

Bioregionalism and Cross-Cultural Dialogue on a Land Ethic

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ABSTRACT This paper argues against the view that a single environmental ethic can be formulated that could be universally applied in all geographic settings and across cultures. The paper specifically criticizes Callicott's proposal that Leopold's land ethic be adopted as a global environment ethic, and develops an alternative bioregional perspective which suggests that while there can be a great deal of variety in how different cultures think about and interact with their local environments, there is nonetheless the need for cross-cultural dialogue on how specific problems that transcend cultural boundaries can be successfully resolved.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue on Environmental Ethics

Globalization has created an entirely new situation in which many of the environmental problems currently faced by humankind cross cultural boundaries and thus require dialogue on how we will interact both in relation to each other and in relation to the environment. This paper will argue, however, that there is no need to formulate a single global ethic to deal with such problems. An alternative bioregional perspective will be proposed which contends that there should be sufficient convergence on ethical issues between cultures to allow for the successful resolution of mutual problems, but also sufficient divergence to allow for adequate levels of cultural diversity and continued cultural evolution.

There are at least three possible theoretical approaches to the problem of how cross-cultural dialogue on environmental ethics might be conducted. Universalist approaches contend that it should be possible to reach agreement on a single global ethic that could be applied unproblematically to all geographical regions and cultural contexts. Particularists argue, on the contrary, that agreement on such an ethic is not possible, given the fact that each culture has its own particular beliefs, values, and ethical systems, which are incommensurable with those of other cultures. A third approach, constructivism, acknowledges the unavoidability of moral pluralism among cultures as a matter of empirical fact, but nonetheless suggests that it is both necessary and possible for people from different cultures to reach a measure of agreement on how to deal with problems of mutual concern.

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Against more idealist, postmodern versions of constructivism, which see nature as 'nothing but' a social construct and reject any appeals to an external reality outside of those constructions, the version of constructivism employed here acknowledges the extent to which our understanding of and attitudes towards nature are socially constructed and therefore culturally variable, but nonetheless contends that all constructions are constrained by the pragmatic criterion of how successfully they enable humans to function in the world. (For overviews of current positions on the 'social construction of nature' see Bird, 1987; Demeritt, 2002; on 'constrained constructivism' see Hayles, 1991; for attempts to reconcile constructivism with a more realist and pragmatic perspective see Proctor, 1998; Peterson, 1999; Evanoff, 2005a; for a good introduction to environmental pragmatism in general see Light & Katz, 1996.)

Idealist versions of constructivism easily lead to the relativist conclusion that there are no standards by which competing cultural constructions can be evaluated, and hence no prospect for resolving ethical disputes across cultures through a dialogical process. Constructivists of a more pragmatic bent, however, contend that it is precisely because ethical beliefs are culturally constructed that they can be subjected to critical evaluation and reconstructed in ways that enable people to interact more effectively both with their natural environments and with each other, not only within but also between cultures. As Harmon notes, a 'stance in favor of moral pluralism does *not* commit one to relativism' (2002, p. 155).

One merit of the pluralistic approach to environmental ethics advocated by a number of philosophers (see, for example, Stone, 1987, 1988; Weston, 1991; Brennan, 1992; Midgley, 1996) is that it brings to the fore a variety of different perspectives and strategies for dealing with particular moral issues. Moral pluralism nonetheless becomes problematic when competing theories arising out of different cultural traditions involve not only substantive disagreements about what constitutes 'good' human lives, 'good' societies, and 'good' natural environments, but also procedural disagreements about how dialogue on such issues should be conducted, who should be included, what counts as a valid argument, and so forth. Pluralism easily degenerates into relativism if it fails to specify exactly how individuals with differing moral conceptions can establish the norms that will govern relationships between them and effectively work together on mutual problems.

Noting such problems, Callicott, one of the principal defenders of a monistic approach to environmental ethics, has argued that pluralism is unacceptable because it 'fails to specify what to do when two or more of its theories indicate inconsistent practical imperatives' (1990, p. 99). While Callicott (see especially 1999, ch. 9) defends monism at the intrapersonal level (moral theories held by individuals should be coherent), he is willing to accept a measure of pluralism at the interpersonal level (individuals with differing theories can attempt to persuade others about the correctness of their views). Callicott nonetheless holds out the prospect that such dialogue should ultimately lead to agreement on a single moral philosophy, which could then be universally applied to all cultures.

