

J. Baird Callicott 'Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair' 1980

Briefing Notes for Webinar 9 July 2021

Noting that (then, in 1980) Environmental Ethics (EE) was relatively new in Western philosophy, Callicott used Leopold's Land Ethic (LE) (1949) as a paradigm - the standard by which to judge whether an ethic is environmental.

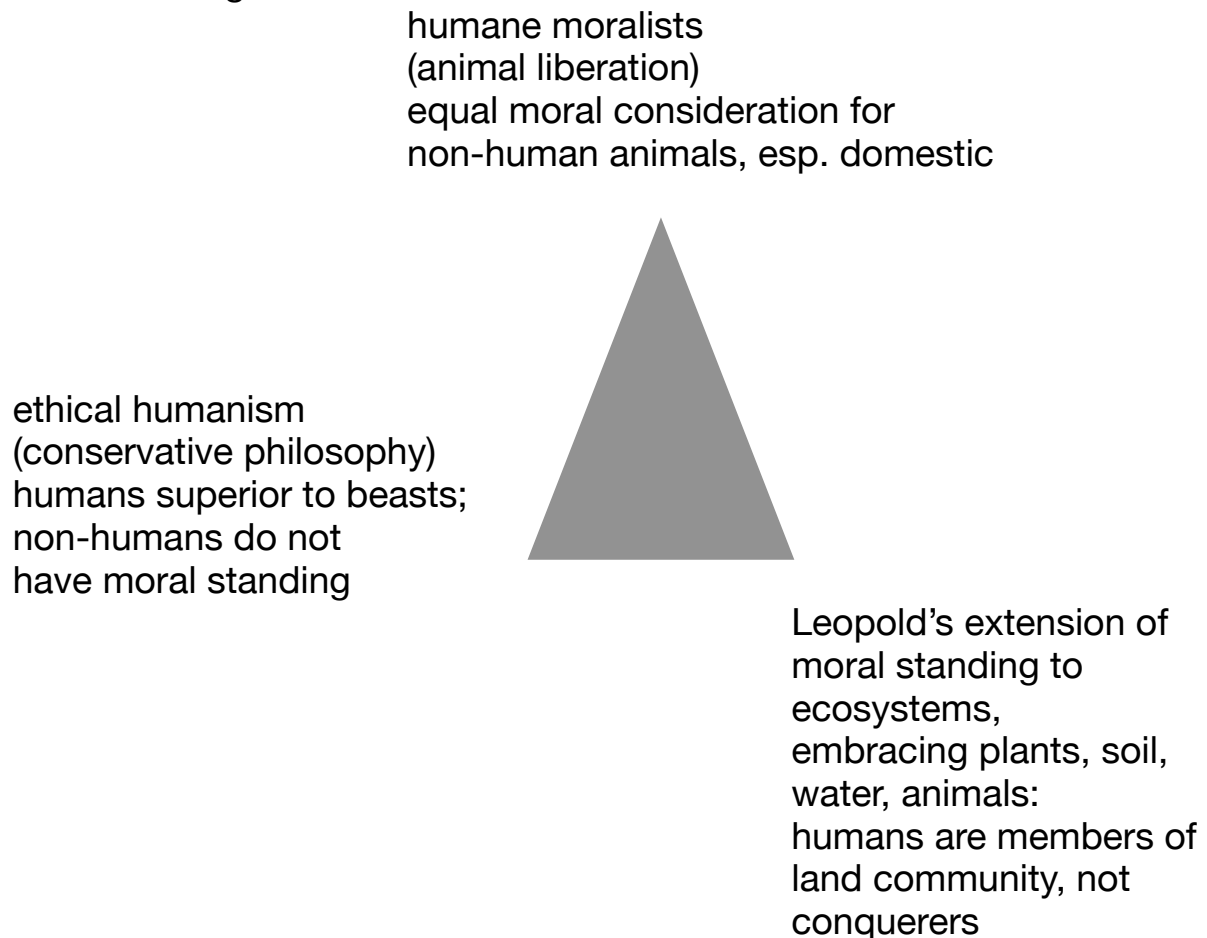
Generally, Western traditions of philosophy have not accorded moral standing to non-human beings. The key aspect of LE is the extension of direct ethical considerability from people to non-human natural entities.

Callicott questioned whether the animal liberation movement may be a form of EE.

