



## Compassionate Coexistence: Personizing the Land in Aldo Leopold's Land-Ethic

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### Abstract

Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic (1949) was one of the first clarion calls announcing a new era of thinking about Nature, but it is obviously difficult for the human race to turn conceptual insights into action. I propose that the missing link lies in acknowledging non-human personhood. If we allow ourselves to "personize" Leopold's Land, we enable moral behavior towards the world as a whole. In this paper, I build on Leopold and develop the acknowledgement of non-human personhood as the logical and necessary next step in his Ethical Sequence.

### Personizing the Land

"We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in". (Leopold 1949, 214)

One of the first modern appeals for rethinking our relationship, as human beings, to our fellow world has been Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic* with its principal premise that "The extension of ethics [...] is actually a process in ecological evolution" (Leopold 1949, 202). Aldo Leopold construes the development of ethics as a process undergoing a development of increasing inclusiveness. He holds that the rules for social intercourse initially were defined over individual humans and have, in a next stage of the "Ethical Sequence" (ibid, 202-203), been expanded to include injunctions about how individuals should behave towards their community. The third step, Leopold proposes, is an ethic that informs a respectful relationship between human society and land. The Land Ethic thus argues for endowing the natural world with ethical standing.

Being decades ahead of a wide-spread "ecological conscience" (ibid, 221), Leopold lay the ethical foundation for the emergence of a Deep Ecology (Naess 1973), an Ecopsychology (Roszak 2001), an Earth Ju-

risprudence (Cullinan 2011); and the ideas of an Earth Community (Berry 1999), of Biophilia (Wilson 1984, Kellert 2003), and of a joint Journey of the Universe of all beings (Swimme and Tucker 2011). These appeals to reconcile humanity with Nature are widely hailed since they come in the wake of centuries of human dominance and exploitation. Reason and intuition tell us that living in harmony with our fellow world is more than a romantic notion—it is a matter of life and death for the natural world and, because of our dependence on it, our only hope for long-term survival of humankind. The idea of harmony, of living in peace and feeling whole and embedded, is an archetypal human desire. Ethics are a means to foster and to safeguard harmony. And both harmony and ethics ultimately rely upon the genuine and irreducible feelings of love and connectedness to beloved others. Allowing for a personal connection is paramount for including someone or something within the boundaries of an ethic of harmonious communion.

What or who is the “something” towards which we should behave ethically? Leopold suggests: “[S]ome mental image of land as a biotic mechanism” (ibid, 214). This includes “soil”, “waters”, “plants”, “animals”, the “fountain of energy” and “fertility” (ibid, 216-217). To be sure, for an ecologist like Leopold, species, habitats and biotic pyramids (ibid, 214) are exciting to think and to moralize about. But consider the average citizen. Will he care about the biotic pyramid? What is ecologically correct is not necessarily ethically compelling.

Likewise, abstract notions of an “Earth Community” (Berry 1999, Cullinan 2011), the concept of a “fellow world” or the overused “Nature” and “The Environment” only appeal to people who are already convinced of the cause. Specifically, these concepts are so holistic and loaded with tacit assumptions that they fail to evoke the vivid images that enable “love, respect, admiration” (Leopold 1949, 223). Acting responsibly is contingent upon evidence that our behavior affects and is meaningful to individual others (Heberlein 2012) and that we are personally liable (cf. Darley and Latane 1968). The average citizen understands much better why it is good to post a birdhouse in the garden than why he should reduce his carbon footprint in order to protect biodiversity. Thomas Berry (1999) traces his “life orientation” back to a field of white lilies to which he bonded as a boy.

Surely, Aldo Leopold, too, had a personalized picture of “the land-community” in mind when he conceived of the Land Ethic. He must have seen the Sand County that gave rise to the *Sand County Almanac* (1949) his collection of stories and environmental essays, i.a. comprising “The Land Ethic”, he surely immersed in the view of the pines and the shrubs surrounding his shack, birds circling above him and bees humming over the ground. Don’t we all carry an image of “land” in our hearts, an image in which our attachment to the non-human world crystallizes? The one-on-one encounter with particular animals, plants, and landscapes that, collectively, constitute Nature is the mediating link between personal responsibility and actual land-ethical conduct.

What, then, is “personizing” in the sense suggested here? To personize another being means to recognize him or her as an individual with a unique set of qualities, motivations and capacities. Essentially, personizing means recognizing another being’s personhood, cherishing his or her inherent value and right to be and thrive according to his or her disposition (cf. Berry, cited in Cullinan 2011). Personization, thus, is the extension of the respect and appreciation we show to our beloved others beyond the circle of kin, friends and species.

