

“Hume, Callicott, and the Land Ethic: Prospects and Problems”

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Aldo Leopold’s holistic land ethic principle – “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community ... wrong when it tends otherwise” – has widely been thought indefensible by appeal to any of the traditional normative theories of character and conduct central to Western moral theory since the early modern period.¹ J. Baird Callicott has long disputed this assessment, arguing that the principle is not incompatible with the moral philosophy of David Hume.² Callicott’s position has been criticized as incompatible with Hume’s texts. But closer examination suggest that Leopold’s land ethic principle is in fact defensible in light of Hume’s ethics in either of two ways. After a brief review of Callicott’s position, I go on to present and assess these two alternatives and their prospects and problems.

I: Callicott on the moral point of view

On Callicott’s reading, Leopold’s land ethic principle may be understood as a sort of Hursthouseian v-rule,³ a simplified action-guiding expression of a virtuous disposition to action: the disposition to approve acts that tend to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. Leopold came to his essentially Humean subjective naturalist view of ethics through following “Darwin’s basic account of the origin and evolution of ethics, and thus through Darwin, is committed to an essentially Humean theory of the foundations of morals.”⁴ That is, following

Hume's lead, Leopold appeals to our sentiments, and in particular sympathy, to explain the nature and scope of morality and moral judgments. According to Callicott, Hume held that not only do our altruistic sentiments and our sympathy extend to the welfare of other individuals, "we also are naturally endowed with a sentiment, the proper object of which is society itself."⁵ But whereas Hume thought only human communities could be said to have a character and welfare distinct from that of the aggregate of their members, Leopold's ecological understanding of natural communities led him to take a different view. For Leopold, human communities are nested within larger biotic communities or ecosystems that each possess a character and welfare of their own, distinct from that of the aggregate of their members. As such they too are proper objects of sympathetic concern. Callicott concludes that "the holistic dimension of the land ethic" characteristic of Leopold's land ethic, specifically "respect for the community as such," is a direct out-growth of the Humean legacies in Leopold's thought, and thus "not in the least foreign" to Hume's moral philosophy.⁶

However, Callicott's interpretation has been criticized as incompatible with the account of intersubjective moral evaluation that Hume presents in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and in the later *Essays* and the *Second Enquiry*.⁷ A brief review suggests the critics are correct.

For Hume, our moral evaluations are sentiment based. "To have the sense of virtue is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character."⁸ Character traits whose contemplation *pleases* us are virtues, those whose contemplation *displeases* us are vices. But Hume also holds that our moral evaluations are not simply idiosyncratic reactions to persons and actions – they reactions we expect others to share. But while our moral evaluations

are sentiment based, they are not and can not be mere reports of our own immediate reactions to other persons, for these we cannot presume others will share. Moral evaluations, by contrast, are evaluations we do presume others will share. This expectation is reasonable only for evaluative attitudes formed from a special, publically accessible perspective that Hume calls the ‘common point of view.’ Hume writes

When we form our judgments of persons merely from the tendency of their characters to our own benefit, or to that of our friends, we find so many contradictions to our sentiments in society and conversation, and such an uncertainty from the incessant changes of our situations, that we seek some other standard of merit and demerit, which may not admit of so great variation. Being thus loosen’d from our first station, we cannot afterwards fix ourselves so commodiously by any means as by a sympathy with those, who have any commerce with the person we consider. [T 3.3.118]

To attain a common point of view on another’s character, we must ignore the consequences his or her tendencies to act have for ourselves and focus instead upon consequences for that individual and for third parties. This is essential, Hume argues, because

“in judging of characters, the only interest or pleasure which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself whose character is examin’d; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him ... they alone produce that particular feeling or sentiment on which moral distinctions depend.”⁹

