

PERSONS IN NATURE: TOWARD AN APPLICABLE AND UNIFIED ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

by *Frederick Ferré*

Abstract. Two major contenders for the role of robust environmental ethics claim our allegiance. One is Baird Callicott's, based on the land ethic formulated by Aldo Leopold; the other is that of Holmes Rolston, III, sharply distinguishing environmental from social (human) ethics. Despite their many strengths, neither gives us the vision we need. Callicott's ethic leaves too much out of his picture; Rolston's leaves too much disconnected between nature and humankind. A really usable environmental ethic needs to be both comprehensive and integrated. For that, we need a worldview that includes the human in nature but also affirms the unique values of personhood.

Keywords: ethics; humanity; metaphysics; nature; organicism; personalism.

Most of the people in my circle of friends—though not yet (alas) the majority of people—have by now accepted the need for a robust environmental ethics that goes beyond mere prudential concern for human resources. I take it for granted that readers of *Zygon* are all within that intimate circle and thus need no preachments against the heedless abuse of the earth nor even against an anthropocentric, “shallow” ecology.

That gets us a long way, at least if the initial standard is set very low (down to former Vice President Dan Quayle's “Council on Competitiveness,” for example), but it does not get us to our destination. It is my reluctant conclusion that the two main contenders for environmental ethics fumble—or worse—when it comes to providing applicable guidance for resolving the really tough problems that

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confront human decision makers today. This article is intended to show why I have come to this unhappy position and to say what I think would be necessary to change the situation.

The two prominent positions I plan to discuss are, first, Aldo Leopold's land ethic as interpreted by Baird Callicott; and, second, what I will call the "painful good" ethic, as formulated by Holmes Rolston, III. The first frustrates our need for guidance by flunking the applicability/adequacy test; the second undermines the demand for ethical coherence.

The first two parts of my discussion will be critical, spelling out why I find little hope for guidance from either of these important sources. The final, constructive part of this essay will point to a way forward; I shall advocate a revision in worldview, a frank embrace of a theory of value and reality that puts persons into continuity with—but not on all fours with—the rest of the natural order. It is what I have been calling personalistic organicism (Ferré 1989). I shall not try to apply personalistic organicism to complex problems in any detail, but I hope it will be clear, when I finish, that this ethic offers a vision that can in principle provide guidance, since it avoids the problems that handicap the alternatives.

THE LAND ETHIC: PROBLEMS OF ADEQUACY

Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* is a wonderful book, and one of its later chapters, "The Land Ethic," contains perhaps the most stirring and influential statement ever made on environmental responsibility (Leopold [1949] 1966). Leopold is in many ways the founder-patron of what I called "robust" environmental ethics. His influence has been immensely constructive. His evocation of the morally appalling image of Odysseus, hanging "all on one rope a dozen slave-girls of his household whom he suspected of misbehavior during his absence" (Leopold [1949] 1966, 237), required many people to think for the first time about the rightness of doing "whatever they wish with their property," even when that property is land rather than ladies.

In this way he forced the issue of what philosophers call "moral considerability" and required us to notice that the range of recipients of our moral attention has slowly but steadily grown. To members of other tribes or language groups, to prisoners of war, to men with differently colored skins—even (!) to women—the circle of those to whom moral obligations are in principle due has expanded; and nothing but habit, Leopold implies, prevents us from making the evolutionary move toward incorporating in our ethics the land,

animals, and plants that live on it. He writes, "The extension of ethics to this . . . element in human environments is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity" (Leopold [1949] 1966, 239).

But Leopold was actually urging more than a simple "extension" of ethics; he was proposing a genuine revolution. In the same essay, he formulated a new *standard* for ethics. In judging the very meaning of *right* and *wrong*, he said, we should put the living land at the center: "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" (Leopold [1949] 1966, 262).

Baird Callicott is right, therefore, when he maintains that this is not evolutionary at all, but rather a revolutionary contribution of the land ethic (Callicott 1980, 318–24). It shifts concern from collections of "atomistic" individuals, as was the central consideration for both Kantianism and utilitarianism (the two main branches of modern ethical theory), and places attention squarely on the health of the *biotic system*. Thus, Leopold offers a holistic, biocentric ethics, in contrast to the mainly atomistic, anthropocentric ethics familiar in all the Western traditions.

