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Tyler Veak* Wyatt Galusky†

*Liberty University, tveak@liberty.edu

†Morrisville State College, wgalusky@vt.edu

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"Global Environmental Problems Require Global Solutions":

A Case Study in Ecomessianism[1]

Tyler Veak and Wyatt Galusky[2]

Abstract

Many Western environmental activist groups and theorists have sounded the call for the Earth's salvation from the "global environmental crisis." What is lacking, however, is some reflection on the ramifications of framing the problem globally, and on the justifications for particular solutions. This paper examines the "ecomessiah" (saviors of the Earth) phenomenon to investigate the impacts of these types of programs. Specifically, we examine the "global environmental ethic" proposed by J. Baird Callicott. His program, presented as an inclusive system that incorporates non-Western belief systems, trades heavily on Western science as an authority and a justification. We contend that his ethic, while well-intentioned, rests on assumptions and uses of science that subvert both non-Western ideologies and non-Western interests rather than revere them. Consequently, the inherent flaws undermine the feel-good one-world rhetoric that he espouses.

Ecomessianism is the positioning assumed by certain Western environmentally-oriented organizations or individuals, "that they have the knowledge and the human and financial resources which entitle them to lead the environmental movement, and hence all of society, on the only true road to Earth's salvation" (Gudynas, 170). Various environmental groups and ideologues (e.g. the World Watch Institute, EarthFirst!, Deep Ecologists) have been empowered by the thought of potential global catastrophe to

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[2] Tyler Veak is a Ph.D. candidate in Science and Technology Studies (STS) at Virginia Tech. His research interests center around philosophy of Technology and radical environmental philosophy. Wyatt Galusky is also a Ph.D. candidate in STS at Virginia Tech, with research interests that include the relationships

present totalizing solutions and steer the world in the 'right' direction. While these potential protectors of the Earth rush headlong into their global triage programs, little effort is expended into evaluating the authenticity and desirability of such efforts. That is, implicit in their very conceptualization of the problem are values and assumptions that need to be exposed and critiqued. Whose earth, why them, what direction: these questions need to be addressed when evaluating what these purported 'saviors' advocate versus what they may in fact be doing.

Ecomessianism relies on several factors which allows it to appear viable: the use of science as a tool to identify and fix environmental problems; the identification of those problems as primarily global; and the establishment of an ecocratic discourse used to promote the legitimacy of these efforts. An ecocratic discourse involves a new climate of environmental 'consciousness' that reinforces the 'global' environmental concern. It "offers not only a diagnosis of current problems, but also offers measures on how to deal with them" (Gudynas, 175). Within this discourse, which relies on the might of Western science, developing countries and indigenous peoples are effectively removed from the conversation. Despite its benign or even benevolent feel, ecomessianism tends to invalidate knowledge claims of the non-scientist and the non-westerner. Ecomessiahs have the 'right' way, bolstered by science. Thus, native practices are opened up for evaluation, to see just how 'ecological' the groups are in their lands, and what sort of technological advances could engender a more optimal performance. It is the expert that verifies and sanctifies knowledge. Indigenous

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between environmental activism, science, and popular cultural mediums. Both authors received a Master's degree in Philosophy, specializing in Environmental Ethics, from the University of North Texas.

peoples do not get their livelihoods back if their village practices are not deemed 'ecological'. The epistemic evaluation is clear – Western science is charged with certifying or devaluing. Thus, despite the helpful rhetoric, ecomessiahs can exhibit much of the same domination that they had hoped to overcome through their efforts.

In this paper, we will examine one particular environmental ethicist, J. Baird Callicott, who displays certain ecomessianistic tendencies. We will first examine Callicott's own justification for the scope ("globalness") of his argument, which trades heavily on recent developments in Western science and its apparent conviviality with particular non-Western ideologies. Then, we will explore the more troubling assumptions that his program is based upon, and the ramifications of those assumptions. We hope to show that while Callicott has good intentions, he presents a global environmental ethic that subverts much of the "wisdom" he purports to cherish by unjustifiably privileging one particular form of knowledge and framing of the problem over all others.

Callicott's "Global Environmental Ethic"

J. Baird Callicott, one the leading authors in the field of environmental ethics, examined non-western attitudes toward nature in his book *Earth Insights*, and suggested a conception of how these different attitudes might fit under the umbrella of a global environmental ethic. Central to Callicott's effort is his appropriation of what he calls the new "postmodern" sciences.