It is sympathy that explains how we can be pleased or pained by changes in others’ welfare. Sympathy is the capacity by which we “receive by communication [another’s] inclination and sentiments however different from, or even contrary to our own.”¹⁰ And it is sympathy that determines the scope of the intersubjective moral evaluations we can all affirm. Hume holds that “there is no human, and indeed no sensible, creature, whose happiness or misery does not, in some measure, affect us ... this concern extends itself beyond our own species.”¹¹ But since sympathy

merely communicates subjective states from one sensible creature to another, sympathy operates only between sensible beings. Communities as wholes are not sentient beings experiencing pleasure or pain distinct from the aggregate of experiences undergone by their members. So communities are not entities with which we can sympathize. Acts producing changes in the state of a particular community, human or ecological, cannot trigger a sympathetic response from the common point of view except or unless the change affects the welfare of some sentient member. Thus neither communities as wholes nor changes made to them are morally considerable in themselves from a Humean perspective.¹²

So from a strictly historical perspective, it seems Callicott's strategy for providing a Humean justification of the land ethic may be a non-starter. But this does not close the door on the possibility that Hume's moral philosophy could be tapped for a justification of the land ethic principle or something like very like it. Two viable strategies remain open for exploration.¹³

II: Types of Humean virtues

Humean virtues have two sorts of genesis, natural and artificial. Thus there are two families of dispositions within which an ecologically minded neoHumean could locate the disposition to act as Leopold's land ethic principle directs: (1) our inborn or natural dispositions approved from the common point of view for their agreeableness, utility, or both, or (2) our artificially acquired dispositions approved from the common point of view for their utility.

Dispositions, for Hume, are psychological tendencies to feeling and action that are either innate endowments or internalized products of sustained habituation and training. We cannot create

or change them in ourselves by acts of will.¹⁴ Nor can reflection from the common point of view alter existing dispositions or create new ones. The process is, psychologically speaking, passive and reactive. Of course our approval or disapproval of others' benevolence or injustice may trigger our dispositions to gratitude and affection or hatred and revenge. But this will happen only if such dispositions were already parts of our psychological makeup.

Natural virtues, such as benevolence, are innate or inborn propensities reflectively approved as virtuous from the moral point of view, artificial virtues have a different genesis.¹⁵ These virtues are artificially acquired dispositions to conform to mutually beneficial social conventions, approved for their utility for others besides ourselves.¹⁶ It is, Hume declares, "utility" that is "the sole source of the high regard paid to justice, fidelity, honour, allegiance, and chastity."¹⁷ As virtuous, morally approvable dispositions can arise in either of these two ways, a neo-Humean has two routes by which to try to justify her moral approval¹⁸ of individuals possessing and acting from a holistic concern for the stability, integrity, and beauty of ecological communities. But if the object is to produce a recognizably Humean position, one or, ideally, both of the following two caveats should be respected.

First, she should respect Hume's caveat that "the original principles of censure or blame" are essentially uniform. While variations in human beings' natural endowments exist, they are variations of degree not kind. Hume writes: "Though many ages have elapsed since the fall of GREECE and ROME; though many changes have arrived in religion, language, laws, and customs; none of these revolutions has ever produced any considerable innovation in the primary

sentiments of morals.”²⁰ So ecologically-minded neoHumeans should not appeal to hitherto unknown innate dispositions in order to justify a holistic concern for ecological communities as naturally virtuous, even if in possible worlds where human beings possessed this dispositions, environmental preservation would be natural virtuous.

Second, they should respect Hume’s caveat about the temporal and conceptual priority of conventions to the development of dispositions to conform to them.²¹ A neoHumean may be tempted to get round this by appeal to either (1) hypothetical rational judgments that such a disposition to conform to a non-existent convention, were we to possess it, would enhance our welfare or (2) imaginative sympathy with the benefits to imaginary individuals in the merely possible world where the disposition already exists. The first must be resisted and, ideally, the second as well. “Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action,” says Hume.²² To abandon this would be tantamount to abandoning Humean moral theory. Hume’s denial of the motivational power of purely imaginary counterfactual events is a much less central component of his moral psychology,²³ so rejecting this is not tantamount to abandoning Humean moral theorizing outright. But the safest way to construct a plausibly neoHumean defense of the land ethic as artificially virtuous would be to avoid any such end-runs around the historical Hume.

