

## ***Teaching the Land Ethic*** by Dr. Michael P. Nelson



This paper is an explanation of how, from a philosophical perspective, I teach the Land Ethic<sup>1</sup> of Aldo Leopold, as a legitimate environmental ethical position, in a university classroom. Of course, modifications can be made in the following presentation to fit nearly any audience; from formal non-university environmental education to informal environmental education to general and popular audiences.

This past summer, 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 experience they had with or knowledge they had about the 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 the environmental literature that she was familiar with. Likewise, she seemed convinced that in order to do anything other than preach to the choir of "Land Ethic or Leopold faithful," that 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.

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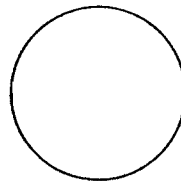
<sup>1</sup> Because the theory of environmental ethics formulated by Aldo Leopold (1949, 1966), and later developed by J. Baird Callicott (see especially 1989, 1998) is a specific type of environmental ethic, it seems proper to capitalize it. Hence, the Land Ethic is that environmental ethic defended by Leopold and Callicott (and myself (1993, 1996, 1998)) and should not be written as land ethic as so many have done. Using lower case letters indicates that "land ethic" is just another name for "environmental ethics," which it is not.

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). This is one of the most often 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 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, they are boiled-down, intentionally understated attempts to wrap up a more robust moral position. As a result, they often do not capture the true and complete essence of the author's intentions. However, as ethicists will tell you, 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 there's more to Leopold's Land Ethic than "A thing is right, etc...." 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.

All ethical systems, including the Land Ethic, address the concept of the moral community, which can be represented by the figure of a circle. If you are within the circle you are included as a member of the moral community, if you are outside of the circle you are not.

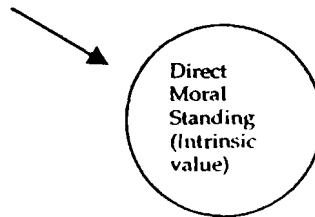
#### The Moral Community



Ethical systems are concerned with who or what belongs inside this circle (or with who or what gets direct moral consideration), with who or what should be left outside the circle (or with who or what gets either indirect moral consideration, or none at all), and with what it is that determines membership within the circle (with 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 morally just because, or that one possesses value in and of themselves (intrinsically 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. Therefore, being left outside of the moral community does not necessarily mean that one does not count morally, it only means that one's moral weight is determined by how one effects those within the moral community.

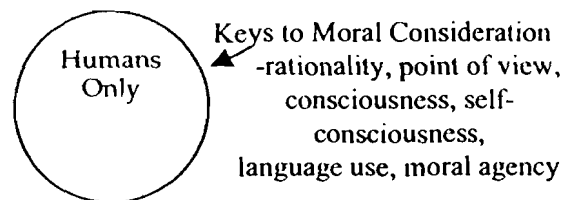
#### Key to Moral Consideration



Indirect or no moral standing  
(instrumental or no value)

Historically, such direct moral standing has only been human-inclusive since the keys to moral inclusion have been offered as traits that humans were thought to possess at the exclusion of the non-human world.

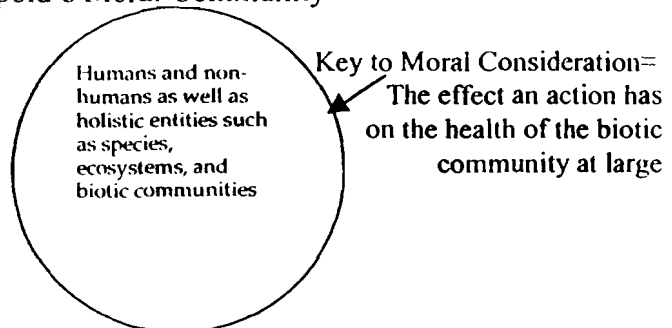
#### Traditional Moral Community



Various non-humans (plants, animals, etc.)

However, by claiming that the key to moral consideration is not some single quality but rather that it is membership in the biotic community and the contribution some action makes to the health of the biotic community, the Land Ethic significantly and radically alters the makeup of the moral community.