One crucial difficulty with moral monism, however, is the fact that different ethical theories typically emphasize different aspects of moral behavior to the exclusion of others. Consequently, it is unlikely that any single theory will be capable of capturing everything that individuals may believe to be morally relevant in every given case.

Midgley suggests that no theory 'can make the whole moral scene intelligible' (1996, p. 52). Steen (1995) further argues that complete coherence at the level of theory may be unattainable in any event simply because theories can be constructed at varying levels of generality and inevitably involve trade-offs (e.g. between degrees of specificity or abstraction). Ethical thinking, therefore, cannot simply settle for a few neat and simple principles but rather must undertake the difficult task of bringing a measure of coherence to a welter of sometimes conflicting moral insights, even if complete coherence proves elusive.

The attempt to formulate a single 'monistic' ethic, whether within or between cultures, which does not allow for sufficient levels of divergence can be both reductionistic and totalizing. By failing to take a wide variety of proposals into account we limit the range of options that can be considered, and thus run the risk of becoming inflexible and unable to adapt to new situations. The effort to maintain a monistic position can also become oppressive, enforcing a dogmatic set of ideas from which no dissent is tolerated. Creative attempts to improve, move beyond, or propose alternatives to a given position may be quashed as 'deviant'. While pluralism can also be debilitating, especially when it fails to achieve a sufficient measure of convergence to enable individuals and societies to relate well both to each other and to their natural environments, a healthy measure of pluralism is nonetheless necessary to insure creative and adaptive responses to new problems as they arise.

In place of an exclusively pluralist or a monistic approach to environmental ethics, a more constructivist, dialectical approach would seek to integrate insights from various traditions into a relatively coherent whole by taking into consideration as wide a range of positions as possible. Norton's convergence hypothesis contends that pluralistic moral perspectives can be integrated 'provided that there are clear rules of application for deciding which principles apply in each given situation, and clear priority rules for deciding which principles take precedence when more than one applies' (1991, p. 237). Although Norton's convergence hypothesis was specifically developed to show how disputes between anthropocentrists and ecocentrists might be successfully resolved, it can be usefully applied to a variety of other disputes, including disputes arising out of different cultural approaches to environmental issues. Taken alone, however, the convergence hypothesis runs the danger of slipping into a new monism. The convergence hypothesis can be profitably supplemented with a 'divergence hypothesis', which suggests that arriving at *complete* agreement on the principles and norms that will govern our relations with each other and with nature is neither necessary nor desirable. Sufficient convergence is necessary to insure that joint action can be taken on problems that cut across cultural boundaries, but sufficient divergence is also necessary to preserve the ability of local cultures to deal appropriately with issues that are of purely local concern.

Cross-cultural dialogue on environmental ethics can be facilitated by shifting the focus away from moral theories themselves towards shared forms of action. A context is thus created in which praxis is able to inform theory. This task involves constructive dialogue across cultures on both the identification of mutual problems and their resolution. How a problem should be defined cannot be prejudged but must itself be subjected to the dialogical process. Once a problem has been defined, however, the problem itself may often help to limit the range of solutions that can be

regarded as acceptable. Instead of simply comparing divergent (and perhaps incommensurable) theories with each other, the theories themselves can be tested against the particular problems to be solved. What is worthless in the competing theories can be discarded, while what is valuable can be retained and perhaps reworked into a more comprehensive and more adequate position.

Such an approach is essentially pragmatic in its emphasis on joint action to solve problems and the avoidance of endless engagements in theoretical disputes, and accords with James's definition of the pragmatic method as 'the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories", supposed necessities; of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts' (1910, pp. 54–55). Naess suggests that normative proposals can be derived from a variety of different philosophical, religious, and cultural sources, which may themselves be incompatible. Common ground, in Naess's view, 'must not be sought at the level of ultimate premises of a given philosophy, or, more succinctly, at the level of the "total view", but rather at a secondary level, where there is agreement on the relationship between [humans] and nature' (1988, p. 128). While it is unlikely that all disputes between competing moral perspectives can be adjudicated easily by adopting such an approach (see, for example, Steverson's [1995] criticisms of Norton's convergence hypothesis), this is not an argument against constructive dialogue across cultures on ethical issues but rather one in favor of more of it.

