

Land Ethics and its relevance in the field of environmental Ethics

Prof. Sathi Debnath, Assistant Professor in Philosophy, Banipur Mahila Mahavidyalaya
Habra, North 24 Pgs, West Bengal

Prof. Mrinal Kanti Sarkar, Associate Professor in Philosophy, Department of Philosophy Barasat
Government College, Kolkata, India

Abstract

Environmental ethics is a nascent field of study within philosophy and discourses within it is slowly getting enriched as professional philosophers have joined to enrich the literature. This paper takes up and revisits land ethics by Aldo Leopold who was a conservationist by profession and an environmental philosopher by accident. The Land Ethic was among the first that caused a stir among the critical fraternity and has ever since been regarded as a classic. Land ethics is the initial response towards formulating a more cogent ethical framework for environmental issues that are increasingly becoming quite urgent to respond to in appropriate manner. Though land ethics as propounded in *The Sand Almanac* is not serious philosophical treatise as such, it can be thought of as pushing forward the well established ethical boundaries to include subjects of environment as well. This paper holds that land ethics was not born in vacuum; rather it inherits rich heritage of ethics beginning with Darwinian conceptual context and it incorporates ecological worldview to formulate a cogent ethical framework for environmental issues and this framework of ethics is quite appropriately termed as land ethics and here we discover a paradigm shift in its approach in its cautious move from individualism to holism.

Keynotes: Environmental ethics, land ethics, Holism, Ecology

Introduction :

Ethics is a discipline within philosophy that asks moral questions, that is questions concerning actions which are right for the humans and which are not. Traditional ethics presupposes that humans are the only sentient beings who are capable of defining the right and the wrong and it is anthropocentric. Moral choices are there for the humans only in relation to other humans and it does not include other non human forms of life within its ambit. But with the development of science and technology and development of our understanding of interdependence of one life forms upon various other life forms and also non-living elements, a new discipline called ecology has emerged and it has so conditioned our understanding that we have started to feel the inadequacy of existing ethical framework to deal with various deep anthropogenic disturbances of nature. Different world religions and early modern Western philosophical thinkers used anthropocentric terms to describe nature and other life forms. According to this view other animals and plants and for that matter all life forms are important in so far as they contribute to the welfare of humanity and they have no intrinsic value. They are solely important for their instrumental value, that is as far as they are useful to humans. So it is morally right to clear forest areas for increasing the farmland or destroying a rich biodiversity area is simply not morally wrong as the place can be exploited for mining and extracting valuable materials like iron ore or coal etc which can prove beneficial to human society. Environmental ethics has emerged from the concern that all these the degradation of nature and ubiquitous pollution, the specter of global warming that threatens the very ecosystem that lets us thrive have been possible because of this deeply flawed notion that everything exists to satisfy the needs and greeds of the precocious children of the earth called humans. Our discussion of environmental ethics will revolve around land ethics which was first propounded by Aldo Leopold in his classic A Sand County Almanac.

Land Ethics

Environmental ethics is a relatively new and still evolving sub-discipline within philosophy. Though nature was much in focus in the nineteenth and twentieth century,

