

# Knowing more and acknowledging others

Kenneth Shockley

Kenneth is the Holmes Rolston III Chair in Environmental Ethics and Philosophy at Colorado State University in the USA.

The essay focuses on the interwoven nature of the epistemic and the ethical. While it is well known that there is an epistemic advantage to approaching a shared concern from multiple points of view, and that basic norms of respect require acknowledging the legitimacy of other points of view, there is an important connection between the two that should be emphasized: only through respecting those other points of view as legitimate is that epistemic advantage fully available. Other points of view, human and nonhuman, need to be acknowledged as legitimate in their own right. This acknowledgement requires a form of humility, a recognition of the limitations of one's own point of view, and has great pedagogical potential. As students share new experiences with one another, particularly as they discover new places whose meanings are collaboratively constructed, this humility becomes an invaluable pedagogical tool. Once students understand the importance of points of view far removed from their own, a lesson common in environmental literature and reinforced through shared experience of place, it is easier to acknowledge the legitimacy of more-than-human points of view, and, accordingly, accept what it means to be a citizen in an ecological community.

**Keywords:** ecological empathy; education; intrinsic value; values

**Citation:** Shockley K (2024) Knowing more and acknowledging others. *The Ecological Citizen* 7(1): 27–34.

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*Somehow, the fact of being food for others had not seemed real, not in the way it did now, as I stood in my canoe in the beating rain staring down into the beautiful, gold-flecked eyes of the crocodile. [...] Some events can completely change your life and your work, although sometimes the extent of this change is not evident until much later. They can lead you to see the world in a completely different way, and you can never again see it as you did before. (Plumwood, 2012: 10)*

*We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain. (Leopold, 1949: 130)*

In sharing an experience we often come to a better understanding. Perhaps that much seems obvious. Gaining insight from different points of view is a familiar phenomenon. From the ‘wisdom of crowds’ literature we also know that under certain conditions we are smarter together (Surowiecki, 2005). But we don’t always gain this collective epistemic benefit: not all sharing gives us a different point of view, and so not all sharing provides us with the wisdom of crowds. The other viewpoints must be distinct; merely absorbing data or insights from others into one’s own point of view or framework will not provide the full epistemic benefit. We need to acknowledge and respect those other points of view, not merely as a means to our own epistemic ends – knowing more – but as representing a respect-worthy member of a common community.

This essay explores the relation between respecting others and the epistemic advantage provided by different points of view. While the epistemic advantage is well studied (Page, 2019; Aminpour *et al.*, 2020, 2021), and the need to respect the views of others is often thought to be an ethical requirement, the intimate connection between the two isn’t recognized as often as it should be. One can see the value of respecting other points of view through shared experiences of place – meaningful locations – as well as through the connections formed through the transformational experiences with the more-than-human world that shapes much of environmental literature. That literature reminds us that these other points of view are not always human. The pedagogical possibilities provided by sharing place yield a means of showing the interwoven nature of respect and epistemic advantage, while also providing an entrée into more ecocentric framings of our own ecological communities.

The argument proceeds as follows. Accessing the epistemic benefit of collectives requires recognizing the value of different perspectives, which, in turn, requires acknowledging the limitations of one’s own perspective. Acknowledging these limitations amounts to an acceptance of other perspectives as being epistemically legitimate, and requires humility. The legitimacy of another point of view provides a claim for moral respect. Respect for the other as an equal member of epistemic community follows under most conditions.

I will conclude, first, that only by acknowledging other points of view as legitimate do we gain the full epistemic benefit of those points of view. Second, acknowledging the value of other points of view in the human context, through shared experiences, provides a constructive pedagogical path to help students understand their membership in more-than-human communities.

### The value of shifting points of view

Many of us can relate to the transformational power of experiences, where a shift in perspective leads to a fundamental change in our understanding of the world, and perhaps in our understanding of who we are. Kurt Fausch provides one poignant example. He writes,

*I found that my life had changed the first time I crossed the reflective boundary to look beneath the surface of a stream. [...] [T]he view was of a place much*

*deeper and more complex than I had imagined from above. [...] Every new vantage point revealed more members of an intricate underwater community. [...] These fish looked so different from the same creatures that flopped awkwardly in my hands. (Fausch, 2015: 7–8)*

Dropping below the waterline requires reframing one's understanding of the world and our place in it.

Environmental writing is awash with examples of the transformational power of seeing the world differently, of acknowledging different voices by acknowledging other points of view: from Leopold's famous encounter with a wolf, where he learned something deep and profound as he watched the green fire in her eyes fade, to Val Plumwood's famous encounter with a crocodile, an encounter that vividly made apparent what it is to be prey.

