BOOK REVIEWS

Bryan G. Norton. *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change: A Guide to Environmental Decision Making*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xx, 319 pages.

"Better it is for philosophy to err in active participation in the living struggles and issues of its own age and times," John Dewey wrote, "than to maintain an immune monastic impeccability, without relevancy and bearing in the generating ideas of its contemporary present."[1] Implicit in Bryan Norton's corpus is a Dewey-inspired position on the public role of philosophers, we grown-ups who deliberately step back to critique the comfortable assumptions that color, shape, and prejudice our thinking. Norton's principal aim has been to inform public deliberation and advance social learning, from the way we formulate problems to the democratic procedures and heuristics we build for dealing with them.

Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change is a culminating work written for a general audience of environmental professionals. In keeping with what he has long urged for environmental philosophers, Norton focuses on ameliorative processes for resolving disagreements, on *making decisions*, while sidestepping the monistic quest for the right general principles to think about and govern human relationships with nature. Norton presupposes his "convergence hypothesis" familiar to readers of this journal: multi-scalar anthropocentric arguments, he holds, usually justify the same policies as ecocentric arguments; hence, it is not essential to convince doubters that parts of nature have intrinsic value. Norton's principal aim in this new work is to spell out his "heuristic proceduralism" while showing that Adaptive Ecosystem Management's pluralistic model of sustainability works better for real decision making than the narrow focus on economic welfare in mainstream environmental economics. Environmental philosophers will also rightly read the book as, in part, Norton's seasoned response to a familiar accusation: that pragmatic pluralism is too mushy to guide action, hence ethicists must fall back on defense of antecedent principles.

How do we measure progress toward sustainability? In "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin famously develops Archilochus's saying that "*The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.*" Norton turns to Berlin's fox and hedgehog for his key metaphors, arguing that the hedgehog—with its one big idea of a final and ultimate good—looks for progress in the wrong place (p. 18). Each conflicted situation is unique, so Adapt (Norton's personification of the fox,

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[1] John Dewey, "Does Reality Possess a Practical Character?" MW 4:142. Citations of Dewey's works are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. Citations give series abbreviation, followed by volume number and page number. Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works:* EW for *The Early Works* (1882–98); MW for *The Middle Works* (1899–1924); and LW for *The Later Works* (1925–53).

clipped from "Adaptive Ecosystem Management") approaches matters *in medias res* and case by case. Adapt is a dramatic participant in decision making, while Optim (Norton's personification of the hedgehog) aspires to disengage from the drama as a spectral calculator. For Norton, the fox is an active, imaginative, and experimental player with something at stake, not a gaseous spectator. We need cool heads that do not hover disinterestedly outside the conflicted situation.

We do not serve our students well, Norton holds, if we merely educate them to judiciously weigh matters so that the balance tips toward a purportedly optimal policy supported by general principles derived prior to engaging real situations. The *actual* result of Optim's approach is reminiscent of an offhanded criticism Dewey once made about "popcorn" solutions: put the right amount in the right mechanism and you get some "unnutritious readymade stuff" that will not sustain anyone for long.[2]

For Optim, the hedgehog, sensitivity to context and experimental understanding of complex underlying structures are not priorities. We might imagine a physician who seeks to heal patients in light of some static, complete, and universal ideal of perfect health, when what is needed is to aid living processes of recovery. Unfortunately, well-meaning environmental economists, according to Norton, are enjoining just such a quest for a predetermined metric to get the Right (i.e, the optimal) policy outcomes. No communal growth or democratic participation on any wide scale is required, nor would these be particularly helpful. This might be fine if, from the start, there had been only one legitimate direction in which to be tugged; or if the problem at hand had been simply an intellectual one. But if politics and policy are arts of actually *achieving* our best possibilities, then the hedgehog's approach to problems ill-equips us for dealing with intractable situations—including many environmental problems—in which even the most sincere participants interpret the facts differently. When we see a problem only as given, not taken, the chief problem is presumed to be that others do not get the problem. Or the chief problem is presumed to be the general failure of the public to adopt our own brilliant solutions.

In Donella Meadows' helpful words, we have a distracting tendency "to define a problem . . . by the lack of our favorite solution" (p. 37). Never mind the unnoticed parts of the mess occluded by our well-defended general principles, which are often assumed to be value-neutral and free of interest-driven rationalizations and inherited biases. Our formulation of the problem, we too often think, is incorrigible and has precisely captured all that is morally or politically relevant. In this way we *predefine* what is relevant, and we covertly prejudge alternative formulations. Yet in order to gain traction toward ideals of justice, sustainability, and health, we need

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[2] 1951.02.14 (14090): John Dewey to Max C. Otto. Citations of Dewey's correspondence are to the *The Correspondence of John Dewey*, 1871–2007, published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Larry Hickman. Citations give the date, reference number for the letter, and author followed by recipient.

an approach that is improvisational and imaginative, pluralistic, adaptive, social, experimental, contextually sensitive, and nimble-footed.

