Ethics and the Environment: The philosophy of Aldo Leopold, Factors that necessitate environmental ethics

Introduction: The Challenge of Environmental Ethics

Suppose putting out natural fires, culling feral animals or destroying some individual members of overpopulated indigenous species is necessary for the protection of the integrity of a certain ecosystem. Will these actions be morally permissible or even required? Is it morally acceptable for farmers in non-industrial countries to practise slash and burn techniques to clear areas for agriculture? Consider a mining company which has performed open pit mining in some previously unspoiled area. Does the company have a moral obligation to restore the landform and surface ecology? And what is the value of a humanly restored environment compared with the originally natural environment? It is often said to be morally wrong for human beings to pollute and destroy parts of the natural environment and to consume a huge proportion of the planet's natural resources. If that is wrong, is it simply because a sustainable environment is essential to (present and future) human well-being? Or is such behaviour also wrong because the natural environment and/or its various contents have certain values in their own right so that these values ought to be respected and protected in any case? These are among the questions investigated by environmental ethics. Some of them are specific questions faced by individuals in particular circumstances, while others are more global questions faced by groups and communities. Yet others are more abstract questions concerning the value and moral standing of the natural environment and its non-human components.

In the literature on environmental ethics the distinction between *instrumental value* and *intrinsic value* (in the sense of "non-instrumental value") has been of considerable importance. The former is the value of things as *means* to further some other ends, whereas the latter is the value of things as *ends in themselves* regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends. For instance, certain fruits have instrumental value for bats who feed on them, since feeding on the fruits is a means to survival for the bats. However, it is not widely agreed that fruits have value as ends in themselves. We can likewise think of a person who teaches others as having instrumental value for those who want to acquire knowledge. Yet, in addition to any such value, it is normally said that a person, as a person, has intrinsic value, i.e., value in his or her own right independently of his or her prospects for serving the ends of others. For another example, a certain wild plant may have instrumental value because it provides the ingredients for some medicine or as an aesthetic object for human observers. But if the plant also has some value in itself independently of its prospects for furthering some other ends such as human health, or the pleasure from aesthetic experience, then the plant also has intrinsic value. Because the intrinsically valuable is that which is good as an end in itself, it is commonly agreed that something's possession of intrinsic value generates a prima facie direct moral duty on the part of moral agents to protect it or at least refrain from damaging it.

Many traditional western ethical perspectives, however, are *anthropocentric* or human-centered in that either they assign intrinsic value to human beings alone (i.e., what we might call anthropocentric in a *strong* sense) or they assign a significantly greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any non-human things such that the protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be nearly always justified (i.e., what we might call anthropocentric in a *weak* sense). For

example, Aristotle maintains that “nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man” and that the value of non-human things in nature is merely instrumental. Generally, anthropocentric positions find it problematic to articulate what is wrong with the cruel treatment of non-human animals, except to the extent that such treatment may lead to bad consequences for human beings. Cruelty towards a dog might encourage a person to develop a character which would be desensitized to cruelty towards humans. From this standpoint, cruelty towards non-human animals would be instrumentally, rather than intrinsically, wrong. Likewise, anthropocentrism often recognizes some non-intrinsic wrongness of anthropogenic (i.e., human-caused) environmental devastation. Such destruction might damage the well-being of human beings now and in the future, since our well-being is essentially dependent on a sustainable environment.

When environmental ethics emerged as a new sub-discipline of philosophy in the early 1970s, it did so by posing a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism. In the first place, it questioned the assumed moral superiority of human beings to members of other species on earth. In the second place, it investigated the possibility of rational arguments for assigning intrinsic value to the natural environment and its non-human contents. It should be noted, however, that some theorists working in the field see no need to develop new, non-anthropocentric theories. Instead, they advocate what may be called *enlightened* anthropocentrism (or, perhaps more appropriately called, *prudential* anthropocentrism). Briefly, this is the view that all the moral duties we have towards the environment are derived from our direct duties to its human inhabitants. The practical purpose of environmental ethics, they maintain, is to provide moral grounds for social policies aimed at protecting the earth’s environment and remedying environmental degradation.

