

**\*\*The following content is intended solely for the educational use of the individual user.\*\***

**These digital images may not be copied, retained, printed, shared, modified or otherwise used without the copyright holder's express written permission, except as permitted for educational use.**

## TEACHING THE LAND ETHIC<sup>1</sup>

Michael P. Nelson

### *Abstract*

This paper discusses the teaching of the Leopoldian Land Ethic in an environmental ethics class. The Leopoldian Land Ethic is arguably the most fully formulated and developed environmental ethic to date. Moreover, at least in North America, it is also the ethical reference point of choice for conservation workers both within and outside of government service, and thus it is particularly important that students who will pursue such careers are exposed to it. Although there are a number of ways to unpack the Land Ethic in a university environmental ethics classroom, and for more public audiences, this paper outlines one method that has been highly effective in both teaching settings over a long period of time.

*Keywords:* Land Ethic, Aldo Leopold, environmental ethics, evolution of ethics, environmental education

### *Introduction*

For well over a decade now my undergraduate environmental ethics class has culminated with a philosophical exegesis of the Land Ethic<sup>2</sup> of Aldo Leopold. This is a class that I have taught every semester to over 150 students who are predominately from our College of Natural Resources. These students generally self-identify as “science- and practically-minded”; they study forestry, water and soil science, environmental education, general resources and land management, and the like; and they will predominantly go directly from their undergraduate educations to entry-level natural resource work for both government and private agencies. Only a handful of philosophy majors or philosophy majors with a concentration in environmental ethics take the course each semester. The course also satisfies the university’s mandatory “Environmental Literacy” requirement and therefore attracts many students who need to satisfy this General Degree Requirement. In short, this large course is predominately made up of students who are required to take it. This course is also the legacy of the first course in the world taught in environmental ethics by J. Baird Callicott beginning in 1971.

Leopold's Land Ethic, I tell my students, is arguably the most fully formulated, developed, and debated environmental ethic to date. In my frequent interactions with colleagues from other academic disciplines and with US conservation organizations from both the private and government sectors, I have also become keenly aware that "Leopoldian" is the language that can bridge gaps between academia and public service, between academic disciplines, and between narrowly anthropocentrically motivated conservationists and those whose environmental concern is prompted by other, more non-anthropocentric, sensibilities. In addition to the purely pedagogical, philosophical, and intellectual reasons to prescribe a heavy dose of Aldo Leopold in my course, given that many of my students will become professional conservationists, I view teaching the Land Ethic as a way to instill within them something that will serve them professionally. This essay serves as at least a rough outline of how I teach the Land Ethic in such a course.

Recently, on the first day of a one week graduate Environmental Education course in Environmental Ethics, students handed in an assignment in which they were asked to indicate what familiarity they already had with topics that were going to be covered during the course. I was especially struck by the comments made by one student:

While I have some familiarity with nearly all of the topics on the syllabus, I'm not sure what the land ethic is. Don't get me wrong, of course I have heard of the land ethic and of Aldo Leopold, and I have heard over and over how we need to begin to live according to the land ethic, blah blah blah. But what does that mean, I mean what *is* the land ethic and how does it work? I hope we cover that in detail in this course and we don't just gloss over it like I see done most of the time.

When I spoke with her about her comments I found that she was upset by what she thought to be a lack of critical reflection and philosophical development of the Land Ethic in both the environmental literature with which she was familiar, and the natural resources courses she had already taken at the university. Likewise, she seemed convinced that in order to do anything other than preach to the choir of "Land Ethic or Leopold faithful", more had to be said. "How can we respond to those who don't think nature merits moral consideration?", she asked. This seems a serious concern not only worthy of, but demanding, a response; a response, I assured her, that would be forthcoming during the course.

*Teaching the Leopold Land Ethic: Moral consideration*

In its most basic manifestation it is obvious what the Land Ethic is. Leopold makes this very clear. In fact, Leopold even goes so far as to provide us with a summation of his Land Ethic. Leopold's summary moral maxim states that "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" (1949: 224-5, 1966: 262).<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most oft-quoted two sentences in all of conservation literature. It emblazons t-shirts, bumper stickers, and park benches. It has become almost a holy mantra among environmentalists. According to the summary moral maxim of the Land Ethic, actions (individual or collective—always a point worth pausing for and asking about in class) ought to be judged right or good if they promote the health of the biotic community and wrong or bad if they harm the biotic community. Voila! . . . notoriously difficult ethical decisions made simple.

