



University of Dundee

Ben Almassi, Reparative environmental justice in a world of wounds

Jones, Tanya

Published in:
The International Journal of Restorative Justice

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jones, T. (2021). Ben Almassi, Reparative environmental justice in a world of wounds. *The International Journal of Restorative Justice*, 1(2021).

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**Ben Almassi, *Reparative environmental justice in a world of wounds*.
Lexington: Lexington Books, 2020, 186 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4985-
9206-2 (hbk).**

Philosophy and ethics have much to say about the ways in which we ought to live in relationship with one another, with non-human beings and nature, with marginalised communities and with future generations. And yet, as Ben Almassi points out, these traditions have comparatively little to say about appropriate responses in light of our continued environmental injustices, about the non-ideal and about, as he puts it, our answer to the question ‘What ought I to do now?’(vii). Almassi has written authoritatively on these issues before, especially in two important articles on ecological restoration and intergenerational climate justice (see Almassi, 2017a, 2017b). *Reparative environmental justice in a world of wounds* builds upon this work to create a wide-ranging and critical account of how justice based on relational repair could address urgent environmental injustices.

As in his previous works, he draws particularly upon the work of Margaret Urban Walker, applying her analysis of responsibility, group harms and moral repair to environmental contexts. Her terminology of ‘reparative justice’ is adopted, but Almassi uses this virtually interchangeably with ‘restorative justice’, attributing the distinction largely to practice within different contexts and disciplines. This usage therefore differs from that of Rob White, who distinguishes decisively between restorative and reparative justice, the former requiring reciprocity, shared agency and community membership, while the latter includes imposed and non-consensual repair within a more punitive context (see White, 2014, 2017; see also *Conversations*, this issue). The book seeks to outline the potential application of restorative justice to a range of issues, its implications for policy and practice decisions but also the situations and methods in which it might be inappropriate or counterproductive. Crucially, it is grounded in actually existing environmental injustice, particularly the 1979 spill of 93 million gallons of radioactive slurry in New Mexico, discussion of which opens and closes the book.

In Chapter One, Almassi identifies three types of amelioration which can follow such events: relative improvement, iterative adjustment and rectification. The first two of these are about doing better in the future, but only the third addresses the continuing effects of past harms. Even here, however, further analysis is needed. Rectification could mean simply a return to the situation before the harm occurred, with monetary compensation filling in the gaps where this is impossible. This, for Almassi, as for Walker, is insufficient. Payment may be a part of the necessary amends, but the focus needs to be upon restoring, building and strengthening the underlying relationships between perpetrators and victims. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, Almassi recognises that actual reconciliation will not always be feasible, but the aim of environmental reparative justice is to create or rebuild the conditions of trust, accountability and hope which would underpin healthy relationships in the future.

In Chapter Two, Almassi identifies significant overlaps between the environmental and restorative justice movements. These include their grassroots origins and sometimes problematic mainstream appropriation – for restorative justice by criminal justice systems, and for environmental justice by the larger NGOs. Both movements pay close attention to

subjective experience and non-ideal problems, as they ‘begin with failure and work from there’ (27). Almassi suggests that both traditions can learn from one another, enabling an environmental justice which looks beyond distribution and compensation, and a truly transformational form of restorative justice, acutely aware of the need for structural change. This is difficult work, demanding an acknowledgement of power dynamics, recognition justice, interconnectedness and the validity of resistance to oppression. Mainstream organisations and privileged environmentalists, slowly becoming aware of their complicity in racist and settler-colonial systems, have too often limited their response to relative improvement and adjustment. But, as Almassi notes, environmental justice groups have already provided the resources needed for a community-focused restorative approach; ‘we do not have to guess at how to make amends’ (34).

Chapter Three addresses the debates and practices of ecological restoration, showing how a relational perspective cuts through the dilemmas of authenticity and arbitrary designation. As Walker argues, the term ‘restoration’ is normative rather than historical, indicating the kind of relationship sought rather than the replication of a particular *status quo*. Ecological restoration can be a process of making amends, looking back at past destruction with acknowledgement of responsibility, as well as forward to future health and what Walker calls ‘moral adequacy’ (2006). Almassi recognises that this is not a straightforward process, and that it contains its own ethical dilemmas. Who should carry out remediation: the actual perpetrators of harm, who may lack expertise, or professionals who may lack moral responsibility? Who are the victims, and if these are non-human beings or nature, how can they experience or express forgiveness or trust? There are no easy answers, but Almassi urges the value of a pluralist approach, recognising that different environmental philosophies can together produce a workable consensus, agreeing on the existence of harm and the need for healing, even where they differ on issues of standing, role and process.

In Chapter Four, questions of animal and interspecies ethics are considered, recognising that even the best human decisions have negative implications for the non-human, that we are involuntarily entangled in interspecies relationships and that compensatory actions cannot counterweigh the harm that we continue to inflict. As in the restoration context, there are issues about the capacity of victims to receive apology, to forgive and to extend trust, and acknowledgement that even where possible, such responses may not be appropriate. The perpetrator of animal suffering may be the very person or entity least fitted to make active amends, calling instead upon the wider community to acknowledge and act upon the responsibility which we share. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that humans do not carry equal burdens, and that groups with traditions of healthy interspecies relationships are themselves frequently victims both of original harm and of – sometimes clumsy – attempts at repair.

