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A Critical Essay on

Wendell Berry’s *“Preserving Wildness”* and

Aldo Leopold’s *“A Sand County Almanac: Axe-in-Hand”*



From time to time again, humans attempt to preserve nature. This only results in reinforcing the ideology that humans are in fact, abusers of nature. In *“Preserving Wildness”*, Wendell Berry points out that it is simply not possible for humans to survive in a world fully independent of nature. Inversely this reinforces the long known fact that humans are in a way, parasites, and our host of course: Mother Nature. It makes no difference to the wild mushroom growing on the side of a tree as to whether its existence harms, or replenishes the tree. But if that very tree is struck by lightning, the mushroom shall face its ultimatum, and the universe in which it knows, becomes threatened.

My father is a carpenter, one of which whose arsenal consists of Sawzalls, hammers, nails, and a tool belt. He uses these tools in the same manner that an artist uses a paintbrush. His canvas differs from the mighty red pines of Seattle, to my personal favorite, the cherry tree. Now to be honest, even with ten years in the Boy Scouts, I couldn’t tell you the difference between an oak and cherry tree. But what I can tell you, is that I know the beauty of a properly stained piece of wood, or what it is like to see your own reflection in a piece of wood that you’ve spent twelve hours applying coats of tongue oil to. I may not know what every tree looks like in nature, but I can undoubtedly tell the difference between the grains of wood better than the average man. Where I come from, this is no special or uncommon talent, in fact most people could tell you the difference.

I recall thinking that, everything in the known human-centered universe, things such as cars, computers, lawn mowers, and even an occurrence of “death by unnatural causes”, to be natural. I mean after all, we are children of Mother Nature, and anything we create must be deemed natural as well. For if this were not true, then my work ethic and my father’s would be a wasteful insult to Mother Nature. In my case, I recall my Father and I working on our house that we built from the ground up, I mean like literally we built it from the ground up (I have pictures of me digging the foundation when I was merely a child, operating a huge Backhoe) I remember hammering a nail into a piece of wood, and I completely messed it up. Now I’m sure it could’ve gone completely unnoticed and the house would still be intact years from now. But luckily my father caught my error, and a sense of pride emerged in his eyes. I recall him saying to me, “Imagine years from now when we no longer live here, another carpenter comes in to do some work. Would you *really* want him to see that?” I shrugged my shoulders and faintly said under my breath, “I dunno”. I didn’t understand it then, but that is a *huge* life lesson I think everyone should understand.

Wendell Berry draws upon this ideology within *“Preserving Wildness”*. The mushroom growing on a nearby tree in the Harvard Yard is living in a mushroom centered universe. The squirrel that built a nest, or pile of leaves amidst that very tree top, is living in a squirrel-centered universe. The same rule applies to humans, as not only is each human living in a human-centered universe, but also each person is living in a self-centered universe. Berry criticizes the cynics who point out that that everything is natural, but then admits that they are after all, correct: “To suggest that, for humans, there is a simple equation between “natural” and “good” is to fall prey immediately to the cynics who love to point out that, after all, ‘everything is natural.’ They are, of course, correct.” (Berry, Am. Earth 526) and then later goes on to say that if everything is natural, then the extinction of all that breathes on this Earth must also be perfectly natural. Some may claim suicide to be selfish, but after all, whether we want to or not, are all cynics, living in a self-centered universe.

Certain circumstances however, prove that it is possible to see from another’s point of view, but it is often considered a rare occurrence. As Loren Eiseley pointed out, “To see from an inverted angle, however, is not a gift allotted merely to the human imagination.” (Eiseley, 527) Eiseley, I think, is talking about when a person steps out of their very own self-centered universe - emerging themselves into an unfamiliar one, that of which belongs to another creature.

