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# Bioregionalism and Cross-Cultural Dialogue on a Global Ethic

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### **Introduction**

This paper considers the contribution that bioregionalism as a political philosophy can potentially make to cross-cultural dialogue on a global ethic. The first part of the paper suggests that there is the need to construct a global ethic to address the various interactions people from different cultures have with each other and with the environment in the present global context. The second part of the paper considers how cross-cultural dialogue on the construction of such an ethic might proceed. The paper suggests that decisions at the global level can best be made through a process of discursive democracy, rather than simply by the “market” or existing global institutions, which tend to favor elite interests. Finally, the paper considers how bioregionalism can serve as a common meeting ground for a variety of different political and philosophical perspectives which are also concerned with creating alternatives to the present global system.

### **The need for a global ethic**

What makes the development of a global ethic so urgent now is both the global nature of many of our current environmental problems and the increasingly interconnected nature of the world economy. Globalization has created a “risk society” (Beck 1992) in which people may end up suffering from the negative consequences of decisions made not by themselves but by others. Individual acts which on the surface seem to be ethically unproblematic can in fact have global consequences. As Bahaouth (1994) has shown in a tragically amusing article, just eating a to-

mato in Toronto can, among other things, lend tacit support to labor exploitation and unsafe working conditions in Mexico; the disposal of toxic wastes from the production process in poor African-American communities in Alabama; exposure to dioxin by workers in Texas making the plastic wrapping to package the tomatoes; the cutting of old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest to make cardboard boxes to ship the tomatoes; the use of CFCs and the burning of fossil fuels in the refrigerated trucks which transport the tomatoes from Mexico to Canada; and the eventual burning of the packaging at an incinerator in Detroit, Michigan.

Dower has offered the following maxim which is a good starting point for any reflection on the possibility of doing ethics interculturally:

... where the lines of cause and effect run across nation-states, so do the lines of moral responsibility. To accept such a maxim is implicitly to endorse a 'global ethic', according to which the whole world is one moral domain, and the network of moral relationships extends in principle across the world (Dower 1998, p. 165; *cf.* Dower 1984, p. 20; Jamieson 1994).

To the extent that our actions result in consequences for others, we enter into ethical relationships with them.

Two important points follow from this perspective. The first is that globalization cannot be morally justified if it consists simply of extending the relationships we have both with other humans and with other ecosystems without simultaneously extending moral consideration to the humans and ecosystems that we enter into relationships with. The second point, which follows directly from the first, is that if the relationships we have with others in our present global context are already too wide-reaching and complex to be cognitively managed or acted on in ethical ways, they should be intentionally limited to more manageable proportions. It can be suggested that bioregions, which allow for local interactions both with other people and with the natural environment, provide a suitable context for the adequate management of such relations.

Nonetheless, given the fact that we do at present live in a global society in which people from a variety of different cultures interact with each other, as well as the likelihood that such interactions will continue in some form in the future, there is a need to enter into dialogue regarding the sort of ethical norms that will enable humans to successfully interact with each other across cultures and with nature as a whole. A global ethic must provide for sufficient convergence to allow cultural groups to work together on problems of mutual concern and yet sufficient divergence to allow for the evolution of new cultural forms.

What is initially required to get such a project going is a more comprehensive approach to ethics than is available at present. The approach must integrate both social ethics and environmental ethics, and be able to address how individual action is related to the entire network of relationships, both human and natural, which individuals find themselves in. Any “global ethic” must in principle take into account *all* of the morally relevant effects that our actions have on *all* of those whom we are related to (although given the complexity of the interactions we have with others, difficulties will undoubtedly arise in attempting to realize this principle in practice). This “ethic of relationships” cannot concern itself merely with the immediate relationships we have with families, friends, and social groups, but must be extended to include mediated relationships—such as those a tomato-eater in Toronto may have with farm workers in Mexico, African-Americans in Alabama, and old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest.