Callicott's Proposal for a Global Environmental Ethic

Consistent with his monistic approach to ethics, Callicott (1989, 1994) has proposed that Leopold's land ethic, which contends that actions are right when they tend to preserve the 'integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community and wrong when they tend otherwise' (Leopold, 1949, pp. 224–225), be adopted as a global environmental ethic. Callicott argues that, with the onslaught of our current global environmental crisis, there is now 'both a mandate and an opportunity to facilitate the emergence of a global environmental consciousness that spans national and cultural boundaries' (1994, pp. 11–12). While humans occupy many different cultural worlds, they are also members of a single species, and therefore both different and the same. Callicott asks, 'Can we not correspondingly, therefore, have many different culturally specific environmental ethics and one global environmental ethic to unite and orchestrate them?' (1997, p. 178). Callicott sees such an ethic as being 'co-created by all cultures' (*ibid.*). While Callicott acknowledges that global industrial culture has brought about the demise of environmentally sensitive ethical attitudes embedded in traditional cultures, he nonetheless suggests that 'conceptual resources' for the formulation of a universal land ethic can be found in a variety of different cultural traditions (1987; see also Callicott & Ames, 1990).

Callicott argues in favor of a specific global ethic that combines Leopold's land ethic with Hume's and Smith's theories of moral sentiments (morality is primarily a matter of affection and sympathy) and Darwin's account of evolutionary ethics (human evolution includes a widening of the scope of moral concern beyond the immediate family and tribe to eventually include all sentient beings). These ideas would combine to form a monistic ethic that allows for a multiplicity of vernacular expressions. Such an ethic would link current scientific thinking in ecology and

physics with the best ecological insights from the past in what amounts to a frontal and rearguard assault on modernism.

While Callicott's call for increased cross-cultural dialogue on environmental ethics can be applauded, it remains open to question whether the land ethic itself can be unproblematically adopted as a global environmental ethic (for a somewhat different set of criticisms on this point, see Curtin, 1999, ch. 6). In Callicott's earlier interpretation of the land ethic (see especially 1989), biotic communities themselves are regarded as the objects of moral concern and accorded intrinsic value. This interpretation has generated considerable criticism on the grounds that the holism and biocentric egalitarianism it implies ignore a concern for individuals and vital human interests (see, for example, Varner, 1991; O'Neill, 1993). Norton further contends, against Callicott, that Leopold's land ethic should be taken as 'a practical remark on the proper focus of conservation management, not as a philosophical statement of what objects in nature are of ultimate value' (1995b, p. 353; see also 1988, 1996; for Callicott's response see 1996c).

Attempts to bring the whole of nature under the rubric of a single theory of intrinsic value or a single land ethic may actually *deny* moral responsibility by failing to acknowledge the necessity of making choices, both as individuals and as societies, with regard to those circumstances in which it may be legitimate to use nature for human purposes and those circumstances in which it may be better to leave nature alone—a criticism that can be leveled against both objectivist theories of intrinsic value such as Rolston's (1988, 1989, ch. 6) and subjectivist theories such as Callicott's (1999, chs. 11 & 12). It is precisely because nature does not make such choices for us that we have to engage in reflective dialogue on the courses of action we will take and actively *construct* ethical norms to guide us in our interactions with the natural environment. From a constructivist perspective it is impossible to ground normative conceptions of 'what nature should be like' in nature itself, as some interpretations of the land ethic seem to imply.

A further problem with Callicott's initial interpretation of the land ethic is that it relies on an essentially static conception of nature, which fails to acknowledge the extent to which the 'integrity, stability, and beauty' of biotic communities might be modified both naturally and through human intervention. The historically predominant view that there is an inherent order and balance in nature, which helps to define ideal conditions for any given area, has been challenged by more recent approaches to ecological science that see nature as being in a state of constant evolutionary change, not only with regard to species themselves but also with regard to how species interact with each other (for good overviews see Zimmerer, 1994; Wu & Loucks, 1995). What must be accounted for is not only the manner in which various organisms, including humans, relate to each other spatially (or 'synchronically'), but also how their relations change over time (or 'diachronically').

