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## Mountain Thinking: A Howl for Environmental Ethics

Aldo Leopold shot wolves.

In one of the most documented and dramatic incidents of all of conservation history, Leopold admits that in his youth he enacted an inaccurate set of values premised upon an incomplete ecological understanding. This set of values informed the youthful Leopold that you never "pass up a chance to kill a wolf," that wolves—like anything else in nature—are only valuable in so far as they serve certain immediate human ends, and a disvalue if they interfere with those limited ends.

But Leopold changed. Prompted by the experience of watching a "fierce green fire" die in the eye of a she-wolf that he shot, Leopold began to think along larger, more complex and intricate, scales of both time and space. He began to think more objectively, more ecologically, more "like a mountain." In kind, and slowly and over time, the sense of value he attached to nature—even to predators like wolves—changed drastically, radically, fundamentally. And then, miraculously, so did his ethical commitments and ultimately so did his actions.

Leopold's confession and transformation, replete with humility and honesty, sets the task before us. It serves as far more than a measure of our missteps. It also becomes our symbol of hope. Leopold recognized his mistakes and misdeeds, admitted them, endeavored to correct them, and correct them he did. If he did it, then so can we. If he could learn to think like a mountain, then we can too.

But what does it mean to think like a mountain; how do we go about doing that; and how can such a conceptual conversion serve us?

## There is Something Amiss

Whether our preferred form of environmentalism is fund-raising, hands-on activism, working at a nature center or for a conservation NGO, or academic teaching and publishing, we collectively appear to hold certain truths to be self-evident. We all assume that Western culture has for some time now been in the throes of an environmental crisis. We also suppose that this crisis is more than merely the product of the actions that people perform. We feel there is indifference when there should be care, ignorance when there should be knowledge and wonder, a sense of separation when there should be a sense of community, malice when there should be munificence. We apparently recognize that at root these actions are motivated by mistaken assumptions about the nature of the human and non-human world, by a misrepresentation of the value that the non-human world holds, and by the nature of the relationship that exists between the human and the non-human. We not only acknowledge that we have different and deeper ethical commitments to the non-human world than those who we feel are responsible for the environmental neglect that we disavow, but in our bolder moments we sense that their values, ethical attitudes, and actions are somehow incomplete or even inappropriate and corrupt. And we seem to agree that these things can and should be remedied.

However, that may be all we agree upon. When it comes to prescriptions for remediation, we diverge. So, we converge on the idea that something is amiss, that things need to change, that people need to begin to think and act differently—more “ecologically,” more “objectively,” more “holistically,” more “mountain-like”—but we diverge on the solutions we subscribe to.

There may be a plurality of ways to articulate our prescriptive disagreement. I suggest that one way to see these differences is as the distinction between 1) radical worldview and ethical transformation on the one hand, and 2) the appeal to worldview clarification and fulfillment on the other.

### 1) The Need for a New Paradigm

In the 1970s, environmental philosophers urged us to begin the work of creating and adopting new, truly environmental, ethics. A properly ecological worldview and correlative ethic was something we apparently lacked but desperately needed. Many other environmental philosophers took them to task and over the past thirty years some genuinely inspired and inspiring work has been done both conceptualizing and realizing such an alteration. This approach to change

works and it has a long history of working. People can and do change their worldviews and their most fundamental ethical commitments (witness the move from the belief that the world is flat to the belief that it is roughly spherical, or from tacit or explicit acceptance of human slavery to its utter rejection). In many ways this is the process that Leopold began as he experienced the she-wolf's fading green fire, and finished when he penned his legendary essay “The Land Ethic.” This approach—abandoning our outdated, outmoded, and dangerous past for a set of new ethical commitments premised upon a new worldview—is certainly one possible manner in which to remedy our history of environmental neglect. However, it is not the only way.

While facilitating “worldview transformation” might be an appropriate task for environmental philosophers, it might not be a possibility for the hands-on environmental advocate or educator. For a variety of reasons the advocate and educator needs to—literally and figuratively—reach people where they live. Establishing a new paradigm is hard and invasive work, people are reluctant to change or resist being told they are mistaken, and such an undertaking may be viewed as inefficiently protracted.

### 2) The Appeal to Internal Consistency

For the “practical” environmentalist, the idea of setting as your mission the alteration of people's worldview is simply not feasible. However, it is no more helpful to simply point out the fact that people disagree on things or even to uncover why they disagree. There must then be another avenue for remediation.

