

Comment on Rosenbaum's "Justice, The Lorax and the Environment"

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Living in Colorado, I have had the environment on my mind. 2013 was a year for both record wildfires and a flood in Boulder, classified as a "1000-year event" (Freedman, 2013). With two children in elementary school, I have also had Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* on my mind. Such conjunctions of events mean that, in my house, we talk fairly regularly about environmental ethics. It was good timing, then, for me to receive Rosenbaum's essay and consider more carefully the connections already in play in my home and home state.

Rosenbaum (2014, p. 151) calls *The Lorax* and other stories "essential tools for expressing objective moral concerns about the environment," and specifically whether the environment is receiving "justice." My paper will focus on two core questions raised by Rosenbaum, spending the majority of time on the first.

The first question concerns objectivity. *The Lorax* exhorts readers to sympathize more magnanimously with natural creatures and their environment. How, Rosenbaum asks, can this exhortation also claim something like "objective legitimacy"? My comment recapitulates the *Lorax* plot, Rosenbaum's remarks about Rawls, Sandel, and Dewey, and then offers some buttressing for his argument.

The second issue regards philosophical uses of *The Lorax* as a text: what uses can philosophers make of fiction, including children's fiction? What do these uses imply about the philosopher's role *qua* philosopher? I express some sympathy toward Rosenbaum's conception of philosophers as "statesmen," thinkers who aim to do more than just create systems of arguments and justifications. Philosophy, like fiction, *can* ignite imaginations and spur the kinds of discussions which enlarge sympathy and grow character.

Objective Legitimacy

Clearly, the *Lorax* implores readers to expand compassion so as to include creatures and the environment. Still, these exhortations, however, do not constitute an ethical position. "The moral issue goes beyond the [varying] vicissitudes of sympathy... to objective legitimacy." "How," Rosenbaum (2014, p. 153 [emphasis in original]) asks, "does *The Lorax*

impart objective *legitimacy* to the claim of justice for the environment?” Before answering, let us briefly review the conflicting perspectives in *The Lorax*.

The Lorax is a cautionary morality tale about economic anthropocentrism. Whether it recommends a precise alternative is less clear, and perhaps not important. But, first, the facts. Before the Onceler ruined everything, creatures *enjoy* life: bears feed and frolic; swans sing; fish jump and hum. Truffala trees grow. The Onceler’s joy derives from using the trees—a resource he says he has searched for “all of my life.” When confronted by the Lorax for chopping the tree, the Onceler justifies his action by *utility*, pointing at his product and exclaiming, “I’m being quite useful.” He rationalizes the hunger he causes the Brown Bar-ba-loots with an all too-familiar truism about economic growth: “Business is business! And business must grow, regardless of crummies in tummies, you know.” He also defends the *unrestrained pace* of this growth: “I meant no harm. I most truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.” Finally, in response to complaints of environmental dumping, the Onceler explicitly appeals to his *rights*, however narrowly economic: “Well, I have my rights, sir, and I’m telling you, I intend to go on doing just what I do!” (Foregoing quotations from Seuss, 1971.) The story ends with losers all around: resources are expended and damaged, business collapses, and the Onceler becomes clinically depressed. Competition for resources, settled by domination, has led to dystopia. Future prospects lie with a small boy whose imagination is (hopefully) expansive enough to grasp the Onceler’s point and, with a seed, restore the environment by growing more Truffala trees. The moral is clear enough: the environment deserves justice. The harder question is: on what ethical basis?

Rawls and Sandel

Seeking a basis, Rosenbaum first considers the ethics of John Rawls. Unfortunately, Rosenbaum notes, Rawls found it increasingly difficult to explicate a theoretical model of justice sufficiently *apart* from the various conceptions of good (flourishing or happiness) which exist, contested, around us. Finding out what is “just” requires more than what might be available behind a “veil of ignorance.” Rosenbaum agrees with Michael Sandel’s view that adequate accounts of justice must be thicker; they must draw, somehow, on the various *actual* conceptions people hold regarding goodness.

