



RETHINKING THE CITIZENSHIP CONCEPT BY J.B. CALLICOTT: PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of J.B. Callicott presenting ecological citizenship principles, their roots, and connection with environmental ethics. Callicott's vision of ecological citizenship is also more intricate in that it understands this construct beyond human rights, including obligations toward ecosystems and other beings. This paper focuses on ethical guardianship, intergenerational equity, and the compatible use of culture and its elements to maintain ecological balance, demonstrating how ecological citizenship can promote a better, more responsible relationship with nature. Specifically, textual analysis of Callicott's writings and other literature related to ecological ethics was used. With this approach, it was possible to delve deeply into the interpretation of the founding axioms of ecological citizenship and their further realization in practice. In addition, examples of case studies of cultural practices and environmental policies were used to demonstrate the conflict between the historically constructed worldviews and the new ecological ones. Thus, these methods helped show how ecological citizenship might shape environmental governance and cultural practices. Such findings make space for a new eco-citizenship persistence for Callicott, which aims to achieve socio-ecological transformation and cultural multiplicity. With the novel combination of a philosophical approach and practical illustrations, this study calls for a new type of eco-citizenship that embraces pluralism and sustainable ethics.

Keywords: Ecological citizenship, Stewardship, Moral responsibility, Inclusive participation, and Global collaboration

Overview of Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that considers the moral responsibilities humans have in relation to the earth. By questioning the dominant anthropocentric worldview that puts humans at the top of nature and separate from her, they offer possible alternative views, stressing the natural environment being valuable.

This discipline started to coalesce in the 1970s, which saw an increasing level of recognition of environmental issues, such as those brought on by some highly influential works of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). The writings emphasized the ecological web of all life and called for a radical change in human behavior towards nature. Thompson (1990) claimed that Environmental ethics refers to an environmental concern that locates reliable worth not only in the well-being of intelligent or sentient beings but also in the concern about living organisms and the world, as most people do.

The concept of environmental ethics emphasizes one major aspect of all, which is the scope of moral consideration. Most ethical systems that exist up to the present time are concentric



spheres and focus mainly on human interactions, resting on principles of justice, rights, or utilitarianism. As for environmental ethics, it maintains that moral agents include not only human beings but also those who possess the most primary importance, including animals, plants, ecosystems, and even inanimate objects like rivers or mountains. As a result, it calls for a revaluation of moral definitions and systems previously unconcerned with or silent about a thorough appreciation of nature (Callicott 2001).

Additionally, environmental ethics challenge the concept of property rights concerning natural resources. Traditionally, these resources have been viewed mainly through an economic lens, treated as commodities for human use. Environmental ethics introduces a normative aspect, asserting that natural resources possess intrinsic value and should be safeguarded regardless of their usefulness to humans. The idea of “deep ecology,” articulated by philosopher Arne Næss, further supports this view, promoting a holistic understanding of the Earth where all forms of life are recognized as having inherent worth (Næss 1989)

Challenges of Environmental Ethics

Despite its increasing influence, environmental ethics faces several significant challenges that hinder its wider acceptance and implementation. Firstly, harmonizing environmental ethics with current economic and political systems is challenging. Industrial capitalism, which powers much of the global economy, relies on exploiting natural resources and typically favors economic growth over environmental conservation. This conflict between economic advancement and environmental sustainability leads to ethical dilemmas, especially for nations in the Global South, which often strive to enhance their living conditions through industrialization (Attfield 2014). Consequently, policies that limit environmental exploitation frequently encounter resistance, as they are perceived to obstruct economic progress.

Another challenge arises from cultural relativism. Different cultures possess distinct attitudes toward the environment, influenced by their historical, religious, and cultural backgrounds. For instance, indigenous communities typically embrace a more integrated view of nature, perceiving themselves as part of a broader ecological system. At the same time, Western industrialized societies have traditionally regarded nature as a resource to be controlled and exploited. This variation in viewpoints complicates the creation of a universal ethical framework for tackling environmental issues (Brennan and Lo 2016). How can we formulate global environmental policies when different cultures maintain fundamentally distinct relationships with nature?

Furthermore, environmental issues' temporal and spatial aspects further hinder environmental ethics. Many environmental challenges, such as climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, have long-lasting impacts that may not be immediately apparent. Addressing these problems necessitates a forward-looking ethical framework that takes into account the rights and needs of future generations (Gardiner 2011). This leads to questions about intergenerational justice: Do we have moral responsibilities to future individuals who have yet to be born?

