

IN SEARCH OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC¹

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Abstract. Environmental ethics has, since Aldo Leopold first suggested the concept, been struggling with the central idea of why should we people, all things considered, have moral responsibility toward the environment. Except for narrow concerns such as the effect of environmental destruction on human welfare and perhaps the suffering of sentient creatures, the application of classical ethical theory to environmental ethics has not been successful. In search of the comprehensive ethic, many environmental ethicists have reverted to the principles first laid down by Aldo Leopold. In this paper I respond to one such attempt to use the writings of Aldo Leopold for developing an environmental ethic and show that this attempt results in failure. In the absence of such support, we are left with no rational basis for environmental ethics, creating a crisis that may eventually result in the re-definition of the field.

Key words: ethics, environment

If ever there was an icon (in the religious, not computer sense) it is Aldo Leopold. And indeed he has every right for this beatification. He was the first to understand that humans are nothing more than one species in an interconnected community and that we humans can disastrously affect changes in the global ecosystem. But more than that, he was the first to suggest that our concerns for the environment have an ethical foundation. The introduction of his “land ethic” in the last chapter of *A Sand County Almanac* is both inspired and inspiring (Leopold 1966). Generations of young people have received their marching orders from Leopold’s vision of our responsibilities to the environment and he will no doubt collect new converts as the environmental movement continues to gather steam.

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The problem has been, however, in transforming Leopold's beautifully written prose into a workable environmental ethic. Leopold was not a philosopher and did not understand the need for rational discourse. He wrote from his emotions and did not bother backing up his ideas with rational argument. Ever since the publication of his book, others have attempted to transform his beautiful and moving prose into a workable environmental ethic.²

One such attempt to use Leopold's ideas as a means of evaluating our actions toward the environment was a recent article by Peter List, an environmental philosopher who writes knowledgeably about Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" and shows how professional organizations can embrace the vision of this ethic to formulate an environmental code of ethics for that profession (List 1996). What he does *not* tell us, however, is why anyone *should* adopt the Leopoldian environmental ethic. That is, all things considered, why *ought* I to agree with the Leopoldian environmental ethic and adopt it as my personal metric for making decisions regarding the environment?

In this paper I use Peter List's analysis of the Leopoldian environmental ethic because it spells out in a comprehensive manner how the works of this extremely influential writer are being used. I suggest, however, that the ethic is not based on rational arguments, and because Leopold's ideas are at the core of what we now regard as environmental ethics, if my argument is convincing, the entire field might appear to be without foundation.

The Leopoldian environmental ethic

A basic objective of the art of philosophy is to mount a rational argument that can be defended against all other counter-arguments. A victory does not mean one is right, of course, but rather that one simply has a better argument and the rational person should agree to accept the stronger argument.

So did Leopold provide us with such an argument? Let me consider Peter List's version of the key principles of Leopold's "land ethic" and evaluate the validity of each. All statements in italics are taken verbatim from Peter List's article.

1) All parts of the land or biotic community have value and are "good" and not only the human parts. While only some parts may have economic value, all parts have ecological and aesthetic value. Moreover, the land as a whole has such value. (a principle of value)

The word "value" has been distorted by environmental writers, particularly Holmes Ralston, who tries to assign value to natural elements by listing all the different ways that value can be measured (e.g. as life, as aesthetics, as survival

² See for example the writings of J. Baird Callicott, such as his *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Callicott 1989).

and so on, see Rolston 1988). But try as we might, the concept of value does not apply to nature without an identification of who is doing the valuing. That is, value requires the identification of a valuer. There cannot be such a thing as value as a basic characteristic of anything, as would be the case with such properties as density, or length, or even color. To value means that there is someone actively calculating this value.³

Such values can exist in non-human nature, of course. My cat values its breakfast, and the titmouse in my birdfeeder values sunflower seeds. A female spider values its mate (if only as a meal). No doubt a mountain lion values the forest, and an owl values the tall pinetree. Similarly, humans value many things from a football game to friendships to a cozy fire. And certainly biosystems in nature have value as they support our lives. We do not want to muck them up no more than we want to strip the transmissions in our cars. Ecosystems are useful to us, and they are valuable. Values in anything are identified as something that makes the valuer's life easier or better or fuller. To assert, as Peter List does (quoting Leopold) that all parts of a biotic community have value requires that he specify the valuer. If the valuer is human, then the values must be antropocentric values. Neither he nor Leopold explain how value in nature can exist without the presence of a valuer, and therefore we cannot simply accept this mantra as being either rational or necessarily truthful.

