

“A Defense of Environmental Ethics: A Reply to Janna Thompson,” *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993):245-57.

DISCUSSION PAPERS

A Defense of Environmental Ethics: A Reply to Janna Thompson

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Janna Thompson dismisses environmental ethics primarily because it does not meet her criteria for ethics: consistency, non-vacuity, and decidability. In place of a more expansive environmental ethic, she proposes to limit moral considerability to beings with a “point of view.” I contend, first, that a point-of-view centered ethic is unacceptable not only because it fails to meet the tests of her own and other criteria, but also because it is precisely the type of ethic that has contributed to our current environmental dilemmas. Second, I argue that the holistic, ecocentric land ethic of Aldo Leopold, as developed by J. Baird Callicott, an environmental ethic that Thompson never considers, nicely meets Thompson’s criteria for acceptable ethics, and may indeed be the cure for our environmental woes.

I

There is nothing quite so frustrating to those who consider environmental ethics to be a valid and worthy pursuit than the thought that the very subject is “a dead end,” “an unnecessary diversion,” and “not properly ethics at all.” In her recent article in this journal, however, Janna Thompson levels these very charges against environmental ethics.¹ In opposition to these charges, I contend that Thompson’s claims about environmental ethics, and ethics in general, are highly questionable. I argue further that there is a well-known theory of environmental ethics that Thompson never discusses which can stand up to Thompson’s critique, even if we grant her dubious assumptions about ethics, both environmental and general. I show that the seminal environmental philosophy of Aldo Leopold, championed in the contemporary philosophical literature by the American philosopher J. Baird Callicott, can provide an environmental ethic that does not fall prey to Thompson’s criticisms and that is, therefore, not a “dead end” or “an unnecessary diversion.”²

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¹ Janna Thompson, “A Refutation of Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 147-60.

² See Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966); J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

In this essay, I (1) briefly summarize Thompson's refutation of environmental ethics, (2) review her recommended system of ethics measured against her own and other requirements for ethical systems, and (3) put forward a specific ethical system which can be defended even in light of Thompson's circumstantial criticisms.³ Because I defend an environmental ethic that Thompson neglects, I do not attempt the reparation and defense of those theories which Thompson discredits. If my defense is successful, nevertheless, environmental ethicists who were swayed or discouraged by Thompson's diatribe can perhaps find some relief in knowing that because there is at least one environmental ethic which is defensible, the pursuit of environmental ethics is valid and worthy after all.

Thompson begins her attack by insisting that all environmental ethics are brought to naught for one of two reasons: "proposals for an environmental ethic either fail to satisfy requirements which any ethical system must satisfy to be an ethic or they fail to give us reason to suppose that the values they promote are intrinsic values."⁴ Thompson goes on to claim that in order to even be considered an ethic a prospective ethical system must meet three requirements. First, it must be *consistent*: it must not be arbitrary; it must be able to dictate which differences and similarities are relevant and why. All relevantly similar things must be treated as such. Second, it must be *non-vacuous*: it must not allow that all individuals or systems are granted equal intrinsic value, for an ethic cannot be prescriptive if all individuals or systems are of equal value. Third, it must be *decidable*: it must be able to dictate what is of value and what is not in order to solve ethical dilemmas, for if it is not decidable, it is not practicable.

Thompson continues by stating that traditionally there are two ways environmental ethicists attempt to defend their particular ethics. First of all, there are those who argue by analogy. These "extensionists" take traditional human-to-human methods of ethics and try to extend them by analogy in order to include within the circle of moral concern such entities as animals (Peter Singer and Tom Regan) and even plants (Kenneth Goodpaster and Paul Taylor), arguing that for all the reasons that we grant other humans moral consideration we can likewise grant other nonhuman entities moral consideration.⁵

Thompson chooses Taylor's life-centered environmental ethic as a representative of this extensionist approach, and after a summary explanation of Taylor's

³ In order to make my essay a more valuable contribution in an extended debate, I also take into account Val Plumwood's essay, "Ethics and Instrumentalism: A Response to Janna Thompson," *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991): 139-49. Because Plumwood's essay is a quite separate and different response to Thompson, her essay may be viewed as being complementary to mine.

⁴ Thompson, "Refutation," p. 150.