environmental ethics emerged as an academic discipline only in the 1970s. The texts to be used in universities on the topic were few. Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) in his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) drew attention of the critical fraternity and ever since has become a classic with its prescription for adopting a brand new philosophical doctrine which he likes to call land ethics. Leopold here strongly calls for a new ethical framework, something that can deal with "human's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it". According to Leopold land ethics has not simply popped out of nothingness, rather it is a necessary extension and evolutionary potential of our existing ethical framework. Though this new take on has revolutionary potential, his land ethics has drawn very different responses from professional philosophers. Wallace Stegner regards *A Sand County Almanac* as a sacred text in conservation circles and Aldo Leopold as a modern day messiah. Curt Meime thinks that the essay "The Land Ethic" in the *Almanac* is the upshot of The Upshot as the land ethics is properly developed in that section of the book. In fact Aldo Leopold designed the book as an environmental conservationist who wishes that humans should take responsibility to conserve the environment as a moral obligation on their part and stop invasive human forays deep into shrinking islands of wilderness that exist in isolated pockets. Professional philosophers did not take this work seriously as they felt it lacked any cogent ethical framework. Australian philosopher John Passmore did not attach much importance to it in his academic discussion of "Environmental Ethics". Canadian Philosopher I.W Sumner quite frankly termed it as "dangerous nonsense." Those who liked the contents of the *Almanac* for its rather revolutionary spirit and enthusiastic verve only took it as naive pronouncements of a well-meaning gentleman, not amounting to the seriousness of a philosophical discourse. J. Baird Callicott thinks that Leopold's land ethic invites indifference and confusion among professional philosophers because from a philosophical point of view The Land Ethic is too abbreviated, unfamiliar and of course radical. We need to remember at the same time that Land ethics did not fall from the void all on sudden but it gradually matured and took the final shape in the *Almanac*. Leopold was a professional conservationist and he was deeply disturbed by the gradual disappearance of many species of life forms, continued shrinkage of pockets of wildernesses as the global economy keeps running

with breakneck speed with utter disregard for environment .His passion for saving the last remnants of what remained of pristine nature unadulterated by human roads and activities and his eminently pragmatic nature went into the making of his land ethic.

Leopold saw land ethic as an extension of contemporary ethics that regards humans as its proper area of study. Leopold writes (pp.203) "*All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community ,but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that they are maybe a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarged the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters ,plants ,and animals or collectively: the land.*" He goes on to say, "*In short a land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from the 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.*" (pp 204)

He discusses his theme in his own unique , inimitable manner and brings himself to define his land ethic: "*Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right as well as what is economically expedient. 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.*" (pp.224).

Land ethic draws inspiration from Darwin

It is important to investigate the philosophical foundation and pedigree of the land ethic so that it might be related to more familiar modern moral concerns and then it can be applied to a range of novel environmental concerns some of which even Leopold did not investigate. After our study we can also address some of the theoretical and practical challenges that the land ethics gives rise to . Leopold traces the evolution of ethics in his Almanac. He writes,

"This extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution...An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These

are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation."(pp . 202)

Here Callicott observes that Leopold was not a better student of philosophy than most professional philosophers are of conservation and its concerns. Though Leopold's "philosophical" account of ethics is somewhat sketchy, his choice of words and phrases like evolution, struggle for existence, origin, points to the classical account of ethics to be found in *The Descent of Man* (1871) by Charles Darwin (1809-82). When it comes to Leopold's thinking about ethics, Darwin's account of things had a great formative influence on it.

Evolution of humans from other related species presents a unique problem. Ethics or sense of right and wrong is purely a human quality not to be seen in any other species. Ethics demanded that moral agents consider other interests in addition to their own. Here we face a conundrum. Humans have much less chance of survival in the fierce battle for the survival of the fittest as humans exhibit a sense of morality and that in theory is their biggest liability. But human history shows the opposite is strangely true. They co-operate and stay together and use their synergy and cooperation to prevail upon much stronger animals. It is also important that a social group has some sort of rudimentary ethical standards to be able to stay together for any length of time. Darwin notes that if murder, robbery, treachery are common, a tribe won't be able to survive as a group. and hence such crimes are branded with "everlasting infamy" within the boundary of its group but if the same happens outside its jurisdiction, no such emotions are excited. Therefore tribal communities were more savage and ethically immature than their civilized counterparts that were to emerge later on. Darwin's speculative reconstruction of ethical pathway among the primitive members of humanity began with parental and filial affections between parents and their offsprings that later widened to include other relatives. These bonded families gel together in stable and permanent groups and this ensures palpable advantages for them in the struggle for life.

