

# **Editorial Introduction on J. Baird Callicott's "Earth's Insights"**

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# Contents

Introduction to Central Themes of <i>Earth's Insights</i> . . . . .	3
Responses to <i>Earth's Insights</i> . . . . .	5

This edition of *Worldviews* is the first of several planned theme editions. It contains a number of papers focusing on different aspects of J. Baird Callicott's book *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (University of California Press, 1994). We felt that the uniquely wide-ranging nature of *Earth's Insights*, its description and exploration of cultural and religious worldviews from around the world, and the links made between these worldviews and environmental ethics, made the book a worthy subject for discussion in an early edition of *Worldviews*. This edition is centred around a collection of papers which are, with the exception of that by James Proctor, all revised versions of papers presented in November 1996 at a session dedicated to exploration of *Earth's Insights* at the American Academy of Religion in New Orleans. This editorial introduction aims to introduce the central ideas of *Earth's Insights* and to outline some of the key questions about it raised in the following papers. The collection is concluded by a response from J. Baird Callicott, who as well as providing support throughout the preparation of this collection, bravely offered to reply to his critics!

## Introduction to Central Themes of *Earth's Insights*

Underlying Callicott's arguments in *Earth's Insights* is the conviction that human beings are currently in a state of global environmental crisis, and that a much more symbiotic and harmonious relationship of human beings to their environment is desirable and indeed necessary. The articulation of an environmental ethic — defined as an ethic which 'would impose limitations on human freedom of action in relation to nonhuman entities and to nature as a whole' (p. 1) — is one of the fundamental ways in which, Callicott believes, change from the state of environmental crisis to the state of environmental harmony may be achieved.

The construction of such an environmental ethic lies at the heart of Callicott's project in *Earth's Insights*. He argues that 'the revival and deliberate construction of environmental ethics from the raw materials of indigenous, traditional and contemporary cognitive cultures represents an important step in the future movement of human material cultures towards a more symbiotic relationship — however incomplete and imperfect — with the environment.' (p.5)

It is with this purpose in mind that much of Callicott's book is taken up with an exploration of the existing and potential environmental ethics in a range of cultures and religions. He reviews major religious traditions — including Judaism and Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism and several forms of Buddhism — alongside a number of indigenous religious and cultural traditions from Polynesia, the Americas, Africa and Australasia. Within most of these traditions he uncovers elements of an environmental ethic (in Judaism and Christianity, for instance, he focuses on stewardship). In the case of traditions where he considers that such an ethic is not obvious (for example in Confucianism and some indigenous African religions) he suggests ways in which such

traditions could be developed to create or strengthen their environmental ethic. (As some of the contributors to this volume argue, his conclusions here are by no means uncontroversial).

Were this to be all that Callicott undertook in *Earth's Insights* (as indeed, its subtitle might imply) his project would be interesting, but fragmented. Callicott is not, however, satisfied with such a pluralist approach to global environmental ethics. 'Untempered pluralism,' he argues, 'courts conflict,' which may, he suggests, lead to violence. For this reason — and also in recognition of the common and global nature of environmental problems — Callicott wants to move beyond the many individual cultural and religious perspectives to articulate a single, global environmental ethic. This one global ethic and the many local traditions, he argues, are not at odds; those who adhere to a variety of cultural/ religious traditions may also resonate with a global environmental ethic. This is especially true as, Callicott maintains, his global environmental ethic 'has many conceptual affinities with preindustrial attitudes towards nature, especially those in the East' (p.12). Indeed, Callicott argues that this ethic not only underwrites and reinforces the individual environmental ethics of different cultures, but that it is also intended to 'serve as a standard for evaluating the others' (p.188).

What, then, does Callicott propose as this single, global environmental ethic? His label for it is 'a postmodern evolutionary-ecological ethic'. It is postmodern, he argues, not in the *deconstructive* sense in which postmodernism is usually understood, but in a *reconstructive* sense based on the 'new physics' (relativity and quantum theory) and the 'new biology' (the theory of evolution and ecology) (p.185). It is expressed in the 'cognitive lingua franca of contemporary science' (p.12). In summary, the ethic he presents is a version of that developed in much of his work in environmental philosophy : a (Humean) basis of ethics in feeling; a belief in the evolution of community altruism; a Leopoldian land ethic where the natural world forms part of our affective community, combined with material from the literature of the 'new physics' and 'new ecology'.

It is the scientific context in which this evolutionary-ecological ethic is based which, according to Callicott, makes it possible to maintain that this global environmental ethic has universal applicability and is epistemologically privileged. The 'genuine global currency' and 'universal endorsement of the foundations' of scientific work he argues, provide a basis for a postmodern scientific environmental ethic to claim universality; whilst the scientific worldview is 'epistemologically privileged not because it, and it alone, is uniquely true, but because it is self-consciously self-critical' (p.191). This postmodern, scientific global ethic could provide a network linking different religious/ cultural approaches to environmental ethics; or, as Callicott maintains: 'Each of the many worldviews and associated environmental ethics can be a facet of an emerging global environmental consciousness, expressed in the vernacular of a particular and local cultural tradition' (p.12).

Callicott concludes his book by describing three practical 'outworkings' of traditional approaches to environmental ethics: the stewardship understanding from the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the US; the Hindu Chipko movement in India and the

Buddhist Sardvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. He uses these active manifestations of environmental ethics to make the point that secular environmental conservation ‘may remain ineffective unless the environmental ethics latent in traditional worldviews animate and reinforce them’ (p.234). This illustrates Callicott’s view that environmental ethics provides a central underpinning if humans are to move from global environmental crisis to a more harmonious relationship with nature.