#### Leopold's Moral Community



Little, if anything, is left outside of the realm of that which merits direct moral standing

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, or why should our moral community become more inclusive?

Ethics, for Leopold, were, like other ecological and evolutionary traits, things in context and always changing or evolving. The Land Ethic claims that there is an historical process of ethics. That is to say that there is an origin, a growth, and a development of ethics through Biology, or that we can explain ethics biologically. For

*An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence.*

—Aldo Leopold

some, this might seem strange given that we usually view biology as a sort of neutral science on the one hand and ethics as a humanities on the other, and we usually think these things have little or nothing to do with one another. Interestingly, Charles Darwin (1981, chapter III) was the first person to give a biological progression sort

of accounting of ethics. Recall, if you will, that Darwin wants, even needs, to show that everything about humans is that product of evolution. This includes our ethical characteristics and systems.

Clearly, Leopold is going to be more familiar with this sort of a biological or scientific account rather than a similar philosophical account,<sup>2</sup> so it is no wonder that Leopold uses the Darwinian model to explain the development of ethics.

Darwin claims that there is an evolution of ethics, and that it is a social one. For this reason such an approach to ethics is referred to 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."

However, there is 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. Both Leopold and Darwin are trying to grapple with a seemingly difficult paradox: How are ethics possible from the point of view of the theory of evolution? At first glance, it seems that they would be impossible. Leopold even admits that they seem at first 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

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<sup>2</sup> A philosophical account does exist and can be found in the works of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers David Hume (1957, 1978) and Adam Smith (1982).

competitive of the world would survive and, hence, reproduce and pass on their ferociously competitive genes, limiting one's freedom of action in the struggle for existence would apparently be a sure-fired 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.

So, how could "limitations on freedom of action" ever have originated and evolved? Of course we can explain 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? Now, we all know that ethical behavior does exist, so how is it possible, how did it come into being, and how in the world did it evolve?

Darwin, takes up the following 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 kind.

Many animals are in some respect social animals. Humans are intensely social animals. For these social animals, life's struggle is more efficiently conducted in a society. That is, for these species, 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. For we cannot live in a social setting without some sort of limitations on our freedom of action, without some sort of rule, without ethics. In fact, this can be summarized as follows:

## No Ethics → No Society → No Survival

Not only are we are 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>3</sup>).

Hence, we are talking about the "social evolution of ethics". Our continued existence is more likely given the presence of a society, and for societies to work there must be some sort of rule, some sort of limitation on the freedom of action, some sort of ethics. In short, social animals like us need ethics. Leopold (1949, 203-4) nicely recognizes this claim when he writes that

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).

So, how does this all come about? What is the origin of ethics? Even though the evolution and development of ethics is social (so we have covered the "social" part of

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<sup>3</sup> See Ridley (1996,69) and Humphrey (1983).

“biosocial”), the origin of ethics is biological (giving us the “bio” part of “biosocial”). Darwin asserts that ethics originate in the natural parental or filial affections, or in the feelings that parents have for their offspring. The origins of ethics is found in the biologically ingrained emotional bond of caring for the young. Since human newborns cannot immediately care for themselves, we are all born into a community with at least one other person who puts on hold their selfish struggle for survival to care for us. This means that, biologically, we all possess the ability to extend moral consideration to others.

This explanation serves to illustrate the origins of ethics, and ethical possibilities within the immediate community of parents and offspring. 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 in our community—again, ethics and society are correlative. Therefore, ethical inclusion spreads as our sense of community spreads.

As we move from feelings of sentiment (and moral inclusion) of offspring and family, to friends, relatives, etc. our ethics extends to include them within our realm of morality as well. We can see this in the 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. However, those outside of the social community of the clan were not ethically considered or included. Eventually, there was a realization, and pressure, that it was more advantageous to live in a larger group (coupled 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 our ethics also 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).

Throughout time, there is a simple repetition of this over and over. 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 get continuously larger. And always, the fuel that powers this system is empathy based on a sense of community.

