

Thoughts about Teaching the Land Ethic  
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What is Ethics?

Ethics help us to decide how we ought to live, what a “good” life is, and how we should behave. An ethical statement (a) expresses a value (rather than a fact), and (b) is “prescriptive” (rather than “descriptive”). An ethical statement expresses how the world *should* be (I *should* tell the truth; we *shouldn't* pollute). A factual statement, on the other hand, expresses how things *are* (I told a lie yesterday; people do pollute).

In a broad sense, an ethic helps us to identify what is valuable or good; what we want to do with our lives; how we want to organize and prioritize our lives in order to achieve a meaningful existence.

In a narrow sense, an ethic is a guideline for behavior; an ethic (or set of ethical commitments) will help us to decide what we should do in various circumstances; an ethic that is shared allows us to coordinate our behaviors (especially when such behaviors effect others). In this sense, an ethic is a kind of “code of conduct” that regulates our (collective) behaviors.

An environmental ethic expresses our values toward nature and guides our behaviors with respect to the environment. Because many of our behaviors “spill over” into a public sphere (either by effecting other people directly, or by effecting the environment), the prescriptions offered by an environmental ethic can be quite extensive (emphasizing our responsibilities, not just our freedoms).

- “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.” (p. 202)
- “That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.” (p. viii)

The Ethical Sequence:

Leopold notes that our sense of ethics (as cooperative mechanisms or “symbioses”) has undergone significant changes in scope.

- “This extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequences may be described in ecological as well as in philosophical terms. 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.” (p. 202)

At first, ethics were concerned primarily with regulating our behaviors toward each other (the relationships between individuals). However, this did not include all individual humans. The opening passages from “The Land Ethic” recounts the story of how in the past some humans were not viewed as “people” but as “property” and so they weren’t treated with the same respect as other humans.

Second, an ethic was applied to regulating our behaviors toward society in general (integrating the individual to the community). The sort of ethical commitment we feel to our community, state, or country is an example of this. To regulate one’s behavior so as to respect the well-being of one’s country is an example of the individual-community stage of ethical change.

The third step in this sequence – the step that Leopold wants to see taken – is to have ethics guide the relationship between humans and the land. Leopold believes that we still regard the land as property, and hence we do not treat it in ethical ways (only in “economic” ways). He says that treating the land in ethical ways is both possible and necessary. It is *possible* in the sense that, thanks to evolution, we are equipped with the capacity to extend our moral sensitivities (our moral “responsiveness”) to communities, including the biotic community. And it is *necessary* in the sense that in order for the continued existence of both humanity and the land community, humans must begin treating the land community with respect (i.e., not as a commodity).

- “There 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.” (p. 203).

- “The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment [the human-land relationship] is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity.” (p. 203)

### Community & Citizenship:

Part of what makes it possible for the extension of ethics to be applied to the land community itself is our deep understanding that we are members of a larger community. We accept this readily with our human communities: membership in our community is what prompts us to regulate our behavior toward our fellow citizens and toward human communities themselves. It is only a matter of extension to identify ourselves as members of the biotic community, and so extend ethical consideration to it.

- “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 to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for).” (p. 239)
- “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.” (p. 204)

Once we develop this new understanding of being a member of the land-community (thanks, in part, to the lessons learned from ecology and other “holistic” sciences), we are prompted to act in ethical ways out of respect for our fellow citizens as well as out of respect for the community itself.

- “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.” (p. 204)

### Ecological Conscience:

What ties together all of the above is the very important idea that our sense of ethical obligation depends on a felt sense of connection with our larger human and biotic communities, not just on an “intellectual appreciation” that we are members of such communities. This “felt” connection is what philosophers call the “moral sentiments” (these are “gut level” responses that we feel; these responses are in some respect involuntary or “immediate”).

- “The evolution of a land ethic is an intellectual as well as emotional process.” (p. 225-226)

So, in addition to intellectual understanding, Leopold suggests that an ethical relation to the land-community also relies on these felt moral sentiments, including the notions of love, respect, admiration. These moral sentiments are indicators of our basic value commitments; they are also essential to triggering action.

- “No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions.” (p. 209-210)
- “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. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense.” (p. 223)

Collectively, these “moral sentiments” (our loyalties, affections, sympathies, etc.) are what Leopold calls our “ecological conscience” and they can be triggered in response to the land-community. So, we can understand the ecological conscience as a kind of internal ethical guideline that prompts us to recognize the ethical obligations we have toward our fellow humans and our human communities, but also the ethical obligations we have toward biotic communities and its non-human members.

- “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.” (p. 221)

This leads to Leopold’s famous statement regarding the Land Ethic:

- “The ‘key-log’ that must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. 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.” (p. 224-225)

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Possible Questions to Inspire Class Activities

What Is Ethics?