From this more dynamic perspective it is difficult to regard any given temporal state of interaction as normative. Botkin writes that over long periods of time (thousands of years) the composition of the forests that cover any given land area is constantly changing, and that none of these states can be taken as representing 'the natural state' (1990, p. 59). The natural disturbance/patch dynamics model of Pickett and White (1985) similarly rejects the notion that the condition of a natural area at any given point in time can be regarded as normative (i.e. as the normal

condition that the area *should* be in). Instead, natural areas change dynamically over time in random and unpredictable ways as a result of many perturbations, some of which are natural (hurricanes, wildfires, volcanoes) and some of which are generated by humans (mining, agriculture, urbanization).

In the 'new ecology' the old concepts of equilibrium, balance, and stability lose much of their usefulness, and are replaced by concepts that describe nature as a 'shifting mosaic' (Pickett & White, 1985, p. 5) or as being in a state of 'flux' (Worster, 1990, 1995). Such views call into question the strategy of attempting to ground a land ethic on a more or less static image of nature. The 'integrity' and 'stability' (if not the 'beauty') of any given biotic community are constantly being dismantled and reconstructed in new ways. Even philosophers defending an ecocentric position have begun to question whether integrity and stability provide a normative basis for an environmental ethic (e.g. Hettinger & Throop, 1999). While the findings of the 'new ecology' call into question the viability of static models purporting to describe what constitutes an area's 'natural state', they pose fewer problems for dialectical positions, such as dialectical biology (Levins & Lewontin, 1985) and dialectical naturalism (Bookchin, 1995), which emphasize not the *state* of nature but its process of development.

Although the 'new ecology' may offer a more accurate account of how nature actually functions, as science it cannot ultimately decide for us how humans should act in relation to nature. Haila and Levins, writing from the perspective of dialectical biology, claim, '[N]atural variability and change make it difficult to believe in strict prescriptive rules derived from nature' (1992, p. 7; see also Taylor & Haila, 2001). While the neo-Stoic idea that nature has an 'order' that provides normative guidelines for human behavior can be rejected, the postmodern idea that any such guidelines that are arrived at are purely a matter of social construction can also be rejected, however. The pragmatic version of constructivism advocated here would contend that normative judgments arise out of specific interactions between human cultures and the natural environments they inhabit, and must therefore take into account *both* cultural aspirations *and* the quantitative and qualitative impacts the attempt to fulfill these aspirations has on natural areas. The question is not whether humans should interact with nature or not, but rather how and how much.

The Land Ethic Revisited

In his more recent writings, Callicott has in fact taken a tentative first step in this direction by attempting to 'dynamitize' the land ethic. Callicott's reformulation suggests that 'A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (1996b, p. 372; cf. Rolston, 2000, which also attempts to reconcile Leopold's land ethic with the 'new ecology'). Although Callicott acknowledges that this formulation is incomplete, elsewhere he has written of the need to abandon the 'wilderness idea' in favor of the concepts of 'biodiversity reserves' (1994–95, 1995, 1998a, 1998b) and 'ecosystem health' (1999, chs. 17 & 18).

Callicott's reformulation of the land ethic has left him open to the charge that he has given up his previous commitment to the preservation of wilderness areas and launched what Willers (2001) refers to as a 'postmodern attack on wilderness'.

In Callicott's defense, it should be noted that he has scrupulously tried to avoid the more nihilistic versions of postmodernism, calling instead for a '*reconstructive* postmodernism [that] is creative and optimistic' (1994, p. 185; see also Callicott & daRocha, 1996). Such an approach advocates replacing the old industrial paradigm with a new ecological worldview, which combines a moral regard for both humans and the natural environment. Callicott specifically states that he favors a 'mutually beneficial and enhancing integration of the human economy with the economy of nature—in addition to holding on to as much untrammelled wilderness as we can' (1999, p. 329).