Enlightened anthropocentrism, they argue, is sufficient for that practical purpose, and perhaps even more effective in delivering pragmatic outcomes, in terms of policy-making, than non-anthropocentric theories given the theoretical burden on the latter to provide sound arguments for its more radical view that the non-human environment has intrinsic value. Furthermore, some prudential anthropocentrists may hold what might be called *cynical* anthropocentrism, which says that we have a higher-level anthropocentric reason to be non-anthropocentric in our day-to-day thinking. Suppose that a day-to-day non-anthropocentrist tends to act more benignly towards the non-human environment on which human well-being depends. This would provide reason for encouraging non-anthropocentric thinking, even to those who find the idea of non-anthropocentric intrinsic value hard to swallow. In order for such a strategy to be effective one may need to hide one’s cynical anthropocentrism from others and even from oneself. The position can be structurally compared to some indirect form of consequentialism and may attract parallel critiques.

The Early Development of Environmental Ethics

Although nature was the focus of much nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, contemporary environmental ethics only emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s. The questioning and rethinking of the relationship of human beings with the natural environment over the last thirty years reflected an already widespread perception in the 1960s that the late twentieth century faced a human population explosion as well as a serious environmental crisis. Commercial farming practices aimed at maximizing crop yields and profits are capable of impacting simultaneously on environmental and public health.

Clearly, without technology and science, the environmental extremes to which we are now exposed would probably not be realized.

The call for a "basic change of values" in connection to the environment (a call that could be interpreted in terms of either instrumental or intrinsic values) reflected a need for the development of environmental ethics as a new sub-discipline of philosophy.

The new field emerged almost simultaneously in three countries—the United States, Australia, and Norway. In the first two of these countries, direction and inspiration largely came from the earlier twentieth century American literature of the environment. For instance, the Scottish emigrant John Muir (founder of the Sierra Club and "father of American conservation") and subsequently the forester Aldo Leopold had advocated an appreciation and conservation of things "natural, wild and free". Their concerns were motivated by a combination of ethical and aesthetic responses to nature as well as a rejection of crudely economic approaches to the value of natural objects.

The confluence of ethical, political and legal debates about the environment, the emergence of philosophies to underpin animal rights activism and the puzzles over whether an environmental ethic would be something new rather than a modification or extension of existing ethical theories were reflected in wider social and political movements. The rise of environmental or "green" parties in Europe in the 1980s was accompanied by almost immediate schisms between groups known as "realists" versus "fundamentalists". The "realists" stood for reform environmentalism, working with business and government to soften the impact of pollution and resource depletion especially on fragile ecosystems or endangered species. The fundamentalists argued for radical change, the setting of stringent new priorities, and even the overthrow of capitalism and liberal individualism, which were taken as the major ideological causes of anthropogenic environmental devastation. It is not clear, however, that collectivist or communist countries do any better in terms of their environmental record

Sustainability and Climate Change

The commission was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway at the time, and the report is sometimes known as the Brundtland Report. This report noted the increasing tide of evidence that planetary systems vital to supporting life on earth were under strain. The key question it raised is whether it is equitable to sacrifice options for future well-being in favour of supporting current lifestyles, especially the comfortable, and sometimes lavish, forms of life enjoyed in the rich countries. As Bryan Norton puts it, the world faces a global challenge to see whether different human groups, with widely varying perspectives, can perhaps "accept responsibility to maintain a non-declining set of opportunities based on possible uses of the environment". The preservation of options for the future can be readily linked to notions of equity if it is agreed that "the future ought not to face, as a result of our actions today, a seriously reduced range of options and choices, as they try to adapt to the environment that they face". Note that references to "the future" need not be limited to the future of human beings only. In keeping with the non-anthropocentric focus of much environmental philosophy, a care for sustainability and biodiversity can embrace a care for opportunities available to non-human living things.

However, when the concept "sustainable development" was first articulated in the Brundtland Report, the emphasis was clearly anthropocentric. In face of increasing evidence that

planetary systems vital to life-support were under strain, the concept of sustainable development is constructed in the report to encourage certain globally coordinated directions and types of economic and social development. The report defines "sustainable development" in the following way:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

Thus, the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries—developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned. Interpretations will vary, but must share certain general features and must flow from a consensus on the basic concept of sustainable development and on a broad strategic framework for achieving it.

The report goes on to argue that "the industrial world has already used much of the planet's ecological capital. This inequality is the planet's main 'environmental' problem; it is also its main 'development' problem". In the concept of sustainable development, the report combines the resource economist's notion of "sustainable yield" with the recognition that developing countries of the world are entitled to economic growth and prosperity. The notion of sustainable yield involves thinking of forests, rivers, oceans and other ecosystems, including the natural species living in them, as a stock of "ecological capital" from which all kinds of goods and services flow. Provided the flow of such goods and services does not reduce the capacity of the capital itself to maintain its productivity, the use of the systems in question is regarded as sustainable. Thus, the report argues that "maximum sustainable yield must be defined after taking into account system-wide effects of exploitation" of ecological capital.

