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The Land Ethic for "A More - Than - Human World"

Ufuk Özdağ

> ***When God-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls of his household whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence. This hanging involved no question of propriety. The girls were property…The ethical structure of that day covered wives, but had not yet been extended to human chattels. (237)***

With these opening lines in his famous essay "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold, nature writer, scientist, and philosopher, presents evidence for his conviction that our ethical systems have, indeed, evolved since the past 3000 years. Yet Leopold complains that progress in ethics has, so far, involved only "the relation between individuals" and "the relation between individual and society." In his words, "[t]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus' slave girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations" (238).

Today, in modern environmental thinking, Leopold's greatness lies in his endeavors to move beyond traditional utilitarian Western ethics and in his breaking the codes of meaning concerning man/land relations. In "The Land Ethic," Leopold states,

> All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. […] The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. […] a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. (239-240)

Despite such an early formulation of a new ethical behavior to include the land within the boundaries of community, one still cannot internalize, in the wake of a new millennium, the Leopoldian proposition of an expanded community. Within the ongoing historical complexities that shape man's relation to his environment, land is still "the other." Leopold was, perhaps, the first environmentalist who was highly critical of the otherness of land in human estimation. He could, indeed, foresee what would become of the land by conferring value to it on account of human interests. Thus, he set to the task of establishing an intrinsic value of the land and of extending our sense of community to non-human nature, which, for him, was "an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity" (239). With his observation that all ethics so far dealt with "the relation between individuals" and "between the individual and society," he was, in fact, being critical of anthropocentrism in the field of ethics, and proposed the idea of an expanded community that included the land, which would, in turn, level off hierarchies in man/land relations, and lead to the development of an ecological perspective.

More than 50 years after the publication of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, Western tradition still lacks a wide-ranging environmental perspective in spite of the unprecedented rate the environmental crisis has reached. The reason is not that the environmental crisis is no concern of the peoples of the world. On the contrary, there is growing interest in the need to save the environment. The inhibiting factor for the emergence of a strong environmental perspective, instead, is the ongoing anthropocentric bias of Western thought. As J.Baird Callicott, a close follower of Leopoldian ethics, posits,

> Since Western moral philosophy has been overwhelmingly if not entirely anthropocentric—i.e., focused exclusively on human welfare and the intrinsic value of human beings (or human experiences)—the environment enters into ethics, upon such an approach to the environmental ethics, only as the arena of human interaction. The environment is treated as, so to speak, a value-neutral vector between human moral agent and human moral patient. (2)

Amidst the soaring abuse of nature, wildlife destruction and species extinction rates, it is, indeed, surprising to see the continuing reluctance of environmental ethicists to give moral value (or intrinsic value) to the environment. Their stance is to confer instrumental value to nature—one

that takes the human as the reference point. Whereas those environmental ethicists in line with Leopold’s philosophy, a minority, emphasize giving "intrinsic value" to nature and its species, and face the difficult task of legitimating the rights of the biota[1] to an audience who believe that the world exists for human sake only.

As a scientist, Aldo Leopold insisted on the "rights" of the "biotic communities." He had attended the Yale School of Forestry and had gotten his education in the narrow utilitarian philosophy of Gifford Pinchot who believed that "the first duty of the human race is to control the earth it lives upon" (qtd. in Stewart 132). Then Leopold realized the inadequacy of such a training. For him, a utilitarian approach to the environment was an inadequate theory in giving an end to the abuse of nature. Combining his knowledge of the science of ecology with the holistic philosophy of the Russian writer P. D. Ouspensky[2], he sought to reveal the rights of the biota which he regarded as an integral whole in which human beings participate as "plain member and citizen."

Contrary to the historical errors in Western moral and intellectual tradition as regards moral value in the biota, environmental sciences have taken a radically different path. Starting from the earliest studies in the fields of botany, biology, geology and ecology, environmental sciences have found value in the physical world regardless of human concerns. Barry Commoner’s first Law of Ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else" (qtd. in Rueckert 108), indicates that there is no absolute divide between humankind and the complex structure of the environment. In this network of interacting and interrelated elements, where all things are linked through water, air and soil, the ongoing Aristotelian idea that the entire hierarchy of organisms exists for the sake of humankind loses ground. Within this ecocentric perspective, humankind becomes a member of the organic whole, and not its dominator.

Despite the long established organic link between human and non-human worlds as a fact of the science of ecology, the "overwhelmingly anthropocentric" stance of Western moral and intellectual traditions as

[1] The term "biotic right" appears in "The Land Ethic," and refers to the rights of "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land," to "continued existence in a natural state."

