Ecocentrism

1. The Land Ethic: Presently, we tend to view land as something that we OWN. We CONQUER the land, we are its MASTERS.

Historically, this sort of mindset of dominion has led to great moral atrocities. Leopold mentions the story of Odysseus (the "hero" of the Odyssey), who has a dozen slave girls killed for misconduct—as if they were just *things* to be disposed of. Over time, we have slowly recognized the injustice of our dominion over others. But, this is not yet so of the land itself. Leopold writes,

> "Land, like Odysseus's slave-girls, is still property."

Why do we think we are its masters? There is a great chain of life—**the land pyramid**, as Leopold calls it—with soil at the bottom, plants growing in the soil, insects thriving on the plants, birds feeding on these, predators feeding on the birds, and so on. Each layer is successfully smaller in population, with apex predators being the fewest in number.

Ultimately, Leopold encourages us to draw three conclusions about our relationship with the land:

- **Land is not merely soil.** In this pyramid, land is the very SOURCE of all life. The soil, the water, and the Sunlight—without these ingredients, NONE of the rest of the pyramid would exist. He writes,

  > ''Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals."

- **We are not conquerers.** We view ourselves at the "top" of such a pyramid, but being at the "top" doesn't make us OWNERS of the rest. Furthermore, why even think of ourselves at the "top"? The pyramid could just as easily be flipped, with the land itself perceived as being on "top". In reality, there IS NO "top", for we too return to the soil once we die. The pyramid is a revolving, cyclical system of life and death—**a circle**, where energy flows FROM the soil and is eventually returned TO the soil—and we are but a PART OF that system. So, then, we are not MASTERS of the biotic community, but MEMBERS of it. Leopold writes,

  > "In short, a land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."

In short, the community of living things is an interconnected, inter-dependent web of which we are a part. Once this is recognized, we see that our moral consideration really ought to be oriented toward that SYSTEM, rather than toward any of the individuals within it. Thus, Leopold's proposal for a "Land Ethic":

> **The Land Ethic:** "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."

Our Moral Failure: Note that we have not been fulfilling our duties according to this ethic. For instance, he mentions the following as examples of human activities which have REDUCED the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." We have:

- We have decreased the complexity of the land pyramid. For the first time in perhaps *ever* (?), it is returning to its former state of being more SQUAT, rather than taller (i.e., food chains are getting shorter, life is getting less diverse). We've done this, for instance by (a) driving out and extinguishing local species by destroying or disrupting their habitats, (b) replacing them (if at all) with domesticated species, or (c) introducing invasive species, which often wreak havoc on local ecosystems.
- We have polluted the waterways, the life-supplying veins of the system, or drained them dry, or choked them with dams.
- We've mined the soil for its stored energy, both (a) releasing that energy into the biotic community and causing artificial imbalances, while (b) depleting it by using it up faster than it can be replenished, or contributing to its erosion, and so on.

All of these behaviors are immoral on a "land ethic". So, Leopold's treatise is at once a proposal for a new ethic and a moral condemnation of our actions.

Inherent Value, Not Instrumental Value: Leopold condemns our current way of thinking, which tends to view the worth of nature only in terms of ECONOMIC value. Land-owners will only preserve nature or wilderness begrudgingly, "with outstretched palm", expecting compensation for their efforts. The problem is that "most members of the land community have no economic value. Wildflowers and songbirds are examples." Instead, we should view the worth of the biotic community in terms of INHERENT value:

> "It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, of course, I mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense."

Objection: Wait, doesn't Leopold contradict this claim? Doesn't he frequently speak as if members of the biotic community have only INSTRUMENTAL value? For instance, consider the following passages:

> "Of the 22,000 higher plants and animals native to Wisconsin, it is doubtful whether more than 5 per cent can be sold, fed, eaten, or otherwise put to economic use. Yet these creatures are members of the biotic community, and if (as I believe) its stability depends on its integrity, they are entitled to continuance."
>
> Of vanishing species, he writes, "They helped build the soil; in what unsuspected ways may they be essential to its maintenance?"

In the first passage, it almost seems as if he's saying that 95% of species DON'T have inherent value, but rather only have INSTRUMENTAL value insofar as they preserve the integrity of the system, as well as the survival of the other 5%. In the second, it seems as if he thinks our moral reason for preventing species from extinction is grounded in their potential contribution to maintaining the SYSTEM (rather than in being concerned with the species themselves).

Reply: That's right. Leopold doesn't actually seem committed to the claim that INDIVIDUAL organisms, or species, have any inherent value. Rather, The Land Ethic is centered around the value of the SYSTEM (i.e., the biotic *community*) as a whole.

