I. Environmental Ethics: Ecocentric Ethics

A. The Land Ethic - Aldo Leopold 1887-1948 A Sand County Almanac (1949) essay "the Land Ethic" --

1. lays the thematic ground for the first ecocentric ethic

2. a radical rethinking of ethics in light of ecology and the sustained abuse of the environment is an absolute necessity

3. Early life a conservationist -- nature a resource to be managed "the varmint question"

B. Leopold's Extensionism

1. Develop an ethical philosophy that establishes a moral relationship between humans and the land and the animals and plants

2. his philosophy is holistic: "Thinking Like a Mountain"

<https://www.ecotoneinc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/aldo-leopold-tlam.pdf>

a. define the new boundaries of the moral community

i. basis for moral standing

ii. question of value

b. new understanding of how we should live in this moral community - the moral "ought"

c. implications for possibilities of social organization

C. Three assumptions throughout his argument.

1. The earth is alive, a living world

a. neither matter in motion, nor raw material

b. difference between biotic and abiotic is virtually impossible to make as earth is constant process

2. living world is too complex to be predictable,

a. can't be reduced to laws of cause and effect

b. humans cannot predict the consequences of their action

3. accepts the holistic perspective of ecology

a. everything is interconnected, interrelated

b. even humans not subject outside or above the world

c. rejects the Cartesian split

4. According to Leopold the conqueror role is self-defeating.

a. it is hubris that the conqueror knows all, can foresee and therefore predict and control the consequences of his actions

b. that the conqueror knows both who and what is valuable, and who and what is worthless

5. Values in a capitalist society are based on market, on economics

a. doesn't take into account essential elements of the ecosphere like marshes and wetlands

b. tree covered hillsides that are essential to the entire functioning of the ecosystems

D. The Land Ethic: Leopold's argument

1. "biotic pyramid"

a. complexly organized and intricate structure of biotic and abiotic elements through which solar energy flows

b. species arranged in "trophic levels" on this pyramid

i. according to the food they eat,

ii. population get smaller as you get to the top levels, less predators the higher up on the food chain

c. Man shares an intermediate layer with the bears, raccoons, and squirrels which eat both meat and vegetables

d. Lines of dependency are food chains, and each species is a link in many chains

"The pyramid 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. Its functioning depends on the cooperation and competition of its diverse parts.'

e. The trend of evolution is to elaborate and diversify biota in relation to the abiotic environment over a long period of time

f. the line between biotic and abiotic elements is very fine

i. dead trees through the work of fungi and insects become rich soil

ii. soil then nutures living things

"Land, then, is not merely 'dirt'; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals."

g. There is always decay and death but a return to the soil

h. the reality is a whole system

i. complex

ii. interdependent

iii. in flux

4. From this holistic understanding Leopold believes that an ethical theory, the land ethic

a. fundamental reality: the land community, the ethical community

b. the land, its biotic and abiotic elements have moral standing

i. include species

ii. ecosystems

b. human beings are members of this land community with moral standing

i. not Lord of Earth

ii. but member

c. as members

i. respect for all members

ii. respect for community as whole

d. basic moral principle

"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."

e. implications

i. the system is so complex that humans have to radically change their way of living

ii. human intervention should be minimal

iii. social organization: small self-sustaining farms and local markets