

J. Baird Callicott,  
 "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair"  
*Environmental Ethics* 4 (1980), pp. 311-38

I

In "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," J. Baird Callicott delivers what can fairly be labelled the "classic" environmental ethics critique of the animal rights movement. Callicott claims that the impression of unity deriving from the opposition to humanist ethics which animal liberation and environmental ethics share may be "rather superficial and conceal substrata of thought and value which are not at all similar." [315] He goes on to conclude that

humane moralism has located moral value in individuals, [centering] its attention on the competing criteria for moral standing and rights holding, while environmental ethics locates ultimate value in the "biotic community" and assigns differential moral value to the constitutive individuals relatively to that standard. . . . Allied to this difference are many others. One of the more conspicuous is that in environmental ethics, plants are included within the parameters of the ethical theory as well as animals. Indeed, inanimate entities such as oceans and lakes, mountains, forests, and wetlands are assigned a greater value than individual animals. . . . There are intractable practical differences between environmental ethics and the animal liberation movement. The animal liberation/animal rights movement is in the final analysis utterly unpracticable. The land ethic, by contrast, is eminently practicable. [337-8].

Thus, Callicott sees animal liberation and environmental ethics differing over holism vs. individualism, extending "direct ethical considerability" [312] to non-sentient entities, and certain practical matters, such as the morality of hunting, and he believes that, because of these differences, environmental ethics is at least closer to providing an acceptable ethic than is animal liberation. He also considers the holism vs. individualism issue to be "perhaps the most fundamental theoretical difference between environmental ethics and the ethics of animal liberation." [337] This review will be confined to a critical discussion of Callicott's "environmental holism" and the criticism of animal liberation as "life-loathing" and "world-denying" [333] which he derives from it.

II

Callicott claims that "ecology has made it possible to apprehend the landscape as an articulate unity" and that "land is integrated as a human community is integrated." [321-2] The moral significance of this ecological discovery is that

the good of the community as a whole serves as a standard for the assessment of the relative value and relative ordering of its constitutive parts and therefore provides a means of adjudicating the often mutually contradictory demands of the parts considered separately for equal consideration. [324-5]

He goes on to claim that Plato proposes a similar holistic view in his *Republic*, [327-9] and, ostensibly defining "environmental ethics" by reference to Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," [311] he identifies its basic

principle as Leopold's claim that  
 A thing is right when it tends  
 to preserve the integrity, stability,  
 and beauty of the biotic  
 community. It is wrong when  
 it tends otherwise. [320]

Finally, Callicott concludes that by  
 adopting this environmental holism,  
 we human beings could reaffirm  
 our participation in nature by  
 accepting life as it is given  
 without a sugar coating.  
 Instead of imposing artificial  
 legalities, rights, and so on on  
 nature, we might take the  
 opposite course and accept and  
 affirm natural biological laws,  
 principles, and limitations in  
 the human personal and social  
 spheres. Such appears to  
 have been the posture toward  
 life of tribal peoples in the  
 past. [334]

This reaffirmation he takes to be the  
 opposite of the "world-denying,"  
 "life-loathing" philosophy of the animal  
 liberation movement.

This account of environmental  
 holism and its supposed moral consequences  
 raises numerous questions, of  
 which I shall consider the following  
 three:

- (i) Is holism, as Callicott portrays  
 it, an acceptable moral position?
- (ii) Is Leopold's principle an acceptable  
 moral principle?
- (iii) Is animal liberation a "life-  
 loathing" morality?

i

Both mainstream moral philosophies  
 and everyday Western morality have  
 long had a holistic dimension to them.  
 Moral philosophers as different as  
 Hobbes, Jefferson, Kant, and Mill  
 agree that

a part of an individual's value lies  
 in his/her role in a community,  
 the good of the community can  
 (morally) sometimes be cited in

adjudicating conflicts, and  
 individuals can (morally) sometimes  
 be called on to make sacrifices  
 for their community.

Let us call any moral philosophy or  
 everyday morality which incorporates  
 these three principles "partially holistic."  
 Judaism and contemporary English  
 socialism are examples of current,  
 common moralities which are partially  
 holistic.

The animal liberation ethics proposed  
 by such writers as Peter Singer  
 and Bernard Rollin are also partially  
 holistic.<sup>1</sup> The strong utilitarian  
 strain in the animal liberation movement  
 which has developed over the  
 past fifteen years entails taking such  
 a partial holistic view, and some  
 animal rights philosophers, such as  
 Tom Regan, have even criticized such  
 utilitarian animal liberationists as  
 Singer for going too far in this  
 holistic direction.<sup>2</sup> Consequently,  
 it misrepresents animal liberation  
 to locate it on one side of a  
 simplistic individualism vs. holism  
 dichotomy.

