

# The Land Ethic

# Leopold's "Ethical Sequence"



Aldo Leopold  
1887-1948

“The first ethics dealt with **the relation between individuals**. [...] Later accretions dealt with **the relation between the individual and society**. [...] There is as yet no ethic dealing with **man's relation to land** and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. [...] The land ethic simply **enlarges the boundaries of the community** to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

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**Moral Extensionism:** At first I value only myself. Then I extend my moral community to include my family, then my neighbors, then all human beings, then animals, then plants, and finally the dirt itself.

**Is this what Leopold is doing?**

# Discuss with your Neighbors

**What has value?**

(...for Leopold? ...for you?)

(How did it acquire value?)

(Why is it valuable?)

**Where does value come from?**

## Leopold's "Land Ethic" (1949)

“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.”

## Getting to the Land Ethic

“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.”

– Aldo Leopold, “The Outlook”

# The Alhambra (Granada, Spain)



# Kinds of Value

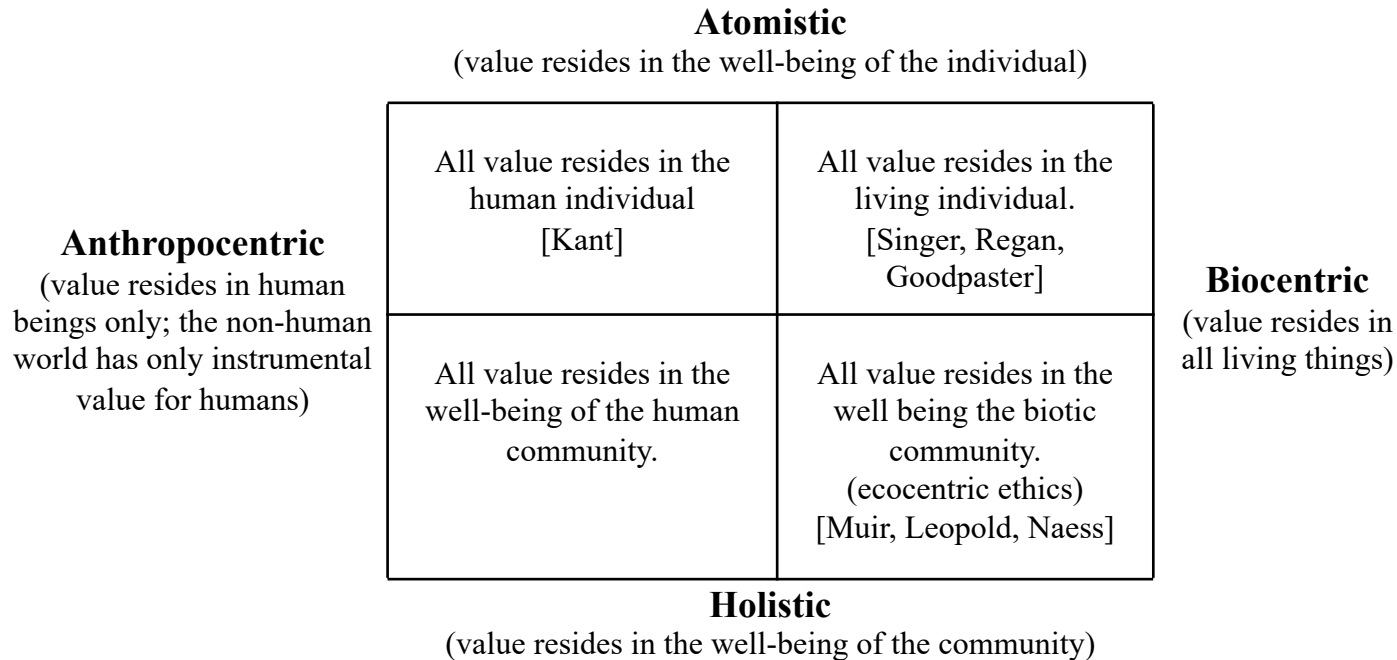
## How we value X:

- final (to value X for its own sake)
- instrumental (to value X for the sake of something else)

## The source of X's value:

- intrinsic (X's value comes from within)
- extrinsic (X's value comes from something else)

# The Moral Value Square



**Final:** to value X for its own sake

**Instrumental:** to value X for the sake of something else.

**Intrinsic:** X's value comes from within.

**Extrinsic:** X's value comes from something else.



# Callicott on the Land Ethic (1987)

## Leopold's Land Ethic in Twelve Easy Steps

1. Early responses to Leopold
2. Moral progress (in practice, in consciousness)
3. The origin of ethics
4. Moral considerability and community
5. Elton's biotic community
6. Conceptual foundations of the land ethics
7. Moral extensionism: I → Other
8. Moral extensionism: Atomism → Holism
9. Ecology
10. Practical principles of the land ethic
11. Fairness and human ethics
12. Land ethic as “concentric circles of obligations”

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 1. Early responses to Leopold

... were not helpful.

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## 2. Moral progress (in practice, in consciousness)

The Land ethic as the next step in our moral progress

(see 7-8: Moral extensionism)

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## 3. The origin of ethics

Does ethics rest on ...

Divine Commandment?

Social Contract?

Pre-Rational State?

“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 the community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).”

[Leopold, “Land Ethic”]

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 4. Moral considerability and community

“The scope and specific content of ethics will reflect both the perceived boundaries and actual structure or organization of a cooperative community or society. *Ethics and society or community are correlative.*”

[Callicott, “Conceptual Foundations”]

“The Land ethic simply enlarges the boundary of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

[Leopold, “Land Ethic”]

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 5. Elton's biotic community

[Charles Elton (1900-1991), *Animal Ecology* (1927)]

How are human communities similar with biotic communities?

How are they different?

“A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it..”

[Leopold, “Land Ethic”]

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 6. Conceptual foundations

Three scientific cornerstones to the land ethic:

**Evolutionary Theory** (diachronic): links ethics and social organization.

**Ecological Theory** (synchronic): links human and non-human nature into one community.

**Copernican Astronomy**: emphasizes the earth as an island of life in otherwise desolate space.

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 7-8. Moral extensionism

Traditional moral theory is based on the individual, and the task is to move from egoism to altruism:

I → Other

Leopold's **ecological awareness** shifted him to a holistic ethical perspective

Atomism → Holism



# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 9. Ecology

“Ecology is the study of the relationships of organisms to one another and to the elemental environment.”

[Callicott, “Conceptual Foundations”]

Ecology emphasizes *relationships* between individuals over the individuals themselves, defining individuals in terms of their relations.

Two competing **models for ecology**:

Elton: “community model”: individuals as members

Forbes: “organism model”: individuals as cells

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## 10. Practical principles of the land ethic

- Do not cause extinctions.
- Be careful when introducing exotics and domestics into new territory.
- Be careful when spending natural capital (e.g., topsoil).
- Be careful when damming rivers.
- Be very careful in dealing with predators (not interfering with them).

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## 11. Fairness and human ethics

“Trophic [nutritional] asymmetries constitute the kernel of the biotic community. It seems unjust, unfair. But that is how the economy of nature is organized....”

[Callicott, “Conceptual Foundations”]

Tom Regan’s charge of “Environmental Facism”

# Callicott on the Land Ethic

## 12. Land ethic as concentric circles of obligation

“Our prior moral sensibilities and obligations...remain operative and pre-emptive. [...] Each emergent, and larger, social unit is layered over the more primitive, and intimate, ones.”

“Ethics evolve because they contribute to the inclusive fitness of the carriers.”

“Ethics are grounded in instinctive feeling – love, sympathy, respect – not in self-conscious calculating intelligence.”

[Callicott, “Conceptual Foundations”]