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The Consequentialistic Side of Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT: There are two principles often found in environmental ethics – self-realisation and environmental preservation. I argue that these are two logically independent principles. An analysis of its essential features shows that the preservation principle should be based on actual consequentialism, for it is only the actual effects of our actions and policies that are important to the main issues of environmental preservation. Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is found to be an example of a consequentialistic theory of environmental preservation.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocentrism, consequentialism, deep ecology, environmental preservation, land ethic.

1. SELF-REALISATION

In *Deep Ecology*, Devall and Sessions identify two main principles that underlie their position:

1. *Self-realisation*: Persons will grow and mature through a new and deeper understanding of their place in the natural world; and
2. *Biocentric Equality*: A denial of the privileged status of human life. This principle leads to a justification for the preservation and restoration of the natural world.¹

Self-realisation, as understood in *Deep Ecology*, begins with finding one’s ‘sense of place’ within a particular bioregion. Most humans are unaware of the complex system of water, air, animals, plants, and soil that lies beyond their cities, suburbs, and farms. They identify with their neighborhood, workplace, and schools; to them, this is home. But if you fly in a hundred mile circle over most communities, there are vast tracts of ‘unimproved’ forests, hills, and valleys. Having a ‘sense of place’ is a feeling of being equal and united to all the other entities (both living and non-living) of one’s natural surroundings in a way similar to the sense of community we have with those persons with whom we live, work, and play.

How does one achieve this unity with nature? John Muir's travels in the Sierra Nevada coupled with his conservation efforts provide a prime example. First, one needs to identify a bioregion; this is a fairly vague concept. The natural world is not a sum of distinct bioregions. Roughly, one bioregion is separated from another by geographic barriers and climatic differences such that there is a significant difference in their ecological characteristics. A bioregion might be defined by the range of a particular animal group including the surrounding area that affects its sources of food and water. Humans are not actually confined to any particular bioregion, since we may travel to any land surface in the world. Because our air and water pollution carry all over the world, the planet could be thought of as a single bioregion. However, adopting an area of a few hundred square miles is useful. We are so far removed from the situation from which we originally evolved in ancient tropical Africa that we are not in a position to reenter the natural world at the place and time of our remote ancestors in the way that wolves could be reintroduced to the Northern Rockies. Therefore, at best, humans may designate and adopt a bioregion as their own – a portal to begin their reentry and reintegration with the natural world.

The study of maps is a good place to begin. Topographic maps show terrain and watersheds, and distinguish forested areas from open spaces. Ownership maps distinguish public lands from private lands. I like to study maps at home beforehand, carefully planning a drive and a hike to explore a particularly interesting area. Go beyond paths that have been identified by the forest service or such agencies as a 'trail' (not to be confused with trails identified on topographical maps that are not developed for public use). Leave these for tourists and YUPPIES who cannot figure out where they are going or how to get back. At their worst, trails are paved with asphalt with little bridges over any obstacle. These trails are a means of beginning to become acquainted with your adopted bioregion; however, they are designed to show you what someone else thinks you ought to see. They often circumvent the clearcuts, the erosion, and the most beautiful areas, too! An intimate acquaintance with your bioregion requires getting beyond the heavily traveled trails to areas that become your own merely by your presence.

These are only the first steps on the way to the reintegration of yourself with the natural world. After becoming one with your adopted bioregion, you will be able to put your maps and tools aside. It is not easy. Aim for one hundred days a year. Something near that is a threshold where entering the wild seems like coming home and coming home starts to seem like visiting some strange new world. There is a point at which you begin to ignore the insect bites, the smoky campfires, and the scratches and itches from the brush. You will walk the elk

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trails with the consciousness of the ancient ones, for a time forgetting that there is a civilised world on the other side of the mountain.