There are clear philosophical, political and economic precursors to the Brundtland concept of sustainability.

Some non-anthropocentric environmental thinkers have found the language of economics unsatisfactory in its implications since it already appears to assume a largely instrumental view of nature. The use of notions such as "asset", "capital" and even the word "resources" in connection with natural objects and systems has been identified by some writers as instrumentalizing natural things which are in essence wild and free. The objection is that such language promotes the tendency to think of natural things as mere resources for humans or as raw materials with which human labour could be mixed, not only to produce consumable goods, but also to generate human ownership. If natural objects and systems have intrinsic value independent of their possible use for humans, as many environmental philosophers have argued, then a policy approach to sustainability needs to consider the environment and natural things not only in instrumental and but also in intrinsic terms to do justice to the moral standing that many people believe such items possess. Despite its acknowledgment of there being "moral, ethical, cultural, aesthetic, and purely scientific reasons for conserving wild beings", the strongly anthropocentric and instrumental language used throughout the

Brundtland report in articulating the notion of sustainable development can be criticised for defining the notion too narrowly, leaving little room for addressing sustainability questions directly concerning the Earth's environment and its non-human inhabitants: should, and if so, how should, human beings reorganise their ways of life and the social-political structures of their communities to allow sustainability and equity not only for all humans but also for the other species on the planet?

The preservation concern for nature and non-human species is addressed to some extent by making a distinction between weaker and stronger conceptions of sustainability. The distinction emerged from considering the question: what exactly does sustainable development seek to sustain? Is it the flow of goods and services from world markets that is to be maintained, or is it the current—or some future—level of consumption? In answering such questions, proponents of weak sustainability argue that it is acceptable to replace natural capital with human-made capital provided that the latter has equivalent functions. If, for example, plastic trees could produce oxygen, absorb carbon and support animal and insect communities, then they could replace the real thing, and a world with functionally equivalent artificial trees would seem just as good as one with real or natural trees in it. For weak sustainability theorists, the aim of future development should be to maintain a consistently productive stock of capital on which to draw, while not insisting that some portion of that capital be natural. Strong sustainability theorists, by contrast, generally resist the substitution of human for natural capital, insisting that a critical stock of natural things and processes be preserved. By so doing, they argue, we maintain stocks of rivers, forests and biodiverse systems, hence providing maximum options—options in terms of experience, appreciation, values, and ways of life—for the future human inhabitants of the planet. The Brundtland report can also be seen as advocating a form of strong sustainability in so far as it recommends that a "first priority is to establish the problem of disappearing species and threatened ecosystems on political agendas as a major resource issue". Furthermore, despite its instrumental and economic language, the report in fact endorses a wider moral perspective on the status of and our relation to nature and non-human species, evidenced by its statement that "the case for the conservation of nature should not rest only with development goals. It is part of our moral obligation to other living beings and future generations". Implicit in the statement is not only a strong conception of sustainability but also a non-anthropocentric conception of the notion. Over time, strong sustainability has come to be focused not only on the needs of human and other living things but also on their rights. In a further development, the discourses on forms of sustainability have generally given way in the last decade to a more ambiguous usage, in which the term "sustainability" functions to bring people into a debate rather than setting out a clear definition of the terms of the debate itself. As globalization leads to greater integration of world economies, the world after the Brundtland report has seen greater fragmentation among viewpoints, where critics of globalization have generally used the concept of sustainability in a plurality of different ways. Some have argued that "sustainability", just like the word "nature" itself, has come to mean very different things, carrying different symbolic meaning for different groups, and reflecting very different interests. For better or for worse, such ambiguity can on occasion allow different parties in negotiations to claim a measure of agreement.

