

Why the Standard Interpretation of Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic is Mistaken

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The standard interpretation of Aldo Leopold's land ethic is that correct land management is whatever tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, of which we humans are merely a small part. From this interpretation, it is a short step to interpreting Leopold as a sort of deep ecologist or radical environmentalist. However, this interpretation is based on a small number of quotations from Leopold taken out of context. Once these quotations are put into context, and once the broader context of Leopold's mature writings and his actions as a land manager are taken into account, it becomes clear that he is much closer to being an enlightened anthropocentrist than he is to being anything like a radical environmentalist. When properly understood, Leopold's land ethic recognizes that fundamental human interests must be treated with the highest possible respect, and it emphasizes the incredible challenge and need for modesty in identifying the correct tradeoffs between lesser human interests and the interests of the broader biotic community.

When we discuss Aldo Leopold's land ethic, we tend to focus our attention on the following classic lines: "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."¹ When we focus only on these lines, it is easy to interpret Leopold as claiming that *the only thing* we should care about is what will tend to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, of which we humans are merely a small part. This is the *standard interpretation* of Leopold, at least in environmentalist circles—and from this interpretation, it is a short step to interpreting Leopold as a sort of deep ecologist or radical environmentalist.²

However, the standard interpretation of Leopold is mistaken for a number of reasons. For one thing, note that if the standard interpretation were correct, then

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¹ Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991 (1949)), p. 262. All references here and in what follows are to the Ballantine Books trade paperback edition.

² As many have done—for example, "Aldo Leopold is perhaps the grandfather of deep ecology. . . . it was his book, *A Sand County Almanac* . . . that helped create modern-day deep ecology. Like deep ecologists, Leopold argued for the need for more wilderness for wildlife, but not for anthropocentric reasons" (Philip Cramer, *Deep Environmental Politics* [Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998], p. 39). "Al-

considerations of economic expediency would be irrelevant to determining correct land use. But consider what Leopold claims in the sentence immediately before the classic lines:

Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, *as well as what is economically expedient*. 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.³

In the sentence immediately before the classic lines Leopold explicitly claims that we should care *not only* about what is ethically and aesthetically right (i.e., what tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community), but *also* about what is economically expedient, contrary to what the standard interpretation implies. This means that the standard interpretation has to be mistaken.

In light of this correction, how can we make progress toward a more accurate interpretation of Leopold's land ethic? The key is to notice that in the classic lines Leopold uses the words *right* and *wrong* in a way that is very different from the way in which those terms are used in contemporary philosophical discussions, with the result that readers who focus only on those lines in isolation are easily drawn toward the mistaken standard interpretation. In contrast, the correct interpretation of Leopold becomes clearer if we carefully examine the context of *A Sand County Almanac* and his other mature works, and then translate the intended meaning that emerges into contemporary philosophical parlance, as in the following paraphrase:

Quit thinking about decent land use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of ethical and aesthetic value, as well as economic value. A thing has ethical and aesthetic value when it tends to preserve the integrity,

though Naess coined the term, many deep ecologists credit the American ecologist Aldo Leopold with succinctly expressing such a deep ecological worldview in his now famous 'Land Ethic' essay, which was published posthumously in *A Sand County Almanac* in 1948. Leopold argued that humans ought to act only in ways designed to protect the long-term flourishing of all ecosystems and each of their constituent parts" (Bron Taylor and Michael Zimmerman, "Deep Ecology," in Bron Taylor, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* [New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005], pp. 456–60). "There is a real problem in attributing a coherent meaning to Leopold's statements, one that exhibits his land ethic as representing a major advance in ethics rather than retrogression to a morality of a kind held by various primitive peoples" (H. J. McCloskey, *Ecological Ethics and Politics* [Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983], p. 56, quoted in J. Baird Callicott, "The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic," in Callicott ed. *Companion to A Sand County Almanac* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987], pp. 186–87). Tom Regan claims that Leopold's land ethic is a case of "environmental fascism" (*The Case for Animal Rights* [Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983], p. 262; quoted in J. Baird Callicott, "The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic," in Callicott, ed., *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, p. 206). For general arguments for the standard interpretation, see J. Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), J. Baird Callicott et al., "Was Aldo Leopold a Pragmatist? Rescuing Leopold from the Imagination of Bryan Norton," *Environmental Values* 18 (2009): 453–86, and J. Baird Callicott et al., "Reply to Norton, re: Aldo Leopold and Pragmatism," *Environmental Values* 20 (2011): 17–22.

³ Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 262 (emphasis added).

stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It has ethical and aesthetic dis-value when it tends otherwise. Land use is correct when it properly balances economic, ethical, and aesthetic values.

By invoking this notion of *balancing competing values*, we are able to provide a much clearer, if less beautiful, statement of Leopold's land ethic. If we wanted to go beyond this and provide a statement that was maximally precise, we would need to examine the evidence provided by the entirety of Leopold's mature writings, policy positions, and other sources that indicate how the mature Leopold would, upon reflection, actually make the relevant tradeoffs between ethical, aesthetic, and economic values. But for our purposes here, it is sufficient to show that Leopold would not make those tradeoffs in anything like the way that deep ecologists would make them, or even in the way that self-identified "environmentalists" tend to make them. Instead, as I demonstrate in what follows, Leopold was a very moderate and pragmatic man who even at the end of his life advocated human dominion over nature, albeit a dominion constituted by *enlightened stewardship* rather than the maximization of short-run economic value.⁴ For Leopold, enlightened stewardship requires preserving the remaining areas of American wilderness, given that Americans are now rich enough to afford such preservation, but more generally implies active land management focused primarily on maximizing the long-run benefits for humanity, which requires a deep understanding of ecology and sustainability science, but which in Leopold's judgment still tends to have as its ultimate aim the best interests of *humanity*. In short, Leopold is much closer to being an *enlightened anthropocentrist* than he is to being anything like a *radical environmentalist*.⁵

One key issue in assessing this interpretation of Leopold is whether, as I have claimed, Leopold's land ethic is essentially about balancing competing values. As it turns out, there is a candid letter that Leopold wrote one month before he died and after completing all of his final revisions of *A Sand County Almanac* and all other papers in which he clearly states that his land ethic should be understood in

⁴ "Conservation is the attempt to understand the interactions of these components of land [i.e., soil, water, plants, and animals], and to guide their collective behavior under human dominance" (Aldo Leopold, "Biotic Land-Use," in J. Baird Callicott and Eric T. Freyfogle, eds., *For the Health of the Land* [Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999], p. 199) (written ca. 1942).

⁵ In this paper, I argue against the standard interpretation of Leopold by focusing on the most relevant evidence from Leopold's own writings and actions. I do not evaluate previous criticisms of the standard interpretation, such as Bryan Norton, "Conservation and Preservation: A Conceptual Rehabilitation," *Environmental Ethics* 8: 195–220; Bryan Norton, "The Constancy of Leopold's Land Ethic," *Conservation Biology* 2 (1988): 93–102; Bryan Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 3; Ben Minteer, *The Landscape of Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), chaps. 5 and 6; and Bryan Norton, "What Leopold Learned from Darwin and Hadley: Comment on Callicott et al.," *Environmental Values* 20 (2011): 7–16. (For the ongoing controversy over related issues in the literature, see also Callicott et al., "Was Aldo Leopold a Pragmatist? Rescuing Leopold from the Imagination of Bryan Norton," and Callicott et al., "Reply to Norton, re: Aldo Leopold and Pragmatism.")

exactly this way. In this letter, Leopold replies to a request that he sign his name to a cleverly titled pro-development statement called “Conservation Credo of an American.” Leopold refuses, and in explaining his dissent he sends a reprint of his article “The Ecological Conscience,” which is the basis for his then-unpublished-but-completed statement of his land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac*, and he provides the following interpretive comments on his view, which is then in its final form:

I do not here imply that I have a completely logical philosophy all thought out, in fact on the contrary, I am deeply disturbed and do not myself know the answer to the conflicting needs with which we are faced.⁶

As this comment clearly demonstrates, Leopold interprets his land ethic as essentially about balancing competing values. Furthermore, the fact that Leopold takes the relevant weighing of competing values to be incredibly difficult and disturbing shows that he is not a deep ecologist or any other kind of radical environmentalist, as from that point of view the relevant tradeoffs seem clear and unproblematic.

Can this letter be dismissed as an anomaly? No. The final revisions to *A Sand County Almanac* were completed only a few weeks before, and the last revisions that Leopold made were to the short foreword, in which he writes:

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher ‘standard of living’ is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. . . .

