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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 see how the example scenarios are setup to demark his preference of the pine tree. Leopold’s efforts to persuade seem to satisfy, at least up until we consider an opposing argument. For instance, to argue that the birch tree is superior to the pine tree is susceptible to the same sort of hypothetical tactics used by the original notion. 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 Leopold’s 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 whatever it is his opposition.

If Leopold’s only means of income was through selling timber, I’m not sure if I would trust his bias towards the pine. If Leopold was economically dependent upon nature, it would be far more appealing to consider selling the more profitable pine rather than the birch: “The pine will ultimately bring ten dollars a thousand, the birch two dollars” (Leopold pg. 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 that disfavor 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 Pg. 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. (516???) Under Leopold’s 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 to Leopold, 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” (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 (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” (517) and 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” (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 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 and a 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. Inversely this reinforces the long known fact that humans are in a way, parasites, and our host of course is 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. I haven’t even discovered what a cherry tree looked like until I looked it up on Google a few moments ago. 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 all night polishing. I may not know what every tree looks like in nature, but I can undoubtedly tell the difference between the grains of the 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. For example, it is common sense to those whom are native to my community that you should never sand a piece of wood against the grain. I learned that at a very young age, as it was one of the first lessons in which my father taught me. Another interesting fact you may not know is that you can determine how old a tree was when it was cut down if you count the number of rings on a stump. These are all things that one can learn by growing up in my community.

Now being that such I’m such a good environmentalist, I decided to inform my father of how much of naturalist he is, my method of conversation of course; a text message:

**Me:** I’m writing an essay on this piece, and it made me think of you. Here’s a quote from it: *“*We are going to have to see that, if we want our forests to last, then we must make wood products that last, for our forests are more threatened by shoddy workmanship than by clear-cutting or by fire. Good workmanship-that is, careful, considerate, and loving work-requires us to think considerately of the whole process, natural and cultural, involved in the making of wooden artifacts, because the good worker does not share the industrial contempt for ‘raw material.’ The good worker loves the board before it becomes a table, loves the tree before it yields the board, loves the forest before it gives up the tree. The good worker understands that a badly made artifact is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source. We could say, then, that good forestry begins with the respectful husbanding of the forest that we call stewardship and ends with well-made tables and chairs and houses, just as good agriculture begins with stewardship of the field and ends with good meals”(Berry, 522-523)So I guess you’re more of environmentalist than you thought huh?

**Dad:** That is a lot of truth and good thoughts. I guess some of that comes from my fathers teaching in not to be wasteful and use the resources that u have. Not only material wise but the problem solving as well.

I find the lessons my father taught me, even something as useless as this (After all, I am studying computer science, albeit I might use a hammer one day to debug a piece of code) to be applicable to all problems in which I encounter. My father explains the solution to all problems that life (or Mother Nature) throws to us in a really simple quote he probably picked up from his father, “If there is a problem you cannot solve, then you just have to work a little harder.” (Dad) Anytime I’ve faced some sort of challenge, deemed nearly impossible, I think of that quote.

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. Since majority of the people reading this will be writers or journalists, allow me to elaborate. Imagine that you’ve just completed the eleventh revision on a paper that is up for publication. It is perfect. It shows you’re extraordinarily talented, you’ve used all of the biggest words you know (from a thesaurus), and you know that you’re editor will surely be impressed with this revision. Let’s say this revision passes the scrutiny of your editor and ends up being published. This essay you’ve written will be around for decades from now, and everyone will admire the hard work you’ve put into this paper. Fifty years from now, a student will be reading your paper in an attempt to develop your stance on issues that are occurring in this future time. You no longer exist, and all that remains of you is this paper. Wouldn’t you want your paper to express yourself, rather than a “scholarly” vocabulary that doesn’t portray your *true* personality? Often times, the most formal method is the most informal.

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. Nature provides bountifully for her children, but, as would now say, she is also extremely permissive. If her children want to destroy one another entirely or to commit suicide, that is all right with her. There is nothing after all, more natural than the extinction of species; the extinction of *all* species, we must assume, would also be perfectly natural.” (Berry, Am. Earth 526) I found this particular passage to be entirely too true. For I recall the sorrow in which I vaguely remember when my Mother received a telephone call from my Grandpa, informing her that he came home to find my Mother’s Mom, my Grandmother, entirely too still on the living room couch. She had taken her own life, suffocating herself with a plastic bag. Her reason for doing so I may never know. In her final note, she claimed it was because of a disorder she had with her ears. She had visited numerous doctors in an effort to get rid of a constant ringing in her ears. It had gotten so bad, that I guess she just couldn’t deal with it anymore. 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. Due to this, nor do I blame her, but give to my sorrow, I never got to spend as much time with her as I would have liked.

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. I have come to suspect that within their degree it is sensed by animals, though perhaps as rarely as among men. The time has to be right; one has to be, by chance or intention, upon the border of two worlds. And sometimes these two borders may shift or interpenetrate and one sees the miraculous. I once saw this happen to a crow” (Eiseley, 527) Eiseley, I think, is talking about when a person steps out of their very own self-centered universe, and emerges 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 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 need to bounce right back up onto your feet, and work a little harder. 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. 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 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) **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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