

## Callicott, J. Baird (1941–)

“J. Baird Callicott”  
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pp. 252-54.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1941. John Baird Callicott is one of the world's foremost environmental philosophers. Acknowledged both as a creative and rigorous scholar and as an eloquent stylist, he is also a provocative and sometimes controversial thinker. Callicott is perhaps best known for his work on the philosophical underpinnings of the Land Ethic of Aldo Leopold, the nature of intrinsic value, and the debate over the concept of wilder-

ness, among other more purely philosophical topics. However, Callicott has also contributed significantly to the literature and discussion surrounding the connections between the world's various religious and cultural traditions and their environmental attitudes, ethics, and actions.

In the early 1980s Callicott was already exploring the connections between world religions and the newly emerging sub-discipline of philosophy known as environmental ethics. For Callicott, drawing upon the planet's religious insights offered a means by which to begin to remedy the planet's environmental woes. As Callicott himself put it,

Environmental concerns cross not only political boundaries, they also cross cultural boundaries. Hence, we need to articulate ecologically correct environmental ethics in the grammars of local cultures if conservation values and ethics are to be everywhere intelligible and agreeable (1999: 169).

Although Callicott views himself “as a quick-study, armchair scholar, mucking about with this sacred text and that, trying to conjure out of each an environmental ethic” (1999: 170), in many ways, his approach to unpacking the “grammars of local cultures” has come to typify much of the discussion surrounding the connections between religion and nature. The core of Callicott's contribution is a discussion of the links between the worldviews of various traditions and their environmental philosophy and ethics. This focus is demonstrated most completely in his *Earth's Insights*, a book Callicott fully expected to “incense” religious studies scholars “more expert and internally situated than I . . . to do a better job” (1999: 170). In general, Callicott gives us a model with which to begin to understand ethics and the connections between someone's or some group's worldview, values, ethics, and eventually their actions. Our various senses of the nature of reality and our place in it – or, our worldviews – inform our sense of value and hence our manifold ethical commitments. According to Callicott,

In sum, ethics are embedded in larger conceptual complexes – comprehensive worldviews – that more largely limit and inspire human behavior. And although idealistic, ethics exert a palpable influence on behavior. They provide models to emulate, goals to strive for, norms by which to evaluate actual behavior (1994: 5).

Hence, the various environmental ethics of individuals and groups is revealed through a careful examination of their metaphysical presuppositions.

Callicott operates under the conceptual exemplar which suggests that the inclusivity of a group's social

commitments bespeaks the depth and breadth of their ethical commitments. Since the sense of social inclusion is correlative with the sense of ethical inclusion and commitment (*ala* the moral theory of Charles Darwin, David Hume, and Adam Smith), a group's environmental ethic is revealed not by focusing on the actions that they do or do not engage in, but by concentrating instead on how they construct their communities. Callicott's approach, then, moves us away from an unfruitful discussion and assessment focusing on the actions of various peoples and toward one centering on an unpacking and articulation of their worldview as a measure of their environmental commitment.

The application of this basic model is perhaps seen most clearly in the work Callicott has done in American Indian and Asian traditions of thought. While the dominant Western European worldview "has encouraged human alienation from the nature environment and an exploitative practical relationship with it," according to Callicott, "the world view typical of American Indian peoples has included and supported an environmental ethic" (1989: 177). In short,

The implicit overall metaphysic of American Indian cultures locates human beings in a larger *social*, as well as physical, environment. People belong not only to a human community, but to a community of all nature as well. Existence in this larger society, just as existence in a family and tribal context, places people in an environment in which reciprocal responsibilities and mutual obligations are taken for granted and assumed without question or reflection (1989: 189-90).

According to Callicott, disparate Asian religious traditions - from Daoism to Hinduism to Buddhism - also harbor and manifest environmental ethics: "Eastern traditions of thought represent nature, and the relationship of people to nature, in ways that cognitively resonate with contemporary ecological ideas and environmental ideals" (Callicott and Ames 1989: 279).