However, summary moral maxims of ethical positions are just that: boiled-down, intentionally understated attempts to wrap up a more robust moral position. As a result, they often fail to capture the true and complete essence of the author's intentions. However, we surely know that there is more to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism than just "actions are right if they produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people", more to Immanuel Kant's theory of rights than "do that action that you would be willing to have made into a universal law", and, likewise, there is more to Leopold's Land Ethic than "A thing is right . . .". Simple reliance on slogans, mantras, and summaries either are no replacement for the understanding of an ethical position at all, or, at best, they are only persuasive to someone who already believes in the ethical position to begin with. Reliance only upon the summary moral maxim of the Land Ethic to convey the meaning of Leopold's ethical position does not allow us to respond to dissenters, nor to articulate why it is that the moral inclusion of the biotic community is called for.

It is this fundamental point—concerning inclusion in the moral community and the nature of ethical systems—that is central to my teaching of the Land Ethic. All ethical systems, including the Land Ethic, address the concept of the moral community, which can be represented by a circle. Those within the circle are included as

members of the moral community, and are due direct moral consideration; those outside of the circle are not. This basic—and arguably oversimplified—model of moral discourse serves the course throughout the semester as a way to illustrate the different moral theories that we encounter (environmental ethical theories that generally become more inclusive); hence it is nothing new by the time we get to Leopold.

One useful way to have students think of ethical systems is that said systems are concerned with who or what belongs inside this circle or with who or what merits direct moral consideration; or, conversely, with who or what should be left outside of the circle or with who or what nets either indirect moral consideration, or none at all. This involves asking what it is that determines a position within the circle, what determines where the line is to be drawn, or what the key to moral consideration should be. When one attains membership in the moral community one attains what might be called *direct* moral standing. In other words, moral community membership implies that one counts for reasons greater than one's value as a means to some other end, or that one possesses value beyond mere instrumental value (intrinsic value, that is). When one is left outside of the scope of the moral community one either possesses no value at all (and hence no moral standing at all) or only instrumental value (value as a means to some other end) and only indirect moral standing.

Historically, given that the keys to moral inclusion have been offered as traits that humans were thought to possess to the exclusion of the non-human world, such direct moral standing has only been (more or less) human-inclusive. Many of these “keys to moral consideration” come out in the course of the semester during discussion of other environmental ethical theories, so by this point the students are familiar with this concept and with the history of proffered keys.

However, by claiming that the key to moral consideration is not some single quality but rather that it lies in membership of the biotic community—and that the rightness or wrongness of an action is judged by the contribution it makes to the health of the biotic community—the Land Ethic significantly and radically alters the makeup of the moral community. In Leopold's own words (1949: 204), “the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the [ethical] community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land”.

So far, then, we know what the end result of the Land Ethic is: a vastly more inclusive moral community. But how does this come

about, why should our moral community become more inclusive and with what problems does this present the class?

*Teaching the Leopoldian Land Ethic: Evolution and Ethics*

Ethics, for Leopold, are—as are other ecological and evolutionary traits—located in a context and always changing or evolving. The Land Ethic builds upon the notion that there is an historical process of ethics—an origin, a growth, and a development—and that we can explain ethics and the development of ethics biologically. For many students, this seems strange (even counter-intuitive) given that they accept a distinction between what we usually view as a neutral and purely objective scientific discipline (biology) on the one hand, and ethics as a more (or totally) subjective humanities discipline on the other, and think of these two realms as having little or nothing to do with one another. However, a discussion of the is/ought problem at the beginning of the semester usually goes a long way toward at least allowing for the possibility that these two realms are not entirely distinct by the time we reach Leopold.

Interestingly for these particular students, Charles Darwin (1981: chapter III) was the first person to give a biological-progression sort of accounting of ethics. Since Darwin is perceived by the students as a “hard” scientist, they are always willing to at least consider what he might have to say about something like ethics. Darwin wants, even needs, to show that everything about humans is a product of evolution: everything including our ethical characteristics and systems. Clearly, Leopold (and, indeed, most of the students in the course) is more familiar with this sort of a biological or scientific account rather than with a similar philosophical account.<sup>4</sup> So it is no wonder that Leopold uses the Darwinian model to explain the development of ethics, and no wonder that the students in this particular course fight this approach to ethics less than they might some other.