Additionally, environmental ethics faces the challenge of addressing the global nature of environmental issues. Take climate change, for instance; it is a worldwide problem that necessitates collaboration beyond national borders. However, current political systems often place national interests above global responsibilities (Elliot 2004). Another significant challenge is broadening the scope of moral consideration. While many ethical theories



acknowledge the moral value of sentient beings, such as animals, they frequently overlook non-sentient entities like plants and non-human species. Environmental ethicists advocate for including non-human and non-sentient entities within the moral community, yet this viewpoint is not widely embraced in mainstream ethics. Critics of this perspective argue that it weakens the notion of moral responsibility by extending it to entities that cannot experience harm or suffering in the same way that humans or animals can (Jamieson 2008).

The Ecological Citizenship of J.B. Callicott

J.B. Callicott, one of the most prominent figures in environmental ethics, has advanced the concept of "ecological citizenship" to rethink human relationships with the natural world. Ecological citizenship builds on the ideas of Aldo Leopold, particularly his "Land Ethic," which posits that humans are part of a broader ecological community and, therefore, have moral responsibilities not only to other humans but also to the land itself (Leopold 1949). Callicott's ecological citizenship expands on this idea, suggesting that individuals should see themselves as citizens not only of political states but also of ecosystems, with ethical obligations toward the non-human world (Callicott 1999).

Meaning of Ecological Citizenship

As articulated by Callicott, ecological citizenship involves a shift from a rights-based understanding of citizenship to one focused on responsibilities and stewardship. Traditional concepts of citizenship are rooted in the notion of individual rights, where citizens are entitled to certain protections and freedoms within a political community. Ecological citizenship, by contrast, emphasizes the duties individuals have toward the ecological systems that support life on Earth. It requires recognizing the interdependence of all living and non-living elements within ecosystems and acting in ways that preserve the integrity of these systems (Callicott 2001).

In traditional terms, citizenship entails rights and responsibilities within a human community. However, according to Callicott (1987), human responsibilities go beyond this narrow definition, implying that people are essential components of a larger ecological community. This perspective, based on the concept of interdependence, holds that ecosystem equilibrium and human well-being are unavoidably intertwined. According to Callicott, the natural world is made up of many interrelated systems in which all living things, from apex predators to soil microbes, play a part in preserving ecological balance (Callicott, 1999). According to this theory, people have an intrinsic connection to nature rather than existing outside of it.

Central to Callicott's ecological citizenship is the ethical duty to respect and maintain ecological balance. He emphasizes that every part of the ecosystem, regardless of perceived utility, holds intrinsic value (Callicott, 1989). This perspective shifts the focus from a resource-based, human-centered relationship with nature to one that appreciates the inherent worth of all life forms. It aligns closely with Leopold's (1949) view that individuals should act as "plain members and citizens" of the land community, honoring and protecting its health, stability, and beauty. Callicott's ecological citizenship thus extends moral concern to all species, ecosystems, and natural resources, advocating a stewardship role in which humans prioritize ecological preservation (Brennan & Lo, 2016).

Callicott's vision of ecological citizenship is fundamentally relational and holistic. He argues that human beings are not separate from nature but are embedded within it, and this



interconnectedness gives rise to moral obligations. These obligations extend beyond the anthropocentric focus on human well-being and include responsibilities to other species, ecosystems, and even future generations of both human and non-human life. In this sense, ecological citizenship requires a biocentric or ecocentric worldview, where the interests of non-human entities are given moral weight alongside human interests (Callicott 1999). According to Callicott, ecological citizenship responsibilities are twofold: individual actions and collective responsibilities. On an individual level, ecological citizens make choices that reflect a commitment to sustainability, such as reducing waste, conserving resources, and minimizing pollution. These personal behaviors, however, represent only part of the broader obligation. Callicott (2003) emphasizes that ecological citizenship also entails collective actions, such as supporting environmental regulations, participating in conservation efforts, and promoting sustainable practices on a community and global scale. Such collective actions highlight the social dimension of ecological citizenship, wherein individuals work together to foster ecological resilience and sustainability (Cafaro & Primack, 2014).

Callicott's view of ecological citizenship also involves recognizing the interconnectedness of the biotic community. For instance, rivers provide critical habitats, support biodiversity, and supply water for human and non-human communities alike. In Callicott's framework, the ethical duty to protect a river extends beyond its utility for human purposes; it acknowledges the river's essential role within the ecosystem (Callicott, 1989). Callicott (1999) asserts that this sense of interconnectedness underpins ecological citizenship, urging individuals to recognize and respect the delicate balance within natural systems. Brennan and Lo (2016) support this view, noting that ecological citizenship shifts the focus from an exploitative to a conservation-oriented relationship with the environment.

