

No Holism Without Pluralism

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Contents

Abstract	3
Paper	3
About the Author	7

Abstract

In his recent essay on moral pluralism in environmental ethics, J. Baird Callicott exaggerates the advantages of monism, ignoring the environmentally unsound implications of Leopold's holism. In addition, he fails to see that Leopold's view requires the same kind of intellectual schizophrenia for which he criticizes the version of moral pluralism advocated by Christopher D. Stone in *Earth and Other Ethics*. If it is plausible to say that holistic entities like ecosystems are directly morally considerable—and that is a very big *if*—it must be for a very different reason than is usually given for saying that individual human beings are directly morally considerable.

Paper

J. Baird Callicott's essay on moral pluralism provides a useful overview of the growing interest in pluralism among environmental ethicists and a challenging statement of certain philosophical problems facing the advocates of pluralism.¹ However, by ignoring a problem I have raised for his theory, Callicott presents a distorted picture of the advantages of clinging to his own version of moral monism, and by focussing on the very multilayered pluralism of Christopher D. Stone in *Earth and Other Ethics*, Callicott presents a distorted picture of the reasons for embracing pluralism in environmental ethics.

In the final section of the essay, Callicott describes his view as “a *univocal* ethical theory” which is “multiple in its moral domains”

that provides, nevertheless, for a *multiplicity* of hierarchically ordered and variously ‘textured’ moral relationships . . . each corresponding to and supporting our multiple, varied, and hierarchically ordered social relationships, (p. 123)

According to Callicott, the Leopold land ethic is just the last in a series of “accretions” by which the nested social relationships in which all human beings live have come to be reflected in a series of ethics which acknowledge increasingly wider spheres of obligation.

For present purposes, the key issue is Callicott's claim that these spheres are “hierarchically ordered.” In defending the land ethic against the charge that it is misanthropic, Callicott has repeatedly claimed that our obligations to family members and fellow human beings trump our obligations to nonhuman animals and ecosystems. In “The Search for an Environmental Ethic,” Callicott said that the land ethic

creates additional, less urgent obligations to additional, less closely related beings. Hence, our obligations to family and friends—and to human rights and human wel-

¹ J. Baird Callicott, “The Case against Moral Pluralism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 99-124. Page references in the text are to this essay.

fare generally—come first; they are not challenged or undermined by an ecocentric environmental ethic.²

In “The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic” he said that “duties correlative to the inner social circles to which we belong eclipse those correlative to the rings farther from the heartwood when conflicts arise,”³ and in “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again” he said that “We are still subject to all the other more particular individually oriented duties to the members of our various more circumscribed and intimate communities. And since they are closer to home, they come first.”⁴

In repeating this now familiar claim in his most recent essay, Callicott ignores a problem which I raised in my review of Stone’s book,⁵ a problem which, unless and until Callicott answers it, utterly trivializes the land ethic. Suppose that an environmentalist enamored with the Leopold land ethic is considering how to vote on a national referendum to preserve the spotted owl by restricting logging in Northwest forests. According to Callicott, he or she would be required to vote, not according to the land ethic, but according to whatever ethic governs closer ties to a human family and/or the larger human community. Therefore, if a relative is one of 10,000 loggers who will lose jobs if the referendum passes, the environmentalist is obligated to vote against it. Even if none of the loggers is a family member, the voter is more closely related to any of them than any spotted owl, and is still obligated to vote against the referendum.

In fairness to Callicott, I must note that he also has claimed that the hierarchy holds only “as a general rule.”⁶ He has insisted that “the outer orbits of our various moral spheres exert a gravitational tug on the inner ones.”⁷ Although “in principle” it may be possible “to assign priorities and relative weights and thus to resolve such conflicts in a systematic way,”⁸ he has yet to supply even an outline of how these conflicts could be resolved without appealing to some consideration other than communal relatedness. If, as Callicott claims in his most recent essay, community is the sole criterion of moral considerability, it certainly is hard to see how anything but the relative closeness of two communal relationships could be used to decide which one has priority.