These wild things, I admit, had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast, and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live. The whole conflict thus boils down to a question of degree. We of the minority see a law of diminishing returns in progress; our opponents do not.⁷

Here Leopold summarizes the philosophical point of *A Sand County Almanac* and of his land ethic in particular, both of which are now in their final form. This passage confirms the textual basis for interpreting his land ethic in terms of competing values, and also provides powerful evidence that Leopold would not make the tradeoffs between economic, esthetic, and ethical values in the way that radical environmentalists would, because it suggests that Leopold gives important aspects of human well-being (e.g., food, shelter, and other means necessary for human flourishing) near lexical priority over the preservation of nature. Of even greater importance, this interpretation is confirmed by every other piece of clear evidence we have from Leopold’s writings and his life, which include his actions during many high-ranking appointments in environmental policy-making institutions, as well as his many essays, and of course his actions in day-to-day life.⁸

⁶ I discuss the date of the letter and the relevant timeline in more detail below (note 15).

⁷ Leopold, “Foreword,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. xvii.

⁸ “Breakfast comes before ethics,” he once told his daughter Nina. But for continued sustenance, the opportunity to enjoy it, and the freedom to thrive on it, an adjustment of human attitudes toward

As just one example of the supporting evidence from his day-to-day life, Leopold was a rabid hunter who also killed vast numbers of animals for scientific purposes, with no slowdown as he aged except as caused by his declining health. With this piece of evidence in mind, it is hard to see how Leopold could be correctly interpreted as thinking that animals and other aspects of nature have the same stringent right to life as human beings. On the contrary, Leopold's actions in day-to-day life stand as further evidence that, as claimed above, what Leopold means by terms such as *right*, *wrong*, and *a right to exist* is very different from what philosophers mean by those terms in contemporary discussions, which explains why readers are drawn toward mistaken interpretations of lines like the following:

A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources' [i.e., soil, water, plants, and animals], but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.⁹

Here Leopold claims that both individuals and biotic communities have a "right to continued existence." What does Leopold mean by that? The crucial thing to see is that what Leopold means by a *right to exist* is different than what philosophers mean by that term, because a *right to exist* in the philosophers' sense implies very stringent constraints on the permissibility of behavior that would infringe that right, whereas in Leopold's sense it does not.¹⁰ Instead, for Leopold a natural thing's *right to exist* should be understood as, roughly, the additional value that humans motivated only by short-run narrow self-interest would have to assign to that thing in their decision making in order to make choices that are permissible in the standard philosophers' sense. As a result, Leopold is using the expression "has a right to exist" to mean something more like what philosophers mean by the expression "has value" than what they mean by the expression "has a right to life"—and Leopold thinks that values derived from human self-interest can easily outweigh the values that individual members of the biotic community have, as long as those anthropocentric reasons are non-trivial; then, as we move up the hierarchy from individuals to species to biotic communities, the value of the continued existence of those entities becomes increasingly weighty.

nature was necessary and proper. This was the sum and substance of Leopold's credo" (Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010], p. 504). "Conservation, without a keen realization of its vital conflicts, fails to rate as authentic human drama; it falls to the level of a mere Utopian dream" (Aldo Leopold, "Review of A. E. Parkins and J. R. Whitaker, *Our Natural Resources and Their Conservation*" [1937], quoted in Curt Meine, "The Utility of Preservation and the Preservation of Utility: Leopold's Fine Line," in Max Oelschlaeger, ed., *The Wilderness Condition* [San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992], p. 131).

⁹ Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 240.

¹⁰ For further discussion of a *right to life* in the philosophers' sense, see Judith Jarvis Thomson, *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

For example, individual animals have a “right to exist” in Leopold’s sense but yet it is still permissible for someone like Leopold to kill many of them every day for science or even just for sport; the point is that they have value beyond their market price, and so it is not automatically permissible to kill them for profit, much less for no good reason at all. Similarly, a grove of trees has a “right to exist” but yet it can still be permissible for a person to cut them down for relatively mundane reasons that could never justify harming a human being. At the same time, if the cost of preserving the last remaining tract of pristine wilderness of a particular biotic type is very high in terms of the opportunity cost of the revenue that we could enjoy by developing and/or exploiting that parcel, preserving that wilderness is still probably the thing to do, assuming that we are members of a wealthy society in which all of our important needs can be met without developing that wilderness. These examples illustrate Leopold’s most important point throughout all of his works, which is the modest point that nature has more than mere “economic value,” where “economic value” is understood in a narrow way as a function of current market prices. At the same time, Leopold never argues for radical environmentalist conclusions such as that humans should make dramatic sacrifices to remove negative impacts on biotic communities, or even that we should stop building houses and managing the land in a way that dramatically privileges human interests. Here it is telling that immediately after the classic lines with which this paper begins, Leopold continues:

It of course goes without saying that economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done for land. It always has and it always will. The fallacy the economic determinists have tied around our collective neck, and which we now need to cast off, is the belief that economics determines *all* land-use. This is simply not true.¹¹

Along similar lines, what Leopold means by *right*, *wrong*, and *ethics* in the context of “The Land Ethic” is different than what philosophers mean by those terms. For professional philosophers, *ethics* is, roughly, the comprehensive system of values that would lead us, if we acted on those values, to make choices that are permissible in the philosophers’ sense. In contrast, for Leopold, *ethics* is, roughly, the particular values that humans motivated only by short-run narrow self-interest would have to add to their decision making in order to make choices that are permissible in the philosophers’ sense.¹² The crucial difference is that in the philosophers’ sense, *ethics* gives important weight to short-run human self-interest, whereas in Leopold’s sense

¹¹ Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 262 (emphasis in the original).

¹² As additional evidence for this reading, consider the following passage in which Leopold discusses the preconditions for his land ethic: “An ethic to supplement and guide the economic relation to land presupposes the existence of some mental image of land as a biotic mechanism. We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 251). This passage reveals that the sort of *ethic* Leopold has in mind is a set of values that humans motivated only by short-run narrow self-interest would have to add to their decision making in order to make choices that are permissible in the philosophers’ sense.

it does not. So, the fact that a choice is “ethically right” for Leopold means that it best promotes the abstract set of values just described that ignore considerations of short-run human self-interest. As a result, there is no contradiction in Leopold’s claims that some choices are at the same time (a) permissible in the philosophers’ sense, (b) wrong in Leopold’s sense of *ethics*, and (c) correct all-things-considered by Leopold’s own lights. Examples of such choices include decisions that correctly sacrifice nature for short-run human ends that are more important by Leopold’s lights—for example, a wise decision to cut down a particular set of trees in order to sell them for a useful profit, or even a decision to kill game for sport as a means to enjoying a pleasant and satisfying afternoon.

These interpretative points are confirmed by every piece of clear evidence we have from Leopold’s writings and his life. It would be possible to provide many pages of quotations from Leopold and anecdotes from his life as further corroborating evidence. However, because many of these passages are familiar or at least readily verifiable, for our purposes it is most productive to focus on a handful of additional passages and considerations that have the greatest remaining probative value and which have also had their value overlooked by previous commentators on these issues.

The writings of Leopold’s that have the greatest value for our interpretative purposes are those that he wrote in the few months between his final revisions of “The Land Ethic” in July 1947 and his death on 21 April 1948, because those are the writings that we should have the most confidence reflect his land ethic in its final form.¹³ Fortunately, we are able to identify these writings and the relevant timeline as a result of the definitive Leopold biography by Curt Meine, along with earlier work by Susan Flader.¹⁴ Because Leopold died less than a year after making final revisions to “The Land Ethic,” there are only four additional writings that are relevant. So far, we have seen two of the four: the letter quoted above, which is dated 17 March 1948, and the foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*, which was revised for the final time on 4 March 1948.¹⁵ The remaining two writings are the essay “Axe-in-Hand”, which was written in late November 1947, and “Wilderness”, which was revised for the last time in August 1947.¹⁶

¹³ For the dates of final revisions to “The Land Ethic,” see Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, pp. 501–04. As Meine notes, “The Land Ethic” is a compilation and revision of “The Conservation Ethic” (1933), “A Biotic View of Land” (1939), and “The Ecological Conscience” (1947).

¹⁴ Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, and Susan Flader, *Thinking Like a Mountain* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1974).