[2] For an explanation of Ouspensky’s holistic philosophy, see Stewart, Frank. *A Natural History of Nature Writing*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1995. 147.

regards man/land relations inhibits an understanding of humankind's proper role in the world. According to the claims of the various sciences, the universe is 15 billion years old, the Earth is 4 billion years old, and humankind is only 2 million years old. In the words of the ecotheologian, Sallie McFague, "On the 'clock' of the universe, human existence appears a few seconds before midnight" (92). Yet, because of his moral traditions that set him apart from the rest of the non-human world, humankind cannot take action to save his world which evolved in billions of years. Still, it must be remembered that the Western intellectual tradition is by no means totally nature ignorant, that from the earliest Greek philosophers onwards, there have been important figures whose ideas on non-human nature could have been rich sources for an ecological perspective to develop. Yet, such views on the environment and species largely went unnoticed since it was not possible to anticipate the environmental degradation of the days to come.

Thus, the growing environmental crisis is, ultimately, a crisis of Western thought—of perceiving man as privileged, and of perceiving nature in the service of man. This image of nature as commodity, constructed by various philosophical, religious, and scientific attitudes over the centuries, is embedded in us so deeply that we are rarely aware of its falsity.

Now, the growing concern to establish an environmental perspective in the West has finally brought into the open those hidden forces that legitimized man's mastery over and exploitation of nature for centuries. Studies by environmental philosophers, nature ethicists, ecologically informed scientists and eco-theologians reveal some of the most fundamental causes that made nature the "other" and created the adverse conditions for an ecological perspective to develop. For some, the primary cause is the Judeo-Christian tradition, for some others, it is grounded in the Greek philosophy from which religion borrowed ideas on man's domination of nature. Still others regard the dualistic, mechanistic world views of Bacon, Descartes and Newton as the most fundamental cause for the devaluation of nature, holding that the conception of nature as mindless matter in the 17th century legitimized its use for human benefit.[3] Collectively, all these studies have made such a great impact that now one has to reconceptualize the most basic assumptions of the dominant Western tradition.

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[3] For a critique of Bacon, Descartes and Newton as regards the environment, see Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993; and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

As regards the charges that the Judeo-Christian tradition led to the current ecological crisis, Lynn White’s much discussed article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" has played a major role. In this article, White traces the devaluation of nature in the West to the basic teachings in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, and especially to those verses in Genesis (1:26-30), that give man dominion over nature. In White’s words, "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes" (9). White argues that man’s practice of dominating nature, "in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects," was induced by Christianity’s extermination of pagan animism, and concludes that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (9). The impact of this single work by Lynn White has been tremendous. It did offend many, and yet also inspired many. Today, in the emerging field of ecotheology in the West, there is groundbreaking study on the relation of religion to ecology through a re-reading of the scriptures. The studies are multifaceted and promise unique contribution to the development of an earth friendly ethic in the future.

Nevertheless, there are scholars in the field of environmental ethics who bypass the charges against religion and declare that "environmentally offensive" attitudes took root during the pre-Christian era, in classical Greek philosophy, and especially in Aristotelian philosophy, which defined the whole natural world in terms of its benefit to human beings and thus had an enormous impact on Western thought. Aristotle’s statements, such as the one in *Politics* 1.8, "if Nature does nothing imperfect or in vain it must have made all of these things—animals and plants—for the sake of humans" (qtd. in Goldin and Kilroe 28), led to a conception of reality that hindered an ecological perspective to develop. Indeed, the environmental ethicist, Eugene C. Hardgrove, argues that "Religion […] has played a much less fundamental role" (15). Hardgrove states "[m]ost of the environmentally offensive ideas in western religion originated not in religion but in Western philosophy […] religion, by continually borrowing from philosophy, was itself victimized by it" (15). According to Hardgrove, what made the Genesis story "environmentally troublesome" was the interpretations of it by the church philosophers in the late Middle Ages in the light of Aristotelian philosophy that declared "the purpose of the world was the service of man" (16). Christopher Manes, too, in his article "Nature and Silence," draws attention to the medieval period in the formation of man’s mastery over nature. Manes lists a number of reasons for the silencing of nature, among which "literacy" and "Christian exegesis" played a major role. As Manes

explains, while "alphabetic writing" induced the idea that "only humans can act as speaking subjects," Christian exegesis "swept all things into the net of divine meaning," causing natural entities to lose their value and autonomous existence. Manes states,

> The Great Chain of Being, exegesis, literacy, and a complex skein of institutional and intellectual developments have, in effect, created a fictionalized, or more accurately put, fraudulent version of the species Homo sapiens: the character "Man," what Muir calls "Lord Man." And this "Man" has become the sole subject, speaker, and rational sovereign of the natural order in the story told by humanism since the Renaissance. (21)

Whether it came from religious sources that gave man dominion over nature, or from philosophical sources that secured the hierarchical ordering of species with man at the top, during the 17th century all the conceptual and moral background was ready for the mechanical view of the world to emerge. This new structural model for human pre-eminence took shape in the 17th century with Bacon, Descartes and Newton.

