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Book Review

J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 389pp., $41.95, ISBN: 978-0-19-932489-7.

In this wide-ranging book J. Baird Callicott explores what he takes to be strengths and weaknesses of numerous ethical theories and especially of those specifically devoted to environmental ethics. He also traces out significant aspects and stages of the development of present-day ecological science. In these two contexts, he develops and defends his own version of an environmental ethics, which he believes is appropriate for such current ecological crises as accelerating global climate change; unprecedented species extinctions and endangerments; and rampant ground, air, and water pollution. As the subtitle of his book indicates, Callicott is particularly interested in showing how Aldo Leopold's development of his famous *land ethic* contains seeds of the broader and more compelling *earth ethic* Callicott explicates and endorses. He analyzes an essay by Leopold he deems to be of particular importance in this regard and includes the essay as an Appendix in this book. Callicott does not want to leave the land ethic behind; he wants to position it in a more encompassing, more adequate setting.

There are at least four central theses of Callicott's book: his defense of the ethical theory of David Hume in contrast with contractual, virtue-centered, Kantian, and utilitarian theories; his characterization of all ethics, and especially environmental ethics, as scale-dependent; his conviction that an adequate environmental ethics needs to be founded on a type of anthropocentrism; and his defense of an unqualified metaphysical holism as the key to an effective ethical approach to the ecological catastrophe presently confronting the earth and its myriad interdependent life forms, including members of our own species.

According to Callicott, the contractual theory of ethics makes the serious mistake of supposing that the natural state of humans is an isolated or atomistic individual existence. They enter into social contract for the sake of safety and protection, not because of felt ethical responsibility to one another. Virtue ethics describes the ideal character of humans as rational individuals but does not give an adequate account of ethical communities and relationships, especially as the latter extend beyond human beings. Utilitarianism is too individualistic or piecemeal in its approach, and Kantianism, while too individualistic, is also too rationalistic—reducing all ethics to considerations of intellectual consistency or non-contradiction and restricting the scope of ethics to humans as rational, autonomous, self-legislating beings. Callicott

opts for a Humean form of ethics on the ground that it rightly insists that ethics should be based primarily in the sentiments or affections that motivate and guide the lives of human beings in their relations to one another in their various communities. Hume acknowledges that rationality can guide us in discerning appropriate objects of these affections and ways of respecting and serving these objects' wellbeing, but ethical sentiments are for Hume and Callicott the ultimate sources and bases of such consideration and concern.

This idea is persuasive, in my judgment, only to the extent that feelings among humans about relations within communities are as similar or uniform in space and time as Hume assumed them to be. This is an empirical question and depends on the plausibility and usability of Hume's ethical theory. Hume's confident reliance on a positive answer to the question of affections is a debatable basis on which to found an entire ethical outlook. Each of the other theories Callicott discusses has elements of plausibility and truth in it that merit more consideration and inclusion in ethical thought, and in environmental ethics in particular, than Callicott allows. If so, then our theorizing about ethics needs to be more pluralistic and contextual, drawing when appropriate on the resources of different theories rather than being restricted to one.

The Humean form of ethics chimes in, Callicott argues, with Charles Darwin's contention that humans are by nature social beings and have acquired evolutionary selected feelings and inclinations conducive to life in stable, flourishing communities. Leopold was able to see in his own time that the boundaries of human dependence and community extend beyond mere human societies to biotic communities in general, and he developed his land ethic accordingly. He spoke lyrically of the importance of feeling and responding to the wounds of a mountain whose slopes have been severely damaged by inadequate human attention to the intricate relationships of its soils, microbes, grass, trees, wolves, deer, and the like—a mountain that in earlier times had naturally preserved and maintained its own integrity and wellbeing. Whole biotic systems are for Leopold the appropriate focus of ethical responsibility and regard, and thus of intense ethical feeling. While his major concern was with the land, and not with the seas or the atmosphere, Callicott shows that Leopold sometimes brooded on the whole planet earth as a kind of living being. In this way he anticipated, although dimly, James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and what Callicott calls a comprehensive earth ethic.

A failure of much ethical thinking, Callicott argues, is that it does not take sufficiently into account that ethics is scale-dependent in both space and time. It follows that the kind of complete impartiality of treatment and regard generally thought to lie at the heart of ethics is false and misguided. One's affection for and felt responsibility to one's own parents or children cannot be and should not be the same as one's ethical responsibility to sets of parents or children halfway around the world. One's ethical concern for persons and other living beings living today or in the near future is bound to be different from concern for such beings in the very distant future, and this difference is for Callicott ethically defensible. His reasoning in this regard becomes particularly important when he weighs in balance our ethical responsibility to generations of humans and other life forms in the very distant future. The latter are so distant as to be for us presently vague, indeterminate, and even unimaginable. How, then, should we think ethically about them?

His answer to this critical question—one that faces anyone who tries to envision an environmental ethic capable of dealing responsibly and effectively with the environ-

mental crisis confronting the world today—is that we should adopt a kind of anthropocentrism. Callicott does not endorse *metaphysical* anthropocentrism, that is, the older view of humans as being the center of the universe and entitled to dominate and control the earth and its creatures for their own projects and purposes. He does support, however, a kind of *ethical* anthropocentrism suited to support and explain our obligations to generations of living beings of the far future. This form of anthropocentrism is concerned not with individual human beings but with the human civilization that has come into being over the past five thousand years. Our object in view as we seek to act responsibly for the sake of distant generations of living beings should be the preservation, protection, and enhancement of human civilization.

Callicott's view makes sense, especially if we factor into it his idea that ethical responsibility turns on ethical feeling, and that we feel responsibility to human civilization in a way that we cannot feel responsibility to whatever individual human beings might exist or turn out to be like in the distant future. The enormous scale of time militates against our being able to care ethically for humans individually or even for the remote future of the earth as a whole, but we are able—at least by Callicott's reckoning—to care for the future of human civilization itself. In doing so, he reasons, we will also need to take profoundly into account the wellbeing of the earth and its nonhuman creatures, because only in this way can the prospect of continuing and flourishing human civilization be ensured.

The anthropocentric strategy Callicott recommends has prudential force and should be evaluated on this ground. It is original if somewhat jarring in its effect. My own fear regarding it is that it threatens to return environmental ethics to an earlier untenable anthropocentrism by seeming to value the continuation of human civilization above all else. Callicott does not mean for it to do so, of course. But it still seems to me to be out of kilter with his focus throughout the rest of his book on the earth as a whole and it as a living system where all of its aspects are integrally related to and dependent on one another, and where humans and their civilizations are only one of these aspects.

The final theme of this book to which I now turn makes this latter point particularly apparent, even though it has a troubling feature of its own that I shall proceed to explain. Callicott argues that the individualistic focus of most ethical theories of the past is radically inappropriate not only because individuals do not exist as separate, unrelated entities, but because there is really no such thing as an individual. There are finally only relationships, and an individual is a mere 'node or nexus of a multidimensional web of relationships', meaning for Callicott that 'the web of relationships is ontologically prior to the nodes or nexuses therein' (p. 292). He also insists that there is no such thing as a 'core self'. When one considers the intricate network of relationships both within and beyond the human organism, he contends, 'there is nothing of oneself left over' (p. 293).

I think that these are overstatements. There are no relations without things, living or non-living, existing in relations to one another. Integral selves and other sorts of entity are certainly dependent for their existence on vast patterns of interdependency and relationship, but they are not simply reducible to them. Parts of holistic systems are no more completely resolvable into systems without individual parts than are the systems into their constitutive parts. Callicott's vaunted holism and his conception of apparent individuals as 'holobionts' (p. 294) does take the focus off of supposedly isolated individuals—especially human individuals—and it can serve to call attention

to the interrelatedness of everything on the earth when it is properly conceived as a biosphere deserving as a whole of fervent ethical regard. But Callicott pushes this idea too far, making the issue an either–or, rather than a both–and. There are real individuals, in my view, *and* they are crucially dependent on their patterns of relationships. Both ideas need firmly to be affirmed. Ethical outlook and practice should always keep both in view, although in varying degrees from situation to situation.

Callicott gives us a lot to think about in this richly informative, meticulously researched, intricately organized, and indisputably important book. I highly recommend it, despite my demurs regarding some specific aspects of his argument and analysis. It is a much-needed book for our time.

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