According to Callicott, the postmodern scientific worldview, which is based on the new sciences of relativity physics and ecology, is slowly replacing the mechanistic paradigm. He claims that "One might therefore envision a single cross-cultural environmental ethic based on ecology and the new physics and expressed in the cognitive lingua franca of contemporary science" (12), and that the "Indigenous worldviews around the globe can contribute a fund of symbols, images, metaphors, similes, analogies, stories, and myths to advance the process of articulating the new postmodern scientific worldview" (192).[3] In sum, Callicott argues that non-western sources provide fresh ways of articulating the "new science," and thereby become "co-creators" of a universal worldview based on western science and augmented by non-western worldviews (Ibid).

After a survey of non-western belief systems on the environment, Callicott, in *Earth Insights*, presents his notion of what the ethical "standard" for other belief systems should be:

> [The "land ethic"] is not just one option among many, standing alongside, say, the Jain *ahimsa* environmental ethic, and appealing only to members of a specific sect or culture. It is a sister environmental ethic, but *it is also proffered as a universal environmental ethic*, with globally acceptable credentials, underwriting

[3] Although Callicott uses the lingo of postmodern "storytelling", he is in fact far more committed to an oral/epistemological/ontological monism than any postmodernist. To illustrate this commitment to monism, see: J. Baird Callicott, "The Case Against Moral Pluralism," *Environmental Ethics* 12, 1990.

> and reinforcing each of the others. Further, *it is also intended to serve as a standard for evaluating others* [emphasis added] (188).

Clearly, Callicott is not hiding the privileging of his conception of a "postmodern evolutionary-ecological environmental ethic," as he explicitly states that his ethic is intended as a "standard for evaluating others." The basis for this privileging of Western science relies on his claim that since:

> Science is now practiced internationally, with only the slightest culture-specific variations from nation to nation...One can fairly assert that at least the ever-evolving scientific worldview enjoys genuine international currency. The postmodern evolutionary-ecological environmental ethic here outlined may therefore make a claim to universality simply to the extent that its scientific foundations are universally endorsed-whether openly and enthusiastically or sub rosa (189).

Globalizing the Local: Privileging Western Science

Appealing to science as a justification for this type of global frame is not without its problems, however. Aspects of scientific knowledge must be examined before Western science can be used as a reliable (and universal) authority. As Bruno Latour notes in his work on the nature of science, no scientific knowledge production can be

ascribed *a priori* as natural (and thus universal). It is only after a controversy deciding which knowledge claim and representation is more accurate does the ascription 'natural' get applied: "…the settlement of a controversy is *the cause* of Nature's representation" (Latour, 99). A controversy comes to a resolution once a competing network expands by a larger extent than its rival.[4] The expansion of this network (which includes the enrollment of all actors, especially social), implies that it had been largely more accommodating to the existing hierarchies. The controversies exist in the first place because knowledge production *begins* from a very particular locality (whether lab or location) that must be made convincing, in order to ensure that the wider application is relevant (Latour, 247-51).

Further, ecofeminists and post-colonialists have persuasively argued that "science" is simply one, among many, ways of "knowing." Women and indigenous peoples frequently emphasize "participatory" (Shiva 1995, 51), "subjective-experiential," and "embodied" knowing over the objective-abstract-disembodied knowing of contemporary science (Mellor, 118). The "new" science advocated by Callicott is no exception.[5] Far from being "universally endorsed", Western science should perhaps be best described as useful *given* certain particular and culturally-specific values and

[4] Bruno Latour conceives of scientific knowledge production as essentially the expansion of varying "networks" (composed of scientists, policy makers, and even material objects), which are mobilized around a certain concept or design strategy. Particular groups then compete by attempting to enroll others into their respective networks and thus dwarf the competition.

[5] While Callicott is clearly privileging Western science, he is not suggesting Western science as a standard because it has any epistemological or ontological insight into truth with a capital "T," or reality with a capital "R" (190). Rather, he argues that Western science is epistemologically privileged because "it is self-consciously self-critical"; that is, "scientists...scrutinize one another's work" (190, 191). The Western scientific worldview is, therefore, privileged because, unlike other worldviews it is self-reflective and critical. These properties, however, are implicitly assumed to be universally valuable, but they are also arguably cultural specific (i.e. local).

experiences. One can admit to the pervasiveness of science without granting a "claim to universality."