Darwin claims that ethics evolve, and that this evolution is social (we might then refer to such an approach to ethics as a “biosocial” evolution of ethics). In Darwinian fashion, Leopold also speaks of an evolution of ethics when he states, at the very beginning of the “Land Ethic”, that the area governed by ethics has grown larger over time. As Leopold (1949: 201) writes “during the three thousand years which have since elapsed [from the era of Odysseus], ethical criteria have

been extended to many fields of conduct, with corresponding shrinkages in those judged by expediency only. This extension of ethics . . . is actually a process in ecological evolution". This phenomenon demands explanation.

However, students quickly pick up on a potentially serious problem with this approach to ethics. Darwin is attempting to provide us with a biological account of the existence of ethics, but ethics at first seems to present a significant hurdle for Darwin, and hence for Leopold: How are ethics possible from the point of view of the theory of evolution? At first glance even Leopold admits that they seem to be impossible from an evolutionary perspective. In fact, he defines ethics such that they seem to be impossible. "An ethic, ecologically", he writes (1949: 202) "is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence". However, since, from an evolutionary point of view it would seem that only the most ferociously competitive of the world would survive and, hence, reproduce and pass on their ferociously competitive tendencies, limiting one's freedom of action in the struggle for existence would apparently be a sure-fire way to eradicate oneself. It would seem that from an evolutionary point of view that ethics would not evolve, that cooperation would get cut off, that those who were altruistic would die off (and altruism would die out), and that only those who out-competed their fellows would survive. I gather that a large part of the problem for my students is a conflation between the notion of "fitness" as found in Darwin, and the notion of strength as in the Social Darwinian notion of "only the strong survive". Clarifying the notion of natural selection and the concept of fitness (as different than strength—something that needs to be clarified in class given some very common confusions about the basics of Darwinian natural selection theory that the students often reflect) goes a long way here, but not all the way.

How could "limitations on freedom of action" ever have originated and evolved, ever have been a trait that improved the fitness of an individual or group of individuals? Of course we can explain the occurrence of instances of ethics, benevolence, and altruism as mutations since any mutation is possible; but why and how was ethics as a limitation of freedom of action a successful mutation? How did it get selected for and develop over time?

Darwin's answer: the key to ethics, ethical behavior, and the process of ethics is found in *society* and *sociability* or *community*. Ethics come

into being in order to facilitate social cooperation. Hence, ethics and society are *correlative*, they change in relation to one another.

Many animals are in some respect social animals, and humans are intensely social. For these social animals, life's struggle is more efficiently conducted in a society; there is a survival advantage to living in a social setting. According to Darwin, at this point, or because of this point, ethics come into being since we cannot live in a social setting without some sort of limitations on our freedom of action, or without ethics. I sometimes summarize this in blackboard shorthand as follows:

No Ethics → No Society → No Survival

Not only are we ethical creatures *because* we are social creatures, but we are ethical creatures *to the extent* that we are social creatures as well. That is, the more intensely social we are as animals, the more complex are our ethical structures (in fact, those with more intense societies even have bigger neo-cortexes).<sup>5</sup> Again, continuing to root this explanation of ethical development in what the students think of as science seems to command their attention even though they were previously unfamiliar, and even uncomfortable, with ethical discourse.

Leopold (1949: 203-4) writes:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).

In short, given the kind of creatures that we are, our continued existence is more likely given the presence of a society, and for societies to flourish there must be some sort of rule, some sort of limitation on the freedom of action, some sort of ethics.

#### *Teaching the Leopoldian Land Ethic: Sentiment and Ethics*

Students often want to know how ethics originate. Darwin asserts that ethics emanate from the natural *parental* or *filial* affections, or in the biologically ingrained emotional bond of caring for young. This



means that, biologically, we all possess the ability to extend moral consideration to others, or that our moral sentiments are malleable. The notion of a shared ethical capacity here butts up against students' preconceived, but unreflective, notion that ethics are wildly subjective and fickle (although many have no problem making very universal and absolutist moral claims at the same time), while the notion that ethics are amenable to change is at first a confusing and uncomfortable idea that I eventually attempt to make an empowering idea: if we are morally adrift with regard to the environment, we can change course; we do have that ability.

But how do ethics develop and spread? How did larger societal ethics evolve? The answer: We extend ethical consideration (feelings of moral sympathy) to those we perceive to be within in our community—again, ethics and society are correlative. Therefore, *ethical inclusion spreads as our sense of community spreads*. At this point, referring back to *A Sand County Almanac* as Leopold's own attempt to foster this sort of enlarged ecological literacy not only illustrates this point but adds another dimension to their experience with the book.

