

## BOOK REVIEW

### EARTH'S INSIGHTS: A SURVEY OF ECOLOGICAL ETHICS FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN TO THE AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK

*J. Baird Callicott*

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Current environmental problems demand complex integration. We need to link humanist and scientific disciplines, cultural and biological diversity, at global and local scales. For this challenging puzzle, *Earth's Insights* arrives as a promising bridge, providing a synthetic, but reticulated, planetary picture. The philosopher Baird Callicott undertook the ambitious project of analyzing the environmental ethics that shape and modulate the relationship between diverse cultures and their natural environments in all continents. He brings into the compass of a single narrative the much discussed traditions of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions in the Western World, ancient Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism in the Eastern World, and novel views of indigenous traditions still scantily considered by environmentally concerned comparative philosophers and scientists –such as the Hawaiian and New Zealand *Maori* Polynesian, *Tukano* and *Kayapo* people of South America, *Ojibwa* and *Lakota* of North America, *Yoruba* and *Bushmen* of Africa, and Aborigines of Australia. In this historically and geographically extensive monograph, Callicott's aim is, rather than be exhaustive, to cover a multiplicity of religious and indigenous traditions around the world. Under a critical interpretation, he analyzes, even evaluates these traditions by current eco-philosophical and scientific criteria. The result is an articulated global panorama,

valuable for philosophers, ecologists and other contributors to conservation biology.

Callicott starts his book by condensely and elegantly characterizing each of the last half-century's decades: The 50's as still technologically optimistic; the 60's as discovering that technology has limits and giving rise to the environmental movement which was at first focused only on local scales; the 70's known as the Environmental Decade, inaugurated by the first Earth Day and followed by a plethora of environmental laws; the 80's as a decade of environmental indifference, led in the USA by Ronald Reagan promoting an economic self-absorption. However, at the end of that decade and entering the 90's a new ecological consciousness emerges, now focused on the global scale. Challenged by global change, environmental professionals are currently compelled to a new planetary thinking, demanding further an integration of sciences with philosophies and religions in order to support effective action for confronting the current environmental crisis.

In this context of globalization of the environmental crisis, Callicott undertakes his planetary survey, looking for a multicultural approach to environmental ethics. His previous philosophical work has been particularly fruitful for integrating theory and practice. As he states in the Preface, "a persuasive environmental ethic... must be located in a more general cognitive context." During the past twenty years Western philosophers have developed an environmental ethics based on our own cultural tradition. However, it would be "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." This

is a crucial statement for ecologists, because it has become increasingly clear that conservation projects do not succeed if we do not understand and incorporate local intellectual traditions. Callicott offers his book as a starting point for "creat[ing] an intellectually diverse global network of indigenous environmental ethics, each adapted to its cultural and ecological bioregion, and contribut[ing] to the conservation of biodiversity and ecological integrity."

Putting traditional environmental ethics in action is illustrated concretely in chapter 10, through a review of exemplary contemporary regional environmental movements. In the Midwestern USA, a Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic inspires a successful project to develop sustainable farming among rural communities that began in the early eighties. The Land Stewardship Project, as it is called, offers a morally and economically attractive alternative to the conventional, intensive agriculture fostered by government agencies and university programs. This contrast between "appropriate technologies" and the highly technological way inherited from the agro-industrial "Green Revolution" is compared by Callicott to the Taoist preference for *wu-wei*, blending and harnessing natural forces, instead of *yu-wei*, resisting and attempting to dominate and reorganize nature. His other two examples are Asian. From the forested region of Himalayan India emerged one of the most famous and charismatic grass-roots environmental movements in the world, the Chipko Movement. *Chipko* in Hindi means "to hug," and by embracing trees, members of the Chipko Movement have succeeded in achieving a moratorium, signed by prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1981, on logging regional Himalayan forests. Another Eastern religious tradition, Buddhism, has also recently acquired attention through the protection and restoration of forests by local populations led by monks in Thailand.

These aspects of the book should indicate the significant value of this multicultural approach to conservation biology. I would like to emphasize, however, a second fundamental level of contribution for ecologists, provided by Callicott's sophisticated epistemological framework and discussion that pervades the book. Well acquainted with the ecological sciences and their historical emphasis on the community concept, Callicott proposes a scientifically informed eco-centric environmental ethic. This new ethic provides a space of intelligibility that permits us to link the scientific discourse of ecology with the discourses of the non-Western traditions to achieve a new way of inhabiting nature. The establishment of this link is of greatest significance and draws heavily on the well-known aspects of Baird Callicott's environmental philosophy.