Growing Pains:

Expanding the Influence of Western Science

In this case, Callicott's specific "locality" (both in terms specific knowledge and specific history, represented by his "post-modern scientific worldview") is generalized and naturalized through the scope of its network, and used to determine scientifically-based policy. Continuing with Latour, he argues that part of the delicacy involved in maintaining a disciplinary whole and expanding its influence involves increasing the amount of people the network's 'facts' touch and influence, and in turn limiting the amount of negotiation that can be done with the information once it is delivered. Thus, the dissemination of facts is not a sterile enterprise. The fact-builders need "simultaneously to *increase* the amount of people taking part in the actions – so the claim spreads – and to *decrease* the number of people taking part in the action – so the claim spreads *as it is*" (Latour, 207). People need to be impacted by it, yet not impact it. As a result, those spreading the network do two things simultaneously: establish their importance (through the spread of the network) and reify their necessity (by being the only fountain through which their network can flow). Callicott's rhetorical notions of his network (his interpretation of the postmodern scientific worldview) being "universally endorsed", "epistemologically privileged" and "a standard for evaluating"

other worldviews illustrates the process just described (189;191;188). He at the same time justifies the network by his assumption of universality (as is), and expands the network by implying that others believe the same (just with slightly different concepts).

Callicott attempts to expand his own scientifically-augmented network by using the implicit belief that ideas/beliefs/ethics can be appropriated from one context for use in another context. While appropriation of ideas is not inherently misguided, Callicott's suggested interchange of ideas takes place between his global ethic on the one hand, which is based on his conception of a "postmodern scientific worldview", and all the "rest" of the ethic(s) on the other. In other words, Callicott's suggested global ethic, which is based on the local knowledge of Western science, would "uproot" and globally impose[6] itself on a plethora of indigenous-local-ethics. This game of ethical "musical chairs" advocated by Callicott is deeply flawed.

Ideologies toward nature are rooted in specific local contexts, which have specific modes of resource use (Merchant; Gadgil & Guha). In addition, these modes of resource use are associated with specific social organizations. Hunter gatherers and pastoralists tend to be more egalitarian (though possibly patriarchal) in their social structure; industrial societies, on the other hand, are much more hierarchical in structure (Gadgil & Guha). If an ideology, supported by a hierarchical power structure, is exported to a context with a more egalitarian social organization, the ideology can actually shift the social organization. Therefore, appropriating a belief system for use in another context, as Callicott suggests, forces the ideology to conform, at least in some

[6]He states unequivocally that his global ethic serves as a "standard" for the rest (188).

measure, to the prevailing social organization (e.g., Callicott's attempt to use non-western beliefs to bolster his global environmental ethic, which is tied to multiple power structures through his linking it with Western science).

Ramachandra Guha succinctly explicates the dangers inherent in transferring ideas that are rooted in American conservation history (76). In cases where "preservationist" philosophy has been exported to Third World countries, such as India, tragic consequences have resulted as thousands of tribal peoples have been forced to relocate.

Guha claims that Western biologists working under the financial backing of powerful environmental groups pressured India's government to appropriate the "common lands" of tribal peoples for the purpose of "preservation" (76). The resulting social upheavals ultimately served to further strain the environment of India as more people were forced to live on less land. Scarcity exacerbated the problems and consequently groups began to fight each other for diminishing resources.

Guha's example demonstrates the problems inherent in attempting to export belief systems (e.g. an environmental ethic) between contexts with differing social structures. Preservationism emerged from American conservation philosophy in the early part of this century. At the time, there was growing support for "setting aside" wilderness areas primarily because the United States had the luxury (i.e., the land and the affluence) to do so. The United States, by the turn of the century, had already moved far down the road of industrialization. The bureaucratic machine necessary for Fordism was no doubt a necessary component for fostering "preservationist" rhetoric. That is, the

move away from an agrarian based economy to an industrial economy was a prerequisite for implementing "preservationist" rhetoric.[7]

India's situation is much different. It has been populated far longer, and that population is consequently much more dense. Further, the majority of its population remains embedded in agrarian and pastoralist economies, which, as noted above, have different social structures than industrial economies/societies. Hence, attempting to export preservationist philosophy which is rooted in an industrial-hierarchical social structure to India's more egalitarian agrarian/pastoralist social structure is, therefore, problematic.

