

Stakeholders, Compromise, and the Ethically Wicked

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To begin, I want to thank Matt Ferkany and Kyle Powys Whyte for their interesting and thought-provoking piece. I think it is important to offer opportunities for educators to reconceptualize their practices and take some long, hard looks at the virtues we are interested in developing. I also agree with the basic premise of the essay that more, and I assume, more fruitful participatory democratic approaches involving the multiple stakeholders in any situation are likely to lead to more robust and potentially better outcomes. And, although I worry about the characterization of these gatherings as addressing “wicked environmental problems,” I do think the authors have identified a lack in the discussion and have done an admirable job in trying to respond.

I would like to divide this response into three sections. The first explores a couple of challenges I see in this line of educational enquiry that are germane to today’s discussion and might open up possibilities in the spirit of the participatory process advocated by the authors. The second section takes up the question of compromise, an important component of the participatory process, and its implications for environmentalists. And the third section offers some educational implications and possibilities beyond those already proposed.

THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATING THE ETHICALLY WICKED

The authors have done a nice job of choosing several candidates for consideration as virtues, and I think they rightly point to the need to define each more carefully, as they have done in the example of basic self-confidence. I see two substantial difficulties, both of which I am sure the authors recognize. The first is related to definitions and the worldviews from which they spring. Is it possible to give a precise definition of any virtue, and is that definition universally applicable? Do we not rapidly slip into those treacherous areas where we need to ask who is doing this defining, how is it being done, and for whom? For example, Gregory Cajete has suggested that each worldview responds to the questions posed by its own population, and thus presents a full picture of that particular world.¹ He explains that it is not the case that there is no science in aboriginal culture, it is just that the cultural space that is occupied by science in, for example, western culture in order to answer our particular question sets is, in theirs, occupied by something else. With that in mind, what would the Great Lakes study look like if two sets of experts, equally qualified and revered in their own particular cultures, were to attempt to reach a compromise with regard to pollution? What language would they use? — Remember that, if we are to believe Cajete, this is not just a question of good verbatim translations of English and Huron. — How would the standards of “reasonableness, logic, and evaluation” be applied when each worldview defines these terms differently?

The second challenge is the very practical one that begins with the question: “what teachers see themselves as not already teaching these virtues?” This quickly

expands into: “how does one teach virtues?” In citing Lawrence Kohlberg as a source for teaching support, you are immediately face-to-face with the problem. Here is a man, immersed in moral education, who self-admittedly acted mostly at his own level four and had a difficult time conceptualizing level six, and whose doctoral student, Carol Gilligan, provided a devastating critique of the incompleteness and bias of his work.² Further questions arise; who assesses the students on their level of virtue, and how? Finally, what evidence do we have that schools are equipped to do this job, and how do we know, once they have passed through our hands, that students are now, or will be in future, virtuous actors on this stage of engaged citizenship? This is the wicked problem known as educating. Interestingly enough, part of the answer to these questions might lie in beginning a fully participatory democratic process to determine and define the virtues needed for such a transformation.

Having identified these large challenges that keep many of us gainfully employed, I want to ask a more specific question. What do we do with wickedness? Not wicked problems but the character trait, if that is what wickedness is? Environmental activist and writer Derrick Jensen tells a long and sickening story of how land-developers and “expert” cronies in his neighborhood lied, cheated, and manipulated the apparently participatory process and ended up destroying a much beloved forest.³ The participatory process described in this essay seems to require those in attendance to assume a position of openness to each other, to be prepared to have their minds changed; to assume that their understanding is incomplete, as is their solution; to assume that the group will reach a better conclusion than any individual; and to let each be heard in their own manner and from their own expertise. So what happens if this is the case for everyone present, except one? The proposed system, if you are inclined toward Thomas Hobbes, is ripe for exploitation, and the idea of teaching the wicked (that is, the “non-virtuous” as defined by the authors) the language of virtue, which they, without believing a word of it, will then employ to justify their practice, is both terrifying and all too likely.

THE ENVIRONMENTALIST’S COMPROMISE

In the *Natural Alien*, environmental theorist Neil Evernden worries about the trend he sees among environmental activists toward negotiation and compromise.⁴ He thinks, and I am shortening his argument tremendously, that even the most seemingly sophisticated compromises, for example, where well-being and pollinator contribution are economically factored into decision-making processes, have a loser — the natural world. It may not lose as much as it might have done if the discussions did not happen, or if the economic calculus wasn’t used, but it still loses. The natural world is not part of the win-win sensibility of the participatory process, because it is not involved. For Evernden, however, there is another cost in compromise, and that is the very integrity of the environmental conversation. Being willing to discuss a forest in terms of dollars and cents, even with the other more robust factors being applied, is still a reduction of the environment to a resource for use by humans, and it is this compromise that is truly dangerous. So, given Evernden’s worry and the authors’ apparent support for a process that is desirous of

hearing from all stakeholders, what happens if one extreme position is in fact right? What would negotiations for equal-pay-for-equal-work, or the removal of DDT for sale in North America, or Rosa Parks' decision to sit at the front of the bus have looked like after a participatory process? The point is that the authors assume that rights, powers, goodwill, and equity are integral and present to any proposed participatory processes, and I am not sure they are. One further point: Why is it, when these wicked environmental problems — and remember that the characterization of the environment as problematic is contested ground among environmental theorists — are discussed, the largest stakeholder is not present? Is not the natural world, the environment, the more-than-human world literally “a stakeholder”?

SOME EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

I am very supportive of the essay's advocacy of participatory processes, and I've long thought experiential education, whether David Kolb's or the various, more recent incarnations, is a fantastic place for this kind of learning. I do think, however, that the authors are a bit tentative about it. If it is that important, then get the students genuinely engaged in it, with real wicked problems, with real wicked people, and in their real and “wicked” lives. Having students engage in genuine problems that are germane to their environments, their communities, and their lives is important. It provides them with the opportunity to witness and exercise virtue, to learn skills, to understand from a multiplicity of positions, and to see themselves as having a voice, even as children.

With regard to having the point of view of the natural world present as a stakeholder in discussions related to the environment, I propose a modified version of the bioregionalist's concept, the Council of all Beings. Participants in such discussions might take turns as representatives of different aspects of the natural world. Thus, someone would represent the trees in a discussion about neighborhood development or, in the author's Great Lakes example people might represent water and fish. The result is that the natural world is never relegated to the background in the way eco-feminist Val Plumwood suggests usually happens in such decision-making.⁵ Having the largest stakeholder present might mitigate the dangers Evernden has pointed to. And wouldn't it be a fascinating experience to observe policy-makers and various experts humbly pretending to be a Great Lakes whitefish demanding to be accounted for? We can but hope.

1. Gregory Cajete, *Igniting the Sparkle* (Skyand, N.C.: Kivake Press, 1999).

2. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

3. Derrick Jensen and Aric Mcbay, *What We Leave Behind* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009).

4. Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

5. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2002).