As we extend sentiment (and thus moral inclusion) from offspring and family, towards friends, relatives, etc. we include them, also, within our realm of morality. In teaching, I illustrate this by using the example of the (admittedly overly-simplistic) history of civilization. Aboriginal societies consisted of fifty or so closely related individuals called clans or gens. The moral community at that time included members of one's clan (i.e., there existed a clan ethic, or many clan ethics). However, those outside the social community of the clan were not ethically considered or included. Eventually there was a recognition that it would be advantageous to live in a larger group (coupled, I would imagine, with contact with those "others" and the realization that they were not significantly different than us—or that the differences that they did have were not morally relevant). Hence, there was a banding together of clans into tribes, and here ethics varied and became more inclusive (they had to for the tribe to survive—the ethic has to match the social community realization or it all falls apart. For example, if we did not have a "classroom ethic" of sorts, we could not have a class).

Historically this process of moral expansion is repeated. As tribes merge into nations, which in turn develop into nation states or countries, ethics extend as society does and the boundaries of the moral community continuously enlarge. And always, the fuel that powers this system is empathy (a sentiment) based on a sense of commu-

nity (prompted by reason). I often employ some version of the following diagram to represent this point:

*Historical Social Evolution*

Clan → Tribe → Nation → Nation State → Global Village → Biotic Community

*Corresponding Ethical Change*

Clan Ethic → Tribal Ethic → Nation Ethic → Patriotism → Human Rights  
→ Land Ethic

= rationality on the first level, sentimentality on the second, and arrow between rows can be used to illustrate the correlative nature of the relationship between the level of social realization and the corresponding ethic.

At this point some caution needs to be exercised. Students often react skeptically to the emotion/moral sentiment approach to ethics.<sup>6</sup> Although the tradition Leopold is reflecting here does claim that we are ethical creatures primarily because we are emotional creatures, that is not the whole of the picture. Human reason drives the community realization. The Land Ethic is, then, an attempt to ground a moral theory on the dialogue between what we think of as reason and what we think of as emotion: two dramatic components of our lived world. As reason prompts me to enlarge my social community, my moral sentiments are now triggered to morally enfranchise that new community; if they are not, then that level of social realization cannot be facilitated. Certainly this interplay merits teasing out in the classroom in greater detail. I have actually found that a short series of fairly mundane examples from one's daily life go a long way toward demonstrating that there may be some problem with trying to sever emotion and reason entirely. For instance, when a friend is upset (emotion) we are often offered—or expect to be given—an explanation (reason) for this emotional state. When we try to calm an angry friend (emotion) the tonic we use is often a re-examination of the facts that lead to the anger (reason), and so on.

There are a number of examples, I explain to students, of the enlargement of the global moral community today. The idea of universal human rights is one such case; and it is widely accepted now that country of origin, race, sexual orientation and so on, are not morally significant differences. We are all part of a single human, moral, community. Leopold's Land Ethic moves one step further on: to the idea of the whole biotic community as a moral community.

So, for the biotic community to become a moral community to which the Land Ethic applies, those previously conceived of as being outside the moral community must be brought in. The key to this social and moral expansion is the science of ecology, which allows us to see the world as a biotic community.<sup>7</sup>

Leopold seems convinced that once we begin to see the world as a biotic community, the Land Ethic will follow naturally—a leap of faith that is always interesting to bring up and question in class. Our inherited social and ethical instincts, for Leopold, will be activated when we begin to see plants and animals, soils and waters as fellow-members of a biotic community. Therefore, ethical change is intimately entwined both with knowledge of ecology and with metaphysics, or worldview remediation. Thus, the key to moving from a humanitarian ethic to the Land Ethic is *universal ecological education*—part of which I hope is happening in the classroom where this is being studied!

For Leopold the acceptance of the Land Ethic is clearly feasible. As he puts it (1949: 203) “the extension of ethics to this third element [the biotic community] is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility”. So, the *possibility* of a Land Ethic is clear—again, ethics are malleable. However, Leopold’s message also contains a warning. The Land Ethic is not just an evolutionary possibility, but also an “ecological necessity.” It is not just that an adaptation of the Land Ethic is possible or that it would be nice, but that it is a necessity if that level of social organization is to hold together; just as every ethical extension is necessary for that level of social inclusion to hold together. There is no clan without a clan ethic, no country without some level of love for one’s country or patriotism, and no biotic community without a Land Ethic. For the biotic community (which now includes us) to flourish, the adaptation of a system of moral thought that attributes direct moral standing to the land is an absolute necessity.