⁵ See especially Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, rev. ed. (New York: New York Review/Random House, 1990); Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983); Kenneth Goodpaster, "On Being Morally Considerable," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 308-25; Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

position she dismisses it.⁶ Although Taylor does seem carefully and plausibly to argue that the value of "teleological centers of life" is of the intrinsic (or inherent) type, Thompson dismisses his theory of environmental ethics for two reasons: first, because Taylor's criterion for admitting a being into the moral community appears to be arbitrary; and second, because Taylor can provide no reason not to assign intrinsic value to practically everything, which leads to value overload, which in turn leads to the loss of practicability, and, hence, the loss of the possibility of an ethic at all. Thus, according to Thompson, Taylor's extensionist ethic is an unsatisfactory ethic because it is both vacuous and undecidable, and therefore fails to meet two of the three criteria that any ethic must meet to be considered an ethic.

The second way environmental ethicists attempt to defend their particular ethic is by persuasion. Thompson claims that the philosophers who use this method endeavor to persuade their audience, as valuers, that certain entities or states of affairs in nature have intrinsic value and others do not. Thompson cites the environmental ethics of Val and Richard Routley (now Plumwood and Sylvan, respectively), Holmes Rolston, III, and John Rodman as models of this "persuasion" method of positing an environmental ethic.⁷ For example, the Routleys assert that the diversity, naturalness, integrity, stability, and harmony of the biotic ecosystem are the criteria for moral consideration, and Rolston claims that because self-contained systems as well as individuals deserve respect, certain states of affairs have intrinsic value and should be protected and promoted, and other states of affairs lack intrinsic value and should be discouraged and discontinued.

Such defenses of an environmental ethic fail in Thompson's eyes for another reason. She claims that these persuasive attempts at ethics do not satisfactorily provide a theory of intrinsic value. Thompson dismisses this "persuasion" approach to environmental ethics because it fails adequately to dictate what is of value in and of itself—that is, it fails to provide an adequate criterion for intrinsic value. She also dismisses this approach to environmental ethics because, just as she alleges in discussing Taylor, what the Routleys, Rolston, and Rodman include

⁶ Thompson wisely chooses Taylor as the primary representative of the extensionist attempt at an environmental ethic, for when Taylor claims that all living things merit equal moral consideration, he takes the extensionist approach as far as it can go toward positing an environment ethic. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether Taylor's extensionist ethic is properly an environmental ethic at all, since it is generally held by most environmental ethicists that a proper environmental ethic needs to include species, ecosystems, and other wholes in addition to individuals. What Taylor really does is show how extensionism pushed to its limits reduces itself to absurdity. See, for example, J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-38.

⁷ See especially Richard and Val Routley, "Human Chauvinism and Environmental Ethics," in *Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Don Mannison, Michael McRobbie, and Richard Routley, Monograph Series 2 (Canberra: Department of Philosophy, Australian National University, 1980); Holmes Rolston, III, *Environmental Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); John Rodman, "The Liberation of Nature," *Inquiry* 20 (1977): 83-145.

in the moral community seems to be arbitrarily included. Why do we just value large environmental systems? Why draw the line there? Are there not infinitely many systems, both living and nonliving, including machines, that could be included under the same criterion?⁸ There seems to be no end to the possibility of assigning moral consideration ad infinitum. According to Thompson, such attempts to ground environmental ethics theoretically fail to account satisfactorily for the intrinsic values of the broad class of entities that they include within the purview of their ethics.

Thompson concludes that since these are the only two ways in which philosophers attempt to defend an environmental ethic, and since both fail, no philosopher has yet succeeded in providing an ample foundation for an environmental ethic. This conclusion then leads Thompson to declare that environmental ethics is a "dead end," "an unnecessary diversion," and "not properly ethics at all."