We MIGHT interpret Leopold as saying that humans have value, and animals, and plants, and we should extend our consideration to things like soil and water—they have value too. And some HAVE tried to interpret Leopold in this way. But, it doesn't seem to be Leopold's actual view. The Land Ethic isn't MERELY about extending our moral consideration to the land, or to the biotic community—rather, ethical consideration for any individual members is TRUMPED or PREEMPTED by our consideration for the biotic community. This is **holism** (the idea that *collections* or *systems* are the fundamental bearers of moral value/standing). Competing theories are all intensely individualistic—concerned with the well-being of INDIVIDUALS, rather than the community as a WHOLE.

The fact is, the very well-being of the biotic community THRIVES on life and death. That's its fuel. So, to focus in on individuals and say that individuals within that community have, for instance, a "right to life" is incompatible with the land ethic.

Objection: But, then, given how much time Leopold spends on pointing out how awful human activity is for the land, and given our present radical overpopulation, it seems to follow that, morally, we ought to "cull the herd" of human beings—i.e., murder billions. For this reason, Tom Regan called this view "environmental fascism".

Reply: Of course he would. He leveled similar accusations against utilitarianism as not valuing the individual "vessels" of happiness. In this respect, holism seems a little like utilitarianism. There is no moral regard for particular individuals, per se—they have value ONLY insofar as they contribute to some TOTAL or BIG PICTURE end result. In the case of utilitarianism, it is the total utility (happiness minus suffering). In the case of ecocentrism, it is the total well-being, or health, of the biotic community.

Don't worry. We'll still have plenty of reason to promote the well-being of individuals. For instance, even on a view where it is the HUMAN BEING that is the thing which has inherent value, we still have reasons to promote the health of, say, her kidneys—because kidney health CONTRIBUTES to the health of the human being. Similarly, we will have moral reasons to promote the health of, say, a local species of whale, because doing so will CONTRIBUTE to the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

Rebuttal: Yeah, but… TUMORS or VIRUSES don't contribute to human health. The Land Ethic really does seem to call for a large-scale annihilation of the human race. As Regan noted, on ecocentrism, "The individual can be sacrificed for the greater biotic good."

As Taylor noted, "Every single man, woman, and child could disappear from the face of the Earth without any significant detrimental consequence for the good of wild animals and plants. On the contrary, many of them would be greatly benefited."

Even Leopold likens our presence to a disease, writing, "This almost world-wide display of disorganization in the land seems to be similar to disease in an animal."

If a disease is harming human health, we should eradicate it. Similarly, on ecocentrism, if an invasive species is harming the health of the ecosystem, we should eradicate it. Now ask: What do you think the land ethic entails should be done about US (human beings)?

Reply: One alternative is to instead immediately IMPROVE our relationship with nature so that we are no longer hindering the health of the system but instead promoting it.

Too Demanding: Even so, consider how restrictive this proposal would be:

- If this were true, using natural resources would be wrong; e.g., logging even ONE forest would be impermissible—the only sort of logging that would be morally acceptable would be the sort that thins out a single tree here and there in order to better help the forest flourish. Is logging morally wrong?
- Any activity which damages or interferes with an ecosystem would be wrong (e.g., even merely *visiting* national parks is often detrimental to their health).
- Having children would often (always?) be morally wrong.

A Final Worry: Holism vs. Individualism: Leopold doesn't really give us any reasons for WHY holism is the correct view, rather than individualism. Why is the SYSTEM the fundamental bearer of moral value, the primary object of our moral obligations? Moral duties are grounded in THE GOOD (i.e., we have duties to promote goods, prevent/avoid bads). But, for a thing to have a GOOD, it must be the sort of thing that can be made better off, or worse off—and this is most plausibly true only of those sorts of individuals that have INTERESTS. Yet, ecocentrisms do not have interests. They are not sentient. In short, it seems as if ecocentrism has to go a sort of biocentric route and talk about the system's "health" or "integrity" being an intrinsic good for that system.

On ecocentrism, our direct duties are TO systems. Yet, we can also have duties REGARDING individuals. For instance, we might have a moral duty to protect wolves as a MEANS to promoting the health of the ecosystem. Isn't it far more plausible to adopt the reverse view? We have duties TO wolves (and humans, and pigs, and whales, etc.), and duties REGARDING ecosystems. For instance, we might have a moral duty to protect an ecosystem as a MEANS to promoting the well-being of those individuals.

[*Note: Alternatively, as mentioned, you COULD retain the view that the land itself is intrinsically valuable without rejecting the value of the individuals within it—namely, by simply expanding the circle of moral consideration to include things like the soil, rivers, and so on. In fact, Leopold DOES sometimes seem to talk this way; e.g., he writes, "The Land Ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the [moral] community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."*]

[Brainstorm: Ecosystem Identity: Is it necessarily the case that ecosystems overrun with, e.g., invasive species get "less healthy"? For instance, maybe the Asian carp invasion in the Illinois River is not an example of a SICK ecosystem, but rather a very healthy NEW ecosystem. After all, the carp numbers there are EXPLODING! They're doing quite well.

