

**Overview of Land Ethic Criticisms and Responses – Supplement to Michael P. Nelson “Teaching the Land Ethic,” *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, 8, 2-3, 2004, pp. 353-65.**

1. Problem(s) of the Moral Story – Leopold’s theory depends on notion that we have made moral progress over time, that we have become more morally inclusive.

Problem 1. – One could simply deny the truth of the claim that we have made moral progress – assert that we are no different now than we were in the past with regard to moral inclusivity.

Response 1. – Modest response: Need to draw a distinction between moral **consciousness** and moral **practice**, stress that our moral consciousness is expanding, so examples of bad practice do not necessarily refute that. Stronger response would point to social scientific work that shows this moral expansion over time.

Problem 2. – (from Ernest Partridge) If we have had this moral expansion, then how do we explain a racist-sexist-dog lover, or someone who include dogs, but not all humans, in their social and moral community? Doesn’t this destroy the moral story?

Response 2. – The main point of the moral story is that ethics and society are correlative (as sense of society/community expands, we see a correlative expansion of the moral community to account for this new social realization), the racist-sexist-dog lover includes dogs in social and moral community (but for some mistaken reason does not include some other humans) – so, this actually illustrates the point.

2. Anthropocentrism

Problem – Isn’t the Land Ethic (LE) anthropocentric? There seem to be two (at least, probably more) reasons to say this:

A. The theory depends on provoking human sentiments – so, it is ultimately centered on human sentiments – isn’t this a kind of anthropocentrism?

Response – While it is true that the theory depends on provoking the moral sentiments of those who have them (e.g., valuers), humans are not the objects of those sentiments, others are. So this is not the real, or worrisome sense of anthropocentrism wherein only humans are said to merit direct moral standing.

B. The LE is said to be the best or wisest courses of action for humans, in the long run. Does this mean it is really aimed at human welfare ultimately? Isn’t this to say it is anthropocentric?

Response – Again, this is not the type of anthropocentrism worth worrying about. It is, rather, an unavoidable type, a necessary component of any ethic. Moreover, concern for humans does not equate with anthropocentrism.

3. Relativism (of the individual or radical variety)

Problem – Given that the LE is grounded in **variable, highly personal human sentiments** isn’t the LE in a position, which destroys any ethic, of having no moral norms, no prescriptions for action?

Response – There is universality, or sorts, possible: certain parts of our ethical judgment are shared in common, moral feelings vary, sure, but they vary within a range of normalcy, which is determined to a large extent by natural selection (biology).

#### 4. Biological Determinism

Problem – Following #3: If moral norms are decided on a “consensus of feeling” (as suggested above in 3.), then isn’t our morality just a product of biology, a description of the moral facts of the world and a defense of the moral status quo? Therefore, how can we condemn any actions? How can we make prescriptions for actions?

Response – Morality is not biologically determined, there is also a cultural component to it (consider language – our biology provides us with the ability to use language, but it does not determine which language we speak – that’s a product of culture).

#### 5. Relativism Revisited (now of the cultural variety)

Problem – Following #4: Isn’t our morality now just culturally determined? How do we get universal standards of right and wrong if morality is just the product of a given culture? Can we condemn any practices of other cultures?

Response – Perhaps we can (I say, cautiously and carefully). Our cultural values and corresponding moral norms are premised upon and justified by reference to certain assumed facts of the matter, which can be wrong (this is where the rational component of the theory comes in, how sentiments are tied to reason). So, an examination of a culture’s ethical position could be examined objectively, and possibly rejected accordingly.

#### 6. Can’t Extend Ethics to Wholes

Problem – Holistic entities (populations, species, ecosystems, etc.) are not the sorts of things that can merit moral consideration, hence ecocentrism is impossible. As a colleague once said, “The idea that I can have an ethical relationship to the place where I take a dump [actually his words were more explicit] seems utter nonsense.”

Response – Just wrong; not only can we extend moral consideration in this fashion, we already do (e.g., patriotism or love of one’s country, love of sports teams, commitment to our communities). We do this over time even as all members of the group “turn over.” We can, therefore, turn this comment on its head, given how common and intuitive this is, any theory that did not do this or allow for this would be weird.

#### 7. Environmental Fascism

Problem – The LE permits or requires that we sacrifice the interests of individuals for those of the whole (sometimes? all of the time? – needs to be clarified, but seldom is).

Response – 4 things that could be said here:

A. Concern for individuals is secured by concern for that which supports them; holistic concern is individualistic concern.

- B. “Fascist” is not the right word – “environmental communitariansim” might be more accurate – but certainly not as provocative.
- C. “Accretion” – Leopold describes the LE as an “accretion” to already existing ethical commitments, he expressly provides for the good of individuals, and innermost rings win out (*prima facie*).
- D. Could we not argue that all moral theories do this in some degree?

## 8. Paper Tiger

Problem – Following #7: Our ‘Land Ethical’ obligations will never have actual claims on us given that it is the outermost accretion, so the LE has no force or bite, it is, rather, a paper tiger.

Response – Our ethical obligations are not all equal, so outer accretions can take priority given the level of interest at stake (e.g., choosing to override a trivial inner accretion for a vital outer accretion seems justified).

\* note: for a more detailed account of the discussion in 7. and 8. see Michael P. Nelson, “Holists and Fascists and Paper Tigers...Oh My!,” *Ethics and the Environment* 1:2 (Fall 1996):103-17.

## 9. Decision Making Model

Problem – Following #8: The LE does not give us a formula for making decisions.

Response – This is not what ethics are: ethical prescriptions are not formulas for action, but general modes of guidance. Think about value theory, which includes both aesthetics and ethics – we would never think that painting is rule-bound, in fact we make fun of this idea (paint-by-numbers). The insistence on this model of ethics is a product of mechanistic mindset where everything, including here our ethics, is the quantitatively understood.