III: Concern for Ecological Communities as a Kind of Natural Virtue

Natural virtues are innate or original dispositions approved from the common point of view for their utility for or immediate agreeableness to either their possessor or sentient third parties.

Hume's examples fall into three categories: dispositions directed to others' good, such as benevolence, compassion, friendship, gratitude, and humanity; dispositions whose expression enhances their possessor's own welfare, such as temperance and perseverance; and dispositions whose expression is simply "immediately agreeable" to the possessor or third parties (such as greatness of mind.)²⁴ Since a disposition to care for the preservation of social wholes, as wholes, is targeted at the continuance of entities possessing no distinctive welfare of their own, it presumably cannot be a species of other-directed natural virtues, such as benevolence, gratitude, or compassion. It must instead be a species of virtue that is approved either for its tendency to benefit its possessor or because it is immediately agreeable to its possessor and third parties. Callicott has argued that there is a virtue within the latter category that closely resembles the disposition with which we are concerned –so closely that we might plausibly analyze the latter as one of its species.

²⁵ That virtue is patriotism – a disposition to cherish one's own community for its own sake.

Patriotism is a virtue that seems to arise quite naturally, independent of the particular conventions one's community happens to have and whose grounds of approval might plausibly be explained as arising from the pleasure it gives its possessor and its agreeableness both to the possessor and third-parties. If Callicott's identification is accepted, the way seems clear for treating the disposition in question as a variety of natural virtue

Hume, like Callicott, sees human communities as wholes at least some of which possess distinctive 'national characters.'²⁹ And the character of a community, as Hume understands it, is never wholly reducible to the characteristics of its members. It is as much a product of the peculiar social relations and practices that bind its membership into a whole. It is for this reason that a

nation can maintain its peculiar character through innumerable changes in its collective membership over time. In a Humean schema then, patriotism then would be a disposition to care for the preservation of these character-constituting features of one's community as a whole, as distinct from, and independent of, care or concern for the welfare of its members.

For Hume, this would make patriotism a form of pride: specifically a pride taken in one's community as opposed to personal possessions or abilities. As such its tendency to benefit its possessor is readily explicable in Humean terms, since the indulgence in pride is pleasant to us.³⁰ Threats to the objects in which one takes (and enjoys) pride thus directly threaten one's welfare. For those whose communities as wholes are a source of pride, threats to those communities are threats to their subjective welfare. So of course the disposition to preserve one's community as will be approved as beneficial to its possessor's subjective welfare.

We will also disapprove of individuals who fail to exhibit patriotic concern for their community as an immediately disagreeable defect of character. As Hume notes, the mere "absence of a virtue may often be a vice; and that of the highest kind....Where we expect a beauty, the disappointment gives an uneasy sensation, and produces a real deformity"³¹ So common is patriotic concern for the continuance of the distinctive life of one's community, that we expect it of one another. When our expectation is disappointed we are distressed and disapprove the individual responsible for our distress as morally defective.

So a neoHumean can argue, with Callicott, that concern for one's ecological community as a species of natural virtue. Ecological communities make distinctive contributions to the character the social communities in which we live, supporting the practices that define those communities

whose continuance is essential to our pride. Ecologically informed neoHumeans who accept this view of the relationship between their social and ecological communities will thus approve, and expect others to share their approval, of individuals disposed to preserve the stability, integrity or beauty of the distinctive features of the ecological communities with which their social communities are bound up.

However to succeed, two challenges must be met. First, we must be able to establish that the relationship between the distinctive features of our social communities as wholes and the surrounding environment is as tight as Callicott takes it to be. If the practices that give our communities their distinctive character can survive the transformation of the ecosystems on which those communities depend, then not even ecologically minded neoHumeans will draw the conclusion Callicott is after.