II

As an acceptable alternative method, which we can employ to deal satisfactorily with the substantive questions that exist in regard to the human treatment (or rather mistreatment) of the nonhuman world, Thompson proposes an ethical system which makes entities possessing a "point of view" morally considerable. Thompson writes:

I believe that an ethic which takes individuals who have a point of view (i.e., that are centers of consciousness) as having intrinsic value—an ethic which supports the satisfaction of the interests, needs, and preferences of those individuals—is such an ethic. The fact that individuals have a point of view, and can therefore be caused anguish, frustration, pleasure, or joy as the result of what we do, is one good reason for valuing such individuals and requiring that their interests and preferences be a matter of moral concern to all rational, morally sensitive agents.⁹

Although Thompson herself never makes it explicit exactly where her point-of-view centered ethic falls on the spectrum of existing ethical systems, I think we can successfully pin her ethic down from the hints that she gives us. It is located somewhere between the traditional utilitarian animal liberation ethic of Peter Singer and the more Kantian animal rights ethic of Tom Regan. That is, it falls somewhere between granting all sentient beings moral consideration, à la Singer,

⁸ This argument is quickly dismissed by Plumwood ("Ethics and Instrumentalism," p. 146). Plumwood also points out earlier in her essay (pp. 139-42) that not all of those arguing for an intrinsic value theory do so as objectivists, as Thompson mistakenly assumes. Therefore, Thompson's grouping of the Routleys, Rolston, and Rodman is actually not as homogeneous as Thompson thinks. Thompson more accurately appears to be speaking directly of Rolston's moral realism and not of more subjectivist intrinsic value theory.

⁹ Thompson, "Refutation," p. 159.

and granting only mammals over the age of one year who are arguably subjects of a life moral rights, à la Regan. The base class of Thompson's ethic is hence broader than Regan's, but not as broad as Singer's. Because it includes only individual entities with a point of view as objects of moral concern, it grants humans and perhaps some of the more highly psychologically developed animals inclusion in the moral community.

Near the end of her essay, Thompson assumes without supporting argument that her ethic does indeed adequately satisfy the three requirements of consistency, non-vacuity, and decidability, which she claims any proposed ethic must satisfy in order to even be considered an ethic at all. This assumption, however, is highly questionable. To quote Bentham, where should we draw the "insuperable line" of moral consideration? Why should only those individual entities that possess a point of view (i.e., that are centers of consciousness) be granted moral consideration?¹⁰ What makes the possession of a point of view the key to moral inclusion? Throughout her paper, Thompson severely criticizes the various more inclusive environmental ethics for being arbitrary, for giving no adequate reason to suppose that their specific criterion for moral consideration is any more defensible than some other even more inclusive criterion. The same criticism of arbitrariness that Thompson levels against the environmental ethics that she reviews can also be leveled against her own ethical system.

For this reason, then, it could be claimed that Thompson's critique of environmental ethics and her defense of a version of animal welfare ethics is not evenhanded. Although Thompson claims that having a point of view is morally relevant, she never really tells us why. Thus, her view is just another claim lacking substantiation. According to her own specifications for an acceptable ethic, her theory needs a more rigorous justification of why its proposed relevant differences and similarities are genuinely appropriate. Thompson never really provides such a justification in her essay; she merely assures the reader that the possession of a point of view is the correct criterion for moral inclusion. Hence, her criterion of moral consideration is no less arbitrary than those of the ethical systems she previously dismissed.¹¹ Indeed, it is a good deal more arbitrary, since Goodpaster and Taylor, whether correctly or incorrectly, at least argue for the relevancy of their criteria of moral considerability and inherent worth.

There is another flaw in Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic. Callicott has argued that a persuasive ethic must be both self-consistent (logical) and externally consistent (scientifically factual).¹² If we grant that Thompson's ethic is self-

¹⁰ Thompson assumes that the group of entities with points of view is coextensive with the group of entities that are centers of consciousness, which actually might not be the case.

¹¹ A point also recognized and discussed by Plumwood ("Ethics and Instrumentalism," pp. 142-43).

¹² J. Baird Callicott, "The Search for an Environmental Ethic," in Tom Regan, ed., *Matters of Life and Death: New Introductory Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1993), pp. 337-38.