¹⁵ For the dates of the letter to M. L. Cooke, see Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, pp. 514 and 586; for the dates of the final revision of the foreword, see *ibid.*, p. 515. In this discussion I ignore the essay “Good Oak,” written in January 1948 (see *ibid.*, p. 512) because it is more or less a purely descriptive/historical essay that does not shed any light on Leopold’s land ethic.

¹⁶ For the dates of “Axe-in-Hand,” see Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p. 510; for the dates of the final revision of “Wilderness,” see *ibid.*, p. 504. “Wilderness” is a compilation and revision of “Wilderness as a Land Laboratory” (1941), and “Wildlife in American Culture” (1941).

As it turns out, “Axe-in-Hand” is both a completely original composition written entirely after Leopold finished work on “The Land Ethic” and is essentially a poetic reflection on the difficult questions about value that Leopold found disturbing and to which he claimed not to know the answers:

November is, for many reasons, the month for the axe. It is warm enough to grind an axe without freezing, but cold enough to fell a tree in comfort. . . .

I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land. Signatures of course differ, whether written with axe or pen, and this is as it should be.

I find it disconcerting to analyze, *ex post facto*, the reasons behind my own axe-in-hand decisions. I find, first of all, that not all trees are created free and equal. Where a white pine and a red birch are crowding each other, I have an *a priori* basis; I always cut the birch to favor the pine. Why?

Well, first of all, I planted the pine with my shovel, whereas the birch crawled in under the fence and planted itself. My bias is thus to some extent paternal, but this cannot be the whole story, for if the pine were a natural seedling like the birch, I would value it even more. So I must dig deeper for the logic, if any, behind my bias.

The birch is an abundant tree in my township and becoming more so, whereas pine is scarce and becoming scarcer; perhaps my bias is for the underdog. But, what would I do if my farm were further north, where pine is abundant and red birch is scarce? I confess I don’t know. My farm is here.

The pine will live for a century, the birch for half that; do I fear that my signature will fade? My neighbors have planted no pines but all have many birches; am I snobbish about having a woodlot of distinction? The pine stays green all winter, the birch punches the clock in October; do I favor the tree that, like myself, braves the winter wind? The pine will shelter a grouse but the birch will feed him; do I consider bed more important than board? The pine will ultimately bring ten dollars a thousand, the birch two dollars; have I an eye on the bank? All of these possible reasons for my bias seem to carry some weight, but none of them carries very much.

So I try again, and here perhaps is something; under this pine will ultimately grow a trailing arbutus, an Indian pipe, a pyrola, or a twin flower, whereas under the birch a bottle gentian is about the best to be hoped for. In this pine the wind will sing for me in April, at which time the birch is only rattling naked twigs. These possible reasons for my bias carry weight, but why? Does the pine stimulate my imagination and my hopes more deeply than the birch does? If so, is the difference in the trees, or in me?

The only conclusion I have ever reached is that I love all trees, but I am in love with pines.¹⁷

The wielder of an axe has as many biases as there are species of trees on his farm. In the course of the years he imputes to each species, from his responses to their beauty

¹⁷ Leopold, “Axe-in-Hand,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 73–74.

or utility, and their responses to his labors for or against them, a series of attributes that constitute a character. I am amazed to learn what diverse characters different men impute to one and the same tree.¹⁸

. . . Our biases are indeed a sensitive index to our affections, our tastes, our loyalties, our generosities, and our manner of wasting weekends.

Be that as it may, I am content to waste mine, in November, with axe in hand.¹⁹

Once again, it is clear that Leopold interprets his land ethic as essentially about balancing competing values, and that he takes the ultimate source and proper weighing of those values to be unclear and intellectually troubling, but that he clearly rejects any sort of radical environmentalism.²⁰ “Axe-in-Hand” also provides further evidence for the other interpretative points made above because it shows that even after his land ethic was in its final form, Leopold did not hesitate to affirm human dominion over nature and the permissibility and advisability of active land management in most cases.

The final essay to be considered is “Wilderness,” which begins and then later ends as follows:

Wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization. . . .

For the first time in the history of the human species, two changes are now impending. One is the exhaustion of wilderness in the more habitable portions of the globe. The other is the world-wide hybridization of cultures through modern transport and industrialization. Neither can be prevented, and perhaps should not be, but the question arises whether, by some slight amelioration of the impending changes, certain values can be preserved that would otherwise be lost.

To the laborer in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was wilderness an adversary to the pioneer.

But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to his life. This is a plea for the preservation of some tag-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of their cultural inheritance.²¹

The shallow-minded modern who has lost his rootage in the land assumes that he has already discovered what is important; it is such who prate of empires, political or economic, that will last a thousand years. It is only the scholar who appreciates that all history consists of successive excursions from a single starting-point, to which man

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁰ Partly as a result, I am inclined to think that Leopold should be interpreted as agnostic about anthropocentrism. For further discussion of this issue, see Meine, “The Utility of Preservation and the Preservation of Utility: Leopold’s Fine Line,” pp. 132–33, and Norton, *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists*, chap. 3. See also the final footnote of this paper below.

²¹ Leopold, “Wilderness,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 264–65.

returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values. It is only the scholar who understands why the raw wilderness gives definition and meaning to the human enterprise.²²

In addition to displaying incredible foresight, this passage shows that Leopold understands correct land management in terms of balancing competing values, and that he thinks it is difficult to know exactly how to balance those values, but that correct balancing should conform to the basic constraints identified above. (“Neither [outcome] can be prevented, *and perhaps should not be*, but the question arises whether, by some *slight* amelioration of the impending changes, certain values can be preserved that would otherwise be lost.”²³ Note the italicized phrases.)

Taken together, these crucial passages are the best evidence we have about how to understand Leopold’s land ethic. As we’ve seen, they reveal that, contrary to the standard interpretation, Leopold is much closer to being an *enlightened anthropocentrist* than he is to being anything like a *radical environmentalist*.²⁴ Because this interpretation is also supported by every other piece of clear evidence we have

²² Ibid., p. 279. Meine suggests that in this paragraph Leopold is referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “American Scholar” (Meine, *Aldo Leopold*, p. 504).

²³ Leopold, “Wilderness,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 264 (emphasis added).

²⁴ In fact, it is possible to read Leopold as a pure anthropocentrist who believes that biotic communities and other aspects of nature ultimately have only instrumental value, and thus that our requirements toward them derive only from what best promotes human interests over the long run—which of course includes anthropocentric aesthetic and cultural interests. On this reading, Leopold intends only to emphasize the way that unsustainable land use and destruction of entire biotic communities is inadvisable from a purely anthropocentric perspective, albeit one that is much broader than the prevailing perspectives of the 1940s in that it properly recognizes the value of human esthetic experience, culture, and considerations of sustainability. I note the possibility of this reading without endorsing it; as noted in a footnote above, I think it is more likely (but not obvious) that Leopold was uncertain about how to think about these issues even at the end of his life. (I am indebted to Dan Shahar and Paul Schwennesen for their stimulating and expert thoughts about the possibility of an anthropocentrist reading of Leopold.) Here are some representative quotations from Leopold near the end of his life relevant to anthropocentrism: “I am interested in the thing called ‘conservation.’ For this I have two reasons: (1) without it, our economy will ultimately fall apart; (2) without it many plants, animals, and places of entrancing interest to me as an explorer will cease to exist. I do not like to think of economic bankruptcy, nor do I see much object in continuing the human enterprise in a habitat stripped of what interests me most. . . . I think I know what the fallacy [in present-day conservation] is. It is the assumption, clearly borrowed from modern science, that the human relation to land is only economic. It is, or should be, esthetic as well. In this respect our present culture, and especially our science, is false, ignoble, and self-destructive” (Aldo Leopold, “Wherefore Wildlife Ecology?” in *The River of the Mother of God* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991], pp. 336–37). “But we have not yet learned to express the value of wildlife in terms of social welfare. Some have attempted to justify wildlife conservation in terms of meat, others in terms of personal pleasure, others in terms of cash, still others in the interest of science, education, agriculture, art, public health, and even military preparedness. But few have so far clearly realized and expressed the whole truth, namely, that all these things are but factors in a broad social value, and that wildlife . . . is a social asset” (Leopold, “Goose Music,” in *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 226–27).

from Leopold's writings and his life, there is decisive reason for affirming this interpretation of Leopold's land ethic.

In sum, we've seen that Leopold is neither an ideologue nor a radical. Instead, he is a true philosopher who recognizes that in both ethical theory and in the real world, tradeoffs are incredibly difficult, and legitimate competing interests must be treated with the highest possible respect.