In the context of a global market that makes few genuinely ethical options available to us, ethics must be more than the working out of personal preferences. If the societies we live in are to become truly ecological, *structural* changes in our economic and political systems will also be necessary (*cf.* Trainer 1995, p. 212). We cannot buy products that have been made in socially just and environmentally sensitive ways, for example, if manufacturers and distributors do not make them available to us. The tendency to regard moral decisions as purely individual consumer choices simply allows existing oppressive social structures to maintain their legitimacy. It is largely our unwillingness to consider the

enormous social changes that would be necessary to really solve our current problems which leads us to seek solutions, such as “green consumerism” and “green capitalism,” that are at best half-measures.

By failing to incorporate such deeper structural changes into their own agenda, market approaches to environmental problems based on cost-benefit analysis and other utilitarian forms of decision-making (*cf.* Pearce and Markandya 1989) fail to deliver on their professed goal of creating a more ecological and sustainable society. Decisions or regulations which in any way prevent individuals or corporations from maximizing their own economic benefit are ruled out from the very start, even when such measures may be the best means to promote genuine human well-being, social justice, and environmental integrity. While lip service is often paid to such values by defenders of free-market environmentalism, the free-market approach may in fact lead to diminished prospects for their realization.

An individualized approach to ethics, which makes ethics a matter not of public deliberation but of personal “taste,” dovetails conveniently with the need of those who benefit most from the present system to maintain the status quo and prevent any deep structural changes in how society is currently organized. An individualized morality obliged to respect the “right” of other individuals to their own moral opinions and to never question their validity has no basis for constructing effective social opposition to the dominant powers. Put differently, an appropriate ethic can only emerge out of a process of social dialogue in which the participants subject their moral views to public reflection and debate. Since the effort to create a new morality poses a threat to the system, the system attempts to divert attention away from genuine moral reflection by making morality a matter of individual preference. Choices about what should be considered right or wrong are put on the same plane as preferences for chocolate or vanilla ice cream. Ethics becomes little more than a myopic preoccupation with satisfying one’s own wants, particularly in the form of consumer desires.

In this view, action that concerns itself purely with the instrumental attainment of one’s desires is deemed “rational,” while action that gives

ethical consideration to others is deemed “irrational.” It is “rational” to destroy a rainforest for profit and “irrational” not to cut it down out of concern for the long-term consequences of deforestation. Morality comes to be defined in terms of behavior that follows socially accepted goals and standard rules of behavior. In short, morality becomes whatever maintains the present system and immorality whatever challenges it. This perspective should be reversed, however: it is *immoral* to merely obey and conform to unethical social norms and *moral* to challenge the norms of an unjust society. While it may be rational to increase profits by destroying a rainforest within the context of capitalism, for example, the rationality of the capitalist system may itself be questioned.

While a disruption of the status quo is no doubt *necessary* (and has been an integral part of ethics since Socrates), it is not by itself *sufficient* to create the conditions for a good society. Postmodern approaches to ethics often advance the nihilistic conclusion that since all attempts to create ethical norms result in totalizing “metanarratives” which repress differing perspectives (see, for example, Lyotard 1984), the task of ethics is simply to liberate individuals from the tyranny of existing social norms. As with neoliberalism, postmodernism makes the individual the final arbiter of value and ethics a matter of personal choice, and thus fails to address the problem of how conflicts between individuals can be resolved (except perhaps on the basis of power) and how societies can be genuinely transformed in more satisfying ways. A contrary view sees ethics as primarily a social matter, intended to help individuals relate to each other in non-oppressive ways. In this view ethics involves the co-creation of norms that individuals can use to govern interactions between them, thus enabling more harmonious and mutually beneficial human relationships.