But how, then, do we explain the appearance of environmentally negligent behavior in many parts of the world where supposedly environmentally inclusive and ecologically resonating traditions dominate? Again, Callicott applies the basic model of connecting ethics with worldview to answer. To the extent that these traditions have been influenced or infiltrated by the Western worldview - whether it be via the infusion of Western technologies or ideologies - they manifest Western patterns of environmental indifference. The "massive and aggressive disruption of their belief systems" allowed for, even promoted, the acceptance of European technologies by American Indians. And, as Callicott argues, "to adopt a technology is, insidiously,

to adopt the worldview in which the technology is embedded" (1989: 205).

The appearance of environmentally malignant activity in the Eastern world is *not*, according to Callicott, an indication that certain Asian traditions lack a social continuity with the nonhuman world or conceptual continuity with a basic ecological framework; nor is it proof that there exists only a tenuous connection between worldview and ethic. Rather, for Callicott, it is an indication of the alteration of the Eastern worldview by Western thought. As Callicott (and Roger Ames) assert,

Technology is not culture-neutral any more than it is value-neutral. To adopt a technology is to adopt, like it or not, the matrix of presuppositions in which the technology is embedded . . . Asian environmental ills . . . are either directly caused by originally Western technology (e.g., heavy metals pollution) or aggravated by it (e.g., soil erosion) . . . contemporary environmental misdeeds perpetrated by Asian peoples today can in large measure be attributed to the *intellectual* colonization of the East by the West (Callicott and Ames 1989: 280).

Moreover, perhaps more deeply and universally, if there does exist a distinction between ethics and actions, between ideas/ideals and descriptions of behavior, then the ideas/ideals may serve not to *determine* behavior but to either accelerate or dampen the innate human tendency to exploit and transform nature. And, according to Callicott, there does exist in the East other, less nature-friendly worldviews such as anthropocentric Confucianism, militarism, and bureaucratism which vie for the ethical soul of the populace.

Finally, perhaps Callicott's most intriguing, and controversial, project within the realm of discussions about religion and nature is his search for coherence, uniformity, and monism in environmental ethics across the globe - both geographically and culturally. Callicott attempts to employ the land ethic of Aldo Leopold as the exemplar of a good environmental ethic. He often compares and contrasts the world's sundry religious and cultural traditions with the land ethic in an effort to generate what he refers to as a "grand narrative," a reconstituted and scientifically informed postmodern environmental ethic to help guide our environmental decision making and policy around the globe:

To construct a genuinely postmodern environmental ethic - an ethic that respects diversity and the wonderful variety of past human culture - we must try to bring the intellectual elements of the earth's many indigenous cultural traditions into a complementary and concordant relationship with those of post-modern international science (1994: 210).

This attempt, however, has met with resistance from various quarters. For example, Lee Hester, et al. refer to Callicott's approach as an "intellectual *coup d' état*," not properly respectful of the world's various cultural and religious traditions (2000: 274).

It is Callicott's hope, and his life's work, to attempt to forge a unified ethical vision; a standard of ethical behavior that will not only motivate a proper respect for nature, but that will at the same time also respect and tap into both the diversity and the uniformity of the Earth's various religious and cultural traditions.

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#### **Further Reading**

- Callicott, J. Baird. *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Callicott, J. Baird. *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
- Callicott, J. Baird. *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.
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- Callicott, J. Baird and Roger T. Ames. *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- Hester, Lee, Dennis McPherson, Annie Booth and Jim Cheney. "Indigenous Worlds and Callicott's Land Ethic." *Environmental Ethics* 22:3 (Fall 2000), 273–90. See also Callicott's response in the same issue (291–310).
- Overholt, Thomas W. and J. Baird Callicott. *Clothed-in-Fur and Other Tales*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982.
- Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 1:2 (August 1997). Bron Taylor, ed. Special issue on Callicott's Earth's Insights.
- See also: American Indians as "First Ecologists"; Conservation Biology; Darwin, Charles; Environmental Ethics; Ethics & Sustainability Dialogue Group; Leopold, Aldo; Natural History as Natural Religion; Restoration Ecology and Ritual; Wilderness Religion.