Leopold’s Land Ethic

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. (Leopold, 204)

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (Leopold, 204)

Leopold’s concept of biotic community:

Community, for Leopold, is not simply an abstract concept or human construct, but a concrete and complex living web of interdependent relationships of ecosystems, species, and individuals, all of which play a vital role in sustaining the health of the whole, which Leopold identified as the biotic community. For the whole to remain productive and healthy, *humans must acknowledge their role as fellow members of the larger community and accept and act on their moral responsibility when interacting with the whole, not solely as "conquers" driven by economic self-interest, but as citizens that are concerned for the well-being and continued existence of their non-human neighbors.* (Holtzman, 8)

Did Leopold's holism dismiss the moral significance of individual members of the community?

J. Baird Callicott describes Leopold's land ethic as a thoroughly "communitarian environmental ethic" (Callicott, 2002, 104). However, this does not mean that Leopold's land ethic is strictly ecocentric as Callicott and others propose. Callicott identified Leopold as an ethical monist, where moral value is determined by an individual's contribution to maintaining the whole, that is, the whole possesses the greater moral value. The land ethic, Callicott argues "not only provides moral consideration for the biotic community per se, but ethical consideration of its individual members is preempted by concern for the preservation of the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. The land ethic, thus, not only has a holistic aspect; it is holistic with a vengeance" (Callicott, 1999, 84). (Holtzman, 9)

But did Leopold’s holism really preempt the moral value of individuals?

Environmental ethicist Bryan G. Norton challenges Callicott's extreme holistic interpretation of the land ethic and describes Leopold as an ethical "contextualist one who follows a variety of principles, one of which is to protect the land community" (Norton, 1991, 184). Norton further asserts that Leopold "never claims the value of the land community is similar, philosophically or otherwise, to the value we today profess to place on each living human individual" (Norton, 1991, 184). Consequently, Leopold's land ethic is not strictly ecocentric in that it does not assign all moral value to the protection of the ecosystem. *Nowhere does Leopold explicitly subordinate the importance and moral value of the individual, especially the human individual. However, the land ethic is ecologically centered because it focuses on relationships within the natural world, particularly between humans and the land.* (Scoville, 2000, 63). (Holtzman, 9-10)

Lynn’s Example: Leopold valued individual species (e.g. bison) and he emphasized that one could only manage the individual by understanding its ecological context (the whole) *i.e.* eco-contextualism
Golden Rule Provides an Ethics of Empathy toward the Land:

Based on the arguments and analogies presented above, an ecologically integrated Golden Rule, understood as an ethics of empathy, can apply to the land and is a plausible means of interpreting and practicing Leopold's land ethic. It satisfies Leopold's moral requirements necessary for the extension of ethics to the land community. Firstly, as analyzed above, the Golden Rule is inclusive; it allows us to consider nature as neighbor, making non-human entities subject to human moral concern and care. Secondly, the Golden Rule assigns to humans a responsibility to love non-human entities as themselves to the extent that they are able and to demonstrate this love by the extension and practice of benevolent empathy, which involves both protective restraint when using the land and ecological restoration that "heals" the "hurt" caused by abusive and destructive land use. Finally, the ecologically-integrated Golden Rule's goal is to foster and maintain relational harmony and health between humans and between humans and the land and thus aims to achieve Leopold's ultimate land health goal, "a state of harmony between men and land" (Leopold, 1993, 145). [from Holtzman thesis Conclusion, p. 59]

Thus, in summary, the basic moral and psychological requirements necessary to practice the Golden Rule as an ethics of empathy include the following:

A. **Empathy.** It requires an empathetic imagination that involves the capacity to sympathetically and sensitively take up the perspectives of others and to imagine oneself in the situation of those others.

B. **Comparability.** It requires that the moral agent can identify with concrete aspects and interests of the recipient's predicament (e.g., hurt, hungry, and homeless) that would be similar to that of the agent if the agent were in the same situation. [Note: Can apply to both individuals and at higher levels e.g. ecosystem as house comparable to our own houses.]

C. **Relationship.** It requires that the moral agent have a relationship with the recipient in time and space and the opportunity to exercise the moral rule.

D. **Benevolence.** Benevolence is a virtue that involves a direct concern and care for the welfare of others expressed in tangible actions. (Holtzman, 37-38; 51)

Holmes Rolston calls this ecological phenomenon "systemic value", where "things do not have their separate natures merely in and for themselves, but face outward and co-fit into a broader [system of interconnected natures] & a value-in-togetherness." "Each is for oneself, but none is by itself" (Rolston, 1988, 216-219). The biotic good or value of each member, which is a good it alone possesses, interdependently participates in the good of every other as it functions and operates relationally within the context of community. Paradoxically, each member possesses an individual worth that is not individualistic in function, but interdependent as it gives to and receives the goodness of others in the community. (Holtzman, 17)

References:


