my neighborhood, I catch a glance of a Cooper’s hawk or red-tailed hawk floating from tree to telephone pole. Or I wake in the middle of the night to hear the owl’s “who-who who-who” in the wee morning hour.

Drinking my morning coffee, within arm’s-reach, I know the whisking playful flight of the hummingbird. A hummingbird feeder willfully filled with red, sweet nectar also attracts hundreds of bees and wasps: the aggressive yellow jacket, paper wasp, or more harmless hornet, mud dauber, bumble, or honey bee. I know that I am somewhat allergic to their sting (venom), and yet I am not bothered by these bees, or any other insect, namely, flies, butterflies, damselflies, dragonflies, and other garden vegetable or flower pollinator.



My favorite is the green lynx spider. She aggressively waits on the underside of a daisy for a bumblebee. Then, my friend is the North American anole! A female is brown, and male “chameleon” is green or brown.

“A/Moral Ecological Vulnerability”

How do ethical imperatives and morals influence how we interpret this image?

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I have a deeply rooted passion for these things I know in my yard and foster this affection with my kids. When my sons Riley and Noah point out small critters (mostly insects), I definitely feel excited and good. Both kids also learn about the dangers of the velvet ant (a wingless wasp with a nasty sting), poisonous plants, and stream banks, where precaution is heeded. This type of knowledge is invaluable in addition to the cultural traditions and skills advocated by Bowers (2009) that serve to lower our impacts on the Earth. But I wonder if the things that Bowers calls for in his essay go far enough to help people interpret *justice*? In this rejoinder, I want to consider the a/moral vulnerabilities of ecojustice that still need to be addressed.

Teacher Education

When I teach my beginning earth, biology, chemistry, and physics teachers, I often use the State Botanical Gardens of

Georgia as a context for our class (rain or shine). There is a big granite outcrop ecosystem where we sit and debate whether rocks have rights or should have rights if they don't already. There is an indoor observatory with tropical plants, various educational gardens that are thematically planted, and several miles of trails along the Middle Oconee River, a path walked by the naturalist William Bartram. These gardens are the environments where my teachers learn about the safety and ethics of teaching science, practice how to deal with misbehaving students, develop lessons, and integrate science with the commons. My teachers know that deemphasized knowledge is important too and they strive to integrate carpentry, for example; to design garden boxes as a way to grow plants to study photosynthesis or attract pollinators. By engaging their students in longer-term ecological studies of climate-garden box-pollinator relations, science teachers will collect and analyze data that can be used to document changes which affect choices.

When teachers teach to the test—a typical practice now-a-days threatened by mandated testing in light of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Race to the Top—they fail to reposition themselves as indispensable in the policymaking arena of the community. When teachers and their students fail to play a larger role in the decisions of the community, they tolerate others' a/morally informed opportunities to watch out for the interests of animals, plants, or habitats, which may not have economic worth. In other words, the best advocates for these species may be the students, but they are rarely being included. However, when teachers network, establish their voice through data collection and science know-how, they become indispensable in larger, educated policy decisions, especially about tradeoffs, such as where or how to expand a growing community's school without significantly impacting local species and habitat.

For this reason, my teachers are learning how to pay more attention to sounds and temperatures regionally in addition to the ways in which their students will endorse cultural ways of thinking that frame behaviors. I no longer preach the ethics of *ecological crisis* to stimulate their learning about the environment. For most people, this ethical imperative lasts a mere 20-seconds and then individuals default to prior beliefs. As I have analyzed the eco-crisis narrative in more depth in another essay (Mueller, 2009), I want to point out that there is an underlying logic still communicated with crisis that has not lost its wider appeal. Some readers may overlook the significance of evaluating this idea in Bowers' writings. Withstanding environmentalists such as David Abram (1996) and Terry Tempest Williams (2004), the wide-sweeping ethical imperative to motivate ecojustice have a/moral foundations which are not supported by science. Essentially, the crisis narrative is supported with a/moral justifications more than with scientific evidence. There are very few, if any, scientific documents that proclaim the crisis writ large in environmental works (e.g., International Panel of Climate Change [IPCC], 2001).