Social impulses and sentiments are not ethics. An ethic is a set of behavioral rules or a set of principles for guiding our behaviour. David Hume (1711-1776) and Adam Smith (1723-90)

argued much before Charles Dickens appeared in the scene that ethics owes its origin to moral sentiments. As humans quite uniquely possess intelligence, imagination and can express themselves in symbolic languages, they are also perfectly capable of murder, robbery, treachery etc. They are uniquely placed to express prohibitions of these perceived crimes in emotionally coloured utterances called moral rules or values.

Development of ethics along with that of society

Darwin moves on from tracing the origin of ethics to its gradual evolution among the members of human species. As competition among communities and groups for scant resources grew more fierce, the better organised and bigger groups are practically better positioned to take advantage over their smaller and worse organised counterparts. In course of time smaller tribes and communities fused into larger clans and then clans came together to form kingdoms and nations. Here Darwin charts a parallel development of ethics. According to him, with the progress of civilization as smaller tribes and communities melt into each other to form much larger communities, its members would feel imperative to extend their "social instincts and sympathies" to other members of the same nation though they are personally unknown to them. Once that point is reached there is no reason he will not be able to break the artificial barrier to extend his sympathies to the members of all other nations and races.

Now let us turn our attention to Hume who came to a similar view long before the advent of the theory of evolution. He believes that as several families unite to form a society, rules are made to preserve peace and order and those rules encompass all the families contained within that particular society. And he moves on to say that for mutual convenience and advantage those distinct societies maintain interaction with each other and when that happens "*the boundaries of justice still grow larger in proportion to the largeness of men's views and the force of their mutual connexions*". We will be guided by history, experience and reason in "*this natural progress of human sentiments, and in the gradual enlargement of*" them.

Leopold is called a prophet for a reason. He looked further ahead than it was possible for Darwin as a well developed ecological world view was missing in his time. Leopold paraphrases

Darwinian natural history of ethics in a condensed formulation,"*All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts*"(pp.203). Then he throws into it an ecological element ,the community model of the biota which was discussed at length by Charles Elton(1900-91). Ecology , according to Leopold, enlarges the boundaries of the community and it includes 'soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land'. This is a paradigm shift ,a radical take .He creates his own term here and he defines the land as as a part of ecology that has everything on it like soil,water,plants and animals and here animals include humans as well.When we all learn to “see land as a community to which we belong” not as “a commodity belonging to us”, results will be a land ethic that “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it” (ibid, p. 204).

The philosophical foundations and pedigree of the land ethic should be clear from the above discussion.Leopold formulated the land ethic by taking Darwin’s theory for the origin and development of ethics, and added an ecological ingredient while Darwin himself was influenced by sentiment-based theory of ethics from Hume and Smith.

The Holism of the land ethic and the problem of Eco fascism

Holism is the land ethic’s principal strength, but also its Achilles' heels.Leopold holds that as per evolutionary and ecological biology “land [is] a community to which we belong” not “a commodity belonging to us” and that from the point of view of a land ethic, we are but “plain members and citizens of the biotic community.” It becomes,then,a logical necessity that the summary moral maxim of the land ethic is equally applicable to Homo sapiens just as they are to the other members and citizens of the biotic community. It goes without saying that overpopulation of humans is a direct threat to the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Thus the existence of such a large human population is wrong from the point of view of land ethics. In order to right that wrong should we not do what we do when irruptive growth of ,say, deer population threatens the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community? We must reduce its population usually by indiscriminately shooting its members

until its population is optimised and hence the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community is ensured. Its ominous implication in regards to human population has alarmed the critics. William Aiken eloquently expresses that from the point of view of the land ethic elimination of a large number of humans is not only a logical necessity but also a duty. Its requirement that individual organisms which also includes individual human

organisms, be sacrificed for the good of the whole, makes the land ethic a kind of “environmental fascism”, according to Regan. Frederick Ferri amplifies Aiken’s and Regan’s indictment of the land ethic. He observes that the idea that to exterminate excess human population is morally right and to stay away from such an act is morally wrong is quite disturbing. Though land ethics aims to guide humans towards a viable and ecologically sustainable future, it may eventually lead toward classical fascism, where the submergence of the individual person is encouraged in the glorification of the collectivity, race, tribe, or nation. Kristin Shrader-Frechette also expresses moral outrage at the land ethic. She states if the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community is ensured by subordinating welfare of the particular species, then in order to prioritise the welfare of the biotic community, the welfare of humans is subordinated in all cases.