The connection with Callicott's project is obvious-he appears to be advocating the imposition of a particular philosophy which is based on Western science.[8] Callicott ignores the fact that Western science, however nuanced, remains tied to the "old" hierarchical power structures of the West that channel research and development funding to the same old places.[9] (Mellor, 55).

In addition, another problem arises in attempting to find resonance between Western science with aspects of other belief systems. It is possible that the aspects that are "resonating" between the non-western belief systems and Callicott's postmodern scientific worldview are Enlightenment "leftovers." He makes the claim that these belief systems "can contribute a fund of symbols, images, metaphors, similes, analogies,

[7]"Nature", in some sense, had to be put at "arms length" for it to be valued as it is valued by "preservationism" (Nash, 1967). For a history of the roots of preservationism see Eugene C. Hargrove. Foundations of Environmental Ethics. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989); and Bryan G. Norton. Toward Unity Among Environmentalists. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[8]Again, he explicitly states that his "ethic" is meant to be a "standard".
[9]Eighty percent of "development" projects (leaving aside the kind of "development") are awarded to First World companies, or Third World elite (Escobar, 164-5).

stories, and myths to advance the process of articulating the new postmodern scientific worldview" (192). However, the aspects that are resonating-"myth, magic, and ritual"-may be "functional equivalents of Enlightenment science and technology" (Luke 1997: 12). These aspects of non-Western belief systems (myth, etc.) can be used as a means of manipulating and controlling nature; they may just not do so with the same scope and "efficiency" as their Western counterparts (Ibid.). Nevertheless, the point is that even if Callicott finds affinity between his constructed global ethic and these non-Western societies, it does not mean they are ultimately more ecologically sensible. If the desire for control and domination is transferred over into existing hierarchical power structures, nothing is resolved.

Who Benefits?:
Subsuming Non-Western Values Under a Global Heading

Of course, one may find fault with Callicott's very attempt to appropriate these ideologies into his own system. Anticipating this kind of objection, he looks to avoid that criticism through complimentarity:

> The 'act of appropriation' is on the face of it an indication of respect rather than disrespect-imitation being the sincerest form of flattery...favorable comparison with the emerging postmodern scientific worldview…*validates* traditional and indigenous intellectual achievements. *It gives them new meaning, dignity, and power* [emphasis added] (193).

In his appropriation of certain idealized facets of these ideologies, Callicott succumbs to romanticizing (at least on the surface) these other cultures. However, romanticizing ignores the oppressive social structures both in the non-western context from which the ideas are appropriated and in the meta-ethic that the ideas are used to support (Mellor, 35; 55). Romanticizing can also hide the very real social and ecological problems in these non-western cultures. That is, by emphasizing how environmentally "friendly" these various non-western belief systems are, we can easily forget about the environmentally destructive "practices" that many of these groups are forced into by the present global market system (e.g., deforestation, urban sprawl, and rapid depletion of natural resources due to increased competition) (Zimmerman, 156).

In addition, Callicott's assertion that non-western societies need "validating" so that their dignity is increased has all the earmarks of imperialism. The West's imperialistic imposition of technology and economy has degraded, if not outright eliminated, many cultures. Creating (perpetuating?) a hierarchical-hegemonic ideology, as Callicott's project advocates, extends the homogenizing monoculture of Western development to the "mind" (i.e., ideology) (Mellor, 64-67).

This homogenization is furthered by the conceptualization of environmental problems as primarily global. While not explicitly referring to any particular "global catastrophe", Callicott does propose a global solution, which makes overtures toward an Earth-wide calamity. By conceptualizing the problems that people face as the same (both in substance and meaning) for everyone, he can claim that he is justified in proposing large-scale changes and solutions to these world problems. But, just what is

'global' and why is it such an important concept? Does it really serve everyone's interests, or does it promote the designs and desires of a select few? Must these problems be conceived in this manner; and if not, what are the ramifications of them being so conceived?