The preservation of opportunities to live well, or at least to have a minimally acceptable level of well being, is at the heart of population ethics and many contemporary conceptions of sustainability. Many people believe such opportunities for the existing younger generations, and also for the yet to arrive future generations, to be under threat from continuing environmental destruction, including loss of fresh water resources, continued clearing of wild

areas and a changing climate. Of these, climate change has come to prominence as an area of intense policy and political debate, to which applied philosophers and ethicists have much to contribute. An early exploration of the topic by John Broome shows how the economics of climate change could not be divorced from considerations of intergenerational justice and ethics, and this has set the scene for subsequent discussions and analyses. More than a decade later, when Stephen Gardiner analyses the state of affairs surrounding climate change in an article entitled "A Perfect Moral Storm", his starting point is also that ethics plays a fundamental role in all discussions of climate policy. But he argues that even if difficult ethical and conceptual questions facing climate change (such as the so-called "non-identity problem" along with the notion of historic injustices) could be answered, it would still be close to politically and socially impossible to formulate, let alone to enforce, policies and action plans to deal effectively with climate change. This is due to the multi-faceted nature of a problem that involves vast numbers of agents and players. At a global level, there is first of all the practical problem of motivating shared responsibilities (see the entry on moral motivation) in part due to the dispersed nature of greenhouse gas emissions which makes the effects of increasing levels of atmospheric carbon and methane not always felt most strongly in the regions where they originate. Add to this the fact that there is an un-coordinated and also dispersed network of agents—both individual and corporate—responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, and that there are no effective institutions that can control and limit them. But this tangle of issues constitutes, Gardiner argues, only one strand in the skein of quandaries that confronts us. There is also the fact that by and large only future generations will carry the brunt of the impacts of climate change, explaining why current generations have no strong incentive to act. Finally, it is evident that our current mainstream political, economic, and ethical models are not up to the task of reaching global consensus, and in many cases not even national consensus, on how best to design and implement fair climate policies.

These considerations lead Gardiner to take a pessimistic view of the prospects for progress on climate issues. His view includes pessimism about technical solutions, such as geoengineering as the antidote to climate problems, echoing the concerns of others that further domination of and large-scale interventions in nature may turn out to be a greater evil than enduring a climate catastrophe. A key point in Gardiner's analysis is that the problem of climate change involves a tangle of issues, the complexity of which conspires to encourage buck-passing, weakness of will, distraction and procrastination, "making us extremely vulnerable to moral corruption". Because of the grave risk of serious harms to future generations, our failure to take timely mitigating actions on climate issues can be seen as a serious moral failing, especially in the light of our current knowledge and understanding of the problem. Summarizing widespread frustration over the issue.

All this inability to act effectively in the political arena casts a long shadow of doubt on whether, politically or technologically, much less ethically, we humans are anywhere near being smart enough to manage the planet". In the face of such pessimism about the prospects for securing any action to combat climate change other writers have cautioned against giving in to defeatism and making self-fulfilling prophecies. These latter behaviours are always a temptation when we confront worrying truths and insufficient answers. Whatever the future holds, many thinkers now believe that solving the problems of climate change is an essential ingredient in any credible form of sustainable development and that the alternative to decisive action may result in the diminution not only of nature and natural systems, but also of human dignity itself

The philosophy of Aldo Leopold (The Land Ethic)

Published in 1949 as the finale to *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic" essay is a call for moral responsibility to the natural world. At its core, the idea of a land ethic is simply caring: about people, about land, and about strengthening the relationships between them.

What are Ethics?

Fundamentally grounded in values, ethics are a moral sense of right and wrong. Ethics are demonstrated by the way people live their lives: When a person cares about someone or something, their actions convey that care and respect, and invite the same in return.

"When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

What is a Land Ethic?

Ethics direct all members of a community to treat one another with respect for the mutual benefit of all. A land ethic expands the definition of "community" to include not only humans, but all of the other parts of the Earth, as well: soils, waters, plants, and animals, or what Leopold called "the land."

In Leopold's vision of a land ethic, the relationships between people and land are intertwined: care for people cannot be separated from care for the land. A land ethic is a moral code of conduct that grows out of these interconnected caring relationships.

Leopold did not define the land ethic with a litany of rights and wrongs in *A Sand County Almanac*. Instead, he presented it as a set of values that naturally grew out of his lifetime of experiences in the outdoors. Leopold wrote that "we can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, understand, feel, love, or otherwise have faith in."

He believed that direct contact with the natural world was crucial in shaping our ability to extend our ethics beyond our own self-interest. He hoped his essays would inspire others to embark or continue on a similar lifelong journey of outdoor exploration, developing an ethic of care that would grow out of their own close personal connection to nature.

This will be discussed further in the next lecture..

Evolution in a Thinking Community

Leopold recognized that his dream of a widely accepted and implemented set of values based on caring – for people, for land, and for all the connections between them – would have to "evolve… in the minds of a thinking community."

We are all part of the thinking community that needs to shape a land ethic for the 21st century and beyond. To do that, we must engage in thoughtful dialogue with each other, inviting a

diversity of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. Together, we can form a land ethic that can be passed down to future generations.

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