Philosophers refer to this as the appeal to internal consistency; others might call it “hitting people where they live.” A most effective method by which people begin to think differently (to think mountain-like in this case) is by rethinking or realizing the implication of something that they are already fully committed to. Over the past couple of decades, for example, many Christians have traded a despotic view of the human/nature relationship where humans are to “dominate and subdue” the earth for a stewardship view of that same relationship where humans are to “dress and keep” the earth. This has been accomplished without a rejection of Christianity or any of the fundamental principles thereof.

I would suggest that within all successful traditions and worldviews—be they religious or cultural—there exist fundamental principles that can be appealed to in order to move someone toward a more environmentally responsible vision without the necessity of abandon-

ing those traditions. The role of someone who opts for this route might be as facilitator of this more "biospheric" perception.

### Impediments

In some ways the deck is stacked against all of us interested in ethical alteration; whether it be radical or more conventional. Historical Western ethical frameworks are stubbornly anthropocentric (i.e., purely human-centered) and individualistic (i.e., only equipped to account for the good or interests of individuals). These frameworks do not explicitly embrace a global- or biospheric-scale reality or set of ethical commitments. At best they deal with how humans ought to live together, and how humans ought to relate to other individual living things for the good of humans—maybe for the long-term good of humans.

Ethics are both place and culture (or community) based and bounded. But this is perhaps the very problem. While our places and cultures have been greatly expanded and melded by global trade, freedom in travel and relocation, acceptance of cultural mixing, the ease and speed of global communications, by the sheer number of human inhabitants sharing one Earth, and by an increased ecological understanding of the world, our ethical commitments have arguably not caught up. In short, our place has become the Earth as a whole, and our culture has become a more unified culture of humanity, but our current ethical structures evolved in a far more narrowly defined world of both place and culture. The question is, can our ethical views now expand to match our expanded global community?

To many of us, it is tragically obvious that we are not yet there, that we still do not possess anything resembling a land ethic. This may in part be because we have not yet learned to see the land as an integrated whole. We lack ecological vision. If we fail to recognize that which makes land a living functioning system, and a system to which we humans fully belong, then it is no wonder that we fall short of developing an ethic inclusive of that land. Certainly we will fail to account morally for those things that we do not even recognize.

We have always, as a parallel, maintained ethical systems of human rights. However, we have not always included all *homo sapiens* within the purview of our moral communities, not because our ethical systems did not include all humans, but because we did not conceive of all *homo sapiens* as fully human, as part of our human community. To the extent that we do not, therefore, conceptualize certain components of the biosphere, or the biosphere itself, as part of our shared community, we do not include that biosphere either collectively or elementally.

I would suggest that such a moral failure has fundamentally to do with a lack of holistic vision, with an inability to see the deep interconnections and dependencies between ourselves and the rest of the non-human world. In general, Western culture, dominated by a certain view of science, continues to move toward an increased compartmentalization and bifurcation of the world, under the assumption that this conceptualization increases understanding. Nature, then, ultimately became taxonomy. The biosphere nothing but the sum of biospheric elements, elements which themselves could be further reduced for increased understanding. But if, and only if, we compartmentalize, can we also prioritize and relegate status and value. If we cannot so readily compartmentalize, we cannot so easily dismiss and devalue.

If this is at the root of our environmental problems, it also serves as the source of our salvation. If this is how we understand our problem (as a lack of ecological vision), then there is hope to be found. That hope lies in our ability to foster or bring forth an ecological or holistic vision of nature, inclusive of human beings; a vision in which we scoff at ready compartmentalization as not only naïve and uninformed, but also as dangerous and unethical.

### Conclusion

Aldo Leopold knew what lay at the core of ethics: "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." He also recognized that we have a problem: "the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land." But in Leopold's simple realizations he also points us toward the solution. Given the strong correlation between a sense of community and a sense of ethical obligation; ecological education, thinking like a mountain, learning to see humanity as part and parcel of a biotic community is what prompts ethical obligation to the land community. That correlation may be triggered for some by a significant alteration of their fundamental worldview. However, there are ethical threads in all persisting human cultures and traditions upon which to rest our hope for an ethical alteration: compassion, respect for life, concern for generations yet to come. Time may not be on our side. But history is littered with examples of people rising to great ethical challenges; of people transforming their senses of culture, place, and community; of people embracing the mother of even all ethical invention, necessity.