Second, we must remember that pride and patriotism are by no means unqualified or cardinal virtues for a Humean. As Hume notes, pride “may be either good or bad, according as it is well or ill founded, and according to the other circumstances which accompany it.”³² Pride has virtue-making properties in that the indulgence of pride is undoubtedly immediately agreeable to its possessor – indeed individuals lacking pride so shock our us that “the absence of it in the mind displeases, after the same manner as the want of a nose, eye, or any of the most material features of the face or members of the body.”³³ Yet at the same time, pride is often immediately disagreeable to third parties. Too visible indulgence of any form of pride in oneself so routinely offends others that “custom has establish it as a rule, in common societies, that men should not indulge themselves in self-praise, or even speak much of themselves...; and its is only among intimate friends or people

of very manly behaviour, that one is allowed to do himself justice.”³⁴ Open indulgence of patriotic pride in one’s community can be offensive to third parties whose pride in their own communities is challenged. So although from the moral point of view, pride and patriotism have legitimate virtue-making characteristics, these are at least partly cancelled out by their virtue-defeating characteristics.

The same pattern of virtue-making and virtue-defeating characteristics is to be found when we consider the utility of pride and patriotism for their possessors. Pride can be useful to its possessors: a strong sense of self-worth can help one to face significant threats to oneself or one’s community. Yet a strong sense of self-worth can operate as a virtue-defeater whenever pride or patriotism bolsters us in our pursuit of personally or socially disastrous projects.

Taken all in all, moderate pride and patriotism are surely more virtuous than not. But so significant are the virtue-defeating characteristics of both that no sensible Humean will want either to become pronounced features of human character and conduct. So a neoHumean approval of acts expressing a moderate pride or patriotism will be qualified, at best, and readily overridden in any case where such acts would block the expression of more highly regarded dispositions, for example, benevolence, charity, gratitude, or compassion for human welfare. So if ecologically minded neoHumeans were to be convinced that the preservation of a natural ecosystem as whole was essential for the preservation of their communities as wholes, they would approve moderate acts of ecological patriotism, but so long as doing so was consistent with the more important virtues, e.g., justice, benevolence, compassion, or gratitude. This highly qualified approval for community preservation falls well short of the strong moral approval for which both Leopold and Callicott call. So this strategy, though promising, does not quite deliver the goods for Callicott or like-minded neoHumeans.

III: Concern for Ecological Communities as an Artificial Virtue

Another and perhaps more promising alternative is to consider the possibility of reconstructing Leopold's land ethic principle as expressing a holistic 'artificial' or 'social' virtue.

Hume believed that the stock of natural or innate sentiments with which we are born is uniform through out our species. He also believed that the circumstances of human life are always sufficiently similar as to ensure that every community must cultivate and morally approve the same core set of acquired virtues, specifically: justice and fidelity.³⁵ But the same cannot be said of other artificial virtues, such as allegiance and chastity, which Hume considers essential only after the evolution of civil government. Moreover, Hume allows that differences in the circumstances of life between societies results in differences in the utility of our natural as well as our acquired dispositions and so also differences in their moral importance. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume writes, "Particular customs and manners alter the usefulness of qualities: They also alter their merit. Particular situations and accidents have, in some degree, the same influence," a view reiterated in *A Dialogue*, where he writes "Sometimes also the peculiar circumstances of things render one moral quality more useful than others, and give it a peculiar preference."³⁶ Even within a particular society, changes in the society's circumstances over time will alter the targets of moral approval: "Sometimes, too, magnanimity, greatness of mind, disdain of slavery, inflexible rigour and integrity, may better suit the circumstances of one age than those of another ... Our idea of merit, therefore, will also vary a little with these variations."³⁷ As societies' moral evaluations can vary with variations in social circumstances, this opens up the possibility that a society faced with

significant challenges unknown to its predecessors might develop and morally approve of acquired dispositions that its predecessors had neither practiced nor recognized as virtuous.

Say, for example, a given society were to find itself in circumstances where the welfare of its members was clearly threatened by acts that degraded or disrupted the functional characteristics of a surrounding ecosystem. And say also that a majority of its members were coming to realize that the threat could only be averted by the more general adoption of environmentally sustainable forms of exploitation than purely voluntary efforts had so far achieved. In these circumstances, the members would presumably begin to cultivate and approve one another's acquisition of dispositions supportive of the kinds of sustainable practices upon which their welfare depends: initially from pure self-interest but subsequently morally, after sympathetic reflection upon the welfare of others. Throughout that society, the acquired disposition to try to live sustainably, or, to use contemporary language: to 'be green,' could take on such collective importance as to be recognized as a moral virtue. A neoHumean might argue that this is precisely what is happening today.

