

FINDING ANSWERS IN THE AMBIGUITY OF “THE LAND ETHIC”

HAYLEY SHACKLEFORD

In his essay “The Land Ethic,” from *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold confronts the weaknesses in the common approach to conserving the environment. His proposed solution is no less than the development of an entire new branch of ethics to guide humanity’s relationship with the natural world. It is a big idea. Leopold carefully explains every aspect of his reasoning to us, from a brief history of ethics, to what it means to live in a community with the land, to why it is necessary to do so. But in the end, when we are waiting for him to break down his moral code explicitly, he vaguely concludes: “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” (224–225). We may come to the end of the essay in total agreement with Leopold but still not understand what we should do. What specific things should we do differently if our actions are to be ethically just? The confusion is further complicated by Leopold’s claim that “the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood” (205). If we cannot understand our environment, how can we know what behavior will preserve its integrity?

Leopold often emphasizes in “The Land Ethic” how hard it is to understand the workings of nature and our role in them. He describes the land—the plants, animals, water, and soil of our world—as “the community clock” (205), a mechanism, or an “energy circuit” (217). Putting it in these terms highlights the land’s delicate, interdependent organization. The biotic community, he writes, “is a tangle of chains so complex as to seem disorderly, yet the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure” (215). Like a clock, each tiny piece performs a vital function. Tinkering with a clock is a job that can only be done effectively by a skilled and experienced craftsman. But, as Leopold points out, humans have tinkered with the land to the effect of radical changes to its structure. The clumsy changes man makes to his environment “have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen” (218). Since we only see the cause and effect of our actions in hindsight, we cannot know with confidence that the actions we take toward the land today will turn out to be ethically right or wrong. Leopold warns us: “Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous, because they are devoid of critical understanding either of the land or of economic land-use” (225). When we don’t understand what we do, we’re at risk of destroying the integrity of the biotic community. We may even destroy ourselves. It is this fearsome uncertainty that creates our need for more concrete instructions from Leopold, but he cannot give us a list of rules because of that same uncertainty. Leopold doesn’t know how to fix the biotic

clock. Without a deep understanding of its mechanics, any rules he might lay out could just as easily result in disaster. But then what kind of ethic can we have?

Ultimately Leopold is asking us, since we cannot know how to live in perfect harmony within the environment, to try to limit our effect on it. It is there in the word “conservation” itself: conserve the land. Don’t let it go to waste; keep it from changing. Leopold understands that change inevitably occurs within the energy circuit, “but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life” (216). He sees a balance that happens with gradual, natural change, and this is one of the system’s strengths. He acknowledges that degree of flexibility in the structure as he writes: “When a change occurs in one part of the circuit, many other parts must adjust themselves to it” (216). The trouble with our role in this perfectly engineered machine is that we are increasingly able to make enormous changes to the circuit very quickly. In Leopold’s time, the process was beginning to accelerate. The Industrial Revolution and World Wars brought humanity into the modern era. Leopold saw that man was now able “to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope” (217). Looking at where we are now, sixty-four years later, that potential has increased exponentially. How much more complex and unknowable, then, are the ultimate consequences of our modern way of life on the land? Is Leopold asking us to abandon it all and return to the wilderness?

No, he is calling for a philosophical shift rather than specific actions. Early in the essay, Leopold mentions the Mosaic Decalogue, better known as The Ten Commandments (202), and the Golden Rule (203) as examples of ethics. Both ethics guide our relationships with individuals and society, but there is a distinction between them that illuminates what Leopold’s land ethic is intended to be. The Ten Commandments is exactly what its name suggests: a declaration of ten specific moral rules that are literally set in stone. The Golden Rule, on the other hand, is a single guiding principle of reciprocity: treat other people the way you would like to be treated. While the Ten Commandments ask only to be obeyed, the Golden Rule requires active reflection. To know how to treat others, we must think about feelings and consequences and give true consideration and respect to another human being. There is no point-by-point instruction set handed down by a higher authority. Instead, it is a deeply personal attitude and way of thinking that can shift and evolve with different situations.

Leopold intends for his land ethic to be developed in that same spirit. Throughout the essay, he stresses that, “The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as an emotional process” (225), and it “reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land” (221). In contrast, he complains that the conservation efforts of his day are little more than a formula: “obey the law, vote right, join some organizations, and practice what conservation is profitable on your own land; the government will do the rest” (207). For Leopold, such a formula is too simple to be effective. Meaningful progress is accomplished in a different way:

No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial. (209–210)

Leopold wants to change humanity’s soul right down to its foundations. Rather than having his essay give us a “trivial” list of “easy” steps we can take to conserve the environment, he wants to inspire us to take the land community into our hearts, the same way we try to take the human community into our hearts. Leopold believes the land deserves the same considerate treatment we give to our loved ones: “It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to the land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value” (223). We humans often do not understand each other and can easily hurt one another, but we try to bridge that gap in understanding with thoughtfulness. When a conflict arises, we reflect on it, try to see what went wrong, and use its lessons in our future interactions. What we should not do is use or manipulate each other unthinkingly. We can apply these same principles to the land community. There are things about the land that we don’t fully comprehend, and that ignorance can result in negative consequences. But with the attitude of the land ethic, those situations can become teachable moments that yield deeper insight and better ways of living. Human history is already full of such moments we can study. Leopold asks: “Is history taught in this spirit? It will be, once the concept of land as a community really penetrates our intellectual life” (207).

So even once we understand why Leopold’s land ethic is so vague, another question remains: has it penetrated our intellectual life? Does the essay succeed in communicating Leopold’s subtle concepts? It’s easy to assume that the best way to convey an idea is to say it directly and clearly, but Leopold works in a different way. We end “The Land Ethic” with questions still stuck in our heads. How do we make the land ethic a reality? How do we know that our actions won’t create ecological disasters? These questions are seeds of thought that Leopold planted. So we keep thinking about them and, as we do, the seeds grow in our minds. That is what Leopold would call “the stirrings of an ecological conscience” (221). And that was what Leopold wanted: not to give us easy answers or tell us what to do, but to inspire generations of conservationists to think deeply about our relationship with the land.

WORKS CITED

Leopold, Aldo. “The Land Ethic.” *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford UP, 1949. 201-26. Print.

HAYLEY SHACKLEFORD is a Neuroscience and Behavior major in the School of General Studies. When she's not studying, she enjoys kung fu, karaoke, and supporting Chelsea Football Club.