Philosophical Implications of Ecological Citizenship

Adopting ecological citizenship has major effects on environmental policies, government choices, and cultural values. First, it requires rethinking the way we approach laws and policies, which often put economic growth or immediate human needs ahead of protecting the environment. Ecological citizenship, however, argues that we should prioritize sustainability in political decisions. This shift would lead to stronger regulations on industries that harm the environment, such as fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial farming. Moving toward policies with a long-term focus means placing ecosystem and biodiversity health over short-term financial gains (Dobson, 2003).

Ecological citizenship also changes the way we view education and cultural values. When individuals see themselves as ecological citizens, it is important to go beyond teaching only the scientific facts of ecology and include a sense of responsibility toward nature. This would help create a culture of environmental care where sustainability and conservation become responsibilities we all share, not just secondary concerns (Callicott, 2001). However, while this approach encourages community projects, there is a risk that some efforts could accidentally harm local environments if they are not scientifically planned. For instance, planting non-native plants in green spaces might disrupt local ecosystems, so community projects must be carefully thought out and based on sound ecological planning (Cronon, 1995).

This also raises fairness issues, primarily intergenerational and even interspecific. Realizing that we owe it to current and future generations and all other beings, we should consider how today's decisions affect times beyond our lifetime. This complicates the decision-making process even further, as it continues to force a delicate balancing act of current versus future



rights to continue the practice of implementing change versus the right to biodiversity. Climate policies, for instance, would take into account the impact on future generations and ecosystems, even if such considerations incur costs for people today (Gardiner 2011).

On the one hand, ecological citizenship rightly emphasizes the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their contribution to sustainability. However, on the other hand, there is a risk that placing too great an emphasis on individual action serves to divert attention away from the need for more sweeping systemic change. When people believe that the solution to environmental problems can be solved with personal choices, it makes people forget the more important accountability of corporations and governments, which have a bigger responsibility and bigger impact on society. Although ecological citizenship is about personal responsibility, for it to be effective, it also needs to be about collective action to change the structures, enabling unsustainable practices (Higgs et al., 2020).

Another issue the theory of ecological citizenship faces is related to inclusivity. Those who preach living sustainably often forget that all who wish to live sustainably may not actually have the resources to do so. Environmental projects marginalize marginalized communities, as Walker (2012) argues; these initiatives favor wealthier communities. For this to truly become ecological citizenship rather than a kind of ecological club, initiatives need to have wider pathways of access to resources and opportunities for participation for all.

With ecological citizenship gaining popularity, there is also a risk of greenwashing, where companies exaggerate their eco-friendly actions for marketing. This can mislead consumers, weaken real sustainability efforts, and reduce public trust. Regulatory measures should ensure that companies that claim to be eco-friendly are genuinely committed to sustainable practices (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Additionally, since ecological citizenship covers a wide range of priorities, from localism and conservation to social justice, different groups may have competing goals. This division can weaken the movement's effectiveness by creating confusion and reducing the impact of collective efforts. Working together across priorities can help the movement find solutions to tackling environmental and social challenges (Schlosberg, 2007).

Lastly, ecological citizenship is not limited by national boundaries and calls for global responsibility. This view fosters collaboration between nations to fight global issues, including climate change and habitat loss, which is beneficial for the world and future generations. For ecological citizenship to be effective, a holistic approach that embraces inclusivity, shared responsibility, and robust education and responsibility is crucial. Petitioning both the strengths and challenges of ecological citizenship allows us to move towards an environmental ethic that addresses ways in which it can enhance the position of all.

Toward Embracing Ecological Citizenship

Embracing ecological citizenship, as conceptualized by J.B. Callicott, requires a nuanced understanding and acknowledging its positive potential and challenges. One key proposition for enhancing ecological citizenship is fostering inclusivity within environmental movements. This involves actively engaging marginalized communities in decision-making processes and ensuring their voices are heard. By prioritizing inclusivity, initiatives can be designed to address the unique challenges faced by these communities, ultimately promoting equitable access to resources and information. Agyeman (2005) emphasizes that sustainable



communities must consider environmental justice, ensuring that all community members have a stake in ecological initiatives.

Another important aspect is promoting collective action and systemic change. While individual actions play a role in environmental sustainability, the focus should shift toward collective responsibility and addressing systemic issues. Community-level initiatives that align with broader policy goals can tackle environmental challenges more effectively. This shift means advocating for policies that hold corporations accountable and encourage sustainable practices at a larger scale. Wals and Corcoran (2012) discuss the necessity of collective action in achieving sustainable development, highlighting that systemic change is essential for meaningful progress.