Leopold and Plumwood invite us to supplement our limited points of view by acknowledging the legitimacy of what might have seemed to be an alien perspective. The wolf was no longer just a predator, a competitor to hunters and a hazard for ranchers. It was a part of a larger system, a community that we shared. The crocodile was not a killing machine, a monster from our nightmares waiting in lagoons to prey on innocents. The crocodile was playing a role that fit into a larger systemic whole, one where human beings also had a role, even if that role was not entirely the one they expected or desired. Thinking of the wolf as a threat or the crocodile as a monster results from over-emphasizing a single point of view. We can, and often do, do better. The single point of view represented by the wolf differed from that of the hunter, rancher, ecologist or even the mountain itself. Leopold's "thinking like a mountain" requires taking on board a more inclusive perspective that embraces all of hunter, rancher, ecologist, mountain ... and wolf. It requires accepting the viewpoint of the wolf as legitimate.

A caveat is in order: to recognize another perspective as legitimate does not require endorsing that perspective; nor must one acquiesce to it. Rather, such a recognition points to the irreducible and inaccessible epistemic capacities of another. Further, we can fail to respect not only by treating that perspective entirely as a means to our own epistemic ends, but also by absorbing that perspective, by colonizing it. Two-eyed seeing (Reid *et al.*, 2021) provides a helpful way of addressing concerns about the legitimacy of different points of view; both perspectives are valid. But what of the toxic or morally problematic points of views of other humans, for example. Are they legitimate? Such views may undermine our collective intelligence. That is possible, and it may be difficult in practice to sort the helpful from the detrimental. But even in such cases, it is likely that in understanding the errors of such positions we can adapt, collectively (Almaatouq *et al.*, 2020). There are no guarantees. But from an epistemic point of view, we fail to recognize them at our own peril. To acknowledge as legitimate is not to endorse. And to respect, as Darwall (1977) reminds us, is not to endorse. The possibility of error, epistemic or moral, should not lead to exclusion. The lesson of two-eyed seeing is that so long as we are focused on a shared understanding it is counterproductive, and

disrespectful, to conflate recognition of legitimacy with endorsing the framework of the other.

Of course I may not be able to access the crocodile's view fully, but one can learn, as Plumwood does, the importance of acknowledging that the picture of the world is beyond one's own perspective, that framing the world from the point of view of a predator that would prefer to eat me, provides me with a more complete understanding of the natural world. The crocodile is just doing its part as a member of a community when it treats me as prey. Even as Plumwood resists the crocodile she recognized a larger community, one shaped by respect. And shaped not only by epistemic respect, but also moral respect, respect for that other as being a member of a common community. The strength of the argument comes from recognizing that our own view is limited and that others are just as legitimate, epistemically, as our own. We need not adopt the crocodile's view. I can recognize the perspective, the narrative of the crocodile, as legitimate, even as I resist that crocodile.

There are different paths to respectful engagement. Sometimes engaging with other points of view is shaped more by empathy and less by alterity. Shared experiences may provide this sort of opening. Sometimes this engagement involves recognition of the other as different. Plumwood's encounter is one such example; less empathy, more alterity. Leopold, Plumwood and perhaps Fausch focus on shocking alterity for the lessons of humility and acknowledgement of the epistemic legitimacy of the point of view of others. But there are other ways, some with great epistemic and pedagogical potential. Through the sharing of an experience, for example, we may recognize the other as having a claim to a shared community perspective and an independent point of view.

I am reminded of this every summer. Towards the middle of a field course in environmental ethics I take students to a small scree field, where the shattered wreckage of an old World War II bomber remains, its torn and bent aluminium still bright after almost 80 years. Some students understand this place to be a sacred spot, a testament to the sacrifice and lost lives of those who served. Others take it to be a reality check on the illusion of wilderness; for thousands of years humans have lived and passed through this landscape, no matter what might be mistakenly inferred from its designation as a 'wilderness' area. Still others pass over the history altogether, and lose themselves in the view, northeast over the foothills of the Rockies to the plains beyond.

The discussions that result from their individual perspectives are powerful and provide a great opportunity for students to see this place from the point of view of one another, and subsequently develop a shared understanding. This understanding only comes from their recognition of different views on a common experience. These students bring to this place a remarkable diversity of perspectives and backgrounds, both academic and personal. In sharing experiences of this place with one another, we all see it in a new way. We see it from the point of view of others, or through the lens of history, or through a lens crafted by weeks away from our more urbanized landscapes. Through our exposure to those different perspectives we see the limitations of our own perspectives, and we are presented with possibilities we hadn't imagined.

Sharing place can be just as transformative as the experiences shared by Fausch, Leopold and Plumwood. I think, and hope, this is the case for my students. I know it is the case for me.

## Humility and respect

Recognizing the limitations of our own point of view leads to acknowledging there are other points of view, equally limited but equally legitimate; that recognition requires respect. Humility and respect make an ethical demand on us. We need to listen, to really listen not just to the voices we expect and anticipate, but to voices we hadn't noticed before. We only get the epistemic advantage of shared meaning through respecting others. And who those others are, even *what* they are, is an increasingly expansive group. The gold-flecked eye of Plumwood's crocodile serves as a reminder of this. That eye also serves as a reminder of the need for humility and the dangers of species hubris. The points of view we need to respect are not limited to the human.