This line of argument seems promising. But again, this neoHumean approach faces challenges. The first arises from the fact that as artificial virtues benefit ourselves and others only indirectly and in the long run, situations can arise in which the costs to individuals of acting as justice or fidelity require in a particular case are not balanced by any comparable benefit. In these cases, our willingness to act from these artificial virtues may be defeated.³⁸

The virtuousness of being green may be problematic in a second and deeper sense. If one follows the historical Hume closely regarding the conditions for the emergence and the moral approval of acquired dispositions, then one may have doubts about whether we can now speak of

there being such a disposition at all, let alone speak of it as virtuous. That some of our unsustainable environmental practices have resulted in harm to human beings and other sentient life seems now undeniable.³⁹ Our sympathy with those victimized by such practices ensures that we will deplore such practices and condemn those disposed to continue them as vicious. Nascent conventions restricting environmental exploitation within sustainable limits are being enacted, including local and sometimes global conventions regarding the preservation of endangered species, destruction of wetlands, emission of greenhouse gases and ozone depleting chemicals, containment of hazardous wastes, energy efficiency, and protection of ground water resources. But one can reasonably doubt whether any one convention or set of these conventions is already sufficiently well established to ground acquired dispositions to preserve ecosystems as wholes that anyone taking the common point of view would approve.

Such doubts will tend to defeat individuals' motivation to praise or approve actions in conformity with those conventions as virtuous. When it is a question of acting as a society's conventions of justice require, one might argue, individuals may sometimes doubt whether they have good reason to act as justice demands. But at least those individuals will typically have a fairly clear sense of what the demands of justice are. This is not yet the case with our nascent conventions regarding the preservation of ecosystems and their constituents. Taken together, whether at the level of a particular society or of the global community, they do not as yet provide comprehensive direction about how individuals are to constrain their behavior. Often many and incompatible forms of constraint are recommended simultaneously leaving individuals unclear about what priority to assign them. Whenever this is the case, doubts about what is required will tend to defeat approval or disapproval of individuals' tendencies to preserve or exploit those

resources.

For example, over the last few decades, governmental and non-governmental agencies in most Western societies have been campaigning for their members' acceptance of the rule: Reduce, Recycle, and Reuse, as a means for controlling personal use of natural resources. Suppose that a younger member of one such society has been habituated by her parents to accept the rule as mutually beneficial and to approve those disposed to conform to it as virtuous. Suppose further that she has just inherited an elderly automobile from a grandparent. How should she respond? What would it be right for her to do? Should she 'reuse' the car, inefficient as it is by modern standards, to reduce demand for the natural resources required to build replacements? Should she instead buy a newer hybrid car in order to 'reduce' her overall energy use and carbon emissions? Or should she 'reduce' her energy use and carbon footprint by using only public transport, however personally inconvenient? If she decides against reusing the car, how should she dispose of it? Should she sell or donate it for 'reuse' by another person or 'recycle' it for its materials. The general directive to reduce, recycle, and reuse, offers no clear guidance in this case.

It might be argued that this is less of a problem than it seems. Conventions can be action-guiding even when their details are too vague to provide a precise decision procedure for resolving every case. They can also be effectively action-guiding even when there is widespread disagreement about how to interpret or apply their provisions. For example, people routinely disagree over even well-established conventions of justice without those conventions being rendered ineffective or wholly defeating people's dispositions to conform to them. Overlapping substantive conceptions of our conventions are good enough for most practical purposes. Thus, disagreement about the terms or application of our conventions regarding ecosystems does not

entail that our conventions are too vague or contested to guide action or ground moral approval of those disposed to conform to them -- provided that sufficient overlap exists between the majority of the interpretations in play.