It is evident that Callicott has shifted his stance away from a dualistic view of the nature–culture relationship towards a more symbiotic perspective, which attempts to link concerns for both human well-being and environmental protection (see also 1996a; Callicott & Mumford, 1997; for other attempts to overcome the nature–culture dualism see Haila, 2000; Zimmerer, 2000; Evanoff, 2005b). Moreover, despite his earlier pronouncements in favor of a monist environmental ethic, in his recent writings Callicott seems to be moving towards a more pluralistic approach, suggesting that 'preservationism and resourceism, compositionism and functionalism are complementary, not competitive and mutually exclusive' (Callicott *et al.*, 1999, p. 22)—a position that sounds surprisingly similar to Norton's convergence hypothesis and that has the potential for leading to a more pluralistic approach to the problem of cross-cultural dialogue on environmental ethics, as also advocated by Norton (2000).

Callicott takes his cue in his reformulation of the land ethic from Pickett and Ostfeld, who worry that the natural disturbance/patch dynamics paradigm 'may suggest to the thoughtless and greedy that since flux is a fundamental part of the natural world, any human-caused flux is justifiable' (1995, pp. 273–274; quoted in Callicott, 1996b, p. 372). Pickett and Ostfeld argue, however, that flux has severe limits, and that human-induced flux is excessive when it affects large areas and proceeds at rates that are too fast to allow nature to adapt. Boyden (1993, p. 35) uses the term 'evodeviant' to refer to changes that sharply deviate from the environmental conditions organisms have historically adapted themselves to, leading to maladaptation. Judgments about value must concern themselves with issues of scale and appropriateness, not with questions about whether a given object is or is not valuable in itself.

While no strict guidelines can be given about where to draw the line with regard to the scale and appropriateness of human modifications of their natural environments, one overarching concern would be that perturbations not be introduced that exceed the adaptive capacities of either human or non-human lifeforms. While this formulation supports the need to preserve biodiversity, it is by no means exhaustive—additional norms could, of course, be formulated to preserve specific organisms, ecosystems, landscapes, etc. by specific people in specific situations. While some natural areas will unavoidably be used to provide the resources necessary to sustain human life, other areas can enjoy a measure of autonomy, given that it is neither necessary nor desirable for humans to attempt to control the whole of the natural environments they are a part of.

In the view suggested here, a static conception of integrity can be replaced with a more dynamic conception (see also Norton, 1995a), which allows for a great

deal of diversity both within and between cultural and ecological systems (synchronic differentiation), as well as increasing diversification over time (diachronic differentiation). Evolution can be seen as proceeding in a multilinear, branching fashion towards greater diversity rather than in a unilinear, homogenizing fashion that results in social or biological monocultures, a view that finds support in both Darwin's (1968 [1859], pp. 159 ff.) theory of biological evolution and Steward's (1955) multilinear model of cultural development. To avoid a one-sided emphasis on diversity, however, a measure of integration is also needed. Integrity, as understood here, does not refer to the homogenization of differences, but rather to a dynamic balancing of parts within the context of larger wholes (synchronic integration). It also implies that as these wholes and the relationships that constitute them continue to evolve, they will maintain a measure of continuity with their past states (diachronic integration). Holland and O'Neill (1996) speak similarly of 'diachronic integrity' and Norton (1987, p. 84) of 'dynamic stability'.

Any adequate interpretation of the land ethic, therefore, must take into account human interactions with natural environments. It is important to remember that Leopold's own view (1949, p. 204) includes, rather than excludes, humans from the overall picture by seeing them as 'citizens' and 'plain members' of the land community. Norton correspondingly adopts a contextual land ethic that integrates anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns. In contrast to the either-or thinking that typifies much environmental (and anti-environmental) thought, the goal should be to maintain *both* the productivity of agriculture *and* biodiversity; *both* water supplies for human use *and* wild rivers; *both* outdoor recreational areas *and* natural areas in which there is limited human intervention. Norton suggests that the environment can be seen as:

... a patchy landscape, in which urban elements, productive elements, and pristine elements are arranged intelligently. Each of the patches must be managed according to the methods appropriate to the goals that define its use, but those methods must also be designed to enhance, or at least not destroy, the values sought elsewhere in the mosaic. (1991, p. 189)

Botkin (1990, pp. 194–197) also speaks of maintaining different types of wilderness areas: those that are relatively pristine, those that can be used for recreation, and those that are specifically designated to preserve biodiversity. Pollan argues that the either-or wilderness ethic (i.e. either all or nothing) has allowed Americans to do a pretty good job of managing the 8% of its territory regarded as 'wilderness' while the other 92% has been 'written off as fallen, lost to nature, irredeemable' (1991, pp. 204–205).