Against the more destructive versions of postmodernism Callicott has called for a “*reconstructive* postmodernism [that] is creative and optimistic” (1994, p. 185). Oelschlaeger makes a similar proposal for a reconstructive postmodern environmental ethic that offers a highly critical account of modernism, but nonetheless avoids the nihilism and relativism of deconstructive postmodernism; instead of constructing new mas-

ter narratives, reconstructive postmodernists concern themselves with “. . . performativity generally and societal transformation more specifically” (1995, p. 9, italics omitted; see also 1991, chap. 10). Such a perspective should not be confused, however, with the view that the way forward is through a reactionary retreat back to universalism and modernism. A genuinely *post*-postmodern worldview involves both a *critical dismantling* of existing norms and social relationships, and the *imaginative construction* of viable alternatives.

### **Constructive dialogue**

Constructivism provides a useful approach for how cross-cultural dialogue on a global ethic might be conducted (for general accounts of the constructivist approach to cross-cultural dialogue on ethics see Evanoff 1998; 1999; 2004; 2006). From a constructivist perspective ethics cannot be grounded on foundational arguments, but rather arise out of a communicative process in which individuals jointly arrive at the norms that will govern their relationships both with each other and with the environment. There is nothing in the metaphysical scheme of things which compels us to accept certain ethical principles over others. The process of arriving at a new global ethic can only be made on the basis of considered judgement on the part of individuals and a deliberative process conducted both within and between cultures. The function of ethics in this view is not to arrive at a set of universal ethical principles which presume to tell us what to do in any given situation, but rather to clarify what the choices themselves are. The choices themselves must be made in the context of constructive public dialogue.

As environmental conditions change, new ethical norms must also be formulated. Many of the global problems we presently face are entirely new problems for which existing ethical formulations are inadequate. An example of ethics lagging behind changing environmental circumstances is the tenacity with which modern civilization clings to an outmoded “cowboy ethic,” based on the belief that the earth has unlimited resources which humans are free to exploit (*cf.* Shrader-Frechette 1981). While the adoption of a “cowboy ethic” may have been reasonable in an earlier



era (although arguments could have been raised against it even then), it is altogether unreasonable in our present situation, marked as it is by a declining resource base and increased environmental degradation. As new problems arise, then, new solutions must be proposed. The emergence of environmental ethics, medical ethics, business ethics, and other forms of applied ethics can be seen in this light.

Most of the discussion on the kind of “new world order” that should be created is currently being conducted among, and in the interests of, global elites. There needs to be a much wider and open cross-cultural debate, however, which specifically includes the interests of non-elites and attempts to work out a shared vision of the kind of global society we would like to create. Not only does the current global situation require such a debate in light of the persistent problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, but such a debate can be most effectively conducted by involving all of those who are affected by such problems. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the idea that such problems can be solved entirely by elites, who represent but a small minority of the earth’s population, and a truly global perspective in which all concerned are invited to participate. While the outcome of cross-cultural dialogue on a global ethic cannot be predicted in advance, there is nonetheless the need to begin ethical reflection on the options that are available to us and how they might be discussed cross-culturally.

The alternative to the individualistic orientation of both neoliberalism and postmodernism is a more discursive form of democracy which encourages, rather than impedes, cross-cultural debate on the kind of future global order we would like to create. Making social decisions on the basis of economic considerations rather than on the basis of political debate subverts the traditional democratic notion of one-person, one-vote and replaces it with the notion of one-dollar, one vote. “Letting the market decide” automatically allocates more decision-making power to those with greater wealth. Decisions about how humans should relate to each other and to the natural environment are primarily moral decisions, however, that should be made on the basis of intelligent judgement and a concern not only for oneself but also for society and the environment.

Moral values cannot be reduced to a simple matter of individual consumer choice but must rather emerge out of public debate and political deliberation conducted both within and between cultures (*cf.* Bookchin 1987, pp. 77–97; Sagoff 1988, pp. 28–29).