## Responses to *Earth’s Insights*

It is unsurprising that such an ambitious project should provoke a wide range of responses from those working on environmental aspects of religious and cultural studies, philosophy and geography. Some of these responses, like that of Reuther and Tucker in this collection, consist primarily of developing particular interpretations of individual religious traditions which Callicott does not have space to explore more fully. Other responses engage critically with Callicott’s work, in relation to the *nature and aim* of his project as a whole, in terms of the *methodology* he adopts, and with respect to the *content* of his work. These responses raise questions of significance far beyond this particular debate.

In most general terms, then, Callicott aims to construct a global environmental ethic to which, in its broadest expression, those from a variety of cultures and religious traditions can adhere. Some of the contributors to this collection applaud this aim and consider that the establishment of just such an ethic is essential to avoid further environmental decline. However, others, especially those most sympathetic to postmodern ideas, raise questions about the very nature of such a project. Is not the idea of a global environmental ethic an attempt to establish a new ‘meta-narrative’ — an endeavour harshly attacked by many postmodernists? What sorts of knowledge claims and power relationships are presupposed by the construction of such a global environmental ethic (claims and relationships explored, as Lorentzen points out, by the very deconstructive postmodernists of which Callicott is so critical)? Can a wide range of fundamentally differing worldviews really be included in a global environmental ethic? Would they not rather be subsumed within it?

Alongside these *general* questions about the whole enterprise of constructing a global environmental ethic run a number of questions about Callicott’s *particular* attempt at this. These questions cluster around three key areas. The first is his understanding of ‘postmodern science’. Several contributors doubt whether there are grounds for accepting that any such postmodern scientific worldview is actually emerging; and Eaton argues that even if some scientists *do* accept a worldview such as that proposed by Callicott, this is merely one of many possible interpretations of modern scientific work. Others debate the question of the privileging of science, justified by Callicott on the grounds of the self-critical nature of science. Drawing on work in philosophy and sociology of science, some of the contributors to this collection argue that scientific

work is not, after all, as self-critical as Callicott suggests. Yet other questions concern the suitability of science in general, and Callicott's evolutionary-scientific worldview in particular, as the basis for an environmental ethic. Taylor, for instance, makes the ironic argument that science without religion cannot provide a rationally compelling foundation for an environmental ethic.

The second key area concerns Callicott's way of approaching the range of different cultural and religious traditions explored in *Earth's Insights* to provide material for a global environmental ethic. This raises a raft of questions for contributors to this collection. Is such a process a kind of intellectual new colonialism, using or 'mining' the ideas of other cultures to fit a particular Western agenda (or indeed a particular agenda of Callicott's to highlight their relationship to a Leopoldian land ethic?). Can religious and cultural ideas of indigenous cultures be extracted from their complex social, political and ecological contexts in this way? As Proctor wonders, is there a risk of 'primitivism', where particular indigenous cultures are regarded as being especially privileged because they are supposedly 'close to nature'? Is it possible to avoid interpreting indigenous cultural and religious ideas through western-tinted spectacles, thus failing to focus on what might really be central to that tradition? Is it appropriate to concentrate on the religious/cultural concepts and cognitive structures of indigenous people, rather than on the ways in which they live (their lifeways as Grim calls them) or their political self-identity, in order to understand their relationship with their environments? Such questions raise important issues not only for Callicott's work, but for work in the field of environment, culture and religion more generally.

The third key area concerns Callicott's close link between the construction of a global ecological ethic and a change in human behaviour. For Callicott — and indeed many of the contributors to this collection — the creation and widespread acceptance of such an ethic are thought to be essential if there is to be a change in human environmental behaviour. However, Eaton, Tucker and Proctor critically probe the links between ethical beliefs and behaviour, introducing an important debate about whether ideas precede, follow or are only loosely correlated with actions.

The final significant level of response to Callicott's *Earth's Insights* relates to discussion points about the *content* of his work, in particular his understanding and interpretation of religious and cultural traditions. John Grim, for instance, proposes a different understanding of African indigenous lifeways; Mary Evelyn Tucker contributes a discussion of Shingon Buddhism; Rosemary Radford Ruether develops Callicott's ideas on Judaism and Christianity; whilst Heather Eaton and Lois Lorentzen raise questions about Callicott's understanding of ecofeminism. That such developments and sometimes disagreements occur is hardly surprising. It would surely not be possible for any individual — in particular in a single volume — fully to do justice to such an array of cultural and religious traditions; especially as the meanings of such traditions are contested by those within them as well as those studying them. The debates and discussion about Callicott's work proposed by the papers in this collection thus help to clarify and refine some of his explanations of religious and cultural traditions.

*Earth's Insights*, and this collection of papers commenting on it, thus highlights issues of central importance to a journal like *Worldviews*. It raises, *inter alia*, questions about the possibility and desirability of a global environmental ethic; about the ways in which different religious and cultural traditions can and should be approached, compared, interpreted and used; about the relationships between religious and cultural traditions and environmental science, and about the extent to which environmental beliefs and ideas produce particular kinds of behaviour in the environment; it also raises specific issues concerning the worldviews and environmental practices of diverse religious and cultural traditions. By so doing and to a significant extent, this forum about *Earth's Insights* also illuminates the difficulties of the global scholarly endeavour that the publication of *Worldviews* represents, for *Earth's Insights* is built on an assumption similar to one that helped birth this journal: that 'worldviews' involving 'environment, culture and religion' shape, sometimes even decisively, human behaviour toward and impacts on the earth's living systems. If so, they also influence the very flourishing of life on earth, they are about nothing less than life and death, they *matter*. We hope and expect, therefore, that this exploration of *Earth's Insights* will be especially helpful in framing and stimulating a variety of future contributions to the collaborative endeavour that is *Worldviews*.

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