The term *wilderness* itself is a culturally bound concept, of course, which may be variously interpreted by different cultures. While protecting pristine wilderness areas may be appropriate in a North American setting, in other contexts it is often associated with elitist attempts to preserve nature for the benefit of the wealthy, while denying the poor access to the natural resources they need for survival (Guha, 1989; Gudynas, 1993; Kemf, 1993; Kothari & Parajuli, 1993; Furze *et al.*, 1996; Parajuli, 1997). Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) propose a cross-cultural environmental ethic that combines (1) wilderness thinking's concern for preserving biological and

cultural diversity; (2) agrarianism's concern for the sustainable use of natural resources; and (3) a scientific industrialism which, tempered of its excesses and brought under democratic control, uproots social inequalities based on race, class, and gender. This proposal is more broadly conceived than Callicott's, which focuses almost exclusive attention on the land itself and offers an insufficient account of how human land use might be harmonized with other ecological and social concerns. Guha and Martinez-Alier's ethic, to the contrary, sees humans and nature in relational terms and expresses a concern for both the preservation of nature for the maintenance of biological diversity and the conservation of nature for human use.

The chief problem with protecting biodiversity is not necessarily human interaction with the environment *per se* but rather those forms of human interaction that are highly destructive. Parajuli writes that:

... the contest... is not about whether nature should be kept pristine or be made available for human use; it is about the scale of use and mode of use. It is about who should use, how much, and for what purpose. (1997, p. 189)

A cross-cultural, contextual land ethic sets forth the common goal of maintaining biodiversity while simultaneously embracing a great deal of cultural variability with regard to the methods by which these goals might be achieved. In some contexts biodiversity might best be protected through the cordoning off of wilderness areas, while in other contexts human interactions with the natural environment can be conducted in ways that are conducive to both human and non-human flourishing.

Bioregionalism and Cross-Cultural Dialogue on Ethics

The contextual approach described here is consistent with attempts on the part of bioregionalists not only to preserve areas in which there is limited human intervention but also to create urban, suburban, and rural environments that are both sustainable and ecologically diverse (see Berg, 1990, 1999; Berg *et al.*, 1990). Berg distinguishes bioregionalism from mere environmentalism:

On the one hand, [environmentalism] tries to preserve pristine wilderness areas for their own sake and, on the other, to keep water and air clean for the sake of humans. Bioregionalism goes beyond both of these. In a bioregion there are different zones of human interface with natural systems: urban, suburban, rural, and wilderness. And each of these has a different appropriate reinhabitory approach. (Quoted in Evanoff, 1998a, p. 4)

It can further be expected that different cultures occupying differing geographical regions ('niches') and interacting with them in varying ways will develop different forms of knowledge, values, social organization, and technology. Such regions form what Norgaard refers to as:

... a patchwork quilt of loosely interconnected, coevolving social and ecological systems. Within each patch the ecological system evolved in response to cultural pressures and tended to reflect the values, world view,

and social organization of local peoples. At the same time, the cultural system in each patch evolved in response to selection for fitness with respect to the ecosystem and hence tended to reflect the fertility, species composition, stability, and management options presented by the ecosystem. The reflections of each system in the other also evolved. Through this process, each patch took on unique characteristics particular to the random biological and cultural mutation of the patch. In this world view, what can be known is particular rather than universal. Universal truths still exist with respect to physical and chemical processes, but the diversity of complex biological and social systems that can be built upon these universal processes are unlimited. (1994, p. 90)

Such a 'patchwork' perspective endorses a healthy measure of both biological and cultural diversity.