If the land ethic implies what Aiken, Regan, Ferri., and Shrader-Frechette allege that it does, it has to be rejected. The good news is it is not exactly what they are suggesting. To say that one has to assume that Leopold designed his land ethic as a substitute for, not an addition to, classical human ethics. But he did not. Leopold traced various stages of ethical development from tribal mores to universal human rights and finally offered land ethic as accretions. The land ethic is an accretion to the already accumulated collective knowledge of traditional ethics, and not something that is

supposed to replace them. Leopold has built the land ethic on theoretical foundations that he inherited from Darwin and indirectly from Hume.

Relevance of Land ethics in relation to the evolution of ecology:

When Aldo Leopold introduced the concept of land ethics, the concept that was in vogue in ecology at that time was static equilibrium which did not approve any anthropogenic changes to the environment as those changes have the potential to disturb the delicate balance of nature. But with the introduction of patch dynamics (Pickett & Ostfield, 1995) according to which our ecology is not one giant monolithic structure but it is an aggregate or agglomeration of many isolated areas or patches. So if biotic of one or more such patches gets seriously disturbed, that is not outside the realm of natural flux that continues to shape and reshape the biotic of those and many other related patches. This is a very dynamic process that goes on. Now does this new patch theory materially change the relevance of land ethics which was conceptualised and formulated in an era of static equilibrium concept of ecology? It seems that Aldo Leopold was aware of the importance of ever ongoing changes to the environment. Leopold writes in his Almanac, "Evolutionary changes. . . are usually slow and local. Man's invention of tools has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope". Here Leopold under the influence of static equilibrium concept talks only about evolutionary changes, but he did not have the idea of ecological changes. But as humans are the plain members and citizens of the biotic community, any changes brought about by them are no less natural and normal. So to judge whether any anthropogenic change is within the limits of what is commonly known as natural, I will use two terms. . . **scale**, both spatial and temporal and **rate** meaning frequency. So if a tornado destroys biodiversity of a particular patch of environment or the volcanic eruption lay waste to the entire environment adjacent to it, we still maintain that this is the result of some environmental upheaval and catastrophe but still natural. Perhaps this is how nature regenerates itself or imposes a new order. If it is so, then why will extensive beautification work or the building of a dam in a large enough area be considered merely anthropogenic changes that disturb the equilibrium and hence ethically wrong and so the actions are to be considered reprehensible? If the extinction of certain species of life forms happened naturally in the past, will the extinction of a species by humans be considered wrong from the perspective of land ethics. To be fair, we have not witnessed the extinction of one species by another in nature as

such. So to solve the conundrum, I like to use the two terms already introduced. Disastrous events like tornado are frequent but their spatial reach is limited whereas floods, droughts etc., may have very wide spatial reach but their frequency is much less. Natural disasters like these are both stochastic and chaotic. Anthropogenic changes can be much more frequent and organised and can even be global in its impact like the present phenomenon of global warming. So here a much better and more relevant approach should be to adopt Leopold's land ethics with some changes that provide for the inclusion of newer path dynamics paradigm. With the new take on land ethics we can boldly assert that all anthropogenic changes to the environment are not land ethically wrong. The main principle of land ethics in *Almanac* is, "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" (pp.224). Truth be told, this principle has lost some relevance at present. J. Baird Callicott tried to resurrect the land ethics with a new slightly altered formulation, the one which we can endorse, "A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

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