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A Critical Essay on

Wendell Berry’s *“Preserving Wildness”* and

Aldo Leopold’s *“A Sand County Almanac”*

In his essay “Axe in Hand” Aldo Leopold explains the natural bias he shares with different species of plants on his land. He assumes that we must forsee, compare, and decide upon with the calm assurance that our bias will, on the average, prove to be something more than just good intentions.

Leopold, a wielder of the axe, claims to have as many biases as there are species of trees on his farm. Amongst his attempt to persuade the reader in agreement, we can spot evidence of Leopold describing hypothetical scenarios that are solely fixed on the portrayal of the pine tree. However we cannot blame Leopold, as beforehand he openly informs of us his bias. This remains an ongoing issue, most notably however is his preference for pine trees over birch. Leopold’s bias towards pine trees is not within his control, nonetheless Leopold’s argument as to why pines are better appears to satisfy the reader into valuing pines more than birch. However we can spot a weakness in Leopold’s argument when we consider an opposition. It is simple; the opposition can portray the birch as greater than the pine. In such a manner, both arguments may be convincing at first, but later don’t seem to satisfy either argument. Despite Leopold’s efforts to bolster the environmental value that we attribute to pine trees, we cease to remain convinced of the superiority of the pine tree. In fact, the only thing we can be assured of is his profound affection towards pine trees.

The misconception however is that Leopold, while he does attempt to view the opposition’s side; does so in a way that does not suffice. Not only this, but it appears as if the admittance of ones bias can be used to bypass, or alter the opinions of skeptics. This is a tool that appears to falsely signal the author’s unbiased intentions. This furthermore baits readers into misjudging the intentions and reliability of the author’s. While this may seem a rather peculiar at first, we cannot mistake the fact Leopold’s methods tend to shroud the reader from the denigration of his counter argument.

Leopold’s only means of income was through selling timber. If Leopold were to become economically dependent upon nature, it would be far more appealing to him to consider selling the more profitable pine rather than birch: “The pine will ultimately bring ten dollars a thousand, the birch two dollars” (Leopold 69) In instance however, Leopold stands to lose money by favoring the preservation of the pine. Despite the various other factors that will continue to add on to his bias, he ultimately will remain unmoved by most efforts to alter his initial bias.

If Leopold isn’t concerned sparsely with profits, and if in fact all men, at some point, can be categorized into vocations. What role could he possibly be playing? Leopold says that we, “classify ourselves into vocations, each of which either wields some particular tool, or sells it, or repairs, or sharpens it, or dispenses advice on how to do so” (Leopold 68) And Leopold’s philosophical revelation states that all men in effect, wield all tools, but the questions remains unanswered as to whether we should wield any at all. (Leopold 68) Under the implication that nature is in fact a tool, it is easy to see the amicability that each vocation has within the correspondences between man and nature.

In contrast, Wendell Berry sheds light onto both sides of his argument. In “Preserving Wildness” Wendell Berry discusses the proper relation that humanity shares with nature. Berry described this conflict as being “polarized” (Berry 516) amongst two sides. Berry mentions early on that if he were forced to choose between sides, he would choose to be with the nature extremists despite his acknowledgement that it would be after all a poor choice (Berry 517). While this is the side that seems to be entirely too in favor of nature, these so called “nature extremists” typically believe in the universal principal that our “biosphere is an egalitarian system” (Berry 517) and that it should be shared amongst all, including Mother Nature.

On the other end of the spectrum, Berry defines the group to exist purely of people that are under the assumption that human good is relative to “profit, comfort, and security” (Berry 517). Asserting a universal assumption amongst these so-called “technocrats”, Berry states that they perceive human good merely as a materialistic item that is derived from raw materials. Later suggestions pose this as the group of people Berry holds responsible for the destruction of jobs. This could lead to the implication that these technocrats are against the idea of grass-root economics.

Berry admits that one must *assume* the existence of nature extremists in order for them to exist. If we do not assume, we see very quickly that we are only left with one *realistic* option. This gives rise to the conclusion that there is only one group, the technocrats, and an alternative arises that Berry defines as being the middle between the two. The question is not a matter of quantities, but rather the philosophical question behind our reasons for wanting to preserve nature in the first place.

We cannot deny the insatiable hunger that lies within the human to endlessly strive to preserve nature. But why do we do this? The only results we get end up reinforcing the ideology that humans are in fact, abusers of nature. Berry points out all throughout the text that it is simply not possible for humans to survive in a world fully independent of nature.

The fact of the matter is that in order for all that is Nature to exist in harmony, we must diverge from our homocentric tendencies and take on an unfamiliar foreign perspective. And this holds true for even if we remain self-centered or biased in our judgment of nature.

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