Norton's environmental pragmatism is well symbolized by the adaptive fox, and his case study of the Chesapeake watershed is an exemplar (pp. 250–57). The shift in thinking in the Chesapeake region involved a "value-driven remapping of a complex natural system" that moved away from a model of "local consciousness into a regional consciousness and broader sense of responsibility." People "began living in a larger 'place' than before" (pp. 254–55). This shift in models developed through a public process of adaptive management—a messy, not ideal, process when viewed at close range—characterized by "gradual learning in which the bay, once conceived merely as the productive factory for a growing economy, became a watershed" (p. 256). It was a shift in the ecological imagination of the public, which crucially involved a shift in valuing. This transformative shift, Norton argues, was manifest in "adoption of a new basic metaphor for understanding an entire system"—interconnected webs, etc., not self-sufficing objects (p. 257).

Norton observes that the cultural shift in the Chesapeake region away from object-focused "thinking like an estuary/bay" toward multi-scalar "thinking like a watershed" did not require a victor in the prize fight over foundational environmental values. Nor did it require a prior commitment to a specific view about the moral standing of nonhuman nature. But learning to "think like a watershed" did minimally involve what Norton characterizes (via Kai Lee and Albert Bandura) as Deweyan "social learning." The process exhibited a regional cultural shift away from narrow and short-term human-centered thinking toward broad-range, long-term thinking. Most importantly for Norton, that transformation in values occurred *through* the public process rather than as a prerequisite to participation.

In public disputes, vying camps too often enlist enthusiasm through an evaluative conquest, demanding that sympathies flow down their singular channel. This precludes a conscientious attempt to secure shared toeholds to achieve social goals across a spectrum of values. Such rectitude offers a deep channel for our partialities and dearest inclinations, but it raises suspicions about aims, interests, and background assumptions. It also risks antagonism toward excluded standpoints, closure to being surprised by the complexity of situations and systems, neglect of the context in which decisions are made, and a related general indifference to public processes and integrative values.

Environmental pragmatists hold that when our principal intellectual focus is diverted to justifying antecedent general principles, we end up with an etiolated philosophy that is pale and feeble because its starting point is a wispy abstraction, not a robust situation. The need to manage divergent and often legitimate claims is what gives environmental decision making its richness and vitality. It is also what makes such decision making intrinsically messy or "wicked." A problem is thick and "wicked" rather than thin and benign, in Norton's handling, if (1) *there is no single definitive, approvable solution* and (2) *the way we formulate a problem and the way we appraise success in dealing with it are themselves at issue*. Because

most problems in complex systems are wicked in this sense, moral uncertainty about them is *justified*. The fact that we are at ethical or political cross-purposes is not typically due to a dysfunctional moral module or to a failure to analyze or pray hard enough. The problems of contemporary pluralistic democratic societies demand that we gain a practical footing informed by conflicting claims that tug us in incompatible directions. These conflicting forces are tangled up in the situations themselves, not just in our abstract analyses, so it will take more than correct rational judgments if we are to learn and adapt our way together toward a sustainable society.

Students engaging Norton's book can learn to deal with vexing problems and transitions at a manageable scale in which they imagine concretely the troubled situation, assess relevant information, and mediate conflicts to converge upon solutions. Several of my own students initially missed the hypothetical framing of Norton's heuristic approach: *if* certain social conditions are present, then here is what you can do (e.g., pp. xv–xvi). If this conditional framing is missed, there will be an unwarranted tendency to read Norton as unduly optimistic. His emphasis is on grassroots action, but his case studies (pp. 218–57) attest to his awareness that actors outside a community, such as threats of ever-stricter state and federal controls, may be needed to drive recalcitrant groups to the table. Indeed, he urges state initiatives and activism to introduce such "hammers."

Despite some tightening of prose and elimination of redundancies that could be aims for a second edition, I am unaware of a better environmentally focused volume for building a democratic citizenry. Norton's pragmatist guide to environmental decision making offers an activism for grown-ups, practical tools and plausible hope for those with the courage and patience to secure, again in Dewey's words, the "democratic means to achieve our democratic ends."[3]

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[3] John Dewey, "Significance of the Trotsky Inquiry," LW 11:332.

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