#### *Conclusion: Developing Teaching about the Land Ethic*

In addition to this basic framework, the exciting thing about teaching the Land Ethic is that there are numerous important and interesting further paths that an instructor might take. In fact, some of these are quite crucial for a fuller understanding of Leopold’s theory.

First, after the foundation of the theory is laid out, a series of objections and responses not only helps students to see the Land Ethic as a contested theory, but also allows the theory to unfold in more detail. To this end, I begin with those from Callicott (esp. 1999: 99-115) as well as with my own work on the charge that the land ethic can lead to “environmental fascism” and I explore further issues that arise from such questions (esp. Nelson 1996). In fact, I work through a series of ten objections and possible responses to the Land Ethic. Although I do not have the space here to develop that discussion in any detail, I would be happy to provide a hand-out to anyone interested.

Second, it often serves the students to explore how the rest of Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* provides the reader with a subtle lesson in ecological literacy: the very lesson he believes triggers our biotic community social instinct.

Third, it is important to discuss how ecology has dramatically changed since 1949 and how it is that this change may complicate the foundations of the land ethic beyond Leopold’s own discussions. Callicott’s essays “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology” (1989) and “Do Deconstructive Ecology and Sociobiology Undermine the Land Ethic?” (1999) provide a solid background for this topic.

In my experience the Land Ethic is also the environmental ethical position that seems to translate best to more general audiences. This is not just because these audiences are familiar with Leopold’s work or words, but because the theory appears to resonate quite deeply with the foundations of the moral experiences of those audiences. While they might disagree, at least at first, with the extent to which Leopold and “Leopoldistas” such as Callicott attempt to morally enfranchise the human and more-than-human worlds, they find resonance with the essential form of ethical assumptions and possible extensions. This, it has always seemed to me, is a hugely powerful connection, a place to start from, and a common tongue from which to begin what are perhaps the most important conversations in which the world is currently engaged.

Michael P. Nelson, Department of Philosophy, University of Idaho,  
Moscow, Idaho, 83844-3016, USA; mpnelson@uidaho.edu

## NOTES

1. This paper reflects the author's experiences while teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, a position which he has since vacated.

2. Because the theory of environmental ethics formulated by Aldo Leopold (1949, 1966), and later developed by J. Baird Callicott (see especially 1989, 1999) is a specific type of environmental ethic, it seems proper to capitalize it. Hence, the Land Ethic is that environmental ethic defended by Leopold and Callicott (and myself (1993, 1996)). This avoids the common confusion associated with using "land ethic" as a synonym for "environmental ethic."

3. The 1949 edition of *ASCA* is preferable. The 1966 edition includes added essays, the order of the essays within the volume has been rearranged, and over the years I have even discovered rearranged, added, and missing wordings.

4. A philosophical account does exist and can be found (for example) in the works of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers David Hume (1957, 1978) and Adam Smith (1982), both of whom Darwin actually cites. If I had the time in my own class I certainly would go even further into this account of ethics. If the course were, for instance, less of a massive service course for the College of Natural Resources, and more of a typical upper division philosophy course, then reading Hume and Smith would be a must.

5. See Ridley (1996: 69) and Humphrey (1983).

6. The reason/emotion dualism that has to be addressed here is just one among (what the reader has probably by now realized) a series of preconceived and entrenched dualisms that students bring to the course: is/ought, science/humanities, nature/human, etc. In some ways, a substantial sub-theme of the course is to challenge their preconceptions about dualisms, or at least to demonstrate where it is that these come from and how that might be reconsidered, and what that reconsidering might mean.

7. Admittedly, ecology is not the only scientific theory that might prompt this expansion of the social community. Evolutionary theory and quantum theory (among others) might also do this, and therefore might also be worth exploring while discussing the Land Ethic.

## REFERENCES

- Callicott, J. Baird. 1989. *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- . 1999. *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Darwin, Charles. 1981 [1871]. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hume, David. 1957 [1751]. *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1978, vol. I originally published in 1739, vols. II and III in 1740. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Humphrey, Nicholas. 1983. *Consciousness Regained: Chapters in the Development of Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1966. *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*. New York: Ballantine Books.

- Nelson, Michael P. 1993. "A Defense of Environmental Ethics: A Reply to Janna Thompson", *Environmental Ethics* 15:147-60.
- . 1996. "Holists and Fascists and Paper Tigers . . . Oh My!", *Ethics and the Environment* 1: 103-17.
- Ridley, Matt. 1996. *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Penguin/Viking.
- Smith, Adam. 1982 [1759]. *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.