Bioregionalists have mounted a sharp criticism of the homogenizing effects of globalization, expressing concern not only about the creation of a global market and political order but also about the decline of natural and cultural diversity. In an early article outlining the main tenets of bioregionalism, Berg accused late industrial society of creating a 'global monoculture' based on 'a homogenized directory of standards for everything from diet and clothes to transportation and architecture' (1981, p. 25). Sachs (1992, p. 4) speaks in similar terms of a 'cultural monoculture' that simplifies human artifacts, reduces linguistic and cultural diversity, and even standardizes what people hope for and desire—all on a global scale. Indigenous cultures have been particularly vulnerable to the onslaught of globalization (see Davidson, 1993). Given the homogenizing effects of global capitalism, the approach to ethics offered by bioregionalism is one that seeks to preserve cultural diversity while simultaneously allowing people from different cultures to maintain healthy interactions with each other and with their natural environments. Bioregionalism correspondingly tries to reconcile local forms of development, based on local control over the economy and polity, with transcultural forms of communication that maintain healthy relations between communities and allow joint action on problems of mutual concern.

The bioregional approach to cross-cultural dialogue can be contrasted with current efforts to create global rules and standards, which often seek to maximize First-World access to Third- and Fourth-World resources rather than to allow resources to be locally managed. In the mainstream capitalist paradigm, environmental goods are conceived as being part of a 'global commons' that must be globally controlled, thus requiring the further centralization of political and economic power in global bureaucracies. The UN's Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life states that, 'Managing the commons requires rules and institutions with global reach' (1996, p. 105). Creating global institutions to manage the 'global commons' (on a par with the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO) may ultimately serve to undermine the ability of local communities to manage their own local commons and thus to have equitable access to resources.

From a bioregional perspective local commons can and should be locally managed, while problems that are genuinely regional or global can be discussed

at the appropriate level, with the full participation of those local communities that are directly concerned. The key issue is control. As Hildyard writes:

The demands of grassroots groups are... not for more 'management'... but for agrarian reform, local control over local resources, the power to veto developments and a decisive say in all matters that affect their livelihoods. For them, the question is not *how* their environment should be managed—they have the experience of the past as their guide—but *who* will manage their environment and in *whose* interest. (1993, pp. 23–24)

Cross-cultural dialogue on environmental issues cannot simply be conducted by and for international elites, but rather should include, as Habermas's (1989, 1993) discourse ethics suggests, all of those who are affected by specific decisions.

It may be thought that the emphasis bioregionalism places on localism and decentralization would result in a purely relativist stance towards ethics, particularly across cultures. Indeed, such a 'postmodern' (in the deconstructive sense) reading of bioregionalism is offered by Cheney (1993), who argues that bioregionalism necessitates a rejection of foundationalism and the embrace of a contextual position that more or less limits ethics to the narratives that emerge within local communities. Cheney contends that since cross-cultural dialogue cannot be universalizing, the best it can hope for is to be merely comparative. While this view has the merit of promoting a healthy measure of cultural diversity, it fails to register the extent to which a great many of our current problems—from global warming to acid rain to the threat of nuclear annihilation—have no respect for cultural boundaries and thus require some form of cross-cultural coordination for their resolution. In Dower's maxim, 'where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility' (1998, p. 165).

While the historically contingent and socially situated nature of cultural discourses can be readily acknowledged, effective dialogue between cultures on problems of mutual concern can be conducted only if the two groups are able to transcend their particular 'situatedness' and effectively take into account the point of view of others with whom they have relations. There is the need, then, for continued cross-cultural dialogue on ethical norms to cope not only with the rise of global environmental problems but also with the emergence of a new global situation in which cross-cultural contacts have increased exponentially. While it is unlikely that cross-cultural dialogue will result in the formulation of a single universal land ethic, along the lines suggested by Callicott, such dialogue should nonetheless aim at achieving sufficient levels of convergence to allow cultures to work together on common problems, while maintaining sufficient levels of divergence to allow different cultures the opportunity to find solutions to local problems that best fit their particular circumstances.

Given the fact that different cultures develop different ethical perspectives to deal with particular problems faced in particular geographic areas at particular moments in history, it is difficult to see how a universal, 'one-size-fits-all' land ethic could be formulated. The chief obstacle to formulating such an ethic is that it ignores the particularities of specific geographic conditions as well as the fact that there can be

a plurality of cultural responses to those conditions. Pluralism does not mean, however, that cultures can simply 'do what they like' inside the confines of their own specific regions. Ethical norms are still constrained by how successful they are in harmonizing the relations individuals have both with each other and with their natural environments. Cultural responses to environmental problems can be further evaluated by the pragmatic criteria of whether they are able to successfully resolve the specific problems faced by different cultural groups. If the norms that have been developed thus far prove inadequate to deal with emergent problems, then the dialogue process must concern itself with the construction of entirely new norms, both within and between cultures as the case may be.