The request for personizing the non-human world is no ivory-tower notion about how the world could be a better place in a parallel universe. It actually is an explicitly non-academic idea since it circumnavigates the dogmatic question of which entities may, philosophically speaking, be eligible for “personhood”. The present argument solely depends on the natural personizing capacity of the human mind. Recognizing personhood is what we do every day. We automatically single a being out of its category when we encounter him or her. We do that with our fellow humans, of course, but likewise with animals, plants, even machines and landscape features.

The automaticity of personization derives from a mental faculty, the so-called Theory of Mind (Premack and Woodruff 1978). This built-in tool of our psyche enables us to perceive mental states of others, their thoughts, feelings and intentions. Our Theory of Mind responds to social stimuli emanating from our fellow humans, but when non-human beings display similar characteristics, it responds to them in a similar way. As animals' expressions of life are akin to our own, animal personhood to us is the most striking kind of non-human personhood. Remember, for example, when you first met a fox, a deer or a skunk in the wild. Instantly and involuntarily, you built a personal rapport, making that instance of a species a partner in an infinitesimal conversation. When we deal with individual animals, we automatically think of them as some kind of animal-person. And naturally, we draw on moral principles in relating to them, e.g. walking softly so as not to frighten the deer, boar or skunk. Moreover, we easily observe how each animal, like every human, has a particular pattern of behavior. Involuntarily, we apply personality qualities to them: "brazen", "shy", "curious" or "shrewd".

Science confirms that this is not mere anthropomorphizing but that the inner life of animals is real and is in many cases strikingly similar to human sentience and intelligence (see Bekoff 2007 for an overview). Cutting edge research attests our intuition that animals have personalities just like us. Even lizards, spiders or sticklebacks exhibit behavioral patterns which we would call "personalities" in humans (Ogden 2012). Also, other social animals evince a Theory of Mind. Apes (Suddendorf and Withen 2001), dolphins (Connor and Man 2006), dogs and wolves (Udell et al. 2008), crows (Bugnyar 2007), and many more share the ability to see others' minds as being populated with thoughts, feelings and intentions. Dr. Mark Bekoff (2007, Bekoff and Pierce 2009) takes this one further step. He concludes from his research that "animals have morality" and that "animal morality is different in degree, not in kind, from human morality" (Bekoff and Pierce 2009, 33 and 139, respectively). This means that these animals can really be partners in an emotional and moral dialogue.

However, appreciating non-human personhood is not predicated on non-humans being similar to us. We can perceive and appreciate personhood in plants—haven't you become "friends" with at least one particularly personable tree during your life? We can become attached to a certain rock formation; we can scold our electronic equipment. The remarkable progress in developing of machine minds (e.g. Bina48 of the Terasem Movement Foundation 2014) further blurs the limits between human and non-human personhood. That similarity is no prerequisite for love and respect is self-evident and intuitively clear to us: We do not expect the same degree of responsiveness from a mentally disabled person as from one who is unimpaired but still cherish both as members of our moral community; and we rejoice in the specific doghood of our dog although he will never comment with more than a friendly wag on the draft of our recent paper. The inherent value of human-, animal-, plant- and maybe even rock- and machine-persons derives from the premise that a human, fox, deer, skunk, tree, and object has an existence that is inimitable and singularly precious (Jürgens, 2014). The unique personhood of other beings as perceived by us is in itself worthy of respect and personizing demands nothing more than appreciating an individual as being unique *in his or her own way*.

#### **A fourth stage for the Ethical Sequence**

"[A] land ethic changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it." (Leopold 1949, 204)

Evolution has made us personizers. Thinking and moralizing about individual others is how humans came to think and moralize in the first place, given that our ancestors essentially depended on well-functioning small groups (Lieberman 1991, Vogel 1983). Therefore, sociobiologically speaking, morals are meant for individuals facing individuals. Consequently, Leopold (1949) incorporates this "I – you" relation in the first stage of his Ethical Sequence. The second stage is defined by moral obligations between a human being and society, making the "I – we" connection. At the third stage, moral obligations between humans and "the land" forge the "I – they" tie.

By personizing the land, the Ethical Sequence comes full circle and relates the human “I” back to the “you” in another person who might be human being, animal, plant, machine, object. This fourth stage is characterized by awareness and mindfulness for the unique personhood of others, an evidence-based Neo-Animism if you will, with the intent to forge a harmonious “communion of subjects” (Berry 1999). Let us term this stage of reasoned consideration of our fellow world “Compassionate Coexistence.”

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