Callicott’s simplistic hierarchical ordering rule robs the land ethic of any practical force, for it makes it appear that wherever human interests are at stake—and they almost always are—the land ethic is preempted and one is required to apply a good

² J. Baird Callicott, “The Search for an Environmental Ethic,” in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 420.

³ J. Baird Callicott, “The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic,” in Callicott, ed., *Companion to A Sand County Almanac* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 208.

⁴ J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again,” in Callicott, ed., *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 58.

⁵ Gary E. Varner, review of Christopher D. Stone, *Earth and Other Ethics*, *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 264.

⁶ Callicott, “Search,” p. 208; Callicott, “Back Together Again,” p. 58.

⁷ Callicott, “Back Together Again,” p. 58; Callicott, “Search,” secs. 3-4.

⁸ Callicott, “Back Together Again,” p. 59.

old-fashioned anthropocentric ethic of the kind which Callicott supposes leads to environmental havoc.⁹

In light of Callicott's critique of Stone, it is interesting to note, further, how closely our hypothetical environmental monist's thinking resembles Callicott's farcical account of Stone's moral pluralist senator, whom Callicott characterizes as "blithely" abandoning one ethical theory for another "over lunch" (p. 115). In accordance with Callicott's monism, an environmental holist by lunch would have to become an individualist anthropocentrist in the voting booth. Callicott's monism thus requires the same kind of intellectual gymnastics which he criticizes Stone's theory for requiring.

For the foregoing reasons, Callicott exaggerates the advantages of clinging to his own version of moral monism. In addition, by focussing his critique of pluralism on Stone, he also distorts the reasons for embracing pluralism in environmental ethics. To see clearly how it is that he does this, we need to be clear about what moral pluralism is. By a pluralist ethical theory I mean one which acknowledges distinct, theoretically incommensurable bases for direct moral consideration. Because this definition will not be familiar to readers of Stone's book and Callicott's essay, let me explain some of what I take to be its merits.

First, Stone himself sometimes wavers between a robust theoretical pluralism and a pragmatic pluralism. Sometimes he stresses the utility of attacking different kinds of ethical quandries separately, as if pluralism were a pragmatic strategy for theory construction in ethics rather than a characteristic of completed ethical theories.¹⁰ Most of the time, however, he means the latter, which is what Callicott apparently intended to discuss. My definition makes it clear that we are discussing theoretical rather than pragmatic pluralism.

Second, Stone sometimes writes as if imperfect decidability were part of the definition of moral pluralism. For instance, he says that "determinateness," by which he means "the ambition . . . [of] yielding] for each quandary one right answer," is "a sort of corollary" to the monism of the dominant ethical theories.¹¹ Although it is an implication of pluralism as I have defined it that the theory will remain undecided in some possible situations, the inclusion of indecidability in the definition of pluralism prejudices philosophers against it.

At one point, Callicott comes close to identifying environmental pluralism with the kind of very multilayered, and therefore more often undecided system which Stone seems to embrace in his book, when he characterizes moral pluralism as "invit[ing]" one to adopt a different ethical theory to guide one's actions in almost every different facet

⁹ This supposition has been repeated so often, by Callicott and others, that it is almost gospel, but Bryan Norton has convincingly called it into question in *Why Preserve Natural Variety?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Christopher D. Stone, *Earth and Other Ethics: The Case for Moral Pluralism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 251-52.

¹¹ Christopher D. Stone, *Earth and Other Ethics: The Case for Moral Pluralism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 251-52.

of one's life (pp. 104 and 115). A major virtue of my definition is that it attenuates the tendency to identify pluralism with such a multilayered system. I think this tendency threatens to scare many philosophers away from pluralism before they have given it a fair hearing, and I think that once the tendency is abandoned, philosophers are more likely to see and take seriously what I take to be the real incentive for embracing moral pluralism in environmental ethics.

