



“Summary of article by J. Baird Callicott: The Search for an Environmental Ethic” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 344-347

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“Summary of article by J. Baird Callicott: The Search for an Environmental Ethic”

Since the 1960s there has been a growing recognition that there is an environmental crisis. The solution to this problem cannot be purely technical or engineering based. A new environmental ethic is needed that promotes an ecocentric approach to the environment. However, there are some schools of thought which argue that existing ethics are adequate to deal with environmental problems. This paper first considers and critiques some of these views and points out why they fall short. It then develops the basis and broad outlines of an ecocentric environmental ethic.¹

SOME SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Three schools of thought that reject the need for a new environmental ethic are considered here:

Traditional Humanism

Traditional humanists treat the environment as a pool of natural resources that are to be utilized to increase human welfare. They acknowledge that some human beings indirectly have an adverse impact on others due to the negative effects of their actions on the environment. However, they argue that the solution to this problem can still be found in the old ethics based on moral consideration of all human beings. The problem with this approach is that, by focusing on humans alone, it does not take into account the adverse impact of human behavior on non-human members of the biotic community.

Deep Ecology

The deep ecology movement, founded by Arne Naess, argues that humans are part of a larger ecological system, and it is the realization of this interconnectedness, not ethics, that is vital for maintaining the health and integrity of ecosystems. According to deep ecologists, "ethics" implies separate groups that must respect one another, an approach that results in a narrow conception of the self. However, these metaphysical views of the deep ecologists have no basis in scientific ecology. Scientific ecology reveals a differentiated oneness of nature, rather than the homogenous unity proclaimed by the deep ecologists.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminists argue that the ideology that leads to men dominating nature is the same one that is responsible for men dominating women. The solution to environmental problems is therefore the same as the solution that the feminist movement has been urging with respect to women's

liberation: the overthrow of the patriarchy. Ecofeminists argue that the cause of environmental problems is not anthropocentrism (human-centered thought), but androcentrism (male-centered thought). Furthermore, ecofeminists object to any ethical theorizing (and therefore to a theory of environmental ethics) because theories are inherently male-biased, and serve to rationalize power. Instead, ecofeminists favor contextual analysis based on each situation. The problem with this anti-ethics position is that if power and not truth determines outcomes, then there is no reason for those who exercise power today (males) to give it up. The solution to the exclusive hold on power by any one group, then, lies in a rational, honest, open minded dialogue between all groups with a commitment to truth and reason.

THE ECOCENTRIC APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

An environmental ethic rooted in evolutionary and ecological theory is needed. From the perspective of scientific ecology, every living being is embedded in a matrix of relationships with other beings, and organisms develop their special characteristics through interactive adaptations within this matrix. Individual organisms that are independent of this web of interactive relationships are inconceivable. This matrix of relationships results in a biotic community in which each organism carries out specific functions. Environmental degradation occurs when organisms and functions begin to disappear.

An environmental ethic should therefore have both holistic and individualistic dimensions. Within this framework, right and wrong would be based on the structure and organization of the biotic community, rather than simply on the imposition onto the entire biotic community of ethics relevant only to interactions among humans. Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" can form the basis for such a development. Critics of Leopold are wrong when they suggest that the land ethic emphasizes the holistic aspects at the expense of individuals.

According to Leopold, "an ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence."² This view of ethics raises an evolutionary paradox: how can the practice of self-limitation have evolved given the continuous struggle for existence? Would such an ethic not compromise an organism's struggle to survive and reproduce? Charles Darwin looked into this question from the perspective of natural history in The Descent of Man. He argued that since human beings can survive and successfully reproduce only as members of society, social instincts such as love, affection, and sympathy were naturally selected - because they were essential for communities to flourish. From the perspective of Leopold's land ethic, it is also important to consider the whole of the *biotic* community, rather than concentrating on any specific individual organism. This ethic fosters the belief that all organisms on earth are members of an extended family, and implies respect for fellow members of the community as well as the community as a whole.

Some philosophers have objected to the implications of Leopold's land ethic. If the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community is harmed by the overly large human population, wouldn't it then be our duty to eliminate a whole lot of people? This solution for protecting the welfare of the biotic community is not implied by the Leopold land ethic which would supplement, not replace, traditional human morality. Nevertheless, the human population should be scaled down over time in humanitarian ways.

An ecocentric land ethic should therefore be one in which human beings use the environment in such a manner as to enhance the integrity, stability, and beauty of the entire biotic community. In addition, any use of the environment, including cutting trees and killing animals, should be done in a skillful, thoughtful, and humane manner without waste. This can be achieved by considering the welfare of the entire biotic community and of individual organisms.

Notes

1. This summary does not encompass Callicott's entire paper. In particular, it does not cover the extensive discussions of the Judeo-Christian and extensionist approaches to environmental ethics that are found in the original article, although points from these sections that are relevant to the discussion of the ecocentric approach to environmental ethics are included.
2. Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, with Essays on Conservation from Round River (New York: Balantine, 1966): 288; cited by Callicott, 361.