However, it does not misrepresent  
 animal liberation, or mainstream  
 moral philosophy and practice, to  
 oppose them to what Callicott is  
 proposing. The possible extreme  
 which disturbs Regan about  
 utilitarian versions of animal  
 liberation is, apparently, just  
 the extreme that Callicott is  
 advocating, for he would have us  
 believe that an individual's moral  
 value should be *totally* determined  
 by his/her role in a community.  
 Callicott says things like the  
 following in discussing (his version  
 of) environmental holism:

The land ethic is holistic in  
 the sense that the integrity,  
 stability, and beauty of the  
 biotic community is its *summum  
 bonum*. . . . The good of the  
 biotic community is the ultimate  
 measure of the moral value,  
 the rightness or wrongness, of  
 actions. . . . In every case  
 the effect upon ecological

systems is the decisive factor in the determination of the ethical quality of actions. . . . Modern ethical theory has consistently located moral value in individuals, and humane moralism remains firmly within this modern convention, while environmental ethics locates ultimate value in the "biotic community" and assigns differential moral value to the constitutive individuals relatively to this standard.[311, 320, 337]

While such statements do not explicitly state that individuals have moral value *only* through their contributions to a community (specifically, the so-called "biotic community"), they do strongly suggest that that is what Callicott understands by "holism."

It is this view of the moral role to be played by holism which I shall be referring to as "total holism" and be discussing here. Anything less than this total view would not represent the "fundamental theoretical" break with standard moral philosophy and practice that Callicott sees in (his version of) environmental holism, since standard moral philosophy and practice are partially holistic. Consequently, it seems not only more interesting but also fair to interpret Callicott's holism as total holism.<sup>3</sup> Now, has Callicott provided us with good reasons to move from partial to total holism?

The "body of empirical experience and theory which is summed up in the term *ecology*," and which Callicott identifies as "the philosophical context of the land ethic and its conceptual foundation"[321] cannot (logically) entail that we ought (morally) to take such a step. If all forms of life on earth, including the human form, in some sense "depend on" each other for their survival, it could follow that our role in the biotic "community" is

our "ultimate" significance, in the ironic way that, as Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suicide is the "fundamental" philosophical question. That is, it could be that unless we pay attention to the biotic significance of our actions, we will not be around to appreciate aesthetic, moral, or other values. However, that these values would cease to exist if we destroy the balance of nature does not entail, or even suggest, that our moral value is limited to or in any other than this ironic sense "derives from" the value we have for maintaining that balance.

Similarly, Plato's moral philosophy does not propose or even suggest total holism. The guiding concern of Socrates' thought experiment in the *Republic* is not "the integrity, stability, and beauty" of the state. Rather, that guiding concern is what will produce the best life for human beings:

Socrates: My notion is that a state comes into existence because no individual is self-sufficient; we all have many needs. . . . Having all these needs, we call in one another's help to satisfy our various requirements; and when we have collected a number of helpers and associates to live together in one place, we call that settlement a state.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the individual members of Plato's ideal state are valued not only as contributors to the state but also as the ends for which the state exists. Furthermore, Callicott claims that "from the vantage point of ecological biology, pain and pleasure seem to have nothing at all to do with good and evil." [332] Plato, on the other hand, is a paradigm eudaemonist, arguing that the value of justice, both in the state and in the individual, lies in the "true," enduring happiness it provides.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the ultimate goal of Plato's moral philosophy is found not

in the structure and maintenance of a community but in the quality of life of individuals, the structuring and maintenance of the community being ordered to that end. Consequently, Callicott's total holism cannot find respectability through association with Plato's *Republic*.

As noted above, another reason Callicott gives for valuing total holism is that it provides a way of adjudicating conflicts of interests. However, as a logical claim, that much can be said for all moral principles, e.g., the principle of utility, the categorical imperative, the ethical teachings of the *Bible*, the principles of fairness elaborated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, and so forth. This is because one of the functions of moral principles is to provide guidance in resolving conflicts of interests. Consequently, there is nothing logically unique about total holism here.

As a practical claim, it is, to say the least, not obvious, nor has it been shown, that total holism would be a more practicable guide for adjudicating conflicts of interests than contemporary morality is or than other ethical theories would be. Any theory which, like total holism, advocates a single goal for action will be tidy. However, total holism is not the only moral theory which rests on only one ultimate principle. Utilitarianism and Kantianism are similarly single-minded moral theories. Consequently, total holism does not have a practical advantage on this score. We may also note that single-principled moral theories have repeatedly proven unacceptable, and everyday morality does not follow any such simplifying philosophy. It seems unlikely that a principle which proposes making the *summum bonum* something which is indifferent to individual well-being will be able to reverse that trend. Therefore, the simplicity Callicott seems to admire in total holism may

actually be more of a vice than a virtue. Thus, on both logical and practical grounds, total holism's suggested ability to adjudicate conflicts of interests does not indicate that it is preferable to partial holism.