consistent, then there are no logical blunders in its formulation. Nevertheless, it is clearly not externally consistent because it is not scientifically well informed. Thompson's ethic morally segregates humans and other individuals with a point of view from the rest of the natural world. There are two difficulties with such a separation. First, from a basic evolutionary point of view, human beings and other beings with a point of view are psychologically and physiologically continuous with the rest of the community of life. In this sense, then, humans and other beings with a point of view are not segregated from the rest of the natural world. Second, ecology similarly informs us that all living beings (including humans and other beings with a point of view) are what they are primarily because of their relationships with the rest of natural world. The whole, then, is more than just the sum of its parts; it is the parts plus the relationships between the parts which make up the whole. Evolutionary and ecological biology transform our concept of nature and self. Through the realization of the implications of evolution and ecology, we come to see ourselves in a new light, in terms of interconnectedness, dependence, and integration.¹³ By stating that only individual entities with a point of view are deserving of moral consideration, Thompson drives a wedge between those with a point of view and the rest of the natural world, a wedge that is inconsistent with science. Her criterion for moral considerability is thus artificial as well as arbitrary. Because Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic serves to segregate human and other beings with a point of view from the rest of the natural world, and because this segregation is at odds with basic evolutionary and ecological biology, her ethic is not scientifically well informed, and hence is not externally consistent.

Furthermore, it could be argued that Thompson's ethic has problems with both of her other criteria, non-vacuity and decidability. In order to avoid the problem of vacuity, Thompson is rightly concerned with the possibility of ethical overload, or the granting of intrinsic value to so many entities as to be left with no moral elbow room. Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic at first appears successfully to limit the distribution of intrinsic value so as to avoid the pitfall of ethical overload and hence vacuity, by granting intrinsic value only to those individuals with a point of view. However, a closer look reveals that she does not entirely avoid the problem.

In Thompson's ethic, entities with a point of view have intrinsic value, and those without a point of view do not. Thus, for her, the matter of who or what has intrinsic value is easily decided. Indeed she writes, "That they have a point of view decides the matter."¹⁴ For the moment, let us grant that there is a sharp line separating those with intrinsic value, or those within the moral community, and

¹³ The implications of evolution and ecology come out in many of Leopold's essays in *A Sand County Almanac*. See especially "On a Monument to a Pigeon," pp. 116-19; "Marshland Elegy," pp. 101-08; "The Round River," pp. 188-202; "Song of the Gavilan," pp. 158-63; and the culmination of the implications of evolution and ecology in "The Land Ethic," pp. 237-64.

¹⁴ Thompson, "Refutation," p. 159.

those without intrinsic value, or those outside the moral community. Admittedly, then, there is no problem of vacuity when there is a conflict of interest between those within the moral community and those outside of it. Nevertheless, the problem of vacuity can still arise within the moral community, for a point-of-view centered ethic cannot decisively tell us what we ought or ought not to do when conflicts of interest within the moral community arise. Because all those within the moral community have intrinsic value, and have it equally, in times of moral conflict within the moral community, there is no decisive formula for prescriptive actions. For example, if our dilemma is to save the life of a puppy, a being with a point of view, by ridding it of worms, beings without a point of view, then a point-of-view centered ethic leads to a clear decision. On the other hand, it does not provide us with a way to decide whether we should save a rabbit from being preyed upon by a hungry fox. If we do, the rabbit is spared, but we have inflicted a painful death on the fox. If we do not, we have condemned a fellow being with a point of view to the horrible fate of being eaten alive.

The loss of prescription is of great concern to Thompson, so much so that she is willing to dismiss any proposed ethical system if it is not entirely prescriptive:

An ethic is supposed to tell us what we ought or ought not to do; however, it cannot do so if it turns out that all things and states of affairs are equally valuable, for if they are, then there is no reason to do one thing rather than another, to bring about one state of affairs rather than another.¹⁵

Thompson's problem still persists even if not all things are equally valuable, for so long as many of them are, we can still be stymied. Arguably then, Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic fails to meet her own criterion of non-vacuity, and, as result, her ethic can be dismissed as inadequate, just as she dismisses environmental ethics on these same grounds.

Thompson's criteria of non-vacuity and decidability are both ultimately concerned with prescription or practicability. If an ethic is either vacuous or undecidable, it becomes impracticable, which, for Thompson, is reason enough to dismiss it. I would suggest that practicability is a much more complex and precarious notion than it may at first appear to be. If Thompson means by *practicability* the possibility that an ethic may be rigorously and strictly observed, then there is reason to be skeptical about the importance she places on it. A putative ethic may not need to be completely and totally practicable in this sense. For one thing, an ethic may serve a valuable purpose as an ideal which we strive to attain without it ever being possible to fully realize it. More importantly, a proposed ethic may indeed require a great shift in our current value system and/or world view, which would make this new ethic seem impracticable at first, even though after such a shift it would become quite practicable.¹⁶ This is not to say that