#### 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

Now, even though we are talking about an ethics of sentiment and empathy, do not think that reason or rationality is not involved. Although the tradition Leopold is reflecting here does claim that we are ethical creatures because we are emotional creatures, that is not the whole of the picture. I would claim, as does Leopold, that we are also ethical creatures due to our rationality as well. In a way, human reason, or the level of reasoning, drives the community realization (the whole thing then is premised upon reason). Reason aids us in realizing what are morally significant differences. Therefore, my community enlarges, when I realize (via the use of reason) that the

differences between those in my moral community now, and those not in it now, are not morally significant differences. For example, take the charge by animal welfare ethicists that animals deserve direct moral standing. If I have no reason not to include animals in my community, and some reason to include them, I must by force of logic include them.

Via the use of reason, there is, then, a corresponding ethical change that matches each social change, it must in order for that level of social organization to survive. So what about today? Currently there are clearly conflicts between nation states reflecting a nation state social mentality, but there is also a growing realization that there might be some advantage to our existing in a world of merged nation states where all humans have a basic and similar human rights. It is also more consistent in that we have no logical reason or criterion not to do this, not to include all humans within the moral community. In other words, currently we are evolving away from the nation state schema and are now on the verge of a global village. Clearly, this is something very much in process. Correspondingly, the differences which used to separate us no longer do. Most enlightened people realize that things like country of origin, race, sexual orientation, etc., while differences, are not morally significant differences. There is also a corresponding ethical notion which goes along with this global village notion: A human rights Ethic. Such an ethic recognizes that we are a single human community and is the product of the acceptance of the notion of a global village.

Interestingly, Leopold assumes the global village level of society and the human rights ethic that corresponds to it and allows it to flourish. And he anticipates the next step: the biotic community and Land Ethic stage. This, then, is the beginning of environmental ethics.

But, how do we go from the global village and a human rights ethic to the biotic community and Land Ethic? It seems that there is a bigger jump from the global village idea to the LE than the others were since those others were merely an extension inclusive of more and more humans (a difference in degree) while the Land Ethic asks us to extend moral consideration to animals, plants, and holistic entities (a difference in kind). Remember, the key historically is that something serves to represent those "others" as new members of our social communities. Hence, for an extension to the biotic community and the parallel Land Ethic to occur, something must serve to represent those previously conceived of others as members, with us, of a common community. Luckily, there is something that accomplishes this task. The key to this social and moral expansion is the science of ecology<sup>4</sup> represents nature as a biotic community. That is to say, ecology portrays us as members of not only human social organs but also of a larger biotic community.

The Land Ethic, then, is the appropriate response to this latest realization. Ecology represents nature (inclusive of humans) as a society, a biotic community. And, just as the human rights ethic corresponds to the Global Village level of social expansion, the Land Ethic is correlative to our perception of nature as a biotic community. The Land Ethic is the ethic corresponding to our most recent realization that land is likewise organized as a community. We receive this metaphysical understanding of the land's organization as a community, and then the Land Ethic emerges via this ecological literacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, ecology is not the only scientific theory that forces the expansion of the social community. Evolutionary theory and quantum theory (among others) also do this.

Leopold seems convinced that once we begin to see the world as a biotic community, the Land Ethic will follow naturally. Our inherited social instincts will be activated when we begin to see plants and animals, soils and waters as fellow-members of a biotic community.

Therefore, the key to moving from a humanitarian ethic to the Land Ethic is universal ecological education.

For Leopold the adaptation 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." As I have shown above, the possibility of a Land Ethic is clear. However, Leopold's message also contains a bit of 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 and 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 ones country or patriotism, and no biotic community without a Land Ethic. For the biotic community, and us, to survive, the adaptation of a system of moral thought that attributes direct moral standing to the land is an absolute necessity. And, failure to adapt such a moral schema will most surely bring demise to the biotic community and hence to ourselves.

*The Land Ethic is not just an evolutionary possibility, but also an "ecological necessity." ... For the biotic community, and us, to survive, the adaptation of a system of moral thought that attributes direct moral standing to the land is an absolute necessity.*



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