To understand the conceptual framework of the book, it is important to know that Callicott started, at the end of the sixties, to develop the field of environmental ethics in the discipline of philosophy, while teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, which is located in the heart of the land of Aldo Leopold, the seminal figure for twentieth-century American environmental ethics. This geographical coincidence turned out to be central for the development of Callicott's environmental philosophy. He discovered in the "land ethic" of Leopold the foundations for establishing a new non-anthropocentric ethic, at a time when environmental problems were—as they still are—discussed almost exclusively in terms of human interests for survival or for a better quality of life. For Callicott a new environmental ethics was not merely a matter of extension of traditional Western ethics into Nature, as for example the extension of utilitarianism to sentient animals. Instead, it requires a critique of predominant Western moral philosophy, as he emphatically affirms in the introduction of his book *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (1987): "Ecocentrists are more concerned

to criticize than to expand conventionally Western modern philosophy ... Our goal is to build, from the ground up, new ethical (and metaphysical) paradigms." In this search Callicott started to look at other worldviews, at other cultures and their traditional ways of representing nature and relating to it. At the end of the seventies, he began to inquire about North American Indian attitudes and values toward nature, with particular focus on the *Ojibwa* people, who according to Callicott represent "their natural environments by means of an essentially social model, which although mythic in substance, was identical in form to the ecological model of a biotic community—the key concept of the land ethic." After publishing in 1982 with his co-author Thomas W. Overholt, the book *Clothed-in-Fur and other Tales: An Introduction to an Ojibwa World View*, Callicott started to look toward the East. In collaboration with Roger Ames—at that time chair of the *Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy*—he edited the book of essays entitled *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* (1989), in which the consonance between diverse Eastern philosophies and the emergent world view of contemporary science, particularly quantum physics and ecology, including the community perspective of Aldo Leopold, was documented.

*Earth's Insights* inherits this valuable perspective for ecologists, a view of the diversity of cultures examined through the lenses of a philosophy grounded in the ecological sciences. Further, Callicott attempts "a genuine network, not a patchwork," requiring a common linking language among the plurality of environmental ethics, and he proposes ecological science as such a *lingua franca*. Callicott explicitly acknowledges the complexities derived from the polar tension between multiculturalism and a universal Western science. In the Preface he says that "the most challenging aspect of this study has been to resolve the

tension between a plurality of environmental attitudes and values drawn from a multiplicity of independent intellectual traditions, on the one hand, and a common ecological conscience drawn from the contemporary international scientific worldview, on the other. I hope I have been able to show that these perspectives—the one and the many—are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory." Such an approach is extolled by California state senator Tom Hayden in his foreword, remarking that Callicott "seeks the universal without diminishing our diversity. Whereas many global thinkers, strategists, and institutions implicitly seek a *homogeneous* 'new world order' organized around a single Great Power, a single currency, a single market, a single cultural/religious standard that all should emulate, [Callicott] suggests exactly the reverse. Not a babble of balkanized cultures, but a genuine diversity and interdependence true to the principles of ecology."

In the broad spectrum of cultures considered in the course of *Earth's Insights*, it is interesting to note both notable affinities with contemporary scientific paradigms, such as Darwinian evolutionary theory, and provocative challenges to widely held notions currently in Western society, such as individual ownership of land. Darwinian theory is resonant with cosmologies of numerous indigenous cultures. For example, in the Hawaiian cosmogony, as condensed in the *Kumulipo* chant, the origin of all species began with the coral polyp. Then, the *Kumulipo* genealogy ascends from invertebrates to vertebrates in a scale of evolutionary complexity that astoundingly resembles the taxonomic and phylogenetic classification of Modern Western science. This notion of common origin is essentially relevant to environmental ethics because it provides a sense of kinship, that Callicott emphasizes was pointed out by both Charles Darwin and Aldo Leopold,

and promotes an attitude of human respect toward all forms of life.

In the traditional Hawaiian worldview, integration with nature is so palpable that Hawaiians call themselves *kama'aina*, children of the land. This Polynesian people encode in their language a love of the land –*aloha'ainai*– and a serving or caring for the land –*malama'aina*. The author remarks that more generally in the Polynesian socio-agro-ecosystem traditions that he analyses “land is not merely soil; neither is it properly a commodity.” This cultural perspective, consummated in *Maori* ancestral collective land tenure and worship, challenges the currently prevailing Western concept of individual land ownership. It points out that the concept of private property of the land is a particular historical proposition –developed and defended mainly by the philosopher John Locke– that represents only one among the many forms of relationships possible between human societies and individuals with their bioregions. This interpretation can be very insightful for Chilean environmental professionals working under the *sine qua non* dictum of private property.

The initial historical look in chapter 2 is most insightful for making more flexible the interpretation and understanding of our own culture and its modes of representing Nature, today frequently reduced to an “unavoidable” anthropocentric and utilitarian economic outlook. Callicott starts his multicultural voyage exploring the religious and philosophical traditions foundational to the West. In analyzing the controversial Judeo-Christian tradition, he distinguishes three kinds of ethical attitudes that Biblical texts could promote. First, that of despotic dominion of humans over nature, one of the most usually adopted, and at the same time criticized as unconscionably anthropocentric. Second, a citizenship conception that emphasizes that all living creatures, including humans, were originally created from the same mud or

earth. Third, the interpretation that Callicott favors is that of stewardship, because we cannot evade current human influence on nature, and so we must actively decide how to take care of the Earth. Such a stewardship ethics could even be derived from such a highly anthropocentric religion as Islam. In spite of the dominance of anthropocentrism in our Western traditions, Callicott notes that genealogically egalitarian worldviews once prevailed in our history, codified in Hesiod's *Theogony* where in all of nature is descended from Father Sky and Mother Earth, a mythology similar to that of indigenous people, such as *Lakota*, or prehistoric cultures, such as the aboriginal inhabitants of the Mediterranean basin who some believe worshipped the Earth Goddess, *Gaia*.