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁶ See n. 23 below for a more extended explanation of this point.

all seemingly impracticable environmental ethics could become practicable with a value system and/or world view shift. Paul Taylor's egalitarian biocentrism, for example, would be impracticable with any value system or world view. Nevertheless, it may still be a worthy ideal. Thus, there may be certain proposed environmental ethics that (1) have been prematurely labeled "impracticable," but which would not be if and when a value system and/or world view shift occurred, or (2) can never be rigorously, strictly, and literally followed, but which may nevertheless as noble ideals improve our overall environmental behavior, even though attempts to carry them out inevitably fail. My claim here is not that Thompson's proposed ethic is undecidable and therefore impracticable, but rather that a proposed ethic need not be perfectly practicable in order to exert some influence, as an ideal, on our actual conduct.

Let us assume, for the moment, that the line Thompson draws for moral consideration is the appropriate one. Is it "most often" the case that we can decide which entities are the possessors of intrinsic value and which are not in a point-of-view centered ethic? According to Thompson, it is. Even though there are borderline cases, she claims that an ethic such as the one she proposes has no problems with the criterion of decidability, since "in most cases" it is clear which entities satisfy the criteria of moral considerability and which entities do not. A moment's reflection, however, shows that the matter is not clear at all. The gray area between knowing which individual entities possess a point of view and which do not is much larger than Thompson would have us believe. In many cases, it is obvious which entities possess a point of view and warrant moral consideration, and which entities do not possess a point of view and do not warrant moral consideration. Puppies, of course, possess a point of view and the worms that afflict them do not. Nevertheless, the instances where possession of point of view is not cut and dried are many times more abundant than the instances where it is. What about birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish? Although all these creatures are sentient, none of them are subjects of life, as Regan defines this concept. Do they have a point of view? Thompson does not give a very complete definition of a point of view and even if she did, not having access to a being's conscious states, how can we know if it meets a more complete definition or not? Until we have adequate answers to these questions, we cannot successfully clear the decidability hurdle "in most cases" as easily as Thompson claims—and until we can, by her own standards, her view cannot be considered an ethic at all.

The acceptance of a point-of-view centered ethic also has certain unpalatable and unsettling implications. If only those individual entities possessing a point of view are granted moral consideration, and those lacking a point of view are not, then certain individuals to which we would otherwise continue to grant moral consideration would be forced out of the moral community. Since marginal humans (e.g., the profoundly senile, the very severely retarded, and newborn infants) obviously lack a point of view, they would not be granted moral consideration according to Thompson's ethic. Thompson's point-of-view cen-

tered ethic is liable to this familiar gambit (often referred to as the argument from marginal cases), although she does not attempt to defend her ethic against it in her essay.

Not only does Thompson's proposed ethic have problems with the three criteria she herself proposes, but her point-of-view centered ethic also has problems with another criterion that is quite probably just as important as the three she has already mentioned, namely adequacy: the ability to address problems that are important and relevant.¹⁷ If a putative ethic does not address the problems with which it proposes to help us cope, then it is inadequate and can be rejected. Likewise, if any proposed environmental ethic does not address and deal with the problems of the "environmental crisis" (e.g., local, regional and global biocide, soil erosion, pollution, and so on), it would be an inadequate, incomplete, and deficient candidate for an environmental ethic. Because Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic is concerned only with individuals and not with wholes (or the biotic community as a whole), and because it grants only a select few entities in the natural world moral consideration, it cannot properly address many of the problems of the "environmental crisis," with which environmental ethicists are concerned. For example, if a member of an endangered species that is without a point of view were in mortal conflict with a being with a point of view, then according to Thompson's ethical system, we would be forced to rule in favor of the being possessing a point of view and against the specimen of the endangered species. Of course, since a species as such cannot have a point of view, a species as such cannot merit moral consideration, a conclusion that most environmental ethicists would consider inadequate.

If Thompson, as the title of her paper suggests, is trying to debunk all possible environmental ethics, in the sense that she believes that environmental problems are not moral problems at all, then it could be argued that my point about the adequacy of her point-of-view ethic is otiose. It is not, however, because she does think environmental problems are moral problems: she simply holds that a point-of-view centered ethic is all that is needed to take care of environment problems—provided we have a proper concept of what is "instrumentally valuable" to deal with those entities which she believes do not have intrinsic value.¹⁸

III

In her refutation of the entire pursuit of environmental ethics, Thompson precociously assumes that she has taken into account all available environmental ethics. Nonetheless, she completely neglects to mention one of the earliest and best known environmental ethics—namely, the land ethic of Aldo Leopold. This

¹⁷ Callicott, "Search," p. 383.