Leopold envisaged extending the boundaries of the moral community to soil, water, plants and animals - was animal lib. an early stage of this? although Callicott thought that extending moral standing beyond animals to plants, water, soil etc crossed the boundary between plausibility and absurdity.

As Leopold's concern was with the ecosystem rather than the welfare of individual animals, possibly the ethics of animal lib. were not fully compatible with the LE and also conflicted with the dualism of conservative philosophers i.e. a triangular debate

Callicott's Triangle:



humane moralists argue that sentience is the only relevant capacity for full moral standing - the capacity to suffer is the determining factor

the fundamental principle of humane moralism is Benthamite
the maximization of pleasure, the avoidance of pain.

The movement has identified new problems eg factory farming, animal experiments but has not reworked the first principles of utilitarianism

in the LE the good of the biotic community is the ultimate measure of the moral value of actions.

The philosophical context of the LE is aligned to the newly-emerged science of ecology, in which the land is now seen as a unified system, an organic whole.

As moral agents humans have duties of self-preservation to maintain own organic integrity, which extends to society: do no harm.
Similarly, the LE draws attention to the unity of the biota. Therefore there are duties binding upon moral agents in relation to that whole.

Humane moralists - neo-Benthamites - have not grasped this ecological perspective, holism. They are concerned with individual animals.

The ecological perspective - ethical holism - promotes the good of the community as the standard for assessing the relative value of the competing demands of the individuals within that community.

Is the LE ultimately grounded in human interests? is our preference for a whole, stable, beautiful environment instrumental?

The question of value is - quotes -“sticky” Callicott asserts **“there can be no value apart from an evaluator” :- the value of an ecosystem is humanly dependent** (leaving aside gods or other forms of life)

However, while things may only have value because we (or someone) values them, they may also be valued for themselves. - Can we perceive something disinterestedly as having independent worth?

He uses Leopold’s argument for the non-instrumental value of the biotic community - that the LE creates obligations over and above self-interest. There is an extension of social conscience from people to land - if we value people for themselves, we also value the land in the same way.

If LE is the only means of managing nature, would humans be considered as having an ultimate value essentially different from their resources? Is moral evaluation to be applied to humans? - e.g. overpopulation? quote:- **the extent of misanthropy in modern environmentalism is a measure of its biocentricity**

the LE doesn’t accord equal moral worth to each member of a biotic community - is it an ethic? he asks, and quotes from Plato to find philosophical justification for a system in which the good of the community outweighs that of the individual

Callicott cites Leopold’s final philosophical thoughts concerning the reappraisal of domestic/tame/confined animals in terms of things that are wild/natural/free, concluding that:

- there is a failure in animal liberation to accept that domestic animals are a human creation,
- there is no natural behaviour in domestic creatures, which are bred to docility/tractability/dependency

therefore they cannot be liberated as never free - a logical impossibility

In contrast, the LE provides rights for non-human natural beings to a share in the life processes of the biotic community

the conceptual foundations of such rights are the evolutionary and ecological entitlements, a particular place in nature that domestic animals do not share

Callicott attacks utilitarianism on the grounds that pain is a biological necessity that informs the central nervous system of stress/injury/trauma

- a happy life of continual pleasure would be biologically preposterous
- the value commitments of humane moralism deny the Darwinian struggle for self-preservation, the ecological limitations

He again emphasizes reappraising humans in terms of the wild and natural - reaffirm biological laws and limitations, using our - quotes - “savage” ancestors as a model. We need a renaissance of the ‘tribal cultural experience’.

Finally, there follows a diatribe about vegetarianism and meat eating, which isn’t central to his triangular explanation of philosophical tensions.

His Conclusions:

Debate about animal liberation triangular; the 3rd aspect is LE, most creative and practicable

Moral humanists and humane moralists more in common with one another than with LE because they constantly locate moral value in individual - whereas LE locates ultimate value in the biotic community while assigning differential moral value to the constitutive individuals relative to that standard. This is the fundamental theoretical difference.

Intractable practical differences between EE and animal liberation - v. different moral obligations

Implementing the LE would require a virtual revolution in prevailing attitudes and lifestyles - but it is unified, coherent, practical.

Afterword:

Callicott subjected to fierce criticism:-

1. misanthropy: his version of LE regarded as absurd
2. environmental fascism: holistic LE’s disregard of rights of individual

Consequently Callicott changed his position:-

biotic community *and* its individual members *all* have intrinsic value

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he introduced principles prioritizing obligations to human communities over natural ones