2) *Ethical status and concern should be extended beyond the human social community to all parts of the land, including the plants, insects, animals, rivers, wild areas, and other components. (principle of ethical community)*

Perhaps more than any other point listed by Peter List, this is the core of the Leopoldian environmental ethic. But the key word here is *should*. "Ethical status *should* be extended..." But why?

Consider what we mean by "ethics". Ethics is the study of morality; of how people ought to treat each other. All rational people are thought to be moral agents in that they have a conscious choice as to how they can treat each other, and all people belong to the moral community, that group of beings who deserve moral protection and hence have moral obligations.

The requisite characteristics for inclusion in the moral community have changed over time. Aristotle, for example, was quite convinced that only free men are worthy of moral protection, and that slaves and women should be excluded from the moral community.⁴ It was indeed a very exclusive private club. But even though Aristotle did not accept women and slaves into his moral community, he should have known better. It ought to have been clear to him that *all* rational adult

³ An influential voice in arguing against the concept of value in nature is Richard Watson. See for example his "Challenging the Underlying Dogmas of Environmentalism" (Watson 1985) or his "Comment" in *Environmental Ethics* (Watson 1984).

⁴ An excellent discussion of the effect of Greek philosophy on environmental ethics can be found in Hargraove (1989).

human beings are capable of thought and language, can act in a reciprocal manner with other humans, and can be responsible for their actions. All rational humans therefore have a legitimate right to moral agency.

Extending moral protection beyond human beings is a popular approach to environmental ethics, often classified as "extensionist ethics" (see Des Jardins 1993:141). The trouble with this approach is that if we crack open the door, which creatures are we going to let into the moral community? Some classical ethical theories recognize that animal suffering is an evil and that moral protection should be afforded to those creatures that suffer pain. Jeremy Bentham, for example, argues that animal welfare should somehow be taken into the utilitarian benefit/cost calculation since "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*?, but Can they *suffer*?" (Bentham 1948). Peter Singer, a contemporary Australian philosopher, agrees with Bentham and believes that sentience is the important criterion for inclusion in the moral community, not the ability to reason. He believes that the capacity to have conscious experiences such as pain and pleasure is "the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others" (Singer 1979).

Other approaches to the problem of including non-humans in the moral community include Eric Mathews' argument that since we humans extend our moral concern towards those humans who cannot reciprocate, such as infants and the demented geriatric patients, it makes sense to include in this circle animals that can suffer (Mathews 1989). Mary Anne Warren suggests that the suffering of animals is an evil of the same sort as the suffering of humans and for that reason, inflicting pain on humans (or animals) is wrong and immoral (Warren 1983).

Using the ability to feel pain as the criterion for moral concern however opens up great difficulties. First, we do not know for certain which species actually feel pain. Second, we cannot estimate the amount of pain, a quantity necessary if utilitarian calculus is used to make decisions. We either have to recognize that the rights of animals to avoid pain are equal to those of humans, or to somehow list and rank the amount of pain suffered by animals in order to specify which animals should be afforded more protection than others. If the rights of all animals (including humans) are equal, then trapping animals and torturing prisoners would have equal moral significance. If the rights are unequal, then it is necessary to make a list of living life forms and rank them according to their ability to feel pain.

R. D. Guthrie argues that "a sliding scale of morally obligatory conduct toward, or expected from, other organisms... is operationally unfeasible. We would have to formulate some sort of discriminatory system which would define the nature and extent of preferential moral treatment", a clearly impossible task (Guthrie 1967). And finally, if cruelty to sentient creatures is the extent of our environmental ethics, we are not able to argue for the preservation of places and natural environments, except as how they might affect the welfare of sentient creatures.

It seems, therefore, that it is not possible to draw the line at sentience, and the next logical step is to simply incorporate all of life within the folds of the moral

community, such as the “reverence for life” ideas of Albert Schweitzer (1933) and the “biocentric ethics” of Paul Taylor who holds that all living things have an intrinsic good in themselves, and therefore are candidates to be included in the moral community (Taylor 1986). But again, there is no rational way of weighing the value of non-human animal life relative to the life of humans. Should the life of all creatures be equal, and thus a human life be equal to that of any other creature? If so, the squashing of a cockroach would be of equal moral significance to the murder of a human being. If this is implausible, then there must again be some scale of values, and each living creature must have a slot in the hierarchy of values – a slot determined by humans. Such ranking will introduce impossible difficulties in determining right actions. Drawing the line for inclusion in the moral community at “all of life” therefore seems to be indefensible.