Finally, there is no moral reason for adopting total holism. The common, moral goal of reducing the suffering in life and otherwise making life more enjoyable and fulfilling would not obviously be more effectively pursued by valuing individuals only as contributors to a community. Indeed, since it is individuals, not communities, which experience enjoyment, fulfillment, distress, and frustration and since total holism proposes regarding individuals as disposable items in the pursuit of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, it seems reasonable to conclude that total holism would not provide as likely a path to this moral goal as our current, mixed morality, which directly values individuals and their quality of life. Certainly, considerable argument would have to be provided to warrant believing otherwise. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that total holism would provide a better way of developing moral character. Certain traditional moral virtues, such as compassion, tolerance, love and other emotional attachments to specific individuals, individual initiative, and self-respect, could actually be discouraged by various forms of total holism, including Callicott's. Finally, total holism need not contribute to insuring fairness. Insofar as a wilderness area in which "one being lives at the expense of others"[333] is an example of a total holistic order, insuring fairness seems irrelevant to total holism.

Thus, it seems fair to conclude that total holism is not obviously a superior or even an acceptable moral outlook and that it would take considerable argument to demonstrate that it

is—if such arguments could be found. Callicott does not provide that argument, and nothing he says suggests how such arguments could be developed. (I have not found that other environmental holists provide compelling or coherent arguments for total holism, either.)

ii

Turn to Leopold's claim that whether something is right or wrong is determined by whether or not it contributes to the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic "community." Is this an acceptable moral principle? Once again, there are both practical and logical questions here. This time, we shall consider the practical issues first.

Callicott is clearly opposed to the utilitarian elements in contemporary morality, which he identifies as "a prophylactic ethic of maximizing rewards (pleasure) and minimizing unwelcome information (pain)," [323]<sup>6</sup> and he sees Leopold's principle as pointing us toward a more strenuous way of life. He seems to regret that "it is impossible today to return to the symbiotic relationship of Stone Age man to the natural environment" and to favor all of the following: simple diet and vigorous exercise, a renaissance of tribal cultural experience, cultivating a tolerance for pain, optimizing population by sexual continence, abortion, infanticide, and stylized warfare, regarding sickness as a worse evil than death, eating only what one can hunt, gather, or grow for oneself or barter from one's neighbors and friends, and leaving people who are injured in wilderness areas to get out on their own or "die in the attempt." [327, 334, 336, 338] There are the "practical" consequences of the ethic Callicott describes as "eminently practicable."

As these consequences indicate,

(Callicott's interpretation of) Leopold's principle is fundamentally out of touch with contemporary morality, which emphasizes compassion for the injured, the sick, and the handicapped, tolerance for diverse ways of life, concern to expand the diversity of opportunities and experiences available to people, protecting the weak against the strong, and hope for progress. Callicott doubtless regards this being out of touch as a mark of the holistic environmentalists' willingness "to undertake creative ethical reflection, exploration, [and] reexamination of historical ethical theory." [319] However, since "morality" is a common concept, rather than a technical term which experts can stipulatively define, its meaning is established through our common, moral practice. Consequently, to the extent that a proposed "ethic," meaning merely "a code for conducting one's life," is fundamentally out of touch with our common moral practice, to that extent it is questionable whether that proposed code is a morality at all.

Significant *moral* criticism of common, moral practice cannot (logically) be based solely on the findings of a science, such as ecology, remote from the history and practice of morality. Significant moral criticism must (logically) be based, at least in part, on currently accepted moral principles or values. Even Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most abstract of moral philosophers, acknowledges this, beginning his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* with a section on the "Common Rational Knowledge of Morals" and confirming his ultimate moral principle by showing that it yields the same answers as everyday morality in four clear cases. Similarly, animal liberationists commonly call for the liberation of animals as the next step, beyond combatting racism and sexism, in extending our common, egalitarian moral principles to all those who suffer by not being covered by them.

This requirement that significant moral criticism keep in touch with moral history and practice is, presumably, why Callicott attempts to draw an analogy between his environmental holism and Plato's moral philosophy. However, that analogy fails. This leaves it highly doubtful that environmental holism provides a basis for moral criticism of moral practice or moral philosophies, such as animal liberation, and equally doubtful whether environmental holism is, itself, a moral philosophy at all.