Chapter Five explores ameliorative responses to intergenerational climate injustice, following Annette Baier in identifying responsibilities not only to those who will be harmed by future climate impacts, but also to those in the past who count upon us to continue their ‘good intentions’ (see Baier, 1981). The temptation to view compensation as sufficient is especially strong in this context, as the time lag between emissions and impacts means that payment may appear chronologically before the damage which it purports to reimburse. This delay, and the entangled nature of climate causation, also make the identification of responsibility for

specific harms problematic. As with the issue of animal suffering, it is necessary simultaneously to acknowledge responsibility, especially collectively, for common types of harm, and also to recognise that fault is not evenly spread across humanity. As Greta Thunberg pointed out in her plea at the United Nations, some members of later generations are already present and able to extend or withhold trust and forgiveness. However, the responses of many more, and of past generations, had they known of climate harms, must remain hidden to us. Almassi considers various answers to this conundrum, preferring an approach which seeks forgiveness and the restoration of trust without expecting to know whether or not these are granted. There are potential criticisms of restorative justice in this context, including that it may conflict with other means of achieving climate justice, that it may damage relationships among victims with different access or varying responses to restorative processes, and that perpetrators who acknowledge responsibility may be brought into conflict with those who do not. But there is no neutral position, and denying the opportunity for restorative encounters carries its own dangers. Processes will require care and scrutiny, with an awareness, as in the other contexts, that not all relationships are capable of full restoration and that for some corporate perpetrators the only appropriate moral response to the extent of their wrongdoing would be dissolution.

Restorative processes, of course, require procedural as well as substantive integrity, and Chapter Six considers the issue of reparative epistemic justice in relation to traditional ecological knowledge. This concept includes both bodies of indigenous knowledge of the natural world and the participatory ways in which this knowledge is experienced and shared. Epistemic injustices take a variety of forms, intersecting with other forms of oppression, and can occur in, as well as precede, reparative processes. As in the other contexts explored in the book, appropriate action requires sensitivity, humility, self-criticism and a willingness to accept that sometimes the only truly just act is a respectful cessation of relationship.

In Chapter Seven, Almassi applies the principles of reparative justice to the specific case of the Chicago Wilderness, a site of conflicting environmental aspirations and priorities over many years. The 'Chicago controversy' illustrates what activists know well, that the most painful conflicts are not with governments or corporate power, but where environmentalists disagree among themselves about which practices best heal or protect ecological integrity. As Almassi notes, 'the aftermath of environmental wrongdoing is itself susceptible to further wrongdoing' (126), threatening a vicious spiral of degradation. Here the values of restorative justice are especially pertinent: active participation, recognition of identity and knowledge, acknowledgement of harm, and the patient building of trust, cooperation and what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls 'allegiance to gratitude' (132, see Kimmerer, 2013).

The book concludes with another image from Kimmerer, of corn, squash and beans thriving in coexistence. Almassi applies this to a restorative vision, of repentant perpetrators, forgiving victims and reintegrated communities. Even if, he suggests, only a few such initiatives take place, they can play a significant role in bridging the spaces between us, as humans, and with non-human beings and with nature. He considers the 'misanthropic challenge' presented by Christine Korsgaard (139, see Korsgaard, 2018) that the truly moral act of humanity would be to extinguish itself altogether, but rejects it, arguing that extinction would give us no opportunities to repair the ongoing damage of our environmental and justice failures.

Restorative processes are not easy, either in theory or practice, and carry the risk of creating

greater harm. But with hard work, humility, flexibility and collaboration, they offer the hope of healing our most fundamental relationships.

The intertwined ecological and climate crises are, in every sense, wicked problems, requiring new and restored relationships between people and nature, but also across disciplines and approaches. This book represents an important step forward in the development of environmental restorative justice, providing a thoughtful and nuanced philosophical and ethical foundation for further exploration in both theory and practice. It is especially exciting for those of us involved directly in such work, but also has much to offer to a broad range of scholars, practitioners and policymakers. In this world of wounds, we are all potential medics. Ben Almassi has supplied us with a case of essential sutures for the work ahead.

*Tanya Jones**

References

- Almassi, B. (2017a). Ecological restorations as practices of moral repair. *Ethics and the Environment*, 22(1), 19-40. doi: 10.2979/ethicsenviro.22.1.02.
- Almassi, B. (2017b). Climate change and the need for intergenerational reparative justice. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 30, 199-212. doi: 10.1007/s10806-017-9661-z.
- Baier, A. (1981). The rights of past and future persons. In E. Partridge (ed.), *Responsibilities to future generations* (pp. 171-183). New York: Prometheus Books.
- Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- Korsgaard, C. (2018). *Fellow creatures: our obligations to the other animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walker, M.U. (2006). Restorative justice and reparations. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 37(3), 377-395. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9833.2006.00343.x.
- White, R. (2014). Indigenous communities, environmental protection and restorative justice. *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, 18(2), 43-54.
- White, R. (2017). Reparative justice, environmental crime and penalties for the powerful. *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 67(2), 117-132. doi: 10.1007/s10611-01.

* Tanya Jones is a PhD researcher, University of Dundee, Dundee, United Kingdom.
Contact author: t.w.jones@dundee.ac.uk.