Ethics are about values. Ethical statements express what you value. What are some things that you value? Your family, your friends, your house, your school?

Do you value freedom, trust, love, friendship? Why do you value these things?

Do you value clean water, clean air, safe and healthy food? Why do you value these things?

Do you value animals, trees, streams, forests, lakes, oceans? Why do you value these things?

Another way to think about values is to ask yourself: how would you feel if these things were gone? Would you feel disappointed? Angry? Scared? Sad? Frustrated?

Ethics are also about right and wrong actions. Can you think of some examples of ethically right actions? Can you think of some examples of ethically wrong actions?

What is it about these actions that make them right or wrong?

Is an action right or wrong only in relation to how it effects you?

Can an action be right or wrong in relation to how it effects other people?

Can an action be right or wrong in relation to how it effects our country?

Can an action be right or wrong in relation to how it effects the natural environment?

The Ethical Sequence:

Our behaviors are guided by a kind of “social ethic” that tells us what is (and what is not) acceptable treatment of others. A social ethic helps to explain what is an ethical behavior and what is not. It also serves to identify who or what we value.

In the past, not everyone living in our country was free. Some people were treated as slaves: they were thought of as property, and weren’t given the same rights or freedoms as others. Fortunately, our society no longer thinks slavery is an acceptable practice.

How is our behavior toward other people guided by our social ethic? What values are expressed by this ethic?

Is it ethical to hurt others? Is it ethical to tell lies? Is it ethical to steal?

Is it ethical to help others? Is it ethical to tell the truth? Is it ethical to fulfill your promises?

Does our “social ethic” apply to all humans? In the past, our country did not give the same rights to all people. For example, at one time women and African Americans were not given the right to vote or to own property. Now, however, women and African Americans are valued equally as fellow citizens, and have the same rights and freedoms as everyone else.

Do you think it is ethically right to treat people differently just because they have a different skin color than you?

If they are rich or poor? If they speak a different language? If they have a physical and/or learning disabilities?

Do you think that our shared social ethic can be extended to include ethical consideration of non-human animals and the natural world?

Do we already include non-human animals and the natural environment in our ethical system? If so, how?

Can you think of some examples where our treatment of animals is recognized as part of our ethics?

Can you think of some examples where our treatment of the natural environment is guided by our ethics?

## Community & Citizenship:

You are probably a member of a lot of communities. Can you name some communities to which you belong?

Some of these communities might include: your family, your neighborhood, your classroom, your sports team, your Cub Scout group, your church, your state, and your country. Who else belongs to these communities besides yourself?

The state of Wisconsin is a community. We are all members of this community. Part of being members of this community is to recognize that we are not alone: there are lots of us, and we play lots of different roles.

What role do you play in the community? A student? A teacher? A little brother? A big sister?  
What other roles do people play in Wisconsin? A police officer? A farmer? A truck driver? A nurse?

Do you think that all of these roles are important? Think about the various ways that you depend upon other people in your community. Why is it important to have fire fighters in your community? Why is it important to have teachers in your community? What role do *you* want to play in your community?

What would happen if one of these roles is removed? How would this impact your community?

You also belong to various “natural” communities. What are some of these natural communities? What kinds of natural communities can you think of that are nearby?

Who or what are some of the members of these natural communities?  
Can you name some animals that are part of these communities? What role do they play?  
Can you name some plants that are members of these communities? What role do they play?

What would happen to the community if one of these plants or animals is removed?

## Ecological Conscience:

The “moral sentiments” are feelings or emotions that are both positive and negative.

An example of a positive moral sentiment is the joy and happiness that we experience when we see others who are happy. What are some other examples of positive feelings?

When we get a positive feeling from watching other people (who are themselves happy), do they have to be family members, or do you also feel joy for people you’ve never met?

Can/do you experience happy feelings in response to non-human animals?  
Can/do you experience happy feelings in response to nature in general?

There are also negative moral sentiments (such as frustration or anger) that are triggered when we see bad things happen in the world. What are some other examples of negative feelings? When do you experience these negative feelings?

How do you feel when you see someone else getting hurt?  
Do you have to know the person who is being hurt to feel sympathy and/or empathy for them?  
How would you feel if you saw someone destroying or vandalizing your best friend’s house?

How do you feel when the natural environment is harmed or destroyed?  
How do you feel when you see litter, forest fires, oil spills, poaching, vandalism?  
How do you feel when you see water pollution and air pollution?

Can you think of other examples of how the natural environment is harmed by human actions? Do you think we should try to stop causing this harm? How might we try to reduce our impact on the environment? How do you feel when you recycle, when you plant a tree, when you pick up litter?