We cannot just assimilate those different voices. In order to actually gain the benefit, the epistemic advantage of different points of view, we need to acknowledge the legitimacy of those other points of view. This is a general requirement: the wisdom of crowds literature points out that the epistemic advantage comes from discrete points of view (Almaatouq *et al.*, 2020; Aminpour *et al.*, 2021). Subsuming different points of view under one framework reduces or even eliminates the benefit. And the 'cannot' has an ethical dimension as well. Acknowledging other points of view requires humility and respect: the humility to acknowledge the incomplete nature of our own perspective and the epistemic limitations that come with it, and the respect that comes with accepting the legitimacy of other points of view. Again, we need to really listen.

Plumwood and Leopold both offer models for what this acceptance looks like. Leopold extols us to develop an ecological conscience, to break out of our individual points of view, and adopt a larger perspective that encompasses the ecological systems in which we are situated. Plumwood invites us to see ourselves as part of that ecological community in a more intimate way, to feel like food. We need to see ourselves as embedded and embodied beings, not as creatures apart. We need to acknowledge the legitimacy of the perspective that sees us as prey. And we see this perspective not as one to be denigrated, but as one to be respected, acknowledged to be as legitimate as our own. One of the central lessons provided by experiential education is the use of shared experiences to bring about transformation through recognizing other points of view. Plumwood describes this as recognizing the narratives – both that of which one is author and that in which one plays the role of prey. Leopold asks us to take a longer and wider point of view, and let our conscience expand accordingly. Fausch invites us to see the world below the waterline, to literally immerse ourselves in our object of study, and accordingly gain both respect and knowledge. To gain one fully requires the other.

Here is the point to be taken from Fausch, Plumwood and Leopold: the epistemic benefit of collectives is available in the more-than-human world. We need only respect those diverse perspectives appropriately. I suggest that this



provides the unsung corollary of Leopold's Land Ethic: *Any epistemic advantage of community membership is limited without ethical acknowledgement*. To be part of an ecological community is to recognize and acknowledge the limitations of our own point of view and the legitimacy of others.

Dramatic experiences in remote places are not necessary for either the epistemic benefit of shared meaning or the transformational power of seeing the world from the view of another. Walking together, experiencing our shared landscape, is enough, wherever that landscape might be. Empathic connection through shared experience provides a pedagogical opening for recognizing the legitimacy of the other and the epistemic value of their perspective. Whether walking urban streets, the green spaces between, or an old, remote crash site, we have the opportunity to gain understanding by sharing. Sharing these experiences and perspectives contributes to a more expansive, more complete understanding of our places.

### From acknowledgement to knowing more

There is precedent for Leopold's corollary in the idea of 'making kin' (Kimmerer, 2014, 2017; Haraway, 2015, 2016; see also Ferkany and Whyte, 2012; Whyte, 2020). Getting past treating the other as a mere object to be exploited, whether for epistemic possibilities or otherwise, to a position of respect and acknowledgement – this was the wisdom in the eye of Leopold's wolf and one of the lessons provided by Plumwood's crocodile. There is a form of relationship formed through this respect of the other, one of acknowledgment of the legitimacy of its perspective. This respect entails an acceptance of the narrative with the crocodile as narrator and me as prey. There is a humility required by such an acknowledgement, one found in the idea of kinship, one that requires the limitations of one's own point of view and the deep value of recognizing the legitimacy of the views of others. This is the source of recognizing one's ecological community.

Humility and respect for the more-than-human world, required for the epistemic advantage of diverse viewpoints and essential for kinship, are constitutive of an ecocentric understanding of community. Through shared experience we can provide one another the opportunity for a more ecocentric understanding of our community, our places and our world. Through humility, respect and the primacy of relationship, through a more ecocentric perspective, we can better see Fausch's world below the waterline, Leopold's perspective of the mountain, and Plumwood's challenge to balance the narrative we author and that in which we are prey.

Taking on board a different point of view changes not only how much of the world we see, with all of the epistemic advantages and shared intelligence we might get from that view, it can also change the meaning of the thing experienced. For Fausch, the river changed; for Leopold, the Mountain, and all that it represented; for Plumwood, everything. The transformative power of experience arises from these changes in meaning.

We can come to a recognition of the epistemic and ethical significance of the other, recognizing their point of view, in two ways (of course there may well be

others). First, encounters with other beings can simultaneously require the acknowledgement that our own perspective is limited (and bring with that acknowledgement humility) and that other perspectives, different from our human point of view, provide a complementary perspective. Second, sharing experiences can inspire the recognition of the limits of one's own perspective and the distinctness, and epistemic significance, of others. In both cases recognizing one's own limitations is necessary to accept the other point of view as providing a distinct epistemic perspective. With this acceptance comes humility and acknowledgement of shared community, ethically, and the conditions required for the benefit of collectives, epistemically.

Without the humility of recognizing our own limited point of view, and the corresponding respect for the points of view others, we will not gain the benefits of our collective intelligence, whether we understand that 'our' to be a matter of our friends, our species, our ecological community, or our world.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the audience at the 2022 annual meeting of the American Fisheries Association, where some of these ideas were initially presented, the excellent students of his field-based environmental ethics courses, and – for invaluable comments and guidance – the reviewers for and editors of *The Ecological Citizen*.

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