Bacon's aim in writing *New Atlantis* (1621) was to lead the way to the domination of nature through science. For him, the entire physical world (landscape, animals, plants) could be manipulated for human benefit. With his new logic, non-human species lost their autonomous existence and all life forms became an object of scientific study. Therefore, Bacon "lies at the germinal core of the intense anthropocentric orientation characteristic of our modern age" (Oelschlaeger 84). With the publication of Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1636), the mechanistic world view that Bacon had envisioned passed into effect. Descartes's convictions that nature is intelligible through science, that advancement in science is possible through the analytical method, and that animals, as they lack reason, are soulless machines all paved the way for the exploitation of nature and its species. Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1687) furthered the domination of the natural world. As described by Merchant, "[t]he mathematization of the world picture presented in the *Principia*, based on the dualism between the passivity of matter and the externality of force, epitomized the success of the mechanical analysis of nature. Mechanism eliminated from the description of nature concepts of spatial hierarchy, value, purpose, harmony, quality, and form central to the older organic description of nature, leaving material and

efficient causes—matter and force" (277). This radically anthropocentric perspective of nature, in the 17th Century, as "machine" legitimized man’s hegemony over nature, and prepared the conceptual basis for its willful destruction in the days to come.

Today, some environmentalists point at the necessity to destroy the dualistic, mechanistic world views of Bacon, Descartes and Newton to give an end to the exploitative attitudes towards nature. For them this is absolutely necessary before there is irreversible damage to the ecosystem. They rely on a number of scientific proposals that challenge the long-established mechanistic conception of nature. As Callicot explains, "[q]uantum theory, relativity and the other revolutionary developments of postmodern science are said to have invalidated the Cartesian distinction between the subjective and objective domains" (132). Significantly, long before the advances in postmodern science, Leopold, as a scientist, had articulated the "interdependence between the complex structure of the land and its smooth functioning as an energy unit" (253-4). Contrary to the Cartesian, Newtonian concept of land as inert matter, land, for Leopold, "is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals" (253).

In the essays in *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold refers to all the hidden forces—religious, philosophical, mechanical—that inhibited the emergence of a land ethic over the ages. In the "Foreword to *Sand County Almanac*," Leopold posits, "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" (xviii). In "Song of the Gavilan," he refers to the narrow Baconian, Cartesian, Newtonian world view that turn nature into mindless matter. For Leopold, the Cartesian "mechanized man" is only able to see parts and not wholes, and hence comes the "discords of misuse." Thus, Leopold celebrates the fact that "Science has not yet arrived on the Gavilan":

> There are men charged with the duty of examining the construction of the plants, animals, and soils which are the instruments of the great orchestra. These men are called professors. Each selects one instrument and spends his life taking it apart and describing its strings and sounding boards. This process of dismemberment is called research. The place for dismemberment is called a university. [...] Professors serve science and

> science serves progress. It serves progress so well that many of the more intricate instruments are stepped upon and broken in the rush to spread progress to all backward lands. [...] If the professor is able to classify each instrument before it is broken, he is well content. (162-3)

In "On a Monument to the Pigeon," Leopold questions Aristotelian hierarchies and embraces a biocentric perspective that recognizes, at base, "kinship" with non-human nature:

> It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise. (116-7)

Rejecting all the basic assumptions of Western thought, Leopold formulates his land ethic in which man is no longer the sole purpose of creation, but a "plain member and citizen" of the biotic community. Declaring that "the trend of evolution is to elaborate and diversify the biota," he confers "biotic right" to each member. In his philosophy, species have rights regardless of their use to man because each has a function in nature's scheme: each is indispensable for "the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community" (262). This holistic sense finds its best expression in "The Round River." Leopold states, "[t]he outstanding scientific discovery of the twentieth century is not television, or radio, but rather the complexity of the land organism [...] If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering" (190). Following from this, man has no right to disrupt "the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community" for his economic advantage, thinking nature is for human sake. Besides, as Leopold posits, "Of the 22,000 higher plants and animals native to Wisconsin, it is doubtful whether more than 5 per cent can be sold, fed, eaten, or otherwise put to economic use" (246).

In A *Sand County Almanac*, to counteract the old religious, philosophical, and mechanistic forces that hinder an ethical relationship to the land, Leopold acknowledges a new theology that questions man’s mastery over nature in the scriptures, a new philosophy that confers value to nonhuman entities independent of the interests of man, and anticipates a new postmodern science that affirms interconnectedness of all things. In view of the new paradigms introduced by Leopold, one can finally expect an ethical relationship with the land. Leopold develops his ethical theory in the last part of the book, in the section titled "The Land Ethic." In the parts preceding "The Land Ethic," he aims at opening our eyes to biodiversity in "a more-than-human world,"[4] a topic lacking in the education of civilized man, and he does this with profound ecological literacy. In "Prairie Birthday," for instance, the reference is to innumerable "wild plants coming into first bloom" during Spring and Summer ("In June as many as a dozen species may burst their buds on a single day. No man can heed all of these anniversaries; no man can ignore all of them"). First collecting and displaying data, and then formulating his land ethic, Leopold, indeed, takes a scientific approach to reflect his biocentric vision. He couples his scientific method with a deep love of nature and its species. The result is a "gift" to the mechanized man of the twenty-first century for it forever changes the way he thinks about the land.

[4] I borrow the term "a more-than-human world" from David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. 7.

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