

And then, Man asked the mountain:

*“What do **you** think of technology?”*

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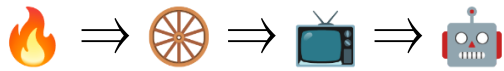
The Technology Ethic

Man is a technologist; he has tinkered with tools since the dawn of his existence as mankind. Man is also an ethicist; he is wise as his name implies. But the quiet calling of higher knowledge points to just one humbling reality: *that we are beings of the Land* – our foremost forgotten self.

In light of recent developments in technology – with more automation, addiction, and emissions than ever – we are perhaps overdue for a recent development in ethics. Hans Jonas argues for this point, in *The Imperative of Responsibility*, when saying that the Kantian imperative of “act so that you can will that the maxim of your action be made the principle of a universal law” ought to change to “in your present choices, include the future wholeness of Man among the objects of your will” (Jonas). While Jonas has identified an accurate problem, his solution of “includ[ing] the future wholeness of Man” is rather shallow as it fails to capture the agency of the destroyed Land he is troubled by. However, he does come close to something very important, and Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic, outlined in *A Sand County Almanac*, serves as a sound soil for fostering this view. In this paper, I will argue that the only lasting way to unite our identities as both technologists and ethicists is to develop technology in harmony with the Land – and I will demonstrate what it means to do just that.

The first question that naturally arises is: *why the Land Ethic?* It is oftentimes misunderstood that adopting a new ethical theory means doing away with previous ethics altogether. Let it be known that there is no assertion of mutual exclusivity between the Land Ethic and other schools of thought; what there is, however, is a broadening of perspective. Jonas and Leopold would agree that past ethics, for the most part, have been anthropocentric – and that this does not work in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), where a large factor of human agency in society, rationality, is now subject to automation – leaving the only hope of a *human special sauce* to be something more than the human being itself. In the Land Ethic essays, Leopold discusses how there is ethics with the individual, ethics with the community, and ethics with the Land – and that these are stages of realization. AI is here, whether we want it or not, and it is time for us to realize that, in this effort, there is no ethic that we can sufficiently derive from merely tunneling in on any specific *thing*; whatever we choose to look at suggests a tendency to exclude, from the moral community, that which we ignored. In such cases, we must reason holistically with all that we can sense. हरि ॐ तत् सत्.

Given the climate of the modern day, the brilliance of the Land Ethic creed remains relevant and self-evident: “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” (Leopold). The plain fact is that *if the Land does not exist, we do not exist*. So what good could any more constrained ethic be if we are too *perished* to practice it? Thus, the question we *ought* to be asking is: *what does the Land think of technology?* To understand this, we need to understand technology itself.



Technology is an impressive expression; it immortalizes the intent behind which it was made, cementing its message within the confines of its medium. Marshall McLuhan's theory of extensions discusses how various technologies serve as extensions for existing faculties of the human being. This dynamic relation, between tool and technique, provides an interesting perspective on the evolution of humanity as tied with the evolution of our technological capabilities – and like in Darwinian evolution, choice is but a cement that hardens over time. For example, the first monkeys to walk on two feet might have thought it was a free choice, but try moving around like a chimp and you will quickly realize that something has been lost in evolution – and it is likewise with technology.

That igniting fires to control nature ignited a controlling nature within Man;

That driving past the city gates was a gateway to overdriving the Land;

*That pleasurable programs have programmed us to perceive **all** programs as plain pleasure;*

Neil Postman suggests an inherent evil of our current technological evolution in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*; the phrase “the medium is the metaphor” rings true today in an era of Snapchat, TikTok, and OnlyFans – where the youth, and the future along with them, crumble in front of the gods of pleasure. When Postman says “what I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience”, he is coincidentally speaking to the modern era of technology where, in a sequential recommendation feed, clips of the remnants of genocide can be followed by clips of families belly flopping into pools – and humanity is left drowning in infotainment (Postman).

Given how naïve algorithmic pleasure-maxing has affected society, it should be of great concern that advanced AI could have orders of magnitude greater an ability to capitalize on human weakness, since we would be too entertained to notice. Some might argue that Man can overcome this with enough rationale to see himself being destroyed, and I agree – for the most part. The problem is that this argument is not cohesive, or even sensible, when we consider how the Land can be entertained to death.

Thinking Like a Mountain

Consider the zoo, an industry built on alleged animal welfare. From the outside, all seems well. The animals are happy as they have a place to be fed and cared for, and we are happy because we can see these endangered animals up close. *But look closer.* From a young age, zoos have conditioned us to a particular power dynamic between us and animals – embedding a superiority complex within humanity and failing to address the *actual* cause of mass extinction. What kind of holistic review of zoos would ever suggest that they have not had adverse effects on the Land? – animals going back into the wild losing their instincts; invasive species conquering foreign lands whenever we mess up; habitats being destroyed by our own actions. Only an observer, who believes the Land is a being to do ethics with for the sake of itself, will understand why the aforementioned are atrocities. The medium is the metaphor – and that applies to the Land as well. This is why it is misguided to conceive of a *medium* that technology operates in without consideration of the Land: when we, human beings, don't notice the effects of certain mediums on us, the Land might be telling a different story.

Hence we ought to proceed with caution, and Leopold lays out an important groundwork for this when saying “A river or stream is a cycle of energy from sun to plants to insects to fish. It is a continuum broken only by humans” (Leopold). This energy pyramid theory puts some perspective on where technology fits in the Land Ethic because Leopold has aptly identified that Man, in the pyramid, is only species in a state of confusion, for while we are citizens of the Land, we often fail to recognize ourselves as such. The truth is that every citizen of the Land has a purpose in its dynamism; the deer exist to eat the grass, the wolves exist to manage the deer, and the soil exists to consume the remains – and they all exist to challenge each other in competition. However, while *members* of the pyramid are biotic, the patterns by which these beings are related to one another doesn’t seem to have a specific liveliness in of itself.