The Meaning of "Global"

The global-ness of the environmental crisis is not a self-evident condition. It has a specific and relatively new history. As Escobar notes: "The category 'global problems' is of recent invention, deriving its main impetus from the ecological fervor fostered by the Club of Rome reports of the 1970s, which provided a distinct vision of the world as a global system where all the parts are interrelated" (193). In addition, Vandana Shiva explains that the concept of global is narrow and misleading (1993, 151). What is global is the one localized problem that has a global reach: namely, the industrialized west. Western influence spans the Earth, yet it is a very localized and specific form of knowledge and appeal. Referring to the infamous Bruntland Report, Escobar relates the kind of hopeful rhetoric involved in that kind of projection. Invoking a collective "we", the report proclaims the need for a more sustainable planet. But who is the referent of this knowledgeable "we"? Looking closely, "we" turns out to be "the familiar figure of the Western scientist turned manager" (193). Despite all the one-world rhetoric, "[t]he Western scientist continues to speak for the Earth" (194).

The Third World is subjugated under this global heading. Gudynas notes the pedagogical outcome of such 'global' conceptions (173). The flow of information and expertise is always from the First to the Third World, and not vice versa. The West

offers help to the Third World for development strategies, resource and debt management, etc., while the industrialized countries do not seek advice the other way. On the surface, Callicott appears to rectify this one-way dialogue through drawing on other belief systems. However, by filtering these belief systems through his system, which is based on Western ideologies (i.e., science, and ecological philosophy), Callicott at most pays lip service to these other belief systems. They are not appealed to provide unavailable insight, but rather used as diminutive "seconds" to Western wisdom (which thus validates that cultural system as somehow "useful"). Thus, despite his one-world feel, he means for the solution to the "global environmental crisis" to be mitigated through Western ideologies alone.

Conclusion(s)

As stated, Callicott's effort to construct a "multicultural" yet "unified" environmental ethic is a worthy aim. However, the problems in basing this unification on Western science are clear-however nuanced it may sound. Callicott's understanding of science is extremely Eurocentric, to say the least; but the larger issue is his failure to acknowledge the hierarchical power structures that come along with appealing to "Western science." Similarly, in appropriating ideologies from one cultural context for use in another, though not inherently deleterious, can be extremely disruptive to social organizations if the two contexts are dissimilar in material conditions and social structure. Finally, Callicott's view of non-western peoples, far from "venerating," is

actually a "romanticization" with ulterior motives-that is, to further his project of a "postmodern evolutionary ecological environmental ethic."

Rather than being informed by different forms of knowledge production and cultural insights, Callicott *judges* the 'rightness' of these views based upon a Western ideal-scientific knowledge. By co-opting indigenous views and pre-forming them into his own level of reality, he denies the independent value of these particular forms of reality. Instead, it is an example of a local product being appropriated, privatized, commodified, and redistributed to the original owners. What results is devaluation or outright denial of indigenous or other alternative knowledge production; instead of wanting to eradicate the native peoples, the ecomessiahs want to 'save' them – to save them 'in what manner' and 'as what' are questions best left to the "experts." This bottom-up approach is just a guise for another form of top-down valuation. Callicott's ecomessianistic tendency is clearly evident, in that the salvation flows only through his Western based ethical theory.

Also, by implicitly endorsing the conceptualization of certain environmental problems as primarily global and boundary-less (e.g. global warming), Callicott both extends the reach of Western scientific "authority" and provides a platform for subtle forms of ideological imperialism. A positive feedback loop is created, in which the "global" aspect of the crisis "requires" a global authority (Western science and its "universal currency"), which in turn is used to "certify" other systems as ecologically benign or not. This certification qua homogenization then reinforces the "global-ness" of the problem by helping to remake the world in one (Western) image. Callicott

justifies his own project in terms of this ideological Catch-22-the world (as defined and filtered by *my* belief system) needs to be saved, and thus can only be done through appeals to the ecomessiah (or at least the eco-evangelist).

Callicott is only one example of an increasing number of attempts to establish a new attitude toward nature by appealing to non-western belief systems.[10] This endeavor, though not entirely misguided, should be approached with caution. The consequences of recommendations such as Callicott's cannot be underestimated as we note the ongoing social upheaval caused by the imperialist imposition of Western preservationist philosophy in the Third World. Callicott is not unaware of the power of such ideas, as he states: "ideas shape the stage on which the human drama is enacted" (210). However, in shaping the "human drama," the issue of justice cannot be ignored.

[10]Deep ecology, and various forms of ecofeminism have also attempted to link themselves philosophically to primal/indigenous people groups (Mellor; Zimmerman).

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