¹⁸ Which, as Plumwood also points out ("Ethics and Instrumentalism," p. 148), looks a lot like what is meant by "intrinsically valuable."

seminal environmental ethic is rooted in the moral thought of David Hume and the evolutionary and ecological theories of Charles Darwin and Charles Elton, respectively, and has been crafted into a philosophically respectable contemporary environmental ethic over the last two decades by J. Baird Callicott. It is not only the most well-known environmental ethic to date, because of the popularity of Leopold's writings, but also one of the only (if not the only) genuine and proper environmental ethic so far formulated. Simply and briefly put, it is a genuinely environmental ethic because it is genuinely holistic. The, by now familiar, summary moral maxim of the land ethic reads: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."¹⁹ This position is holistic, rather than individualistic, because its concern is with species (among other collective entities), as well as with specimens of species.

Because it is holistic, it meets the criterion of adequacy without any problems. Even though it is concerned primarily with wholes and not individuals, all members of the biotic community merit moral consideration to some degree. As a result, it is able properly to address the problems that environmentalists are actually concerned with (e.g., the biodiversity crisis, soil erosion, pollution, etc.). Thus, the key question is how well it can be defended against the charges of Janna Thompson. I contend that even if we grant her less than unquestionable assertions about both ethics and environmental ethics, the Leopold/Callicott land ethic still proves to be quite superior to any other proposed environmental ethical system. Not only does it provide for intrinsic value (of the nonobjective variety that Plumwood shows is possible), but it also meets Thompson's three proffered criteria for an acceptable ethic, as well as other plausible criteria.

First of all, the land ethic is both internally and externally consistent. No one has exposed any errors in its formulation. It is scientifically informed by the theories of evolution and ecology, which suggest certain metaphysical implications about who we are, what our place in nature is, and what our relationships to other entities and states of affairs are, as well as certain ethical implications about how we ought to behave in relation to each other and the rest of the natural world.²⁰ The land ethic, furthermore, is not arbitrary, for it clearly and with reason informs us which differences and similarities are relevant and why they are relevant. In this way, the land ethic provides us with objective criteria for moral consideration.

Even though it might be said that the land ethic grants intrinsic value to all members of the biotic community and the community as such—each individual (human, animal, and plant), each species, and the community as a whole—they are not granted equal moral consideration. As a result, there is no ethical overkill with

¹⁹ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 262.

²⁰ See J. Baird Callicott, "The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology," in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, pp. 101-14.

the land ethic. Because the land ethic is an "accretion" to our already existing human-to-human ethics, and does not replace or transcend these previously existing ethics, it is non-vacuous and decidable. As Callicott reminds us,

... [the land ethic] neither replaces nor overrides previous accretions. Prior moral sensibilities and obligations attendant upon and correlative to prior strata of social involvement remain operative and preemptive.²¹

The land ethic is prescriptive in practice. It is prescriptive primarily because it is an accretion that does not replace our other operating ethical norms. Since membership in the community is the measure of moral concern, there are gradations of moral consideration, and thus moral elbow room. Once again as Callicott writes,

... our recognition of the biotic community and our immersion in it does not imply that we do not also remain members of the human community—the 'family of man' or 'global village'—or that we are relieved of the attendant and correlative moral responsibilities of that membership. . . .²²

Because it does not award equal moral consideration to all members of moral community, the land ethic also provides for prescriptive action "in most cases," a quality Thompson claims is vital for any proposed ethic, and a quality, as I argued above, that her own ethical system lacks. It could be argued that the land ethic is not, after all, prescriptive and genuinely practicable, because it is so contrary to our current value system and world view. It is true that many of our current practices and moral norms are not ethical according to the land ethic. The problem, however, is not the land ethic, but rather our current value system and world view, both of which are still based on the destructive, misguided, and outdated Newtonian mechanistic paradigm. This paradigm, which inaccurately portrays the natural world and all that is in it as complicated machinery composed of nothing more than easily replaceable parts, encourages us to ignore the complex and sometimes fragile relationships between the parts and the whole. As the more recent and informed paradigm, the evolutionary-ecological world view, grows in influence, the current reigning Newtonian mechanistic paradigm will gradually be replaced. As we come to see ourselves not as dominant over the rest of nature, but rather as part and parcel of it (as citizens rather than conquerors), our value system and world view will change. As our world view and value system change, the prescriptability and practicability of the land ethic will become more obvious. Thus, even though it may be claimed that the land ethic is not prescriptive and

²¹ J. Baird Callicott, "The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic," in *In Defense of the Land Ethic*, p. 93.

