

Understanding Aldo Leopold's Land Ethics

P Samzeila Seneca *

Assistant professor, department of philosophy,
Dyal singh college, university of Delhi

Abstract

In the face of the growing socio environmental change such as climate change and its impact, environmental unsustainability, etc, many scholars have shown interest in the field of environmental ethics. The problem has always been traced back to human actions, greed, interventions, and its implication. It becomes important to address the necessary relation between humans, and their actions toward non-humans and the environment at large. As a response to this need, several theories and approaches of environmental ethics have been developed. In this paper, it will be my endeavour to understand the theoretical development in the field of environmental ethics. What moral consideration is to be extended toward the environment as moral agents on the part of humans? What would be the standard of environmental ethics that brings out the necessary relation and its limits between humans and the environment? I have specifically focused on 'land ethics' propounded by Aldo Leopold because of its major prominence and influence in the field of environmental ethics. I will further investigate if 'land ethics' was successful in being the standard of environmental ethics.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, Land Ethics, Aldo Leopold, Biocentrism, Sentientism, Ecocentrism.

Introduction

The field of Environmental ethics as a philosophical and ethical study has come a long way since its inception in the early 1970s. One definition as given by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy states “environmental ethics is defined as the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relation of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents” (Environmental Ethics, SEP). It is primarily concerned with the question of how we ought to live our lives in close association with the environment, and its non-human contents such as plants, animals, rivers, mountains, etc. A

* Corresponding Author: P Samzeila Seneca

Email: psamzeilaseneca.philosophy@dsc.du.ac.in

Received 17 Oct. 2024; Accepted 24 Oct. 2024. Available online: 30 Nov. 2024.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



closely related important question that has been raised in environmental ethics is to understand how the value and moral status that have been given to the environment is measured. There have been several approaches and developments that provided an answer to these questions. The basis of such relation between humans and the environment will be further discussed.

The interest in environmental ethics can be verily said to have started as a critic toward the anthropocentric view. The anthropocentric or the human-centered view, as argued by Paul W. Taylor in 'The Ethics of Respect for Nature' revolves around human interest and realization of human good alone. According to this view, any action is good if it is favourable to humans or if they are in accordance with human standards that protect human rights. It follows from here that any action is bad if it is unfavourable to human well-being or if they are inconsistent with protecting human rights. The human-centered approach views the responsibility toward the environment as limited to the realization of human good and its goals. There is no independent obligation that has been included in promoting and protecting the good of non-humans besides the protection of human interest (Taylor, 1981). As a result of these, several attempts have been made by advocates of environmental ethics to address the moral relationship between the environment and its constituents i.e., humans and non-humans.

Approaches of Environmental Ethics

2.1 Sentientism/ Animal Rights Approach:

One of the dominant approaches of environmental ethics is the extension of moral concern toward non-human animals. Peter Singer is one of the major proponents of animal rights. In several works of his, he has argued for the extension of the basic principle of equality toward non-human species. He takes the arguments of racism and sexism to show that the basis of discrimination based on one person's race and sex are unfounded. There is no merit, moral

capacity, physical strength or characteristics that can be attributed to any human or group as superior to the other. The principle of equality in humans is a simple prescription of how humans should be treated just by the virtue of being a human (Singer, 1974). Singer argues that this same principle of equality is to be put forth toward non-humans simply on the ground that non-human animals have the capacity to suffer and enjoy. This principle is called sentientism where the basis for moral consideration is based on the capacity to suffer and enjoy. The justification for this principle is that since non-human animals can suffer, they have an interest in protecting themselves from harm and it follows that such interest needs to be preserved and promoted. Singer also goes on to clarify that the extension of the principle of equality means to equally consider the interest of different beings. This would further imply different kind of treatment and give rise to different rights for different beings. For example, both men and women have the capacity to think and choose representatives in any kind of election, therefore the right to vote is common to both sexes and to human species after attaining a certain age. However, non-humans such as dogs do not need the right to vote. Therefore, by virtue of being different and belonging to different species, there needs to be different sets of rights and treatment where equal consideration of interest is being taken into consideration.

2.2 Biocentrism:

The life-centered or biocentric approach is the extension of moral consideration toward all living beings, including every organism, plants, animals, species population, etc. The basis for this approach can be understood from the concepts of the good of a being and that of inherent worth as given by Paul Taylor. The good of a being is the recognition that every living being or things has a good of its own. What is the good of a being is to ask what can enhance and preserve the life and well-being of that entity. For example, the good of a plant can be promoted by getting adequate sunlight, water, etc whereas what is detrimental to the good of the plant

such as extreme heat and cold is bad for the plant. Secondly, the concept of inherent worth is something that is closely related to the good of a being. A living thing is said to have inherent worth simply because it is part of the Earth community, and therefore it has an intrinsic value of its own. It follows that the good and intrinsic value of a thing is deserving of our moral concern and consideration. Taylor also goes on to advocate a disposition of respect toward nature which is applicable to every moral agent. Such an attitude calls for a disinterested aim in promoting the good of all beings, to act in accordance with the realization of such good and lastly to develop a feeling, positive and negative toward the state of affairs that are favorable or unfavorable for the good of the beings (Taylor, 1981).

