

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT—DO NOT CITE

EARTH'S INSIGHTS: A GEOGRAPHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON ITS RATIONALE AND METHOD

In Earth's Insights (1994), J. Baird Callicott has written a work of eminent interest to geographers. There has been a growing intellectual concern among geographers in environmental ethics; as a recent example, the first edition of Philosophy and Geography was devoted exclusively to the subject (Light and Smith 1997), and a new journal of geographical and environmental ethics, Ethics, Place, and Environment, will be launched in 1998. With few exceptions, however (Glacken 1967 being the most noteworthy), it is difficult to think of a work by a geographer that matches Earth's Insights in breadth. Inevitably, a study of such magnitude lays itself open to criticism, and that is what I wish to provide here, albeit in the spirit of encouraging further work of similar breadth in this topical area by environmental philosophers and geographers alike.

One way to look critically at Earth's Insights is to consider it in three phases: its rationale, its method, and its conclusions. The latter is the most immediately apparent, and, I will venture, commonly-discussed, so I will not treat it at length, but merely restate it here. Though at times Callicott seems simply to be arguing that there ought to be a somewhat unified global conservation ethic, his real conclusion is that there indeed is a global conservation ethic emerging, an ethic resonant both with Leopoldian ecocentrism and postmodern science, evident in many of the world's cultural traditions. To Callicott, premodern ideas of nature found in nonwestern cultures bear strong affinity to postmodern ideas of nature that part with Cartesian subject/object dualism in favor of more ecological, relational ontologies and derivative ethics—ontologies and ethics of the sort alluded to by Leopold in his emphasis on the biotic community as the

locus of value and respect. Callicott's conclusion is foregrounded in much of the book, as early as the introductory chapter:

The coming twenty-first century paradigm has many conceptual affinities with preindustrial attitudes toward nature, especially those of the East. Thus, detailed cross-cultural comparison of traditional concepts of the nature of nature, human nature, and the relationship between people and nature with the ideas emerging in ecology and the new physics should be mutually reinforcing (p. 12).

Callicott's rationale and method are, however, at least logically prior to this conclusion, so they deserve careful scrutiny. First, his rationale: very broadly, Callicott is convinced that we live in an era of environmental crisis, an era by no means fully addressed by 1970s-era environmental policy. He states at the outset, for instance:

In the late 1980s, the second wave of the twentieth century's environmental crisis began to crest. Word reached the public that a "hole" in the planet's protective membrane of ozone had been discovered over the Antarctic....Each spring the hole has grown larger. Because of the continuing increase in carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse" gases in the earth's atmosphere, most scientists now agree that the planet will warm up, with potentially disastrous environmental consequences. The assault on Earth's girdle of moist tropical forests, home to half the planet's complement of species, has intensified. Our generation may preside over a rare episode of abrupt, mass species extinction....The environmental crisis—discovered in the industrial West in the 1960s, plastered over with regulative legislation in the 1970s, then forgotten only to return with a vengeance in the 1980s—is now global in scope and focus (pp. xii-xiii).

Callicott then asks, "So, what can we do about it?" (xiii). His answer, ultimately, is that we will not fix this environmental crisis without invoking an appropriate ethic to inform our actions:

Undergirding individual resolve and the incisive criticism and reform of our social structures, I think we must deliberately explore the contours of an ecological consciousness and conscience. We must, in other words, also work at articulating an environmental ethic (p. xiv).

The global scope of our environmental crisis suggests to Callicott the need for this environmental ethic to be compelling to the world's peoples, and thus optimally emerge from the diversity of indigenous thought:

While the Western world needs an environmental ethic evolved in concert with its intellectual traditions, an environmental ethic is needed just as badly in Egypt, Iran, India, China, Japan, Brazil, and everywhere else in the so-called developing world. But it is as arrogant as it is hopeless to suppose that environmental ethics can be exported without attunement to resonant elements in the rich intellectual traditions of non-Western cultures (pp. xiv-xv).

Callicott's rationale not only establishes the need for a global conservation ethic, but its specific function as well. Callicott echoes Leopold early on in arguing that an environmental ethic primarily exerts a negative influence on human activity:

Our familiar social ethics would impose limitations on interpersonal freedom of action and on personal freedom in relation to society as a whole....Similarly, an environmental ethic would impose limitations on human freedom of action in relationship to nonhuman natural entities and to nature as a whole (p. 1).

In sum, Callicott's rationale for Earth's Insights is the need for moral (i.e., above and beyond natural and legal) restraints to human conduct throughout the world so as to avert the kinds of practices that have resulted in the global environmental crisis we face today.

I have several concerns, however, with this rationale for Callicott's work. The first lies in its very point of departure: the assertion that we live in an era of environmental crisis. We would all agree at some level with this claim, though we may be less comfortable with the overarching declensionist narrative (Cronon 1992; Merchant 1995) Callicott applies to environmental history—that is, the sense I get from Earth's Insights that human impacts have been by and large destructive (“A reexamination of human history and prehistory from an ecological perspective reveals a long-standing pattern of anthropogenic environmental degradation,” pg. 7). Geographers have looked at human impacts on their environments a good deal (e.g., Bell and Walker 1992; Goudie 1990; Roberts 1989; Simmons 1989; Turner et al. 1990); and their conclusions are mixed from one place and situation to the next. One comparative study largely done by geographers, for instance, discovered very different temporal trajectories and levels of environmental criticality in regions such as Amazonia, the North Sea, and Nepal (Kasperson, Kasperson, and Turner 1995).

What is more important, however, is that we must admit that terms such as “crisis” are evaluative judgments, not simple statements of fact. Thus we should consider that thinking of environmental ethics as a response to environmental crisis is not wholly correct, that indeed at some level an ethic informs and hence precedes the ways we make sense of anthropogenic environmental change. This leads to the challenge: whose ethics ought to be invoked to evaluate anthropogenic change, to call it good or bad or neutral? We can look around the world and find people of many cultures who

are concerned about the negative effects of environmental change, so I am not sure that labeling it as crisis is wholly a Western cultural project. But then again, we can look around the world, indeed within our own communities, and find many more positive evaluations of environmental change; whose evaluations ought to prevail?

Unproblematized, environmental crisis becomes a problematic point of departure for environmental ethics, though I realize that Callicott is by no means alone in this respect.

I am also uncomfortable with the notion that an environmental ethic primarily serves to restrain human practices that may otherwise result in more serious environmental impacts. This reminds me of the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's book Morality and Imagination (Tuan 1989), in which the title's two terms are counterposed as a dilemma in human societies, with creativity and imagination constantly bucking up against moral restraints. Though I would agree with the significance of Tuan's dilemma, surely an environmental ethic is more than a set of should nots! Ethics often involve some notion of the good—even, arguably, those that primarily attend to notions of the right in deontological fashion (Goodin 1993, 241). Callicott approaches this positive sense when he alludes to the evolutionary basis of environmental ethics (e.g., pp. 199ff.) as a reminder of the connectedness of humans to natural processes, yet the good is not explicitly stated (other than, by implication, as adherence to these processes). If indeed there is some global environmental crisis, then we need to define the good to inform restorative actions as much as we need some restraint on actions that would worsen it. Environmental ethics must somehow be linked with our geographical imaginations (Gregory 1994), if we are to overcome the dilemma Tuan raised.

Other potential problems with Callicott's rationale may exist, though I do not think that he is unaware of them, given his other published work. For instance, this search

for environmental ethics among the world's indigenous systems of thought could, if pursued naively, smack of primitivism. Indeed, the tendency of the environmental movement to privilege, in Edenic fashion, primitive cultures as being somehow closer to nature has been roundly criticized by geographers (Lewis 1992; Pepper 1996; Simmons 1993). Additionally, hasn't globalization resulted in a world where virtually all of its peoples are now participants in multiple and overlapping scales of meaning (Bird et al. 1993; Featherstone 1990; Robertson 1992), of which "traditional" meanings are only one component? Another potential theoretical problem with work in the genre of Earth's Insights is idealism, of placing socially-based ideas as causally prior to the conduct of societies. Social theorists have, in the context of the concept of ideology (Eagleton 1991; Larrain 1994; McLellan 1986; Thompson 1990) and related discussions, generally adopted a dialectical account of the relationship between ideas and action, which acknowledges that ideas may in some cases merely justify action ex post facto, and in other cases may be poorly correlated with action at best. Callicott discusses the relationship between environmental ethics and environmental conduct in his last chapter ("Traditional Environmental Ethics in Action"); yet it is worth bearing in mind that, since we cannot presume that social conduct necessarily follows social ideas, global environmental crisis is not going to be readily solved even if people have access to the best systems of environmental ethics. How will, for instance, these ideas likely influence the kinds of development projects supported by the economists of the World Bank (Adams 1990)? How will they help curb the growing rates of absolute poverty and related causes of environmental degradation among the world's dispossessed (Smil 1994)? One could argue that the weak link in coming to terms with our environmental crisis lies not in some paucity of environmental ideas, but in our inability to check abuses of economic and political power which underlie environmental degradation.

Turning now to Callicott's method: how does he go about establishing that the world's indigenous traditions largely resonate, each in its own special way, with a Leopoldian ecological ethic? The question is an important one, because without some explicit method the temptation must be too great to find in the world exactly what one is looking for, to be selective in one's vision.

I briefly provide two points in this vein for consideration. The first is the famous problem of inductive logic, generally discussed by philosophers of science in terms of white swans (sometimes ravens, cats, or other fauna) and black swans. If, for a moment, we take white swans to represent a Leopoldian-style ecocentric ethic, is one white swan per indigenous worldview enough to fulfill Callicott's criterion, or does even one black swan in a lake of white swans disprove his assertion? Is it enough, in other words, for Callicott to find something, anything, in the moral ideas of a culture that could be resonant with certain elements of a land ethic, or must he demonstrate that these moral ideas represent at least a potential majority view? Perhaps Callicott is an optimist and I am not, but I do not at all see Leopold cropping up in every part of the globe (and I may not be alone; one generally positive review of *Earth's Insights* was rather cynically entitled "Around the world with Aldo Leopold" [Light 1995]). I would like to be able to say that I am right and Callicott is wrong or vice versa, but we cannot without some agreed-upon set of criteria, and I do believe that the problem of inductive logic, without explicit attention, makes it difficult to identify sound criteria upon which to proceed.

Another very important methodological point: what is Callicott comparing these indigenous ethics against, and how is he deciding that this standard ought to be the norm? Callicott explicates this point in the context of what he calls the "one-many" problem (pp. 11 ff., 187ff.): the tension between universalist and particularist ethics.

Callicott's argument is that he will adopt the Leopoldian evolutionary-ecological land ethic as a standard in large part because it lies in accordance with a more readily universalizable scientific worldview, which is "self-consciously self-critical" (p. 191), and at any rate is moving in a good direction in his estimate, from a modern sensibility of nature as machine to a postmodern sensibility of nature as organism. Though some geographers may support Callicott's decision to privilege a worldview which is "self-consciously self-critical," others would wonder whether science is as self-consciously self-critical as he alleges (e.g., Gregory 1979), and indeed virtually all geographers I know, whether supporters or opponents of postmodernism, would take exception to his arguably quixotic statement that a postmodern scientific worldview of, among other things, nature-as-organism is emerging—or perhaps they are all what Callicott refers to as "deconstructive" postmodernists (p. 185). This point is critical: if we can't agree with the standard he uses in his assessment, we certainly can't approve of its outcome.

To engage in a detailed discussion of Leopold and postmodernism is beyond the present task, for this ethical framework is that which Callicott has developed and defended at length for some time (at least since Callicott 1989). I applaud Callicott's resolute stand behind this ethical position—indeed, I share his strong sentiments regarding the need to move beyond anthropocentrism, a direction certain geographers have considered unnecessary (e.g., Pepper 1993)—but I cannot agree with his defense of its claim to universality, given the methodological problems I raise above.

If I have taken my task here to be one of good-naturedly goading Callicott into considering global conservation ethics from the perspective of a geographer who dabbles in environmental philosophy, then the related task of Callicott and other environmental philosophers is clearly to goad geographers into considering human-environment relations from their perspective as well. It is my sincere hope that

geographers and environmental philosophers will continue to interact in future in our search to understand this Earth, the “geo” of geography, so as to make it a better place.

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