A/Moral Ecological Crisis and the Marginalization of Others

In my work, I focus on these imperatives because they tend to deemphasize or ignore Earth's history, narratives of theists, women, children, families, and indigenous thinkers, to name a few (Mueller, 2009). By using the terms *moral*, *ecological*, and *crisis* in the way that Bowers continues to do in his essays, he further perpetuates an unrecognized vulnerability for the rapid *greening* of America's youth. In short, anything green sells! Using an ethical imperative to motivate people to become green-like-everyone-else or else does much to inadvertently threaten and situate youth with more cultural and ecological risk than before.

As I read the essay on "Rethinking Social Justice Issues," the word *ecological* appears over 28 times without a clear definition. This lack of clarity is not uncommon for scholars who operate outside of science. It lacks an obvious moral responsibility to understanding the natural world that helps people decode justice. The transcending word *crisis* appears in many ways, after *economic*, *ecological*, and so forth. This buzz-word is frequently used in the newspaper, magazines, and on TV to bypass the brains of individuals. Ironically, Bowers (2009) says, "what now has to be avoided is endless repetition that there is an ecological crisis and that capitalism is primarily responsible. Thoughtful people already understand the connections between the two phenomena" (n.p.). Perhaps this idea has been gleaned from some of my previous works, but it doesn't last long, because Bowers goes on to use the crisis narrative to motivate action three more times. By the way, it is not easy to disconnect ourselves from the connections developed around crisis by Kuhn (1962/1970/1996). Clearly, ecological crisis is a significant trouble for thoughtful and connected people!

One might argue that thoughtful people should have to justify their philosophies before saying it is so. But using the higher-status of science knowledge is just not going to cut it or make the connection for teachers. Saying that N scientists predict warmer climates or decreasing fisheries does not make the logical leap, and it seems morally irresponsible for environmental scholars to advocate *crisis* that is not proved by logic. There is also a huge a/moral vulnerability for Bowers when logic overrides the status of moral knowledge. One can easily glide down the slippery slope of doing what is assumed to be right (such as "saving all of Earth's species") without questioning if a green project, policy, or advertisement has nonhuman tradeoffs. For example, the ecological crisis does not dispel the reasons why humans are

privileged for survival and reproduction. It basically becomes a double standard for humans following the logic of worldwide crisis (Mueller, 2009).

Consider the ways in which population pressures are targeted by environmentalists, yet very little is said about global scientific research which benefits cancer patients. Does this contradict population pressures? What about the ways that science prolongs and enhances the quality of life (or human health disparities)? These ideas are more difficult to wrestle with in the particular, which is why I began my rejoinder this way. Despite that, we can cultivate a democratic ecojustice that constantly critiques itself and which serves to benefit a pluralist society where democracy (in the way described by Bowers) flourishes when recognized. We start by acknowledging the ways in which we can participate more fully in our own regional contexts. We become informed. We participate in policy decisions. We advocate for affected others and ecologies.

As Bowers accurately writes, these actions will not be easy for those who are concerned with social justice (exclusively). But we cannot be successful by constantly critiquing the ways social reforms are being done. There are some shorter-term concerns, such as children's dying of cancer, which will need to be privileged in terms of human priorities, and take precedence over longer-term environmental dilemmas, like crises. Enough said.

Coda

How do we democratize ecojustice? That question has rarely been asked within the ecojustice literature (and after completing a dissertation on Chet Bowers and reading hundreds of articles and books since, I do not claim to know this fact without exception). But after the green haze begins to dissipate and the smoky residual of environmentalist a/moral theory takes more seriously the ecological work of scientists and others who have learned to become informed such that they can participate more fully in ecological decisions, we will move forward as a group of scholars, teachers, preachers, and youth embedded within ecorelations. I use this term, ecorelations (absurdly), because it conveys an idea that is not new, but has been around for many thousands of years. When ecorelations are acknowledged, they are discovered in every facet of life. The a/moral ecological vulnerability is "rethinking social justice issues" without rethinking ecojustice too.

Dedication

This article rejoinder is dedicated to my niece Ariana Doyle.

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