What, then, is this incentive? Callicott writes as if it were primarily either intellectual laziness or philosophical charlatanism. He characterizes Stone's pluralism as "happy-go-lucky," "an easy and appealing alternative" to monism, and he calls Stone's argument for pluralism "seductive," suggesting that it is just as suspect as he takes deconstructive postmodernism to be (pp. 116, 104, 102, and 118-20). These may be two incentives for embracing pluralism, and given Stone's very multilayered theory and his sometimes pragmatic characterization of pluralism, I can see how one could get the impression that pluralism is a substitute for a fully worked-out monism. Nevertheless, there are other reasons for siding with pluralism, at least one of which expresses a serious philosophical challenge which I think ultimately cannot be met by the monists, and certainly not by the kind of monism which Callicott advocates.

As Callicott understands, the bowhead whale example in *Earth and Other Ethics* is intended to dramatize Stone's suspicion that the broad range of entities which some environmental philosophers want to say are morally considerable cannot be claimed to be directly morally considerable on any single ground. Stone may turn out to be wrong. It may be that many of the entities in his example (e.g., corporations and states) are not morally considerable at all, and it may turn out, as Callicott argues, that the ones which are can all be said to be directly morally considerable on the same ground. However, if Stone is right, if at least some of the entities on his list both are directly morally considerable and cannot be considerable on commensurable grounds, then pluralism as I have defined it is required, and to insist on giving a monist account of what are distinct and incommensurable moral realms is not parsimony but dogmatism.

Is Stone right? I am convinced that he is. Although I cannot go into the details of my argument here, the following brief sketch illustrates what is wrong with the land ethic as Callicott interprets it, and how this failing suggests that holism requires pluralism.

Leopold said that "a land ethic . . . implies respect for [the] fellow members [of one's biotic community], and also respect for the community as such."¹² Callicott's theory will generate a truly holistic ethic of the kind described by Leopold only if his "Humean-Smithian moral psychology" can generate concern for one's biotic community as such—as opposed to concern for the other members of one's biotic community—when combined with modern ecological science. However, *pace* Callicott, sympathetic concern for communities as such has no historical antecedent in David Hume or Adam

¹² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 204.

Smith, and because modern ecological theory provides no account of what is and is not good for an ecosystem, it would appear to be impossible to be concerned about one's biotic community as such.¹³ Although Callicott criticizes Holmes Rolston for trying to base a Leopoldian-style holism on a conative view of ecosystems (pp. 108-09), doing so makes no sense, for only by taking some such tack can one hope to make Callicott's Humean-Smithian moral psychology generate a holistic environmental ethic. Only if I can know what is and is not good for another entity can I be concerned about its welfare.

It is because an ecosystem has no welfare of its own, in the sense that each individual member of an ecosystem has a welfare of its own, that a holistic environmental ethic must be pluralistic. If it is plausible to say that ecosystems (or biotic communities as such) are directly morally considerable—and that is a very big *if*—it must be for a very different reason than is usually given for saying that individual human beings are directly morally considerable (and, perhaps, higher animals or all individual living organisms).¹⁴

Succinctly: no holism without pluralism.

About the Author

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¹³ Detailed arguments to these conclusions are contained in Gary E. Varner, "A Critique of Environmental Holism," in preparation.

¹⁴ In my recent paper, "Biological Functions and Biological Interests," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27 (1990): 251-70, I argue that the biological functions of a living organism's component subsystems provide a nonarbitrary criterion of what is and is not in its interests. Nevertheless, as Harley Cahen has shown in "Against the Moral Considerability of Ecosystems," *Environmental Ethics* 10 (1988): 195-216, ecosystems are not goal directed in the way that organisms are. An alternative basis for ecosystem moral considerability is defended by Eugene C. Hargrove in *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989). Hargrove uses G. E. Moore's thought experiment in *Principia Ethica* to show that the existence of beautiful objects is a moral good, independently of anyone's perception of them, and he uses an analysis of landscape painting to explain how some believe that naturally evolving ecosystems are always beautiful. He thus establishes direct moral considerability for ecosystems (or at least naturally evolving ones) that is wholly independent of whatever (presumably very different) considerations he would use to ground the moral considerability of persons.

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