This is immensely important. Exclusive, short-sighted attention to what is good for *Homo sapiens* has proven ruinous and promises to inflict even worse environmental damage in the future than even before. By default, because there is hardly a hint of an alternative to anthropocentrism among our mainstream ethical resources, it could seem that a land ethic of holistic biocentrism is the life-affirming guide we are seeking.

Unfortunately, it is not, for three reasons. The first of these, although not an obstacle in principle, is the serious current practical difficulty of application. Frankly, at this stage of biological and ecological knowledge, we simply *do not know enough* about the web of life to be confident about which actions will or will not enhance the "integrity, stability, and beauty" of the biotic community. That ignorance, on which not only Leopold himself but also—often even more warmly—contemporary ecologists insist, is a profound block to confident policymaking, if our ethical success depends on our getting it right.

A subobstacle is that the words Leopold chose by which to define his standard of biocentric ethics are notoriously hard to understand with precision. Even aside from the infamous problems of defining *beauty*, what is the operational meaning of *integrity* in a living community? How "stable" should *stability* be in a constantly evolving world? Even the term *community* has been replaced with *ecosystem*, but

not exactly replaced, since *community* was never an exactly defined term to begin with.

If the land ethic is asked to be a clear guide for resolving problems, it lets us down on this first, cognitive level. It expresses, perhaps, a wholesome general attitude, a way of getting beyond a purely economic relationship to the land and its inhabitants; but when pressed to show, in concrete cases, one specific course of action as "better" than another, it passes the ball to the ecologists—who punt.

There is a second reason the land ethic does not satisfy our needs. It simply *leaves out of account* huge dimensions of ethical life which we would be wrong to ignore. Ought I to keep all my promises, or only some? Is it ever right to lie, perhaps in a good cause? Is slavery right or wrong? Should torture be used to extract confessions from suspected witches? These are examples of questions that demand ethical answers, but for the land ethic they are neither right nor wrong unless they can be shown to have bearing on the "integrity, stability, and beauty" of the biotic community. If we are looking for guidance on many of the central issues of human life, even intuitively obvious questions like whether it is right to murder one's mother for her piggy bank, we shall not find it here. Most of human culture is simply marginalized by the biocentric shift.

The third reason for my complaint of inadequacy against an unsupplemented land ethic relates to this marginalization. Holistic biocentrism can do much worse than merely fail to give guidance in crucial ethical situations; rather, it can be expected to *guide in terrible directions*. One of the earth's great problems, both today and as far as we can see into the future, is human overpopulation. However vaguely we may define the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community," it almost certainly would be enhanced by many fewer people burdening the land. Therefore (and here is a consequence from which Leopold and followers like Callicott, rightly heeding fundamental moral intuitions, would recoil), anything we could do to exterminate excess people—especially where they are congregated in large, unsanitary, destabilizing slums—would be morally "right"! To refrain from such extermination would be "wrong." "Culling" individuals, if held short of extinction, is a good thing, biologically, as long as the species is plentiful; and the human species is obviously too plentiful and getting more so.

We have here what could be used as a justification for mass murder, in particular to support policies of deliberate extermination by the wealthy few in the global North against the teeming global South. Is this an ethic, or a potential excuse for ruthless genocide?

No purported ethic can do such violence to fundamental moral intuitions and still offer itself as guide.

Short of genocide, but still ethically disturbing, another problem requires our notice. For thoroughgoing holism, of the sort we are considering, *individual* organisms matter only for the sake of the *system* in which they play parts. Tadpoles, that is, matter only for the persistence of their own species and for the predators that depend on them for food. Should human beings be reevaluated in the same holistic terms? Taken as a guide for human culture, the land ethic—despite the best intentions of its supporters—would lead us toward classical fascism, the submergence of the individual person in the glorification of the collectivity, race, tribe, or nation.

Although a truly needed and refreshing change from anthropocentrism, Leopold's vision could easily swing to the opposite extreme and become an excuse for radical misanthropy. As Callicott himself observes, "The extent of misanthropy in modern environmentalism . . . may be taken as a measure of the degree to which it is biocentric" (Callicott 1980, 326). Can such potentially self-hating biocentrism be a guide for human policy-making? Have we other choices?