2. BIOCENTRIC EQUALITY:

Biocentric equality is based on the denial of anthropocentrism – the thesis that all value must be ultimately grounded in value for humans. It seems that a universe without human-like beings is a world without the concepts of good and bad, right and wrong. The ‘law of the jungle’ makes no provision for ethics. Predation of the weak and helpless by the strong, even the occasional acts of cannibalism of parents destroying their young are not wrong in a pure state of nature. Callicott writes ‘there is no value without a valuer’, and humans and human-like beings are the only valuers in the abstract sense of evaluation in relation to ethics. But, as Callicott also observes, from that we are the only valuers, it does not follow that humans are solely the locus of all value.²

Biocentric equality might mean several different positions. One might begin, like Taylor, and identify each living thing as an individual and then argue that each has equal value.³ The holistic position of Leopold’s land ethic begins with the ecosystem. Individuals have value only in a secondary sense based on their participation in the system. We are then equal to the rivers, trees, and birds, in that our value also depends on our relation to the system. Again, to quote Callicott, the land ethic is ‘holistic with a vengeance’.⁴

Although paradoxical, biocentric equality (so defined) is a coherent position. The idea that ethics are based on relations has been held by Aristotle, Hume, and contractarians. In our world, human consciousness evolved to the point of developing a primitive understanding of ethical theory; we are the valuers. Ourselves, our actions, and the world are what is found to have value in the ethical evaluation process. When we see an unspoiled wilderness, we see a beautiful system where all things within it work together to create something valuable. When we see human civilisation that works with the ecosystem, we also see value. When we see the opposite, we see the evils of our ignorance and ambition. It is theoretically possible that a species like ourselves might have grown to overpopulate and destroy in a way similar to ourselves, except lacking ethical consciousness. The paradox is that their actions would not be evil, because having an ethical obligation to change requires an awareness of ethical concepts. Thus, ethical consciousness is ‘monstrous’ (to borrow from Sartre) because with it comes the awesome responsibility to be accountable for the evil effects of our actions insofar as they devalue the ecological system.

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN SELF-REALISATION AND BIOCENTRIC EQUALITY

These two concepts – self-realisation and environmental preservation based on biocentric equality – are causally related, for if humans seek self-realisation through the interaction and identification with their adopted bioregions, there will be a tendency to defend the area against pollution and unwise development. When self-realisation is based on one's identification with a bioregion, attacks on the health and integrity of the bioregion are tantamount to attacks upon oneself. Thus, actions to protect the bioregion are like self-preservation, not only indirectly in the sense of the bioregion being a resource, but directly as if one's own being is assailed. If I have adopted the North Fork of the Clearwater as my bioregion, if my 'sense of place' is based in its watershed, then the dam at its mouth is drowning me in its backwaters, constipating my means of renewal by the fresh spring waters.

But self-realisation and environmental preservation are logically distinct; one can be conceived independently of the other. It is possible to attain self-realisation without actually preserving pristine ecological systems and vice-versa. On the one hand, human civilisation may die (archaeology shows the fragility of civilisations), and a world without humans precludes the possibility of self-realisation, but as a result the environment might prosper. Another possibility is that a few greedy humans will gain control of the majority of the planet's resources and then keep them in a pristine state for their own selfish reasons. These are, I admit, unlikely scenarios, but they do prove the independence of these two concepts. The one can theoretically exist without the other. On the other hand, it is logically possible that humans could gain self-realisation without averting serious environmental damage. Many seem to find a full and satisfying life pursuing a career in large metropolitan areas while dabbling in literature and the arts. Of course, some level of environmental preservation is necessary to sustain these lifestyles, but it is possible to construct artificial environments that would shield cities from pollution. I remember staying at a large hotel while attending a conference in Atlanta. It was connected to other hotels and businesses by an underground mall with restaurants and shops. It struck me that within such an environment one might live a fairly satisfactory life. Personally, the prospect of a life within an artificial environment is distasteful. But, for many of us, a satisfactory form of self-realisation might occur in an artificial context.

Wildlife biologists see a lion in a cage as being only half a lion, in the sense that the identity of the organism is only realised when the organism is placed within the bioregion in which it evolved. Like a fish out of water, self-realisation for a lion is only possible if it is returned to its natural surroundings. Even with the heat, hunger, and pests, a lion on the savannah has a true sense of place.

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Instincts developed over aeons of coevolution with its prey and its surroundings can only be fully expressed in its native habitat. The frustrations of missing a kill or of an intrusion into its territory are more easily dealt with than the frustrations of the cage (even with its warmth and steady food supply) because a temper appropriate to savanna life has evolved along with its speed, tenacity, and familial graces.

Knowledge gained from paleontology and biology proves that humans evolved from progenitors who were uncivilised and undomesticated. Our progenitors were completely immersed in the evolutionary and symbiotic processes of their bioregion. Not only did they have a sense of place within the bioregion, they really belonged there. Where do we belong? Callicott, following Leopold's lead, refers to domesticated animals as 'transmogrifications' of their wild progenitors.⁵ Don't ask where they belong, for being freaks and monsters, they don't really belong anywhere. Aren't we transmogrifications, too? A flaw in the self-realisation thesis is the assumption that in our homes, schools, and factories we are like the caged lion out of its proper habitat. As we are, we really don't belong in the wild. We, too, are caged. I teach in a classroom cage, go for lunch at the cafeteria cage, go to my home cage to rest. Like the other domestic animals, we are also confined, but we are our own keepers!

Is there a self to be realised? The question suggests the thesis that there is a predesignated niche in the world order for each person, and that to find true happiness one must find and occupy that niche. The concept carries the assumption that there is one, and only one, proper self to be realised. This is contrary to the existentialist position that there is no self to be realised, except in the sense that we each must create a meaning and place for human life. What Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Naess and thousands of nature lovers to follow have found, as I see it, is a special kind of satisfaction gained through projects and activities based in a background of forests, rivers, and wildlife. Lacking is a proof that this is the *only* path of self-realisation. I am leaving open the possibility that one might find self-realisation through a life playing the cello in the symphony or reading Russian novels in one's spare time while living in a high-rise apartment. Humans are animals and, like all other animals, we are a product of millions of years of evolution. Finding self-realisation in an urban context does not imply a denial of one's ancient roots in nature, but instead is based on the plausible assumption that being a complete person is possible without studying the flora and fauna of one's adopted bioregion. It seems possible that one might grow and mature in an artificial environment totally detached from other animals, trees, and sunsets. Like other domestic animals, most humans are so far removed from their progenitors that they have become transmogrified into a species that is only a shadow of the original. In the same way that it is senseless to liberate most domestic species because they are unfit for life in the wild, it will not be simple for modern humans to find their place in the natural world.

4. THE CONSEQUENTIALISTIC SIDE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

If self-realisation and environmental preservation are logically distinct concepts then their theoretical foundations may differ. This is the heart of my thesis. Self-realisation is mostly a matter of developing an attitude. Rather than viewing nature merely as a resource with value only in relation to providing satisfaction for humans, environmentalists such as Leopold, Devall, and Taylor recommend that we develop the attitude of appreciating the intrinsic value of wildlife, trees, and waterfalls. The value in developing an attitude may exist apart from the effects expected to follow from it. It need not be understood in a consequentialistic framework. On the other hand, problems in the second side of environmental ethics – the preservation and restoration of the environment – are most reasonably cast in a consequentialistic theoretical framework.

Consequentialism is the view that actions are right or wrong solely on account of their effects.^{6,7,8} It is contrasted by views in which actions are found to be right or wrong entirely by reference to motivation. Kant's view – a right action is one motivated through a sense of duty based on the categorical imperative – is the prime example of the nonconsequentialist position. Cases in which badly motivated actions produce good effects and cases in which well motivated actions produce bad effects illustrate the essential difference between consequentialistic and nonconsequentialistic positions. According to consequentialism, actions with evil motivation that accidentally produce great benefits are the right actions to perform. Good motivation generally produces good results, so a consequentialist may hold compassion, honesty, and duty in high regard, but only insofar as they are seen as productive of benefits.

There are different versions of consequentialism according to what it is about an action's effects that count for its being right or wrong, and whether actions are evaluated individually or collectively. Utilitarianism is a version of consequentialism in which only the effects of actions in respect to the pleasure, happiness, and/or preferences of sentient beings are relevant to actions being right or wrong. Although utilitarians usually limit the moral community to humans, Jeremy Bentham suggested that it include all animals capable of pleasure and pain; a position not fully developed until almost two hundred years later, by Peter Singer.⁹ Usually, utilitarians evaluate the actions of each person individually, but in the case of public policy decisions, the theory might be applied to assess the actions of a society taken collectively.^{10,11}

There is also a distinction between actual and expected consequentialism. According to the former, actions are right or wrong solely on account of their actual effects. With the latter, actions are right or wrong according to the effects that most reasonably can be expected to follow from them. Actual consequentialism seems counter-intuitive when malicious or irresponsible actions accidentally produce good results. To unravel this dilemma, one needs to

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keep separate consequentialism as a theory of right action and consequentialism in relation to decision procedure. An actual consequentialist tries to achieve the best effects, but judges actions, ultimately, on their actual effects.

Utilitarianism in the twentieth century has come to be associated with the cost-benefit analysis method employed by economists. Only humans participate directly in the economic system. The cost-benefit analysis version of utilitarianism is a combination of consequentialism, anthropocentrism, and a theory that what is good is equivalent to maximising the economic welfare of humans.¹² The shortcomings of the cost-benefit analysis version of utilitarianism do not necessarily extend to the consequentialistic assumptions of the theory. I argue that Leopold's land ethic is based on consequentialism and a modified version of the the maximisation concept of goods.

An analysis of environmental issues shows that only the actual effects of our actions are ethically relevant. This is the consequentialistic side of environmental ethics. In other areas, we accept accidents and unforeseen outcomes as excusable, if one was being careful and trying for the best. For example, my car goes out of control on an icy road and I ruin your new BMW. My insurance will buy you another. An examination of our dealings with one another shows that motivation is an important factor. But being motivated in a way that was reasonably expected to preserve the environment will not excuse our actions, if the end result is failure. Well, this is not true of isolated actions of little consequence; for example, your straying from a nature trail to follow a path that is eroding the hillside. There are ways of remedying minor transgressions. But there is a point at which ecological systems are damaged beyond repair. When it comes to the large-scale effects of human civilisation, there are no remedies.

If we fall short of preserving the environment, all other than the actual effects of our actions, no matter how noble our intentions or reasonable our aims, will be insignificant. Environmental disaster precludes every other right and good. Imagine that one hemisphere becomes environmentally conservative and the other destructive. The efforts of the conservative half will have been in vain, if the actions of the destructive half destroy the global environment. Human-to-human, we might applaud the efforts of preservationists who fail, but in respect to environmental issues, motives are unimportant. Trivially, environmental preservation will be realised only if it actually comes about. It is an end to which all efforts will be measured according to their impact on its realisation. Dramatic changes in attitude which don't actually achieve widespread, concrete results are of little value here.

One would rather see highly positive results coming from actions motivated by the wrong reasons than less positive results coming from actions motivated by the right reasons. For example, a Central American forest might have gone unscathed through the nineteenth century because its capitalistic owners were purposefully cutting back production in order to drive up prices. Later, after a

revolution in the twentieth century, the forest is nationalised and the new leaders want to cut it to buy military hardware, but due to a lack of organisation and machinery, the forest again escapes destruction. In both cases, there was the desire to cut the forest, but the relation of these motivations to the fact that the forest is still standing is irrelevant. From the standpoint of environmental preservation, all that matters are the actual effects, in this case that the forest remains uncut.

Problems inherent to consequentialism generally also apply to environmental ethics issues. Since we can never completely predict the effects of our actions, we can never know with certainty that we have done the right thing. Given the complexity of the environment, this seems reasonable. We can, at best, only be fairly certain that the reduction of greenhouse gases will contribute to the overall health and integrity of the planet. If well-conceived and motivated efforts fail to rectify the problem then they would have been less than the right course of action.

Consequentialism sometimes provides a justification for actions that seem to be horrible. Its application might prescribe that basic human rights be compromised for the sake of the health of the planet. Again, this seems reasonable, since some degree of environmental integrity is a precondition for the enjoyment of these rights. Consequentialism has been seen as contrary to personal integrity; it prescribes actions through a method external to one's own internally-held values.¹³ Again, we must realise that a minimally healthy environment is a precondition for the existence of personal integrity, unless we are willing to face a dying planet before we are willing to compromise personal integrity, which is ridiculous.

A version of consequentialism, of interest to environmentalists, is the view that actions are right or wrong insofar as their effects contribute to or deter from the integrity of an ecosystem. The land ethic is consequentialistic, it evaluates actions and policies in respect to their effects on the overall integrity of ecosystems. Although Aldo Leopold was not explicitly a consequentialist, there are passages that support consequentialism as being central to his position. For example, when writing of a botched soil conservation program and the proposed remedy of 'more education', he replies: 'The *net result* (my emphasis) is that we have more education and less soil.'¹⁴ Leopold is opposed to versions of consequentialism that try to reduce the value of nature to economic self-interest of humans; but, this is not to be confused with consequentialism in general. He was concerned about developing an ecological awareness, but the fundamental principle of the land ethic is 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise.'¹⁵ Clearly, that an action or a thing 'tends to preserve' is a causal property, not a type of motivation or consciousness from which the action originates. Therefore, the land ethic is consequentialistic.

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Callicott asks 'Is the land ethic prudential or deontological? In other words, Is the land ethic a matter of enlightened (collective, human) self-interest or does it genuinely admit nonhuman natural entities and nature as a whole to true moral standing?' But the question, as he defines it, is not a choice between prudential (suggesting utilitarian) and deontological (the anti-consequentialist position that a right action is one motivated by a proper sense of duty). The choice, as he poses it, is more between an anthropocentric or extended moral community. Clearly, the land ethic is a rejection of anthropocentrism. But a rejection of anthropocentrism does not apply a rejection of consequentialism. Anthropocentrism is a theory of value. Consequentialism is a theory of the factors relevant to an action being right or wrong. Therefore, Callicott has not proven, as he claims, 'that the land ethic is deontological (or duty oriented) rather than prudential'.¹⁶ The land ethic, aside from its implications in regard to self-realisation, is a thoroughly consequentialistic (and, therefore, not a deontological) theory.

Actual consequentialism as a theoretical basis for issues in the preservation and restoration of the environment gives us one piece of the environmental ethics theory puzzle. Some might find it a perplexing conclusion, since the main thrust of recent work in environmental ethics theory has been extending to non-humans rights and interests traditionally reserved for humans. The key is seeing that environmental ethics confronts two logically separate questions – self-realisation and the preservation and restoration of the environment. The latter question most reasonably is cast in a consequentialistic framework.

NOTES

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¹ Devall and Sessions, 1985, pp.66-69.

² Ibid.

³ Callicott, 1987, pp.186-214.

⁴ Taylor, 1981.

⁵ Callicott, 1987, pp.186-214.

⁶ Callicott, 1980.

⁷ Sartre, 1956, pp.617-625.

⁸ Scheffler, 1988.

⁹ Donagan, 1977.

¹⁰ Holbrook, 1988.

- ¹¹ Singer, 1986.
¹² Goodin, 1990.
¹³ Riley, 1990.
¹⁴ Singer, 1986.
¹⁵ Williams, 1973.
¹⁶ Leopold, 1949, p.209.
¹⁷ Ibid., pp.224-225.
¹⁸ Callicott, 1987, p.212.

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