The sense of unity of humans with nature is pervasive among the Eastern religious traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. These traditions have, in turn, recently fascinated Western scientists for their resonance with contemporary physics and evolutionary-ecological paradigms. And they have nourished Western environmentalism, as is clearly manifest in the concept of *Self-realization*, central to the philosophy of the Norwegian Arne Naess who originated the Deep Ecology movement. Callicott recalls how Hinduism was also a source of inspiration in the past for the precursors of North-American environmentalism, the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Leaving behind the better known Eastern cultural world, Callicott turns to the Southern hemisphere, making the important and original point that comparative philosophy has almost exclusively preoccupied with cultures of the Northern hemisphere. This book has the merit of incorporating the analysis of environmental ethics, worldviews, and attitudes of those cultures inhabiting the regions of the Southern hemisphere –which contains most of world's biodiversity, but whose rich

cultural traditions in respect to the environment, have been all but neglected.

Reading the section on Africa the lack of information about southern regions is immediately apparent. The continent that contains the most conspicuous and charismatic megafauna appears to be urgently in need of studies that could contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between its traditional societies and their natural environments, with a view to fostering the conservation and protection of African biological and associated cultural diversity. Callicott notes that an environmentally ominous anthropocentrism and monotheism seems to prevail in Africa. However, he also notes that it would be inappropriate to generalize about a continent with such a rich diversity of languages, cultures, and religions. For example, the Niger-Congo language family alone includes over nine hundred distinct tongues, each having numerous dialects, and native African social structures range from small bands of gatherer-hunters to large kingdoms, and from small encampments and villages to ancient cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants. In this vast cultural universe, complex cosmogonies—such as that of the *Yoruba*, which contains a rich world of spirits or *orisa* that inhabit and inspire nature—could have played a crucial role in preventing the “rape of earth and forests” in the African past. Therefore, it may be most valuable—and a challenge and stimulus for novel research—to deepen and to expand the analysis of many other African cultures.

Australia emerges as an exception to the scarcity of studies of environmental attitudes and values in the cultures of the Southern hemisphere. This continent, home of many original and innovative philosophers contributing to the field of environmental ethics, such as Peter Singer—the advocate of Animal Liberation—the distinguished deep ecologist Warwick Fox, and the polemical ecofeminist Val Plumwood, is also an active arena of environmental anthropological studies. A key for this

effervescence could be inferred from Callicott’s remark on Australia as the home of aboriginal peoples embracing worldviews “that at once unite[s] human beings with the land and with the other forms of life on the land,” constituting a precious source of inspiration for environmental ethics.

When referring to the Amazonian forests, Callicott emphasizes once again the importance of the conservation of cultural traditions for the protection of biodiversity. This region of the world is threatened not just with the loss of tropical ecosystems but with the loss of the people, whose ideas and knowledge may be the richest of all tropical resources. In consequence of their “land-wisdom” indigenous forest-dwelling peoples are not just a passive part of the problem but an attractive part of the solution. Callicott supports this thesis by looking at two socially diverse Brazilian tribes. In the northwestern Amazonian rainforests, the *Tukano* believe in an intricate cosmology that promotes interrelated restrictions in food consumption, hunting, and sexual activities—the last resulting in birth control reinforced by the ingestion of herbal concoctions that render *Tukano* women temporarily sterile. To the southeast, along the forest-savanna ecotone bordering Amazonia, the *Kayapo* are custodians of another elaborate system of refined knowledge about the natural environment. Among other conservation and productive practices, *Kayapo* swidden horticulture includes a high variety of crops, planted along a temporal sequence that resembles the plant successional sequences of local ecosystems. Callicott’s view of these two cultures of our continent invites us to continue the study of those tribes, and to extend the similar environment-oriented analysis to other poorly studied cultures. For conservation biologists this approach provides a stimulus and guide to link anthropological and ecological studies, and to develop a science that articulates a cultural “multiverse,” preventing its

reduction to an objective “universe” that override our cultural richness.

In sum, the multicultural path of “ethno-environmental” ethical and ecological research explored by Callicott through *Earth's Insights* represents a fertile and relevant source for contemporary environmental philosophers and scientists. It is fertile in nourishing our imagination for conceiving new possible relationships with the natural world. It is relevant in facilitating a dialogue with other

cultures, and through mutual respect promoting the conservation of biological diversity and the perpetuation of a multiplicity of traditional forms by which humans represent and relate to nature.

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