Our nascent conventions regarding ecosystem preservation, from those designed to guide individual behavior to those designed to govern the behavior of nation states, are in some respects vague, in others contradictory, and, in every respect, highly contested. There is some overlap between the views of the various stakeholders, at least within particular regions or communities. Nevertheless, one has only to read the letters to the editor of any newspaper running articles on some local or environmental controversy to find evidence that the overlap is not as yet very close. Such letters give evidence of the deep disagreement that results when individuals attempt to evaluate environmental policy issues from the common point of view. Invariably, some will approve those they consider to be green as morally virtuous; some will dismiss the same individuals as mere cranks; and some will condemn them as morally flawed.

For these reasons, Hume would probably counsel his ecologically minded successors that it is as yet premature to assert that a holistic concern for the preservation of ecosystems is morally virtuous. Interestingly, there is a point of similarity here between Leopold's outlook and Hume's. Leopold does not characterize the disposition to act as the land ethic principle directs as one already generally possessed or morally approved but rather as one whose possession and moral approval is "an evolutionary possibility." "The present conservation movement," he says, "is the embryo of such an affirmation."⁴⁰ Hume would surely agree. Being green seems well on its way to social recognition and approval as a moral virtue in many communities around the world. But it is not yet truly virtuous to be green.

The only way an ecologically minded neoHumean would seem to be able to get round this disappointing conclusion would be to reject Hume's caveat that imaginative engagement with purely fictitious entities can strongly move us.⁴¹ The argument could run as follows. Let us take up the common point of view on two possible future worlds: one in which a convention enjoining the preservation of ecosystems as wholes exists and one where it does not. We have good reason to believe that the possible future world in which the convention exists and individuals are morally approved for their disposition to conform to it will be a much happier world than the alternative. From our sympathy with the imaginary pleasures and pains of the inhabitants of these two possible future worlds, we cannot now help but approve the imaginary convention, together with the artificial virtue of conformity we imagine the inhabitants of that world to possess, and deplore its absence in the alternate possible world. That is, we will now approve individuals who happen to act in ways that would conform to the relevant convention as morally virtuous, even though the relevant convention does not now exist.

This argument would justify neoHumeans in viewing action in accordance with Leopold's land ethic as virtuous, since they could reasonably expect suitably informed imaginative individuals, taking the common point of view on these possible worlds, to respond as they do.⁴² It has a further consequence of considerable interest: that moral approval for a non-existent disposition can play a causal role in bringing that disposition into being, one that would not run directly afoul of Hume's apparent denial of this possibility.

Our moral approval of people who now act in ways that tend to preserve the stability or integrity of ecosystems does *not* require us to suppose that those people possess a disposition to

conform to a non-existent convention (the outward resemblance is mere chance.) Nor will our moral approval for such people cause us, *per impossible*, to instantly acquire the disposition we approve. Nevertheless, our moral approval will now change our behavior towards others in an important way: we will now morally praise and deplore for tendencies to act that happen to conform to the imaginary convention. This may have little affect upon others of our own generation but our children are another matter. Habituation from infancy to moral approval for ecosystem-preserving behavior would dispose them to act as the land ethic requires prior to its being established as full blown social convention. If we now ensure that the next generation is so habituated, it will not be long before the convention itself exists in fact. Our children will have the same deep moral intuitions about environmental protection that our generation acquired about issues racial and gender equality. Like us, they will shape their formal social conventions to fit their intuitive attitudes. If this is correct, then although natural virtues remain essentially uniform over time, a community's artificial virtues can evolve remarkably quickly. NeoHumeans, working cooperatively, can reasonably aim to alter, redirect, or even establish new artificial virtues within the space of their own lifetimes, by the right combinations of educational initiatives and appeals to the imagination.

5. Conclusion:

Neither of these ways of generating a neoHumean justification of Leopold's land ethic is wholly unproblematic. But the fact that at least two plausibly Humean arguments can be offered, with only relatively minor departures from the writings of the historical Humean, lends support to Callicott's belief about the value of Hume's moral theory for environmental ethics. NeoHumeans need not

abandon the holism of the land ethic to approve persons disposed to conform to it morally. All they

may need to abandon is too close an attachment to the historical Hume.⁴³

NOTES: