

"J. Baird Callicott" for *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, edited by Joy A. Palmer and Peter Blaze Corcoran (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 290-295.

J. BAIRD CALLICOTT 1941-

There is no survival value in pessimism. A desperate optimism is the only attitude that a practical environmental philosopher can assume.¹

For the past three decades John Baird Callicott has argued that philosophy and ethics lie at the root of our global environmental problems. He has steadfastly clung to a 'desperate optimism' that philosophy and ethics can both elucidate and help resolve these problems:

Although an ethic, whether environmental or social, is never perfectly realized in practice, it nonetheless exerts a very real force on practice. Ideals do measurably influence behaviour. In envisioning, inculcating, and striving to attain moral ideals, we make some progress both individually and collectively, and gain some ground.²

Baird Callicott was born in Memphis, Tennessee, on 9 May 1941. He was educated at Rhodes College and Syracuse University, receiving his Ph.D. in philosophy (where he specialized in the philosophy of Plato) from Syracuse in 1971. He has taught and lectured at a vast number of universities in the United States and abroad and is currently a Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Texas. His contribution to the field of environmental ethics has been immeasurable. He was there at the beginning; teaching the very first university course in the world in environmental ethics in 1971 at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point, publishing in the very first issue of the original journal in the field in 1979, and establishing himself as one of the founders of the field.³ One author recently referred to Callicott as 'the man who practically invented environmental ethics'.⁴

Although Baird Callicott did not begin publishing until age 38, his

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reputation for insightful and creative argument, lucid and engaging prose, and provocative thought have earned him the highest merit from countless contemporary environmental thinkers. One can hardly pick up an issue of *Environmental Ethics*, *Environmental Values* or any other journal in the field (and many related fields) without encountering numerous references to and comments upon Callicott's work. As the editor of *Environmental Values* recently wrote: 'Sustained critical interest in the work of J. Baird Callicott ... just won't lie down.'⁵ Dave Foreman has commented that 'in scholarship, sincerity, and openness ... Callicott stands head and shoulders above his academic colleagues'.⁶ A recent introduction at a wilderness conference in Montana invoked the words of Henry Miller to comment on the status of Callicott's contribution:

'Only a very few souls, at any time in man's history have been privileged to battle with the great problems, the problems of man.' Baird Callicott is just such a soul.

And always, Callicott's efforts have included a progressive attempt to bring philosophy out of the ivory tower of academia and apply it not only to real-world environmental problems but to other disciplines as well. He has written for many non-philosophical journals, various encyclopedias, textbooks in conservation biology, and has served on natural resource advisory boards.

Callicott's interest in environmental ethics grew out of his serious commitment to the discipline of philosophy. It has remained philosophically grounded ever since: 'My work has always been connected to philosophy; I see environmental ethics both as philosophy and as something that is challenging and transforming philosophy'.⁷ His sense is that in the years to come the progress made by environmental philosophers on this front will be positively acknowledged:

I've bet my life on the belief that environmental philosophy will be regarded by future historians as the bellwether of a twenty-first-century intellectual effort to think through the philosophical implications of the profound paradigm shifts that occurred in the sciences during the twentieth century.⁸

If so, Baird Callicott will deserve much of the credit. Callicott is most notably recognized as the leading interpreter of

the philosophical legacy of Aldo Leopold. Leopold's recognition that evolution and ecology altered our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and the world around us marks him as an early environmental philosopher. However, Leopold was not a philosopher in the formal sense. His ideas required unpacking. Baird Callicott provided the conceptual and philosophical foundations upon which to ground Leopold's metaphysical and ethical assumptions. Just as it is hard to see where the ideas of Socrates leave off and those of Plato (his student and scribe) begin, it is difficult at times to tell where Leopold's thoughts end and Callicott's emerge. However, both Leopold and Callicott view the evolutionary/ecological world-view as a dismissal of the modern mechanistic paradigm which, until quite recently, has been taken as a given. Denying the sharp divisions between self and nature and forcing a re-thinking of an atomistic and mechanical world in terms of an organic and systematically related world, Leopold and Callicott assert that such scientific paradigm shifts cannot be viewed in isolation – they have profound metaphysical and ethical implications, they challenge and change both. Building upon the work of biologist Charles Darwin and philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, Leopold and Callicott point out that one's sense of ethical inclusiveness corresponds with one's sense of a shared community. And, since evolution and ecology portray the 'soils and waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land'⁹ and human beings as part and parcel of a shared social community, Leopold and Callicott have argued that the ethical duties that we admittedly owe to one another can be and ought to be prompted and extended to this land community as well. Leopold refers to this set of ethical obligations as the 'land ethic', and Callicott's most acknowledged role has been that of defender of the land ethic. The power of the work of Leopold and Callicott, then, is that they portray the world as significantly more morally fertile than previously perceived.