For neoliberals “freedom” is defined as freedom from political control and government regulations rather than the freedom to democratically participate in the process by which the rules which govern society are constructed. Under the current system, political decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a global elite, with decisions being made more on the basis of what furthers the interests of global capital than on the basis of inclusive democratic debate. The present system strips non-elites of their role as citizens and reduces them to mere consumers. If a company is polluting the environment or using child labor to produce its products, for example, the neoliberal approach to environmentalism would urge people to simply stop buying products from that company rather than to pressure their governments to impose stricter regulations.

Discursive democracy, as advocated by writers such as Dryzek (1990; 1994; 1997; 2002), shifts political decision-making power back to the principle of one-person one-vote. Everyone who is affected by a particular decision is empowered to participate equally in the process by which that decision is made. Discursive democracy does not mean that all perspectives count equally, but rather that all perspectives receive a fair hearing in the context of an open and public debate. Alternative views can be openly expressed and judged according to their merits. Social and environmental problems can be addressed on the basis of reasoned argument rather than solely on the basis of economic considerations. Regulations and other sanctions can be legitimately imposed to restrict the freedom of those whose actions result in unwanted negative consequences for others; those who suffer under the present system should not need to wait until the market decides that their suffering is no longer profitable. The present system, by concentrating political power in global institutions serving the interests of global capital and leaving the rest of humanity with no real voice in the decision-making process except their “purchasing power,” fails to provide a suitable framework for cross-cul-

tural dialogue on a global ethic.

Despite the fact that different moral communities have different conceptions of ethics, constructivism is compatible with the view that solutions to problems of mutual concern can be arrived at through a process of inclusive dialogue along the lines suggested by Dryzek's conception of discursive democracy. While a variety of norms and principles may be appealed to justify certain courses of action, the problems themselves often set parameters on what can count as a solution. Cultures may also, of course, look for ways to integrate differing principles into a larger framework, a process Sarre describes as "... absorbing and reorienting the values of different groups rather than eliminating or converting them" (1995, p. 125).

### **Conceptual integration in the bioregional paradigm**

Bioregionalism has the potential to serve as a common meeting ground for a variety of different political and philosophical perspectives whose advocates have sometimes been antagonistic towards one another, including social ecologists (Bookchin 1982; 1995; Biehl 1991; Clark 1992; 1993; 1997; Watson 1996; Light 1998); deep ecologists (Devall and Sessions 1985; Naess 1989; Sylvan and Bennett 1990; 1994; McLaughlin 1993; Sessions 1995; Orton 1996; Katz, Light, and Rothenberg 2000); radical decentralists within the ecofeminist movement (Shiva 1989; Plumwood 1993; 2002; Shiva and Mies 1993; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999); and ecoanarchists (Marshall 1992; 1998; Purchase 1994; 1997; Rousso-poulos 1994; Zerzan 1994; 1999; 2002). Bioregionalism can also benefit by seeking out dialogue rather than confrontation with schools of ecological thought that have different starting points, including radical capitalism (Korten 1996; 1998), eco-socialism (Ryle 1988; Pepper 1993; Sarkar 1999; Kovel 2002); and ecological Marxism (Gorz 1980; 1994; O'Connor 1994; 1998; Foster 2002). While there are certainly points of contention between these positions—some major—there is also probably sufficient common ground to support efforts towards a measure of theoretical integration, which is the basic approach suggested by this paper.

The bioregional perspective rests on a number of tensions which some

may find initially contradictory. Rather than see local and global concerns as contradictory, bioregionalism attempts to integrate the two by making a distinction between those areas of cross-cultural interaction in which a high level of convergence is necessary and those areas in which divergence should be not only permitted but encouraged. Conceptually, as well, bioregionalism draws on a variety of different political and intellectual traditions, seeking to integrate insights from each into a larger, more comprehensive whole.