We must all agree, as humans, that in order to maintain the balance between humans and nature, we must sacrifice material items for the greater good. But what must be defined as the greater good if not to exist for our own survival? Are all environmentalists greedy? For what is their reasoning behind global warming? They sell us the idea that we should recycle pop (soda) bottles rather than throwing it in the garbage because it will result in our ultimate doom, or an increase in the carbon monoxide level in the atmosphere. Who cares about the atmosphere? Human’s only care about the atmosphere, but why? Surely we cannot escape the anthropocentric (human-centered) universe, even if it is for the “well-being” of our planet. I guess the only way an environmentalist remains a true environmentalist, is when we no longer need Earth. When the day comes that we can inhabit Mars or another planet within our solar system, the true environmentalist will shine. As of this moment however, I cannot think of a way that one can prove their commitment, or claim to be, not living in a self-centered universe. Berry answers these questions similarly, “We have no way to work at this question, it seems to me, except by perceiving that, in order to have the world, we must share, both with each other and with other creatures, which is immediately complicated by the further perception that, in order to live in the world, we must use it somewhat at the expense of other creatures. We must acknowledge both the centrality and the limits of our self-interest. One can hardly imagine a tougher situation.” (Berry, 527) And indeed, it is a tough situation. I suppose the best thing we can do, is to just give it our best shot. In other words, it’s okay if you don’t succeed in your original goals. Just make sure to have the resilience needed to bounce right back up onto your feet. If you’re going to do a half-ass job, you’re going to do more harm than good - not only to yourself, but to others as well. Don’t leave something behind for future generations to find that would be embarrassing. For example, we can critique Gifford Pinchot’s 1913 testimony before Congress. Pinchot’s testimony persuaded congress to pass legislature that flooded the Hetch Hetchy Valley in California, in order to build a dam that provided electricity and water to San Francisco. Of course this resulted in destroying wildlife, it is also possible an alternative solution could have been developed. In other words, this was a sloppy job that was left for future generations (present day) to deal with.

One point I disagree with Berry on is his critique on the so-called “technological heroism” he defined as, “The worst disease of the world now is probably the ideology of technological heroism, according to which more and more people willingly cause large-scale effects that they do not forsee and that they cannot control”. You know, this really lit a flame inside me. Maybe he’s right, maybe we *can’t* control it. But does that mean we should blame all of our problems on it? Or is it just an excuse for Berry to point the finger at. Generally, when something is unfamiliar, you develop a genuine distaste for it. For example, my parents absolutely hate computers. Why? Because it is something that is unfamiliar to them that is now invading their life. My Mother once called my computer the devil because I wouldn’t get off of it. If it weren’t for the computer though, I would know nothing. It is a plentiful resource, one that I use sacrilegiously in order to perform daily tasks. I mean I can read my email’s, write my essay, and it even allows me to like Wendell Berry’s page on Facebook. It also however, allows me to lookup Berry’s latest publications, that of which are published in the Temenos Academy Review, which is a journal funded by the Prince of Wales. (site link) It must also be dutifully noted that Mark Zuckerberg, while he controls the executive decisions of Facebook, does not control society’s use of it. Berry hit it right on the nail when he said that the technological savvy cause large scale, uncontrollable effects. I mean, the President of Turkey tried to ban Twitter within Turkey the other day. It didn’t exactly work out so well for him, it generated negative publicity, “Twitter, mwitter!,’ he told thousands of supporters at a rally, in a phrase translating roughly as ‘Twitter, schmitter!’.” (huffingtonpost.com) Shortly after the Twitter ban, it didn’t take long for users to figure out that they could still post tweets via text messages. Berry says people such as Mark Zuckerberg and myself are “...people who will go anywhere and jeopardize anything in order to assure the success of their careers” and classifies us as, “a class whose allegiance to communities and places has been dissolved by their economic motives and by their educations” If this were true, then what about EdX, what about Facebook? Mr. Berry, are you saying that Facebook dissolved our allegiance to communities and places? I respectfully disagree, if anything, technologies such as Facebook, or any social media rather, intensifies relationships within communities. I mean, being as I’ve relocated to Boston, MA if it were not for social media, I would have no association with my hometown in Ohio, nor would I be able to see pictures of my Niece everyday. It is also true, that technological savvy people are greedy, but indeed it is also true for all of humankind.

Keep in mind, I find Berry’s writing extremely inquisitive. I have a bitter relationship, one that of which sparks an interest within me, with his ideologies. It was mentioned in class that, “If a man was paid to dig a hole, it would stimulate the economy”. I find it hard to prove such a claim and I would really love to discover the origin of this claim. It seems as if Berry would agree with this. My response however is, not that I disagree with the statement, but rather, would you want to dig a hole all day? This differs from Berry’s response to a similar question, “The issue of obsolescence may be more urgent for us now than the issue of human population” (Berry, 529) I don’t know what to think of this. I haven’t made up my mind as to whether it would be better for an economy to do one of two things.

1. Developing new technology that makes production more efficient, similar to Henry Ford’s solution to supplying American’s with an affordable car, the Model-T Ford; the Assembly Line. In other words, job creation.
2. Preserving current jobs, such as New Jersey’s legislation, which, as I’ve been told, outlaws residents from filling up their own automobiles with gas, instead having a clerk fill it up. Or in other words, job preservation.

Now I’m pretty sure both methods can stimulate the economy, and I’m not going to discuss it. However, I would just like to elaborate Berry’s stance on the issues. Clearly, Berry would prefer the second method. Berry also creates a strikingly, if not intentional, then coincidental, relationship between nature and economics: “Looking at the monocultures of industrial civilization, we yearn with a kind of homesickness for the humanness and the naturalness of a highlydiversified, multipurpose landscape, democratically divided, with many margins. The margins are of the utmost importance. They are the divisions between holdings, as well as between kinds of work, and kinds of land. These margins-lanes, streamsides, wooded fencerows, and the like-are always freeholds of wildness, where limits are set on human intention.” (Berry, 530) Now I’m not sure if he intentionally used the words such as: highly diversified, margins, divisions, and holdings on purpose. But when I first read the particular passage, it reminded me of the Stock Market, as if he is comparing Wall Street to Wildness. Berry ends his essay with the following message, “And we should not neglect to notice that, whereas the monocultural landscape is totalitarian in tendency, the landscape of harmony is democratic and free.” (Berry, 530) According to Wikipedia, or rather, the users of Wikipedia, since lets be honest, while it isn’t the most reputable source, we all still use it; Monoculture is defined as:

**“Monoculture** is the agricultural practice of producing or growing a single crop or plant species over a wide area and for a large number of consecutive years. It is widely used in modern industrial agriculture and its implementation has allowed for large harvests from minimal labour.” (Wikimedia Foundation, Monoculture)

On the very same page however, exists a link to another definition of Monoculture, one that is used within computer science:

“In computer science, a **monoculture** is a community of computers that all run identical software. All the computer systems in the community thus have the same vulnerabilities, and, like agricultural monocultures, are subject to catastrophic failure in the event of a successful attack.

This concept is significant when discussing computer security and viruses. In particular, Dan Geer has argued that Microsoft is a monoculture, since a majority of the overall number of workstations connected to the Internet are running versions of the Microsoft Windows operating system, many of which are vulnerable to the same attacks.” (Wikimedia Foundation, Monoculture: Computer Science)

And *totalitarianism* is defined as:

**“Totalitarianism** or totalitarian state is a term used by some political scientists to describe a political system in which the state holds total authority over the society and seeks to control all aspects of public and private life wherever possible.” (Wikimedia Foundation, Totalitarianism)

So we see, Berry’s last words, if applied to the governance of society, claim that it is a natural tendency for humans to be self-centered. Gathering what I’ve learned from Loren Eiseley, indeed it is a rare occurrence in which one ventures out of a self-centered universe. Regardless, both authors romanticize a spiritual: “marvel” (Eiseley) or “landscape of harmony” (Berry) In which all species, living or not, exist in the same society, and are duly judged, and or/are limited by each other. Both authors would agree that, in order for all that is Nature to exist in harmony, we must diverge from our homocentric tendencies and take on a foreign perspective, that of which is unfamiliar, but ultimately still biased, or self centered.

Aldo Leopold immediately associates a direct connection with his audience in a classic battle with good versus evil, the giver versus the taker, or the Ying that completes Yang. “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the only one to do so. When some remote ancestor of ours invented the shovel, he became a giver: he could plant a tree. And when the axe was invented, he [the inventor] became a taker: he could chop it down.” (Leopold, 67) Leopold mentions some remote ancestor of “ours”, or rather, associates that I (the reader) have a connection with Leopold, thus he assumes that we all derive from the same remote ancestor. People generally assume that all that is of relevance to them is good. Therefore, if I, as a reader, share a particular ancestor with Leopold, then that ancestor must be good. Similarly if one of my ancestors is to be disrespected, then naturally, I too feel as if I’ve been disrespected. The disrespectee, or the inventor of the axe (taker), can be blamed for all that has thus been taken away by thou(s) Lord, so claims Leopold. Since Leopold indirectly disassociates the reader with the inventor of the axe, we now have a person to point the finger at (since after all, all that is of relation to us as an individual is to be deemed as good, but only in our own mind)

Consider each branch within the United States federal government. We have the Executive Branch, the Supreme Court, and a high stakes bottomless pit, that of which is the Legislative branch. Out of these three branches and their rightful duties, which vocation out of the following would you associate with each branch? Aldo Leopold defines the functions of society as, “We classify ourselves into vocations, each of which either wields some particular tool, or sells it, or repairs it, or sharpens it, or dispenses advice on how to do so; by such division of labors we avoid responsibility for the misuse of any tool save our own”

**Works Cited**

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