Within the larger debate surrounding the extension of moral obligations to encompass the land, Callicott has argued that the land possesses intrinsic value: said to be value in and of itself as opposed to value as a means to some other end, or value in addition to merely instrumental value. Such a move designates Callicott as an ecocentrist – or one who attributes direct moral standing to such things as species, ecosystems, watersheds, biotic communities and the biosphere as a whole, not to mention those individuals which constitute those biological collectives,¹⁰ – and places him in the company of other environmental philosophers such as Holmes

Rolston III and Arne Naess. The debate surrounding the ascription of intrinsic value to environmental parts or wholes, and Callicott's contribution to this debate, has remained at the centre of environmental ethics from its inception.

Of course, anyone familiar with Baird Callicott's work realizes that he has made deep contributions in a multiplicity of other areas as well. Such sundry topics as environmental education, aesthetics, the distinction between animal welfare ethics and environmental ethics, Judeo-Christian stewardship, hunting ethics, farming, health and wellness, and environmental activism, have all garnered his attention.

Callicott possesses an uncanny knack for the provocative. If arguing that nature possessed intrinsic value and that we owe moral obligations to the land was not enough, a number of other topics he has taken up over the past thirty years have launched him into the centre of, sometimes, controversial debates.

Callicott became one of the earliest theorists on the environmental attitudes and ethics expressed by the overlapping world-views of North American Indian societies. He argues that an examination of the cosmology of American Indian tribes displays an environmental ethic worthy of notice – and one, interestingly, that shares strong affinities with Leopold's land ethic. As he once wrote:

The implicit overall metaphysics 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.¹¹

This line of thought later developed into commentary on the environmental attitudes and values expressed in a wide range of world cultures and religious traditions – from Christian to Islamic, from Pagan to Australian Aboriginal – which was published as his critically acclaimed book *Earth's Insights*.

Most recently, Callicott has been at the centre of the highly contentious debate over the concept of wilderness. Along with historian William Cronon, Callicott has argued that the concept of wilderness is a product of social construction; a product desperately in need of reconstruction. Callicott 'believes that the received

wilderness idea has been mortally wounded by the withering critique to which it has been lately subjected'.¹² However, although this point is often misunderstood or ignored, he is no enemy of wilderness, but rather a friendly critic:

I am as ardent an advocate of those patches of the planet called 'wilderness areas' as any other environmentalist. My discomfort is with an idea, the received concept of wilderness, not with the ecosystems so called.¹³

Callicott also emphasizes that through a conceptual re-thinking of wilderness those areas we refer to as wilderness will be better protected.

A journey through the writing and thoughts of J. Baird Callicott is always insightful, always challenging, always instructive, and always a lesson in the power of sound reasoning and good writing. And at all times in his work there is a sense of an empowering optimism, an affirmation that a successful ethical relationship between humans and the non-human world can and will be forged.

Notes

- 1 From 'Benevolent Symbiosis: The Philosophy of Conservation Reconstructed', in J. Baird Callicott and Fernando J.R. da Rocha (eds), *Earth Summit Ethics*, p. 157.
- 2 *Earth's Insights*, p. 3.
- 3 He also established one of the first environmental studies programmes in the United States at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point.
- 4 Arthur Herman, *Community, Violence, and Peace: Aldo Leopold, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gautama the Buddha in the Twenty-first Century*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 234, 1999.
- 5 Alan Holland, 'Editorial', *Environmental Values*, 9/1, p. 1, 2000.
- 6 Callicott, 'The Ever-robust Wilderness Idea and Ernie Dickerman', *Wild Earth*, 8/31, p. 1, 1998.
- 7 Personal communication, March 1999.
- 8 'Introduction: Compass Points in Environmental Philosophy', in *Beyond the Land Ethic*, p. 4.
- 9 Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 204.
- 10 Callicott defines an ecocentric environmental ethic as 'An environmental ethic that takes into account the direct impact of human actions on nonhuman natural entities and nature as a whole', *Earth's Insights*, p. 10.
- 11 'Traditional American Indian and Western European Attitudes Toward Nature: An Overview', in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, pp. 189–90.

- 12 'Introduction', in J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (eds), *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, p. 12.
- 13 'The Wilderness Idea Revisited', in J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (eds), op. cit., p. 339.

See also in this book

Darwin, Leopold, Naess, Rolston

Callicott's major writings

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Further reading

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