Reply: Sure, ONE species is doing well. But, overall, there's been a decrease in the DIVERSITY, as well as a SHORTENING of the overall food chain, and thus a decrease in the ecosystem's overall STABILITY as well. For instance, in many cases—e.g., with the kudzu vine that "ate the South"—the invasive species thrives very well for a WHILE. But, it eventually chokes out all life in the area, and then IT TOO dies off. Any apparent "health" of the system is only temporary.]

2. Ideals of Human Excellence: Thomas Hill offers us another route to the conclusion that our moral consideration ought to extend to all of nature. He begins with a case of someone who cuts down the trees, flowers, plants in their yard and replaces them with asphalt (a small-scale version of someone who owns a mountain and strip-mines it).

Let's assume that such an action is ultimately morally *permissible*. Even granting this, we can still ask: **What kind of person does that?**

[You might suggest it's wrong because it destroys something with instrumental value, but Hill simply invites us to consider a case where the thing destroyed had no instrumental value. You might suggest it's wrong because it destroys something with intrinsic value, but Hill says he's not convinced that there's any such thing. Furthermore, imagine that the destroyer OWNS the property, and justifies their actions by an appeal to property rights. Even granting ALL of this, we can STILL ask: Who does that!?]

There are many instances where we may not be convinced that an action is morally WRONG, per se, but that DOING it nevertheless reveals something about the DOER. For instance, imagine the following individuals:

- Someone who collects human-skin lampshades.
- Someone who laughs spontaneously when they read a newspaper headline reporting the deaths of hundreds in a plane crash.
- A grandson who, badly in need of his inheritance, is very kind to his grandmother on her deathbed, but then secretly spits on her grave after she dies. Hill writes,

> "Spitting on the grave may have no adverse consequences and perhaps it violates no rights. The moral uneasiness which it arouses is explained more by our view of the agent than by any conviction that what he did was immoral. Had he hesitated and asked, "Why shouldn't I spit on her grave?" it seems more fitting to ask him to reflect on the sort of person he is than to try to offer reasons why he should refrain from spitting."

The Lesson: In short, there can be instances where one's actions may not be clearly morally WRONG, but where performing them reflects poorly on your moral CHARACTER. In short, Hill pitches the moral question as a question about US. What SORT OF PERSON would destroy nature? And, even if we can't demonstrate that things like trees, or rivers, or land have intrinsic VALUE, or RIGHTS, or whatever, it still seems like disregard for these things is morally relevant because of what it reveals about US.

Why? Answer: For humans to achieve *excellence* or truly *flourish*, Hill believes that we must achieve certain VIRTUES. Among these is the virtue of **humility**. If we do not understand our place in nature (namely, as tiny, insignificant specks whose lives and deaths are governed by the same laws as everything else), then it is either due to our (a) ignorance, (b) denial, or lack of acceptance, or (c) inflated sense of self-importance. All of these are obstacles to achieving the good of humility.

A person who is not deeply moved when they see The Grand Canyon, towering redwoods, The Rocky Mountains, the ocean extending to the horizon, the vast starry night sky, and so on, likely lacks a developed sense of humility, and so is evidently morally "stunted" in a way (to use Schmidtz's words).

Alternatively, we might think that a fully-developed, flourishing human is one who has developed an **aesthetic sensibility**, or a robust sense of **gratitude**.

Someone with an aesthetic sense will find nature absolutely filled with beauty, and will develop a sense of respect for that beauty in response. Similarly, a person who has been moved by nature aesthetically (or moved to humility, or even to the simple recognition of all of the benefits we've derived from the natural world) will, if they have developed the appropriate sense, be moved to gratitude. They will, in other words, come to cherish that thing, and desire its survival and continuation, independent of whether or not it continues to instrumentally provide benefits. Hill concludes,

> "when we set aside questions of blame and inquire what sorts of human traits we want to encourage, our reflections become relevant in a more positive way. The point is … to see that those who value such traits as humility, gratitude, and sensitivity to others have reason to promote the love of nature."

[Exercise: Both Leopold and Hill seem to find it problematic when humans justify the destruction of nature simply by appealing to the claim that it is their "property". For a moment, consider these questions:

(a) What DOES it mean for someone to "own" land?
(b) Even granting that we're okay with the concept of land as property, what does such ownership entail? Are we permitted to do WHATEVER YOU WANT with our property?
(c) For instance, it may be helpful to ask: If Brazil "owns" most of the Amazon rainforest, does that entail that the Brazilian government may permissibly burn it all down to make room for livestock pastures? If the U.S. "owns" the upper parts of the Colorado River, may it permissibly take all of the water from it—even if this means that those portions of the river that extend into Mexico will go dry? Explain your answers.
(d) If you answered "no" to the previous question, what do your reasons entail more generally for property ownership? Are there any restrictions on what we may or may not permissibly do with our own property? [*]]

[*] Note: Some propose that one may permissibly acquire property (or use it, etc.) only so long as doing so *makes no one else worse off*. Is this plausible?