THE "PAINFUL GOOD" ETHIC: PROBLEMS OF COHERENCE

Holmes Rolston, III, sees very clearly that the tenderheartedness we cultivate for dealings among human beings is unsupported and unsupportable in nature. He is, however, keenly aware that the predacious standards of biotic health in nature are morally outrageous when imported into human culture. Early in his book, *Environmental Ethics*, he states the contrast very clearly:

Nature proceeds with a recklessness that is indifferent to life; this results in senseless cruelty and is repugnant to our moral sensitivities. Life is wrested from her creatures by continual struggle, usually soon lost; those few who survive to maturity only face eventual collapse in disease and death. With what indifference nature casts forth her creatures to slaughter! Everything is condemned to live by attacking or competing with other life. There is no altruistic consideration of others, no justice. (Rolston 1988, 39)

Since this is so, *right* and its opposite cannot simply be equated with what enhances or hinders biotic flourishing. Thus, drawing on widely shared ethical intuitions, Rolston concludes that there are "elements in nature which, if we were to transfer them to interhuman conduct in culture, would be immoral and therefore ought not to be imitated" (Rolston 1988, 39).

Rolston's tough realism about what goes on in ecosystems forms the foundation of his environmental ethics. Despite our tender

human sympathies for an innocent fawn, for example, we must accept that a hungry cougar will make a meal of it, if it can; and even if we have a chance to intervene to save the fawn, we should not. This follows from one of Rolston's major principles: "There is no human duty to eradicate the sufferings of creation" (Rolston 1988, 56). Here we catch a familiar echo from the land ethic, as when Rolston writes that "environmental ethics has no duty to deny ecology but rather to affirm it" (Rolston 1988, 56).

But this ethic, Rolston insists, should not be used for interhuman guidance. On the basis of sheerly biological principles, it would make little or no difference whether a hungry predator were to eat a wandering fawn or a lost child. We should *not*, on Rolston's principles, save the fawn; but our ethical intuitions strongly urge us that we *should* save the child. Rolston accepts this difference and explains: "The fawn lives only in an ecosystem, in nature; the child lives also in culture. Environmental ethics is not social ethics. . . . We would not want to take predation out of the system if we could (though we take humans out of the predation system), because pain and pleasure are not the only criteria of value, not even the principal ones" (Rolston 1988, 57).

The more important criterion, for Rolston, is "satisfactory fitness" in nature. Fitness rests on predation, which makes for suffering; and since animals are morally innocent, this results in enormous quantities of innocent suffering. Is this a problem? Yes and no, for Rolston:

It may seem unsatisfactory that innocent life has to suffer, and we may first wish for an ethical principle that protects innocent life. This principle is persuasive in culture, and we do all we can to eliminate human suffering. But ought suffering to continue when humans do or can intervene in nature? That it ought not to continue is a tender sentiment but so remote from the way the world *is* that we must ask whether this is the way the world *ought* to be in a tougher, realistic environmental ethic. A morally satisfactory fit must be a biologically satisfactory fit. What *ought to be* is derived from what *is*. . . . Nature is not a moral agent; we do not imitate nature for interhuman conduct. But nature is a place of satisfactory fitness, and we take that as a criterion for some moral judgments. We endorse a painful good. (Rolston 1988, 58-59)

In Rolston's sharp separation of environmental ethics from social ethics, we encounter what I call ethical incoherence. Incoherence, in general, is an obstacle for thought when principles are "just different" and out of connection. In Rolston's case, we are given, in effect, two ethics. *Social* ethics urges us to do whatever we can to prevent innocent suffering (when a human life is at stake); *environmental* ethics assures us that "we are wrongheaded to meddle" (Rolston 1988, 56). *Social* ethics condemns predatory activity in

culture; *environmental* ethics praises predation as enhancing “satisfactory fitness.” Rolston uses the strongest moral disparagements to urge against humans playing a role in the extinction of species; at the same time, he contemplates prehuman periods of even catastrophic extinctions with unruffled approval.