These approaches have been successful in extending moral considerations toward sentient beings and all living individual entities. However, they fail to address how the overall ecosystem can be given moral consideration. A new approach which is ecocentric in nature has been discussed in the following section.

2.3 Land Ethics:

The need to consider a new approach that studies the relation between humans and the environment has been felt. Dale Jamieson in “The Value on Nature: Ecocentrism” has pointed out that 'Sentientism' (where inherent value are given to all sentient beings who have the capacity of suffering and enjoyment) and 'Biocentrism'(where inherent value are given to all individual living being), are just extensions of our moral consideration to animals and the rest of the biosphere, so there is a need to consider a new outlook that looks at the interest of ecology as a whole (Jamieson, 2008). A new approach called the ‘land ethics’ has been regarded as the standard example in addressing the question of extending moral consideration to the ecology at large.

The term 'land ethic' was first coined by Aldo Leopold in his classic essay "The Land Ethic" from the book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). He begins with a brief history of ethics, stating the pre-existence of different ethics that deals with relations between individuals, between individual and society, and so on, but “there is as yet no ethics dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants that grow upon it” (Leopold, 1949, p 2). For Leopold, the collective community of plants, water, soil, and animals have been constituted under the term ‘land’. He says that in most cases and to most people, the land has been just seen as having an economic value which is to be commercialized, used and enjoyed. He challenges this common understanding and goes on to assert that in the community concept of land ethic, man is seen only as a member, as he puts it “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold, 1949, p 3). Men are to be viewed as citizens and members of the community like any other beings and entities. When one is viewed as being only a member, to live in a community means to respect and co-operate with the interdependent parts of the community. This responsibility lies with every being and with men in particular as moral and intellectual agents.

In Land ethics, conservation of land is one of the central ideas according to which, Leopold viewed the relation between man and land as a state of harmony. What conservation implies here is not about investing in more of conservation education or economic interest of land use, but rather to have an internal change from within. The problem associated with conservation that is economy based and is about fulfilling the self-interest is simply that the value of those members of the land community without or lesser commercial value tends to be ignored. But this is not what is intended in the land ethics. Leopold further explains the mechanism of land by using the image of 'the biotic pyramid', where the species in different layers are dependent on each other. In the pyramid, land is also seen as a sustained energy circuit flowing through plants, soils, and animals. He wrote that “a land ethic then, reflects the existence of an

ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity” (Leopold, 1949, p 11). For Leopold, land health is the much-needed goal for our conservation effort and he goes on to translate it into an ethical standard that is able to guide individual behaviour.

The moral extension according to Land ethic requires us to look at land with love, admiration, and respect. It calls for a philosophical shift in valuing the land which differs from the conventional way of commercializing it. As seen above, land here refers to all members who are part of the biotic community. The central adage of land ethic is 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” (Leopold, 1949, p 14). What is right and wrong in any actions is measured on the grounds of preserving the beauty, integrity, and stability of the biotic community at large.

Callicott's View on Land Ethic

J. Baird Callicott is one amongst the major exponents of Leopold's land ethic and he has fully developed the eco-centric interpretation of Leopold. His contributions cannot be left unmentioned. Callicott explores the philosophical foundation of Leopold's land ethics and attempts to lay out with a more complete philosophical approach. He also addressed some of the challenges and limitations of land ethics in both its theory and practice that have been raised by professional philosophers and he gave his defence. He asserted the fact that land ethic is grounded upon a non-instrumental value toward the land and its members by extending ethical consideration from humans to non-human entities. According to Callicott, what is evident is that Leopold links the philosophical foundation of land ethic to the evolutionary interpretation of ethics, and more particularly to Darwin's account of evolution of thing's origin and development. So, how Leopold developed the land ethic was by adding an ecological ingredient

to Darwin's evolutionary account of origin and development of ethics, according to Callicott (Callicott, 2008, p 204).

Another important aspect of land ethic which Callicott mentions is the holistic dimension, as he wrote “its holism is precisely what makes the land ethic the environmental ethic of choice among conservationists and ecologists” (Callicott, 2008, p. 209). But the problem that is linked with holism is the question of how equal respect can be shown to fellow members of the land community. While trying to protect the beauty, integrity, and stability of the biotic community, it is likely that we destroy some individual members of the community. Thus, it is true when Callicott wrote that the holistic approach of land ethic is not only its strength, but also its liability. By taking the example of our large human population, he showed how it can be a threat to maintaining the three cords of beauty, integrity, and stability of the biotic community, and therefore overpopulation of humans is wrong according to land ethics. So, the solution to it is to reduce the population by whatever means, until its members are optimized. It is in this area where critics have drawn out the fault in land ethic.

Callicott addresses a few criticisms from animal liberationists Tom Regan, who accuses land ethic as a kind of ‘environmental fascism’ for it would require the sacrifice of individual organisms for the common good of the whole community. Kristin Shrader-Frechette, an advocate of environmental justice, thinks that land ethic lowers individual human welfare while considering the welfare of the whole community. However, Callicott is fast in defending the land ethic. He said that it is not what the critics have alleged, but the land ethic serves as an additional ethic to the already present social ethics. Our duties toward our fellow humans remain intact. In his work "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair" he asserts that the purpose of land ethic is not to replace our existing ethics, but it is to supplements them.

Callicott also believes that what is needed with land ethics in the purview of recent development is not to deem it as irrelevant but to see it as in need of revision. To solve the changes taking place in the natural biota, he believes that the answer to this problem is the concept of scale, which is to be seen in both temporal and spatial ways. He also pointed out that Leopold was more oriented toward the problem from a mid-century equilibrium ecology, not from a broader and changing dynamics of the ecosystem. Another limitation is due to his conception of natural change not in terms of ecological change but primarily in evolutionary terms. However, according to Callicott, the key to evaluate direct human ecological impact requires both temporal and spatial scale (Callicott, 2008, p. 215). This understanding needs to be brought in the broader implication of land ethics.

Criticisms of Land Ethic

Land ethics as propounded by Leopold looks pleasing and acceptable to many, but its practical implication is not as easy as it appears. There are various criticisms and shortcomings that have come forth in the critical reading of Leopold. Environmental ethicists Dale Jamieson have pointed out that the use of the phrase 'biotic community' by Leopold which is considered as the central object for moral concerns seems unclear and too broad to comprehend. He wrote that, "It is too broad since it apparently includes all of the Earth's biota; it is unclear in that it is far from obvious how this is supposed to form a community" (Jamieson, 2008, p 150). The problem lies in the difficulty of defining what an ecosystem is or which organisms or elements of the environment can be counted as elements of the ecosystem. Jamieson also pointed out another problem based on temporal and spatial dimensions, as we cannot tell when one ecosystem begins and another ends. Thus, several questions remain unclear i.e., what is the nature of the community? What is the supposed role of humans (or any entity) as members of the community?

Eric T. Freyfogle in his essay on land ethic has also discussed a few overlapping critical issues on land ethic. There are questions regarding the origin of the moral norm in land ethic, like if it arose from a certain belief in the intrinsic moral value of the community or the instrumentality attached to its parts, and if the land ethic is non-anthropocentric and holistic. There are also questions on how the moral value of the parts of the community is served by the concern for the land community (Freyfogle, 2009). This is where critics like Tom Regan have charged land ethic with Eco fascism. Another major criticism was made on what is the content or substance of land ethic. Stating the general maxim of Leopold's conservation ethic again 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 to be otherwise." These terms have been quite problematic and unclear. The term *integrity* refers to the state of being whole, which implies totality of species that have existed in this context. This leads to the practical impossibility that the role of humans is to preserve the land by leaving them untouched in its pristine state and undoing prior human change. John Nolt in 'Ecocentrism:

Leopold's Land Ethics' also pointed out that integrity has to do with the system of interdependencies, i.e., to provide mutual benefits for the system's inhabitants (Nolt, 2015). But it is not clear if this idea of integrity benefits the ecosystem itself. The term *stability* is problematic because it seems to endorse the old norm of unchanging ecosystem, while in the present time the norm is of change. This is rejected by contemporary ecologists. The term *beauty* is taken to be too subjective that it cannot provide an objective treatment.

Conclusion

The question is 'was the land ethic successful in being the standard example of what an environmental ethics is, as Callicott has claimed it to be?' It has been successful in addressing the moral relationship of human beings with the environment, as the definition of

environmental ethics demands. Leopold's intention, I believe, was to inspire us to be concerned about the welfare of the environment around us. With the attitude of land ethic, we will somehow do away with our anthropocentric approach, and realize the need of interdependence in the biotic community, as Leopold calls it. However, when we go deeper to its practicality, it is not as easy as it appears. Questions such as these remain; How do we make the land ethic a reality? What actions are we supposed to do? To what extent and degree are we supposed to care for the other members?

REFERENCES:

Callicott, J. Baird. "The land ethic." in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Dale Jamieson. USA and UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2008.

Callicott, J. Baird. "Animal liberation: A triangular affair." in *Environmental ethics* 2.4 (1980): 311-338.

Environmental Ethics, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/>

Freyfogle, Eric T. "Land ethic" in *An Encyclopaedia on Environmental Philosophy*, editors J. Baird Callicott, Robert Frodeman, Victoria Davion, Bryan G. Norton, Clare Palmer, Paul B. Thompson. USA: Gale, cengage learning, 2009.

Jamieson, Dale. "The value of nature: Ecocentrism" In *Ethics and the Environment: an Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Leopold, Aldo. "The Land Ethic" in *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*.
www.waterculture.org/uploads/Leopold_The_Land_Ethic.pdf. 1949.

Nolt, John. "Ecocentrism: Leopold's land ethic" in *Environmental Ethics for the Long Term: an*

Introduction. New York: Routledge, 2015

Singer, Peter. “All Animals are Equal” in *Philosophical Exchange*, Vol 1, no. 5 (Summer 1974).

Taylor, Paul W. “The Ethics of Respect for Nature”
<https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil308/Taylor.pdf>. 1981.