On the one hand, bioregionalism provides an alternative to both Marxism and capitalism, but it is nonetheless capable of engaging in critical reflection on both traditions, making evaluative judgements about what it feels is worth preserving and what should be discarded in each, and attempting to integrate positive aspects of both into a new synthetic whole. In true Hegelian fashion, the bioregional position is essentially an attempt to find a viable third alternative which is, in the words of the familiar slogan, “neither right nor left but straight ahead.” This stance does not involve a moderate, middle-of-the-road political compromise, but is rather one which recognizes that both right and left perspectives can make valuable contributions to bioregional political thought, despite their other shortcomings. While bioregionalism would reject both capitalism and Marxism as desirable social systems, it can nonetheless appreciate some of the specific values which inform those traditions.

Bioregionalism is capable of drawing on such conservative values as liberty and anti-authoritarianism, as well as such liberal values as equality and compassion. With conservatives, bioregionalism emphasizes less bureaucracy, smaller government, and limited national control, as well as more responsibility, greater personal initiative (to be distinguished, however, from selfish action for personal gain), and increased local community involvement. With liberals, bioregionalism is interested in larger issues of social and economic justice, ranging from the role corporations play in environmental destruction to ways of moving from representational to more participatory forms of democracy. Such liberal concerns as anti-racism, human rights, and increased opportunities for women are also on the bioregional agenda.

At the same time, however, bioregionalism is critical of the tendency of both capitalism and Marxism to centralize decision-making power in an elite minority. Whereas liberal democracies concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a capitalist class, Marxism encourages the concentration of wealth and power in the state. Under both systems crucial decisions are mostly made by large-scale organizations—transnational corporations under capitalism (which exercise a high degree of control over national governments as well) and central planners under socialism (which exercise a high degree of control over national economies)—which effectively undermine genuine democratic participation. Bioregionalism is opposed to both big business and big government, favoring instead more decentralized forms of political and economic decision-making (for penetrating critiques of the power of multinational corporations see Kazis and Grossman 1991; Grossman and Adams 1993; Danaher 1996; Korten 1996; Karliner 1997; Welford 1997; Madeley 1999; Cromwell 2001; Richter 2001; Bruno and Karliner 2002; Hartmann 2002; Lubbers 2002; Mokhiber and Weissman 2002; Danaher and Mark 2003; Nace 2003; Pilger 2003; Bakan 2004).

Disillusionment with both capitalism and socialism, and efforts to outline a “third alternative,” are widespread in the international Green movement and are by no means confined to a single “school” of ecological thought. McLaughlin (1993), writing from the perspective of deep ecology, is critical of the tendency of both twentieth century liberal democracies and Marxist states to promote economic growth and industrialism while giving insufficient attention to environmental concerns. McLaughlin sees the potential for combining the concerns of the deep ecology movement (what he calls the “nature tradition”) with a radical political perspective (what he calls the “social tradition”). His synthesis is an attempt to go beyond the antagonisms that have sometimes existed between these two traditions.

Despite the fact that some deep ecologists are more concerned with changes in personal consciousness, lifestyle, and culture than in social or political change (see, for example, Fox 1990; Devall 1988; 1993), others, such as Naess (1989), are explicitly political in their outlook. The plat-

form of the deep ecology movement specifically calls for a change of policies that affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. In Naess's view, the green political outlook incorporates both the sense of personal initiative found in blue (i.e., capitalist) perspectives and the sense of social responsibility found in red (i.e., socialist) perspectives. In addition, Naess sees possible affinities between deep ecology and anarchism.

Bookchin's social ecology has formulated an explicitly anarchist / social libertarian position which has many affinities with the bioregional outlook (see especially 1982; 1986; 1987; 1995). Although Bookchin (1994) prefers to label his political position *communalism*, the basic orientation is towards small-scale, self-governed communities in which face-to-face interactions are possible. In Bookchin's view, ecological problems cannot be divorced from larger social and political problems. Bookchin's vision of a non-dominating, non-hierarchical social order is encompassed in his idea of libertarian municipalism, which would restructure society on the basis of local communities rather than on the basis of either nation-states or globalized institutions. While local communities could confederate into larger units, libertarian municipalism is based on the Aristotelian notion that the *polis* should form the most basic unit of political decision-making.