Enhancing education and awareness is also critical in this context. Educating citizens about the complexities of environmental issues can help combat the overemphasis on individual responsibility. Programs promoting a deeper understanding of ecological systems will enable individuals to make informed decisions considering personal actions and their broader implications. Gough (2009) notes the importance of education in fostering a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, which can empower individuals to engage more effectively in ecological citizenship.

Culturally, many practices and traditions, while meaningful, can inadvertently contribute to environmental harm, thus highlighting the need for an enlightened approach to cultural heritage. For example, the Argungu Fishing Festival in Kebbi State, Nigeria, celebrates traditional fishing skills and community unity. However, its large-scale fish harvest places significant stress on local fish populations and disrupts the aquatic ecosystem. During the festival, thousands of participants use nets, baskets, and even bare hands to capture fish from the Sokoto River. Without sustainable catch limits, these practices risk depleting fish stocks and harming biodiversity, underscoring the need to balance cultural celebration and ecological responsibility (Adebayo, 2010). Embracing ecological citizenship would entail modifying such practices to reduce environmental impact, perhaps by incorporating measures like catch quotas or promoting alternative, sustainable activities that honour the festival's spirit without compromising the ecosystem. This balanced approach allows communities to preserve their traditions while aligning them with environmental values, fostering an ethic of care that is central to ecological citizenship.

Religious perspectives, particularly within Judeo-Christian traditions, also offer valuable insights into embracing ecological citizenship. In the Judeo-Christian framework, the idea of stewardship is foundational, originating in the biblical concept of “dominion” as described in Genesis. Scholars widely interpret this “dominion” not as a license for exploitation but as a duty of guardianship over God’s creation. Humanity is viewed as a caretaker of the Earth, responsible for safeguarding its health and diversity. The concept of stewardship has been reinterpreted in modern theological discourse to emphasize environmental responsibility and the need to protect the Earth as a sacred trust (White, 1967). This view supports the belief that caring for the environment is not only a social or ethical duty but also a spiritual obligation. Recent religious movements, such as the “creation care” ethos within Christian communities, urge believers to adopt sustainable practices and participate in conservation efforts as a reflection of their faith (DeWitt, 1998).

Incorporating ecological citizenship within a religious framework encourages communities to see environmental protection as an expression of reverence and gratitude. This view aligns



personal actions with a larger ethical commitment to future generations and other living beings, reinforcing the interconnectedness of life as a core spiritual value. By framing environmental care as both a cultural and religious imperative, societies can foster an ethic that not only values but actively preserves ecological well-being, laying the groundwork.

Evaluation

Evaluating the concept of ecological citizenship, mainly through the lens of J.B. Callicott's framework, reveals its transformative potential and its challenges in contemporary environmental movements. On one hand, ecological citizenship encourages individuals to take responsibility for their environmental impacts and fosters a sense of community engagement. It promotes a proactive stance toward sustainability, urging citizens to advocate for policies that support ecological health and social justice. This approach can cultivate a strong, informed citizenry that actively participates in environmental stewardship, contributing to positive change at both local and global levels.

However, the complexities and contradictions within the framework also present significant challenges. One primary concern is the potential for fragmentation within environmental movements, as diverse interpretations of ecological citizenship may lead to divided efforts. Different groups might prioritize localism, conservation, or social justice in ways that dilute their collective impact. Furthermore, the focus on individual actions can sometimes overshadow the necessity for systemic change, allowing corporations and governments to evade accountability while promoting the idea that personal choices alone can resolve environmental crises. This can result in greenwashing, where companies project an eco-friendly image without making substantive changes to their practices.

Addressing these challenges through several vital strategies is essential to embrace ecological citizenship effectively. Fostering inclusivity ensures that marginalized communities have a voice in environmental decision-making, promoting equity within sustainability efforts. Shifting the emphasis from individual responsibility to collective action can help unify diverse movements under a common goal of systemic change. Enhancing education about ecological systems can empower citizens to understand the complexities of environmental issues, enabling informed decision-making that considers broader impacts. Additionally, establishing regulatory standards to combat greenwashing can restore trust in corporate claims and strengthen the credibility of sustainability initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of ecological citizenship has the potential to mobilize individuals and communities toward meaningful environmental action. However, realizing this potential requires a careful balancing act that acknowledges the intricacies of social, ecological, and economic interconnections. By prioritizing inclusivity, collective action, education, and accountability, the movement can evolve to be more effective and resilient. Embracing these strategies will enhance the impact of ecological citizenship and contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future for all. Through this comprehensive approach, ecological citizenship can be redefined as a powerful tool for transformative change in the face of pressing environmental challenges.

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