The terms of Leopold's principle reinforce this doubt. Leopold mentions three specific values in his principle: integrity, stability, and beauty. The last of these is, directly, an aesthetic value. It can take on moral significance only by being tied to some moral value, e.g., through the principle that "Goodness, truth, and beauty are one and the same" or the argument that "Beauty is something people enjoy; so, since the principle of utility instructs us to maximize happiness, we ought (morally) to consider the aesthetic consequences of our actions when determining what we ought (morally) to do." Leopold and Callicott have not provided principles or arguments to establish the moral significance of the beauty of the biotic community. Since Leopold's principle is supposed to be the fundamental principle of the land ethic, stating its *summum bonum* and ultimate measure of moral value, the logic of this total, environmental holism would seem to preclude such a principle or argument. Consequently, it is, at least, highly doubtful that the beauty of the biotic community can have moral significance here.<sup>7</sup>

The first of Leopold's value terms, "integrity," can refer to a moral value, but the term does not here have its moral meaning. It does not mean "probity," "rectitude," or "firm adherence to a code of values." Talk

of "the probity of the biotic community" would be nonsense. Rather, "integrity" here means "unity" and "completeness," referring to the condition of not having been dismembered or otherwise reduced to a truncated version of its fully functional form. Thus, "integrity" here denotes biological or ecological conditions. Once again, some principle or argument tying these conditions to moral values is needed to give them moral significance, and, once again, neither Leopold nor Callicott provides, nor likely could provide, such a principle or argument.

Finally, the second of Leopold's three value terms, "stability," also refers to a physical condition—and it definitely is startling to see this condition offered as an ultimate value for a "biologically enlightened" value theory in a post-Darwinian era. Once again, we are given no reason to believe that the stability of the current state of nature has moral significance.

Thus, there is nothing in Leopold's principle which identifies it as a moral principle. Labelling something an "ethic," in the sense of being a code for conducting oneself, such as "the hunting ethic," does not establish that it is a code of moral values or even that it has moral significance. The moral value of hunting remains an open question, even though hunting has long had an "ethic."<sup>8</sup> Considerable argument is needed to show that a principle referring to an aesthetic value and ecological conditions has moral value, let alone expresses an acceptable, ultimate moral principle. Until such argument is provided, if it can be provided, the so-called "land ethic" would less misleadingly be renamed "the land aesthetic" or "the ecologist's code."

Beyond his mistaken analogy to Plato's *Republic*, the only suggestion

Callicott offers for why we should regard (his interpretation of) Leopold's environmental principle as a moral principle is that

the representation of the natural environment as, in Leopold's terms "one humming community" brings into play, whether rationally or not, those stirrings of conscience which we feel in relation to delicately complex, functioning social and organic systems. [322]

However, this suggestion begs the question, for it is far from obvious that the environment can properly be described as a "community" in a morally significant sense. Ecologically, "community" means merely "a group of plants and animals living in a specific region under relatively similar conditions" or "the region in which they live." [*American Heritage Dictionary*] There is nothing here of the *feeling* of community, including being cooperative, mutual care and respect, sharing of burdens and responsibilities, emotional and moral attachments, intentionally formed alliances, a sense of obligations to, responsibilities for, or rights against other members of the group, and identifying with, feeling one can rely on, and feeling one is making a contribution to the group—all of which contribute to making communities morally significant. Lacking all of these dimensions, a merely ecological "community" lacks moral significance. That plants and animals, including ourselves, need each other and other inorganic things, such as unpolluted water and air, in order to survive does not make us a "community" in a morally significant sense, and to try to stir moral feelings by employing that term in discussing ecological issues is to equivocate and to substitute rhetoric for argument.

Until further argument is supplied to show, if it can be shown, that Leopold's principle is a moral

principle, it seems fair to regard his land "ethic" as the statement of the way of life he personally preferred, rather than as a moral principle. Some people like cities and luxury; others prefer the country and austerity—in terms of the substance of Leopold's principle, the significance of the land "ethic" is that it provides a guide for the latter group.

Finally, Leopold's principle could be given moral significance, if it provided useful guidance for accomplishing our common, moral goals. However, it is doubtful that it can play that role. As already indicated, it would not, at least as interpreted by Callicott, encourage the development of some morally highly prized character traits, such as compassion. Also, it would not help to insure fairness, since it would, apparently, counsel against defending the weak against the strong. Finally, in directing us to cultivate a tolerance for pain, to leave injured people to die, to destroy animals in order to save plants, and so forth, it seems unlikely that it would provide us much guidance in reducing suffering and otherwise making life more enjoyable and fulfilling. Consequently, Leopold's principle is not likely to be of service in attaining our common, moral goals.