Ethics, as we have defined it over the thousands of years and as it is practiced today, seems to be the wrong tool to use to either make decisions concerning the environment, or to explain our attitudes toward the environment. So when Aldo Leopold formulated his “land ethic” he either was mistaken in the use of the term, or he meant something completely different and used “ethics” because he did not have a better word to use.

3) Humans are “plain members” and “citizens” of the land community, rather than conquerors. They are not separate from the community but are an integral part along with all of its other “members”. (the human role)

Peter List (and Leopold) set up an unnecessary binary. They suggest that humans are either conquerors, or they are plain members. Neither is true, of course. The effect of humans on our global environment has been monstrous compared to the effect that any other species has had. To deny that we are special (if for no other reason than our destructive power and instinct) is to deny reality. We certainly are not a “plain member” on the land community.

But likewise we do not need to be a “conqueror”. Humans exist with the same broad objectives for their lives as all other creatures. A beaver, for example, builds his dam and constructs an entrance to his snug bungalow below the waterline. Beavers do what comes naturally – they provide health, comfort and safety for themselves and those dependent on them. Is this any different from humans? We also want to have homes and creature comforts, and in so doing we do nothing more than any other creature on the face of this planet, except we do it much more effectively and much more destructively, and have been so successful that the natural forces that control our population growth have been almost eliminated. We do “what comes naturally”, and our natural inclination is to be destructive (Vesilind 1979).

4) For humans to despoil any part of the land is wrong, and some human alterations of the land community are unethical or immoral while others are morally right. In particular, rapid, extensive and “violent” changes by humans of the land community are unethical, while human alterations of the land which

are consistent with slow, "evolutionary" changes are ethically advisable. (ethical and unethical actions)

The word "wrong" can be interpreted either legally or ethically. It is legally wrong for me to steal your car. It is ethically wrong for me to lie to you. And of course there are actions that are illegal but ethical, or those that are unethical but legal. But "wrong" means that we have established some agreement among ourselves that this is an action that ought not to be done. We do not lie or cheat. It is wrong to do so.

If I own some land and I choose to despoil it, even "violently" such as by clearcutting a forest, why ought I not be allowed to do so? Indeed, if no other human being ever sees this treeless wasteland, why is it in the least unethical?⁵

One could argue that clearcutting forests results in floods, loss to topsoil and destruction of species, and for this reason such "violent" action is wrong. Agreed; as long as this does indeed result in the loss to some human being. If, however, there is no direct or indirect loss to a human then that action cannot be unethical.

5) All parts of the land have a right to continued existence, and some parts have a right to continued existence in a natural or "wild" state. Moreover, the land as a whole has a right to exist. (rights to exist; "biotic rights")

One approach to developing normative ethical theories is to assume that humans have certain rights and that the withholding of these rights is an unethical act. According to John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, these rights are inalienable and do not emanate from any giver, since for us to give ourselves these rights is nonsense. But do non-human organisms also have inalienable rights?⁶ Do they have the right to exist and to exist in their own environment, and not to have humans deny them these rights unnecessarily or wantonly?

The concept of "rights" requires naming what rights are being assigned. Suppose I want the right to shout "Fire!" at the top of my lungs. Society would afford me that right if I did so in the privacy of my own house, or in the woods. It would however draw the line at yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater. Similarly, we afford a beaver the right to do his thing, as long as he doesn't cut down that sapling that I so lovingly planted on the lakeshore. Does that beaver have a right to cut down my sapling? If I place a wire screen around the tree, am I withholding some of the beaver's rights?

⁵ I do not want to leave the impression that I am for clearcutting forests and for other acts of environmental destruction. I am in fact violently opposed to such actions. I also believe that wanton environmental destruction is wrong even if no other human being ever sees it or is affected by the destruction. My concern here is to demonstrate that the Leopoldian ethic does not provide me with the rational arguments for that belief.

⁶ Of historical interest might be the writings of seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza who argues that, contrary to the theories of Descartes, every being is a part of a larger whole and a part of an ever changing universe. Thus everything has value in God's eyes, and everything has a right to exist.

6) *Human land actions cannot be judged solely or primarily on economic criteria, but such judgement must take aesthetic and ecological criteria into account as well. Humans have ethical responsibilities to the land that reach beyond their narrow, economic interests. (criteria for judging)*

Simply stating that humans have ethical responsibilities to the land that reach beyond their economic interest does not make it true. The truth of such a statement depends on one's ability to marshal a rational argument that would convince others. If I do not believe that humans have an ethical responsibility to the land, how will anyone, Peter List or Aldo Leopold, make me believe it is true? Just like Leopold's neighbors who allowed their topsoil to wash away exposing an infertile sand (and gave Leopold the name for his book) would not accept this principle even in the face of immediate economic loss. Leopold was justly frustrated when his neighbors did not accept the broader responsibility that he thought necessary. He could not convince his neighbors, and Peter List does not convince me.

7) *The basic principle in the land ethic is that human actions that preserve the integrity, beauty and stability of the land community are right and actions that do not are wrong. (basic land-ethic principle)*

Leaving aside the question of wrong and right, this statement requires the definition of both integrity and beauty. If "integrity" is meant as in "an integral part", then it simply means that every species within an ecosystem has an integral part to play in that ecosystem – a tautology. If "integrity" means the absence of falsehood, the meaning is undefined because only the human species is capable of lying.

But should we strive to increase the stability of an ecosystem? Lake Erie,⁷ for example, is a far more stable ecosystem now than it was 100 years ago, when pike and walleye dominated the fish population. With greater numbers of fish and other aquatic species Lake Erie as an ecosystem is far better able to withstand the pollution from human sources. We have increased the stability of this lake, but is this what we should strive to do?

8) *Humans should have more respect, affection and love for the land and its components. (emotional relationships to the land)*

I do not deny that the world would be a better place if we humans did indeed have more "respect, affection and love" for the land. But such human emotions are not open to rational argument, any more than is one's love of parents, spouses or music. Simply saying that we should behave in this way will not make it happen.

9) *There should be social sanctions with regard to "ethical" and "unethical" land practices, meaning social approval and support for "right" practices and*

⁷ Lake Erie is one of the Great Lakes separating the United States and Canada. In the 1950s Lake Erie became badly polluted and although heroic efforts have been exerted to clean up the pollution, the lake has never returned to its original pristine quality.

disapproval for wrong practices. However, government cannot successfully coerce land owners and users into practicing a land ethic; voluntary methods of cooperation are preferable, such as educational programs.

Will education cause a change in our attitudes toward the environment? And what would this education be?

Environmental education is in two forms – indoctrination and science. In the former, the students are repeatedly told that some action like cutting trees or causing pain to animals is wrong. With time and repetition, many young people will start to believe that this is true, but they will not be able to argue why they feel this way. Such indoctrination is in fact a form of religion since it is based on a belief in some dogma that defies rational proof.

The other type of education is science – finding out more and more about the world around us. With such education might come the feeling of an almost religious awe for the environment. Although I have no statistical proof for this, I have noted that many of our most respected biologists are deeply religious. It's difficult to unravel the mysteries of life and remain aloof from its beauty and complexity. Would there not be a greater force behind this complexity? Is there not some explanation for how it all came to be? If such environmental education in science results in a sacred feeling toward the environment and eventually develops "ethical" land practices, then our educational dollars are well spent. But better education is no guarantee that children or adults will develop more caring approaches to the environment. One can be a highly educated ecologist, biologist or any other -gist, and still be coldly unfeeling about our environment or life in general.

10) The first principle of land management is to preserve all of the biotic components of the land community, all of the cogs and wheels of the biotic clock. ... A science of land medicine is needed that is based on ecological study and research about the land and its various biota, both those that are disturbed and those that are relatively undisturbed. (land management principle)

This is the action statement in Peter List's "ten commandments". I have no argument with the need for more knowledge and understanding of our environment. But this has nothing whatever to do with ethics.

Conclusion

In the above discussion I do not want to unduly criticize either Aldo Leopold or Peter List. In fact, I agree in my heart with both of them, and despair at our inability to formulate a rational code of conduct that would incorporate global stewardship, including preservation of wilderness and the rights of non-human creatures. What I am suggesting is that *ethics* is an inappropriate and useless tool for establishing our approach to environmental protection or environmental quality, except as our actions toward the environment directly affect the lives of

other humans. If this is true, the entire field of environmental ethics is without a rational foundation.

If ethics is the wrong approach to articulating our attitude for non-human nature, where do we begin? I believe that our environmental concerns, in fact, have spiritual dimensions and that our caring attitudes toward nature are deeply held sacred feelings. Obviously, I am violating the principle I just used to argue against Aldo Leopold's views on environmental concerns. Spirituality has nothing whatever to do with rationality. But does it not at least *describe* our attitudes? Is this not really how we *feel* toward non-human nature?

Old Estonian farmers, when they began to harvest the wheat, would gather the first shaft of wheat, drive a stake through it and place it at the corner of the field. This shaft was meant for the field mice, and it was called literally a "mouse shaft" (hiirevihk). There seems to be no religious or practical reason for the practice. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

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