Prima facie, this adjustment helps extricate us from a Rawlsian conception of justice too devoid of content. However, the adjustment just winds up passing the buck. While we see that Onceler’s conception of

"goodness" was too exclusive of other conceptions, knowing *that* does not help us with thornier problems—such as which wider and more inclusive good should replace those currently competing. Sometimes, overwhelming majorities *do* agree that certain things are "good"—like the preservation of species. But most remain *unclear* as to how important *this* good is relative to other goods. We want to protect spotted owls? Great! But what should be changed (economically, politically, etc.) to preserve them? Which goods or opportunities should be sacrificed, and why? Other times, often, there is not agreement. Sympathies lay all over the map: you fret about polar bears—I don't; I get nightmares about dying frog populations—you don't. And so on. Again, what is needed is a way to go "beyond the [varying] vicissitudes of sympathy... to objective legitimacy." Rosenbaum thinks *The Lorax* can help "impart objective legitimacy to the claim of justice for the environment" along with pragmatist ethics to help fill in the gaps.

How does pragmatism advance "objective legitimacy?" What in pragmatism helps negotiate divergent sympathies and move us toward greater agreement and more effective action? Rosenbaum looks to John Dewey's conception of "natural piety" to help move the conversation past individual rights, obligations, and contracts toward something deeper and more philosophical.¹ To assume the standpoint of natural piety is to step back and understand that humans subsist in virtue of ecological and interactive relations with nature. This *intellectual* recognition of our dependence upon what is "other" facilitates the growth of a more expansive conception of the domain over which "justice" *should* range.

Still, as Rosenbaum admits, this sketch of "natural piety" is inadequate to help *Lorax* reach objectivity. I suggest buttressing the argument by looking to more contemporary pragmatists addressing issues of environmental value.

As Sandra Rosenthal and Rogene Buchholz (1996) see it, pragmatism *is* an environmental ethic. For pragmatists, values are neither purely objective nor subjective. While it is *our* intelligence's organizing activity that enables us to judge something as "valuable," we also understand (thanks, in large part to science) that "values and valuings... are traits of nature; novel emergents in the context of organism-environment interaction" (Rosenthal and Buchholz, 1996, p. 41). Through observation and experiment, we come to appreciate the increasingly complex relationships that create a shared and experienced world; and some of those relationships, we can tell, are value-laden. (Your dog wants that beef roast—you can tell.)

Meanwhile, the same cognitive capacities that facilitate *recognition* of

value *also* empower us to increase value. “Experimental method, as applied in the moral context, is... the attempt to increase the value ladenness of a situation through a creative growth of perspective which can incorporate and harmonize conflicting or potentially conflicting values” (Rosenthal and Buchholz, 1996, p. 42). This means that what we bundle as “human interests” is not fixed—it can grow. As they put it, “Growth, for the pragmatist, is inherently moral, and growth involves... [the] deepening and expansion of perspective to include ever widening horizons of the cultural and natural worlds to which we are inseparably bound” (Rosenthal and Buchholz, 1996, p. 42).

Their approach conveys much greater assignment of value to environmental entities (and makes “environmental justice” far more objective) *without* relying upon either anthropocentric or biocentric absolutisms. Because value emerges from situations (and not just our subjective minds) we know that the demands of other life-forms are real—we experience them as real claims. Yet because we, too, are enmeshed in situations, we know that *our* needs and desires make real claims, too. However consistent we might find the logic of biocentricism (to value all life, equally) its radical egalitarianism is untenable because it is unlivable. Destroying the AIDS virus does not and cannot present an ethical dilemma. “If everything has intrinsic value, then decision-making becomes somewhat arbitrary” (Rosenthal and Buchholz, 1996, p. 45).

This environmental application of pragmatism (to the anthropocentrism/biocentrism dualism) is pertinent here because it undermines the more fundamental error of presuming an opposition between individual and environment. By insisting on integration, Dewey and William James found a way to not only overcome epistemological puzzles involving “subject” and “object,” but also to re-conceive the ontology of the human self. Once this re-described self (which understands itself as transactional *with* an evolving natural world) is taken as normal, possibilities for growth—moral progress—open up. The meaning of “growth” is liberalized (without specious sentimentality) and new possibilities appear as individuals increasingly identify with other organic beings as well as with the inorganic conditions that sustain all.