Incoherence is always theoretically uncomfortable, but matters get worse. Discomforts become practical, too. Conflicts between domains arise. Which ethics should we follow? As Rolston acknowledges, “Our duties to persons in culture will at times bring us into conflict with this land ethic, and we will have to adjudicate such conflicts” (Rolston 1988, 229).

For example, half the world’s deforestation, annually, is caused by subsistence needs of poor people in the global South. But the preservation of forests is high on the agenda of those who would save biodiversity, minimize extinctions, counter global warming, and somehow atone for destructive anthropogenic encroachments. Which ethics do we use? Shall we protect the forests at the expense of our obligations to the needy? What if we cannot have both? By what higher ethics shall we “adjudicate” between the two incoherent ethics in conflict?

Rolston’s answer is not much help. He acknowledges that there is nothing unusual in “higher trophic levels” (including human cultures) “eating up” lower ones.

But we have also been saying that there is, and should be, systems-wide interdependence, stability, cohesiveness. These have been achieved amorally in nature, where the community is found, not made. But when humans, who are moral agents, enter such a scene and make their communities, rebuilding those found naturally, they may and should capture such values in their own behalf, but they also have an obligation to do so with a view over the whole (which also, derivatively, involves considering individual pains, pleasures, and welfares). The obligation remains a *prima facie* one: humans ought to preserve so far as they can the richness of the biological community. This too is among human obligations. It is not the only one. In a capstone sense it is not the ultimate one, since the cultural values supervening on nature are more eminent. But in a foundational sense it is ultimate, since it is out of projective nature that everything is created and maintained. Such duty must be heeded or reasons given why not. (Rolston 1988, 229–30)

Reasons given why not? Which reasons trump other reasons? Do “capstone” reasons trump “foundational” reasons, or vice versa? Have we come all this way only to be told that our “*prima facie*” obligations to environmental ethics can be overridden by “giving reasons” if we decide that cultural values are more “eminent”? On our quest to “provide guidance for resolving problems,” we have come to a dead end. Rolston’s two scales—one for culture, one for

nature; one “capstone,” one “foundational”—have turned out to be incommensurable. This means that on the really tough questions, when genuine obligations to the environment or to humanity conflict, we have no guidance.

PERSONALISTIC ORGANICISM: CONTINUITY WITHOUT REDUCTION

At the start of this final section, let me affirm boldly what will be necessary in general for a “guiding vision” of the sort we need. Such a vision must reveal a single, continuous worldscape in which human culture is situated fully within nature. It must offer conceptual clarity on what constitutes value, intrinsic and instrumental. It must show how genuine values of both sorts in nature can extend beyond (and can sometimes conflict with) human values. It must offer a way to make distinctions between different degrees of value on a common scale, so that discriminating moral choices can be made, not always or automatically in favor of human interests. It need not come with quantitative value-tags affixed, to remove the need for qualitative judgments, but it should be able to indicate areas where additional knowledge would be relevant for morally responsible decision making. In other words, it should be neither anthropocentric nor value-leveling; it should be organismic, but able to appreciate the precious values of individual personhood.

First, on the relation of culture to nature, some conceptual analysis of the slippery term *nature* is overdue. Callicott and Rolston recently gave each other some needless lumps in a debate over wilderness policy, partially because of terms that had not been analyzed (Callicott 1991a and 1991b, Rolston 1991). Callicott assumes that *nature* simply means “*everything that is* (except the supernatural, if such there be)” (Callicott 1991a, 240), and has a harder time, in consequence, seeing why Rolston persists in saying that human beings should just leave some parts of “nature” alone. If human culture is (necessarily) part of nature, as Callicott takes for granted, then Rolston’s advice is logically impossible. But Rolston tends to use *nature* to mean, instead, “*whatever has not been changed, caused, intruded upon, or spoiled by human purpose*” (Rolston 1991, 371).

Interestingly, Rolston is aware that different meanings of *nature* are possible, commenting parenthetically: “There is another meaning of ‘natural’ by which even deliberated human actions break no laws of nature. Everything, better or worse, is natural in this sense, unless there is the supernatural” (Rolston 1991, 371). But he prefers to insist instead on the sense of the word that separates and divides, by

definition, as follows: "On the meaning of 'natural' at issue here, that of nature proceeding by evolutionary and ecological processes, any deliberated human agency, however well intended, is intention nevertheless and interrupts these spontaneous processes and is inevitably artificial, unnatural" (Rolston 1991, 371).

