

## Leopold Appealed to Conscience

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### Leopold Appealed to Conscience

**B**arbara Paterson (“Ethics for Wildlife Conservation: Overcoming the Human–Nature Dualism,” *BioScience* 56: 144–150) stimulated our thinking about the role of religion and philosophy in the development of an environmental ethic. After reviewing and emphasizing the shortcomings of anthropocentric and biocentric environmental ethics, she recommended Daisaku Ikeda’s Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination as a potential foundation for a new environmental ethic. This pantheistic view proposes a grand unity in which every entity within nature, including humans, exists in dependence upon other entities.

Paterson includes Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” in her criticism of ecocentric ethics that, in her view, lead to a picture of human beings not as vital to the workings of the system, but rather as detrimental to it. This claim challenged us to reexamine what Leopold (1949) had actually proposed in his land ethic. We offer here a brief comparison of Leopold’s ethic with the ethic that Paterson expects to arise from Buddhist teachings.

Human nature, according to Paterson, is to assert control. Hence, she favors an ethic based upon the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, which envisions the human species within a unity of interdependence with all other beings and phenomena.

Leopold also proposed a community of interdependent parts within which “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo*

*sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it.” However, contrary to Buddhism, Leopold does not envision the human members of his biotic community bound together as a result of a denial or suppression of all desires that cause assertion of an individual over other humans, animals, plants, or microbes. Instead, Leopold acknowledged the reality that each human’s “instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate.” Thus, whereas pantheism teaches a goal of ultimate denial of human competitive instincts and does not allow that categories exist within nature, Leopold acknowledged the competitiveness and existence of categories, and proposed an ethic that would allow each to function in cooperation.

We believe that an effective environmental ethic must provide a motivation that stirs within the human heart a passion to discover and to do what we ought to do toward nature. As we understand Buddhism, the goal of life is to deny individual passions to become one with self and environment. In contrast,

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Leopold’s land ethic seeks to harness the passion of the human spirit as a superior motivation to care for nature. He declares, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” Leopold acknowledged that humans are endowed with a conscience. Thus, his land ethic is rooted in virtue ethics, and it is this deep rooting that gives lasting power to Leopold’s call to us from the past.

We conclude with Leopold’s challenge that rings true to many biologists today: “Obligations have no meaning without conscience, and the problem we face is the extension of the social conscience from people to land. No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an *internal change* in our *intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions*” (italics added).

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