In sum, then, the answer to Rosenbaum’s first question is this: *The Lorax* imparts objective legitimacy to claims for environmental justice by helping illustrate the needs and claims of *all* those affected; pragmatism helps ratify the legitimacy of these claims by providing a philosophical account of the ontological and moral connections between sentient and non-sentient, human and non-human.

On the Uses of Fiction and the Philosopher Statesman

In the brief time remaining, I will comment on the second question Rosenbaum (2014, p. 152) raises: does "*The Lorax* have moral substance in presenting a plausible demand for justice for the environment?" What is role of philosophy in helping see the Lorax as an ethical actor? I have mostly answered this question. *The Lorax* does present a plausible demand *in conjunction* with naturalistic pragmatist buttressing. However, what Rosenbaum goes on to say (drawing from his reading of James) is not wholly convincing to me, and I hope to draw him out a bit further.

In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James is pretty hard upon philosophers' analytical and prescriptive tendency to look past actual creatures with actual needs and desires when formulating an ethics. James writes, "They imagine an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides, and each tries to prove that this pre-existing order is more accurately reflected in his own ideas than in those of his adversary" (James, 1891, p. 338). As a result, James says, "We inveterately think that something which we call the 'validity' of the claim is what gives to it its obligatory character, and that this validity... rains down upon the claim, we think, from some sublime dimension of Being, which the moral law inhabits" (James, 1891, p. 338).

But philosophers, James continues, do not really know what's coming down the pike any better than the average person. While a philosopher might be able to argue (as James does) that the universe satisfying more demands is the richer universe, he cannot know in advance *which* emerging possibilities should be the ones we seize and actualize. We must give up prescription and remain sensitive to the fact that "if he makes a bad mistake the cries of the wounded will soon inform him of the fact.... [T] he philosopher is just like the rest of us non-philosophers, so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint" (James, 1891, p. 350).

The upshot for philosophers who agree to stop devising systems of permanent, prescriptive principles is a new job description: they assume the role of a "statesman," negotiating among competing demands. These statesmen, Rosenbaum (2014, p. 154) writes, are "thinkers intent on negotiating among the cacophony of demand and desire to the most inclusive possible whole of mutual satisfaction." They do this not primarily by means of argumentation but using narratives which facilitate communication. Thus, Rosenbaum says (with Rortyan verve) that "Philosophers' responsibility, *qua* philosophers, is to negotiate, not to justify" (2014, p. 154.)

I would ask Rosenbaum: is not this role change a bit too much of a

retreat? Are there not appropriate occasions for argument and justification which nevertheless refrain from implying the construction of a totalizing and prescriptive system? Moreover, is James not proposing something incoherent: a negotiator who is principle-free? Can one really “negotiate” between claimants with no principles of one’s own? Finally, even if one takes the negotiator/statesman role as primarily one of a “story-teller” is there not a fairly important way in which arguments and justifications can help add direction and motive to their moral fables?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I thank Rosenbaum for his ambitious paper. He has sought out important connections not only to philosophy and fiction, but to problems which concern and threaten us all. He has argued that problems of environmental justice will *not* be obvious enough to people until they see that nature’s claims are *both* objectively legitimate *and* intertwined with human identity. *The Lorax*, he contends, provides an example of philosophical statesmanship, insofar as it helps negotiate among conflicting demands not by argument but by imaginative drama. As we are drawn into such stories, we find our sympathies widening—becoming more attuned to the demands of our natural companions—as we come to occupy the standpoint of the Lorax, a standpoint Dewey classified as “natural piety.”

Philosophical statesmanship entails activities productive of moral progress, narratives and negotiations which promise more than argumentation. I have demurred by claiming I do not think these activities can *replace* argumentation, wholesale. What statesmanship does offer is a more dynamical engagement with ethical problems, one seeking not only to discover the present requirements of justice but those required by possible, *future* entanglements, as well.

Notes

¹ See Stone (1972) for an example of an influential legal argument with a similar shift.

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