When the wolf chases the deer, or the deer runs from the wolf, the dynamism of this interaction can mislead people into thinking the relationship itself is dynamic; this is a misunderstanding of the Land Ethic and the continuum of the Land because the concepts of predator and prey have existed for millennia without change. Human beings, however, are neither predator nor prey, as we are the only ones capable of breaking the continuum itself. While Leopold believes that “Man shares an intermediate layer with the bears, raccoons, and squirrels which eat both meat and vegetables”, I believe his view is culturally misguided as Man does not possess the instinct to hunt as a bear does, nor the helplessness to do all but run as a squirrel does (Leopold). What we do have, however, and what we are in the mountain’s gaze, is rationality: the Homo Faber who has the power for great magnitudes of destruction and unification, and Leopold recognizes this point when saying “man-made changes are of a different order than evolutionary changes, and have effects more comprehensive than is intended or foreseen” (Leopold).

As discussed before, technology is the mechanism through which we bring about these changes to ourselves and the Land. The environment is in a fallen state, and given Man's existence as a disruptive technologist and our citizenship in the Land, the Land will not be able to recover on its own; since all biotic beings have a purpose in the Land, it follows that we are, in a sense, indebted to the Land to *build its circuitry* with our tools (Jonas); *this is where Man fits in the puzzle of the energy pyramid*. In showing the appropriate role of Man in the pyramid, we are also nearing the appropriate place of technology in the Land Ethic.

For the sake of demonstration, consider the technology of computing. What once was a giant contraption that occupied an entire room is now a pocket-sized device that is interfaced with the use of gestures – and we prefer the latter to no one's surprise. So just as we like to interface with technology that complements our human features, the Land likes to interface with technology that naturally works *alongside* it – and the Land rewards such behavior.

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Is it not easier to harness the wind than to rape the ground for power?

Is it not kinder to eat the meat around the seed than to cage life in engines of perpetual torture?

Is it not evident that Man has failed in his duties to the Land – foregoing his identity of Sapien?

– but it doesn't have to be this way.

Thus far, we have explored what technology means to Man and what Man means to the Land. The final piece is understanding what technology means to the Land; or stated simply: *what does*

the mountain think of technology? I will introduce a concept called *holistic resistance* – based on the Daoist notion of *wu-wei* (*non-action*). *Resistance* is the Land’s way of saying “not that way”, and it is the imperative of all Land-bound rational beings to respect this unwritten law for it manifests itself in profound forms: the sharp smell of freshly cut grass being the their way of begging not to be cut, the violent screams of pigs nearing their slaughter vocalizing the Land’s own anger at Man’s evils, or the cries of hungry children caught in conflict for a war they wield no power over; and yet, there is grace in the Land’s voice: the passions of all elements that sing the song of the truth to your heart, the inner fire to create something novel, or the inner Will to observe reality unfold. If you listen to the mountain speak in silence, you shall surely hear it sing.

Of course, some will argue that addictive technologies like Snapchat, TikTok, and OnlyFans **are** the path of least resistance by virtue of their ease of use; this is, undoubtedly, a shallow conception of resistance. In these instances, the idea of *holistic resistance* becomes more important than ever. Snapchat, by devaluing long-lasting friendships to long-lasting snap-streaks, blinds humanity to the realities of friendship and, in doing so, increases our resistance to future friendships; TikTok, by recommending the exact content that captures a person, floods humanity with entertainment and therefore increases our resistance to anything meaningful in life; OnlyFans, by devaluing women to bodies, devalues the very act of procreation and, in a final act of creative destruction, veils Man from his highest creative capability. The technology that the mountain enjoys is the technology it does not ever resist for “only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively” to technology (Leopold).

What *good* technology means, now, could take many forms. It could be the flute, which when lifted enables elegant music; it could be the solar panel, which builds a direct circuit from the base of the energy pyramid to humanity; it could even be AI if, when realized, it too respects the unwritten laws of the Land as the rest of the pyramid. Building such technologies is what it means to build the Land's circuitry – and the Land will not resist them because their dexterity is respected by the very canvases they bless; they captivate yet do not hold captive their, wielders – enabling an unbounded spirit of creativity; and they force no superior law unto the Land – for they know that the Land is the superior law.

Man is a technologist and an ethicist – these identities are only united when we think like a mountain while building technology to promote the Land. In the modern age, AI threatens to automate this very thinking process altogether and, if successful, the choice to think like a mountain might become as perceivably impractical as the choice to walk like a chimp. The solution to this, as well as the Technology Ethic, rests in the path of least resistance against the Land within the full stack of technology. By creative design, the components of the Land are built to fit together in dynamic harmony – which remains so long as the pieces of the Land remain interlocked. This can be maintained bottom-up, from consumer to legislature, or top-down, from the legislature to consumer, but the burden eventually, and inevitably, falls on the technologists to act – before the tumor of Land-blindness consumes humanity; before the credit card of the Land runs dry; before our tools, which found muses in Man, amuse the Land to death – leaving the last intelligence in metal. To think like a mountain is to realize the tender choice the technologist is offered: become circuit-breakers or circuit-makers. *So what will you choose?*

And finally, the Mountain responded to man:

On Earth we are born; in earth we die,

In God we trust; on gods we rely.

The flames of justice are blown by the winds of change,

And in this chaos, man has been estranged.

O' mighty men, have you forgotten the truth?

Soil is our body and bearer of fruit.

So confuse not your gift of fire for a given,

The same flame can consume us, if not mindfully driven.

Citations

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