This terminological stipulation seems to suggest, however, that "evolutionary and ecological processes" themselves lose out or disappear once "deliberated human agency" comes on the scene. This is obviously false. Ecological processes—tough ones, coming back to haunt us for human folly—are exactly what worry us these days! Evolutionary and ecological processes are not suspended, though they are influenced, by the emergence of human purpose and intelligence. Does Rolston want to say that ecological processes, once "intruded upon" by human agency, are not "really" ecological any more? It would be *possible* for him, since he may stipulate our meanings as he pleases; it might even be *tempting* for him, since it would parallel his saying that "nature," once affected by human intention, is no longer "really" nature; but it would not be *useful*. It would fragment thought without necessity. Ecologists, on his proposed usage, would need to change fields, from ecology (proper) to some other field, to do research on acidified lakes or forests—on which human purposes have all too obviously intruded.

Therefore I opt against Rolston on this terminology, since it is much harder to think coherently with terms designed to bifurcate; and we have already seen the ethical consequences of disconnection and incommensurability. The best solution is to recognize that words like *natural* and *artificial* are not all-or-nothing terms. *Artificiality* comes in degrees. An apple orchard is more artificial than a forest, but a plastic apple is more artificial yet. *Natural*, by inversion, is also a relative term—and nature, containing many degrees of naturalness, from penguins to people and even plastics, is nonetheless still natural, for all that.

Human beings, I grant, are strange, awkward members of the natural order. We do not fall spontaneously into our behaviors. Not only are we not like rocks rolling downhill, we differ, too, in obvious ways from living things like chipmunks or sea gulls. We plan farther ahead. We consider many more alternatives. We employ tools to help us gain our distant ends. We take responsibility. We feel pangs of conscience.

I do not claim, please note, that all this repertoire is absolutely unique in human beings. But if there are analogues of tool use, strategy sessions, or guilt trips elsewhere in nature, they are very significantly less prominent when compared to their analogues in

human society. What does not seem to set us apart so much from the rest of living nature is the tendency to *prefer*. Preference need not be conscious, as it is with human beings; preference, positive or negative, may be expressed by engulfing a speck of food, by fleeing from an attacking lion, by buzzing into sweet-smelling blossoms, or even by the simple action of leaves and petals unfolding toward the sun. Here, at the level of the organism, is the behavioral equivalent of the value judgment. The organismic world is full of valuers; therefore the world—including, emphatically, the world outside the human realm—is full of value.

For conceptual clarity it is essential that we recognize that values entail valuers, just as thoughts entail thinkers and experiences entail experiencers. Without thinkers, no thoughts; without valuers, no values. Callicott comes close to this position when he affirms “that there can be no value apart from an evaluator” (Callicott 1980, 325), but he pays too little attention to the importance of nonhuman evaluators. In fact, this is a world rich in valuers and values. Among these values are those, the intrinsic values, that are enjoyed for their own sakes, and those, the instrumental values, that are valued because they contribute to or make possible the intrinsic values. To be able to enjoy an intrinsic value, a valuer must be a center of experience of some sort. This need not be self-conscious experience; intrinsically satisfying experiences of a wide range in sharpness and complexity are not hard to imagine. Consider the saying, “As happy as a clam at high tide.” We need not be talking in metaphors when we speak of contented cows and happy clams.

It is no metaphor, either, to speak of a pond as valuable. But if the pond is not the sort of thing that can experience anything at all, if it is not itself a valuer, it confuses matters to say that it is *intrinsically* valuable. Rather, the pond is of very high *instrumental* value to the many varieties of valuers who flourish in and around it, who depend on it as a necessary condition for their continued valuing. In like manner, it obfuscates to say that collective nouns like *species* and *systems* refer to things of intrinsic value. A species does not value, experience, prefer—or even exist—apart from the actual, individual entities which exemplify “it” at any given time. When we work hard to preserve an endangered species, what we are valuing (in that shorthand expression) is the *set of possible organisms which might enjoy their own existence, and contribute to the well-being of other organisms, into the indefinite future*. For this we defend *habitat*, which is a collective name including both instrumentally necessary inorganic features of the species’ environment and other, intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, organisms.