It seems fair to conclude that for all the above reasons, Leopold's principle is not an acceptable moral principle. (This is not to say, of course, that ecology cannot provide important information for making enlightened moral decisions.)

iii

Finally, let us briefly turn to Callicott's charge that animal liberation is world-denying and life-loathing. Morality involves inhibiting and redirecting native desires and tendencies, and in its fully developed form, it also involves projecting "better worlds" for

us to work toward. It follows that concerns, values, principles, codes, guides for action, etc., cannot be restricted to merely "accepting life as it is given" and "accepting and affirming natural biological laws, principles, and limitations," if they are to constitute a morality. Consequently, taken at face value, Callicott's supposedly "life-affirming," "world-accepting" environmental holism cannot (logically) be a morality.

Such advice can take on moral significance only if it is understood as encouraging us to do something which is not currently being done and which would make for a better world. Since Callicott proposes the land "ethic" as an alternative not only to animal liberation but also to contemporary, civilized life, he, apparently, does understand it in this way. However, when so understood, the phrase "life as it is given" cannot (logically) refer to life as it actually is being led by us. Thus, Callicott is not really proposing that we "accept life as it is given." Rather, behind that misleading rhetoric, he is rejecting life as it currently is and advocating that we follow a way of life as he would like it to be. Furthermore, suggesting that, as far as possible, we foresake tens of thousands of years of evolution and history and return to the way of life of Stone Age tribes marks Callicott's "ethic" as a particularly "world-denying" vision. Consequently, when interpreted in the way which makes it logically possible for Callicott's "ethic" to be a morality, it is neither life-affirming nor world-accepting.

On the other hand, refusing to

accept and affirm avoidable suffering, unfair distributions of goods, uninhibited aggression, and so forth, are refusals which have long been and continue to be part of everyday morality. As such, they are a well-established part of life as it is. Animal liberation extends such concerns, which have traditionally been focused on the human world and on human life, to include equal consideration for animals. In this way, animal liberation is simply carrying on the business of everyday moral practice. Therefore, it does not loathe or deny life as it is. Rather, unlike Callicott's proposed retreat to the wilderness, animal liberation is participating in life and, hopefully, in its continuing moral evolution.

### III

Thus, Callicott's total, environmental holism and his criticism of animal liberation have little, if anything, to recommend them as moral theory and criticism. First, Callicott has not provided any reason for believing that holism should be more than a part of morality. Second, the specific holistic principle Callicott advances, namely, Leopold's so-called "land ethic," has not been shown to be a moral principle at all nor to be of particular use in attaining our common, moral goals. Finally, Callicott's criticisms of animal liberation are incoherent. Consequently, total holistic, environmental "ethicists" will have to marshal a great deal more argument, if that can be done, in order to show that their principles and criticisms are morally significant.

Steve F. Sapontzis  
California State University, Hayward



## Notes

1. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), Chapter 1, and Bernard Rollin, *Animal Rights and Human Morality* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981), Part I.
2. See Regan's "Utilitarianism, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9 (1980), pp. 305-24.
3. Evelyn Pluhar also interprets Callicott's position in this way, in "Two Conceptions of an Environmental Ethic and Their Implications," *Ethics & Animals* IV (1983), pp. 120-3, and Ernest Partridge, another noted environmental ethicist, at least does not object to this interpretation of Callicott's position, in "Three Wrong Leads in a Search for an Environmental Ethic: Tom Regan on Animal Rights, Inherent Values, and 'Deep Ecology,'" *Ethics & Animals* V (1984), page 73, note 18.
4. *Republic*, II, 368-9 (Cornford translation).
5. *Ibid.*, IV, 576-592.
6. Callicott treats pain as if it were merely an organic monitoring system putting messages on a mental display screen, e.g., "Your ankle is broken." He simply passes over the fact that in addition to delivering unwelcome information, pain hurts.
7. While this is clearly a criticism of Callicott's conception of environmental ethics, it is not entirely clear that it is an objection to Leopold's position. This is because it is not clear that he regarded his principle as *just* an ethical principle. He introduces that principle in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949) with the following remarks:  
 Quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically *and* esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient.  
 [224, emphasis added]  
 Consequently, it may be that Leopold intended "beauty" to have only aesthetic significance in his principle. Callicott, however, does not even suggest splitting Leopold's principle into aesthetic and (supposedly) ethical components.
8. Robert W. Loftin makes this point in "The Morality of Hunting," *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984), pp. 241-50.