²² *Ibid.*

practicable now, "as we speak," it will become so once we have a value system and a world view informed by the theories of evolution and ecology.²³

When we compare Thompson's own theory with the land ethic in terms of her three criteria, consistency, non-vacuity, and decidability, and two others, external consistency and adequacy, it is difficult not to conclude that while the land ethic meets them all extremely well, Thompson's own suggested ethic does not. For these, and other reasons I suggest that the holistic, ecocentric Leopold/Callicott land ethic, never mentioned by Thompson is the most successful and the best suitable environmental ethic so far formulated.

IV

Adopting an ethical system such as Thompson's is not only philosophically unsound, but also environmentally negligent, first, because an ethic such as Thompson's separates entities in the natural world from humans and only grants certain individual entities moral value, second, because it places no stress on the relationships between all things in the natural world, third, because it cannot properly address many of the problems of genuine environmental concern, and, fourth, because it is a variant of the type of ethic that helped create our current ecological crisis in the first place. Rather than helping to solve our environmental problems, Thompson's point-of-view centered ethic would only exacerbate them. As Leopold himself put it:

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.²⁴

An ethic such as Thompson's would not require any alteration in the current way we see land; indeed, it would only further entrench the commodity view.²⁵

²³ There is much more to be made of this point than I am able to do so in this essay. Suffice to say, an environmental ethic such as the land ethic is but the denouement of a new environmental philosophy. As our knowledge base becomes more and more informed by evolutionary and ecological teachings (as our epistemology changes), we will begin to see ourselves and the world around us differently (our metaphysics will change), and there will be a corresponding alteration in our behaviors and practices, reflecting these new realizations (our ethics will change). For example, prior to the current but fading Newtonian mechanistic world view, animism was the reigning world view. The animistic epistemology and metaphysics were inevitably reflected in the practices (ethics) of that time. As the animistic world view was replaced by the Newtonian world view, humans began to view their place in the natural world differently, and hence human ethics were altered. Similarly, the practicability of the land ethic will increase as evolutionary and ecological teachings begin to serve as our knowledge base, thereby suggesting a new metaphysics. Hence, the call is for more than a new environmental ethic; it is also a call for a new philosophy (Plumwood, "Ethics and Instrumentalism," also makes a similar point on p. 139 and pp. 145-46).

²⁴ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. xviii-xix.

²⁵ Plumwood, "Ethics and Instrumentalism," echoes these sentiments (pp. 148-49) when she

To illustrate with an example, such an ethical system would permit a company to reimburse and otherwise compensate all point-of-view possessing individuals for destroying a rain forest and rendering its endemic species extinct. If the resident higher animals (including the *Homo sapiens*) were relocated, the company would then be free to continue to convert the rain forest and kill all the other creatures. The company's actions would be unexceptionable and permissible so long as the affected point-of-view possessing individuals were satisfied.²⁶ All proposed individualistic environmental ethics eventually run into similar problems. They are simply ill-equipped to deal with the genuine problems of the environment.

I have shown, first, that Thompson's ethical system is not a substitute for an environmental ethic and, second, that environmental ethics is properly ethics after all. Because the Leopold/Callicott land ethic successfully measures up to the standards that any ethic must measure up to in order to be considered an ethic (according to Thompson's standards and others), and because there is, therefore, at least one environmental ethic that is not a "dead end" or "an unnecessary diversion," environmental ethics escapes the charges that Thompson levels against it.

states that even a more "broadly conceived" or glorified instrumentalism remains an instrumentalism, and can ultimately only go so far in protecting and preserving the natural environment.

²⁶ K. S. Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Ethics* (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Boxwood Press, 1981), p. 17.