Sale also sees the possibility for ecology and anarchism to "... unite and inspire a single movement" (1985, p. 14). As with Bookchin, Sale is impressed by the fact that there is neither hierarchy nor domination in a stable ecosystem (i.e., government and authority are absent), and he sees the ecological principles of balance, equilibrium, cooperation, symbiosis, conservation, stability, decentralization, diversity, homeorrthesis, community, and region as having affinities with anarchist ideas about ideal social organization. Interestingly, Sale also finds affinities between these ideas and deep ecology, suggesting points of contact between deep ecology and social ecology which these sometimes antagonistic schools of environmental thought may have overlooked. In his book, *Dwellers in the Land* (2000), Sale specifically links anarchist ideas to bioregionalism.

If Bookchin and Sale represent the "left" wing of libertarian thinking

on bioregional politics, there are other libertarian positions which lean more towards the “right.” McClaughry (1984a; 1984b), for example, sees the potential for developing a Green politics on the basis of the “non-liberal” ideas found in Burkean conservatism, Catholic social thought, distributionism, and agrarianism. McClaughry sees affinities between some bioregional ideas and Jeffersonian democracy: the preservation of individual liberty in an age characterized by large public and private institutions; restoration of the small-scale human community; a widespread distribution of private property ownership; the decentralization of economic and government power; individual and community self-help; environmental protection techniques (i.e., agrarian respect for the land); a sound money policy to prevent the accumulation of unearned wealth; and a non-governmental “people-to-people” foreign policy (see also Browsers 1999). In an American context at least, bioregionalism could be linked to traditional American antipathy towards both big government and big business as exemplified not only by Jefferson but also by Andrew Jackson.

Undoubtedly there are many other philosophical and cultural traditions which could be drawn on to help develop a specifically bioregional perspective. Although the idea of bioregionalism as such originated in the West (for an introductory bibliography, see Evanoff 2009), it offers a set of values and a way of living with natural environments which has been practiced in varying degrees throughout most of human history. Bioregional ideas can be found in the myths of both ancient and contemporary indigenous cultures, as well as in a number of non-Western religious traditions, such as Taoism and Buddhism (for a good introduction see Snyder 1980; 1990). Although space does not permit a detailed survey here, it is clear that there are many traditions, both Western and non-Western, which can contribute to the creation of a bioregional paradigm.

What prevents bioregionalism from itself becoming a totalizing system is that it respects the ability of different cultures to formulate their own values, ideas, economic systems, political institutions, and so forth to the extent that these remain intracultural, and to the extent that any conse-

quences which result from such cultural choices also remain intracultural. There is no attempt to impose a single set of cultural values on the whole of humanity, although this does not preclude the possibility that people from one culture can express solidarity with people who are oppressed in another culture. Once an attempt is made to promulgate the values of one culture to other cultures, however, or once the choices made by one culture have consequences for another culture, then there is the need for cross-cultural dialogue on those values and choices. It is only in this limited sense that there is the need for a global ethic and debate regarding the specific norms and institutions that will be created to govern relationships across cultures.

### **Conclusion**

The creation of a global ethic must concern itself both with an analysis of the procedures by which dialogue on a global ethic can be conducted across cultures and with an attempt to formulate the specific content of that ethic. The exact form that a global ethic might take ultimately depends, of course, upon a wide-ranging cross-cultural debate in which a variety of different values, norms, and institutional structures from a variety of different philosophical, political, and cultural traditions can be considered. Bioregionalism nonetheless has the potential to offer a variety of specific proposals for values, norms, and institutional structures which can make a positive contribution to this debate. Our main contention is that a global ethic informed by bioregional principles constitutes a more viable guiding vision for a global world order than that offered by the present global system.

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