Two additional points emerge from this. First, all organisms can be both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable. To the extent that they value their own inherently satisfactory experiences, they constitute intrinsic value, apart from any use they may have; and to the extent that they contribute to or make possible the inherently satisfactory experiences of other organisms, they are instrumentally valuable, apart from any intrinsic value they may represent for themselves.

Second, though individual valuers are the only possible centers of intrinsic value, organisms are not isolated, atomic phenomena. In fact, even atoms are no longer conceived as "atomic" in that old-fashioned sense! Organisms and atoms alike are what they are because of their environments. An organismic worldview means, above all, that every entity contributes to and is in turn shaped by an entity-network that makes a real difference.

This is holism that retains the individual as the indispensable center of intrinsic value. Its affirmation of the deep *connectedness* of things bars selfish individualism and provides the basis for real community; but its recognition of the character of value as dependent on *actual valuers* resists the lure of collectivisms that would submerge individuals for the sake of some mythic supervening "good of the whole." Here is the basis for a new land ethic which can stand, with Leopold and Callicott, for ethical interconnections with flora and fauna, but oppose in principle the potential dangers of eco-fascism.

Such organicism is not, however, indiscriminately "biocentric" or merely egalitarian as between, say, clams and clam-diggers. The locus of intrinsic value is in inherently satisfactory experience which can be a focus of preference for the experiencer. Clams, we noted, may be capable of a certain level of value for themselves. For people, clams are of significant instrumental value as a means toward obtaining other inherently satisfying experiences: their own gustatory pleasures. The two conflict. Is there no ethically principled way to choose?

If clams and clammers simply inhabited different worlds, the world of nature and the world of culture, the problem of adjudication would be insoluble in principle. But the organismic world I have been propounding is a world of continuities rather than bifurcations. Experience and preference are common features, but these features come in many different qualities and intensities. There is a huge difference in the neural complexity, the behavioral repertoire, the creative potential, the "culture" of clam and clam-cooker. It is reasonable to hold that the intensity, complexity, intrinsic satisfactoriness of the clam-eating person's gustatory experience is

immensely richer and more intense than the general glow of organic well-being that may pervade the interior psychological life of the undisturbed clam. All other things being equal, of course, in the absence of any higher intrinsic value to be realized, the clam should not be wantonly upset by moral agents. It should be left alone to enjoy its own torpid satisfaction—at least until some sea gull expresses a preference for the clam's instrumental value and puts an end to its dream.

Philosophers have supposed for a long time that the very highest levels of intrinsic value on earth are the exclusive preserve of human personhood. This may or may not be true. We are learning amazing things about cetacean capacities, including communication and sociality, that may make us change our minds. This is the sort of scientific research that will make a moral difference in determining policies for inter-species relations.

Metaphysical theorizing, responsibly conducted in contact with scientific findings, will also make a difference. Though I have offered a general sketch of value and reality, I have not attempted any elaborate metaphysical system. There is good reason to go on from here to ask how widespread in our universe inherently satisfactory experience may be. That is a matter to be decided on the basis of the best evidence and the most coherent, comprehensive, and adequate arguments. We may find ourselves drawn to some form of thoroughgoing panpsychism, in which every entity in the universe has at least a rudimentary capacity for preference and interior feeling. Since the only reality we know first hand, from the inside, is our own, it would be odd to scoff at the notion that all reality has the same basic architecture of inside and outside, agent and patient, end and means.

But what I have said here does not depend on going so far with an organismic metaphysics. All it requires is acknowledgment of the relatively obvious continuities between organisms as far “down,” toward unawareness and toward the “means” end of the means-ends continuum, as one cares to go. Below that, where intrinsic values become negligible, if they do, our inorganic environment can and should still be cherished for its wondrous instrumental values: Not just for its abilities to sustain the huge community of valuers who constitute our interconnected biosphere, but also for its miraculous capacities to refresh and renew—both in us and, I believe, in myriad other centers of appreciation—the aesthetic delights perpetually valued in and for themselves.

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