The cross-cultural dimension of bioregionalism remains relatively undertheorized, however, leaving bioregionalism open to the charge that it is inherently parochial and thus unable to effectively address problems that cut across cultural, political, and natural boundaries (Dudley, 1995). There are further concerns that the emphasis bioregionalists place on localism might be construed as promoting insularity, ethnocentrism, and racism—positions also advocated in the rightwing ecology movement of fascist Germany (Olsen, 2000). Clearly such worries are legitimate and point to the need for bioregionalism to develop a wider perspective that transcends a purely local focus and promotes greater cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Thomashow (1999; see also Meredith, 2005) has appropriately called for a 'cosmopolitan bioregionalism', which sees bioregions and the communities that inhabit them as being nested in larger natural and social systems, from the micro-region to the macro-region, with various forms of interaction occurring between the different scales. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism (1985, 1990, 1991) correspondingly advocates a confederal model of social organization that allows problems to be resolved at the appropriate level without sacrificing the right of local communities to retain final decision-making power on matters that directly affect them.

The question of exactly *how* dialogue on environmental ethics can be effectively conducted across cultures is another issue requiring further reflection on the part of bioregionalists (for some preliminary efforts in this direction see Curtin, 1999; Evanoff, 1998b, 1999a, b, 2004, 2006a, b). While the bioregional model indeed encourages a diversity of cultural forms and pluralism with regard to systems of rationality, knowledge, and ethics, it must also be acknowledged that not all problems can be solved at the local community level. Decentralization alone may, of course, go a long way towards alleviating some cross-cultural problems by decreasing opportunities for one culture to exploit the labor and resources of another, and by making local communities more aware of and responsible for the impact their cultural activities have on the particular bioregions they inhabit. As has been noted, however, ongoing problems that require decision-making across political and cultural boundaries can only be resolved through cross-cultural deliberation. Such dialogue, it is contended here, must concern itself not only with practical matters, such as creating appropriate institutional frameworks and formulating specific policies, but also with reaching a measure of agreement on the specific norms that will govern interactions both between cultures and between cultures and their environments.

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Death to Life: Towards My Green Burial

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents reflections on the author's death aspirations as they are informed by a set of earth-connection stories, environmental concepts, and modernist burial practices. This weave is meant to inspire further consideration on what is coming to be known as 'green burial'. More precisely, this means an exploration of the author's earth-centred burial musings in association with the following themes: the meanings and historical trajectory of prevailing death and burial practices; 'narratives' of the human–earth life-cycle; relevant environmental ethics and place literature concepts; and lastly, some sense of the newly emerging practices and appeals to green burial—i.e. the normative and practical grounds for rethinking and working toward more environmentally sensitive burial practices. This weave of themes is instructive for posing green burial as evocative of a more comprehensive and spiritual ethos of connection, continuity, and responsibility. In this sense, rather than being seen as contrary or contentious, green burial may actually enable us to dispel some of the growing angst, uncertainty, and insensitivity often underlyng prevailing burial practices, while contributing to an emerging environmental consciousness.*

Introduction

I begin these reflections on the case for encouraging a more environmentally sensitive ethos of death and burial by sharing a moment within the larger story that I carry of my own death.

Demise on the Shores

With my life force spent and my body slumped against a gnarled pine-tree on the pre-Cambrian shield near the lake, carrion tear at, and flies lay their eggs in, my decaying flesh, while my fluids slowly drain into the cracks in the ancient rock to enter the roots of that same tree against which I exhaled my last breath.¹

I expand on the memorialization aspects of this death scenario near the end of this paper, but want to begin with a few more general thoughts about death and burial to initiate this discussion. Death is universally conceived as a time of search for meaning and significance. The rituals around death and burial practices have their origins in social needs to create spaces of contemplation and to remember and celebrate a life. They provide a time for community and those affiliated with the

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