Nature as Neighbor:
Aldo Leopold’s Extension of Ethics to the Land

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This thesis titled
Nature as Neighbor: Aldo Leopold’s Extension of Ethics to the Land

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ABSTRACT

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Nature as Neighbor: Aldo Leopold’s Extension of Ethics to the Land (63 pp.)

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Aldo Leopold proposed a land ethic that extended moral values and principles to nonhuman entities of the biotic community. I argue that his land ethic can be integrated with an existing moral code, namely the Golden Rule interpreted as an ethics of empathy, which promotes altruistic benevolent acts towards the land. I demonstrate that the basic moral requirements necessary to practice the Golden Rule (i.e., empathy, comparability, relationship, benevolence) can be extended to nonhuman entities. I conclude that an ecologically-integrated Golden Rule satisfies Leopold’s moral requirements necessary for the extension of ethics to the land and, if practiced, makes it possible to achieve Leopold’s ultimate goal, which is land health.

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“That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology,
but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics.”

Aldo Leopold

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Aldo Leopold proposed a land ethic that “enlarges the boundaries of the [moral] community to include soil, water, plants, and animals – collectively the land” (Leopold 1949, p. 204). He argued that an environmental ethic that properly extends to the land would involve both the assignment of moral value to the land and a definition of wrong behavior in relationship towards the land. A moral code, which assigns values and identifies obligations that subsequently direct action could provide these elements of an environmental ethic. But can Leopold’s land ethic be interpreted by and integrated with an existing moral code, or is a radically new moral code required?

I argue that the land ethic can be understood as an extension of an existing moral code, namely the Golden Rule, which is widely accepted as governing ethical dealings between humans, but has not yet been applied by humans to their interactions with the land. I explain how an ecologically integrated Golden Rule can extend to the land and thereby serve as a basis for developing a coherent and workable land ethic. Noted environmentalist and author James Gustave Speth also sees promise in the Golden Rule; in his most recent book, he suggests that an extended Golden Rule “provides a basis for an environmental ethic…specifically our duties to future generations and to the life that evolved here with us” (Speth 2008, p.xvi). Though Speth does not in detail how an
environmental ethic—particularly a land ethic of the sort envisioned by Leopold—could be built upon the Golden Rule, it is my aim to do so in what follows.

The Golden Rule, understood as an ethics of empathy, I purport, can guide our relationship to and interactions with the land as a morally valued other and thereby facilitate the “extension of the social conscience from people to land” (Leopold 1949, p. 209). The practice of an ecologically integrated Golden Rule, I argue, has the potential to nurture within people a “love for nature” and to cultivate a certain respect and moral empathy for the biotic community.

The discussion that follows is divided into five chapters: Chapters 2 and 3 provide an in-depth exposition of Leopold’s land ethic and the Golden Rule, respectively. With this understanding in hand, Chapter 4 argues for an integration of the land ethic with the Golden Rule. Finally, Chapter 5 illustrates how the resulting view might be applied in practice.
CHAPTER 2: EXPOSITION OF LEOPOLD’S LAND ETHIC

Leopold was not a professional philosopher; his land ethic emerged from a lifetime of field experience as a wildlife conservationist dealing with abusive land uses that led to environmental problems such as soil erosion and loss of wildlife habitat. He understood, from his field experience, that economic incentives to practice conservation and laws to restrict harmful land use were not sufficient in and of themselves to promote good land use or restrain bad land use something more was needed. In fact, Leopold sharply criticized the government’s role in making conservation economically driven. Government subsidies given to landowners to practice conservation simply did not change behavior in the long term; when the money stopped flowing farmers resumed their abusive practices on the land. Leopold concluded that conservation guided by economic self-interest was “hopelessly lopsided …defines no right and wrong, assigns no obligation...implies no change in the current philosophy of values” (Leopold 1949, pgs. 207-208). In striving to solve practical problems as a land manager, he considered what ethical principles would best guide humanity’s relationship with and use of the land.

This ethic matured in the mind of Leopold throughout his career as a professional wildlife manager and conservationist until it came to fruition in his capstone essay from A Sand County Almanac, “The Land Ethic.” In this essay, Leopold laid out an argument for extending ethical concerns and moral values beyond the human community to the biotic
community\(^1\) where humans are “plain citizens” and fellow participants (neighbors) in the drama of life.

Leopold argued that the evolution of ethics involved the promotion of cooperation rather than competition between humans, resulting in social harmony. Leopold defined ethics as a “limitation of freedom of action in the struggle for existence” (Leopold 1949, p. 202). For Leopold, ethical behavior requires voluntary acts of self-restraint and respect in order to protect and promote the right of continued existence for all members of the community, including its non-human members.

This extension of ethics to every member of the human society is grounded on and facilitated by the development of moral laws and principles such as are derived from the Mosaic Decalogue, which dealt specifically with “the relation between the individual and society,” and the Golden Rule, which “tries to integrate the individual to society” (Leopold 1949, pgs. 203-204). Leopold believed that the land ethic, in a moral sense, already existed within the Mosaic Decalogue and Golden Rule, but their moral principles had not yet been extended to the land by society at large, even though Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah (Leopold considered Isaiah “the Teddy Roosevelt of the Holy Land”) warned of the moral irresponsibility and the dangers of the wanton “despoliation of the land” (Leopold 1949, p. 203). For example, the following warning included what Leopold considered Ezekiel’s doctrine of conservation:

\(^1\) For Leopold, a biotic community is a population of humans, plants, and animals interacting together with the abiotic components of the land. Leopold’s definition of a biotic community included more than specific or localized ecosystems, such as wetlands, grasslands etc; he also had in mind the larger biosphere.
Seems it is a small thing unto you to have fed upon the good pasture, but must you tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture? And to have drunk of the clear waters, but must you foul the residue with your feet? (Ezekiel 34:18)

Humans have yet to heed this warning. Unfortunately, as Leopold remarks, “The land-relation is a still strictly economic, entailing privilege but not obligations” (Leopold 1949, p. 203).

In the “The Land Ethic,” Leopold outlined the ecological and philosophical principles that underlay his land ethic. They are critical to understanding the arguments presented in this paper. These principles include Leopold’s moral requirements for formulating a practical and workable environmental ethic that would extend to the land. Leopold's land ethic principles will be presented by answering four key questions:

A. How does the land ethic enlarge the moral community?

B. In the context of the land ethic, what value does the land possess?

C. How does a person develop a moral awareness of the land’s worth and cultivate a behavior towards the land that acts in harmony with this awareness?

D. What is the ultimate goal of the land ethic?

**A. How does the land ethic enlarge the moral community?**

First and foremost is his concept of moral inclusiveness. Leopold radically redefined the boundaries of the ethical/moral community. For Leopold, “the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Leopold 1949, p. 204). In his land ethic, Leopold
included both abiotic and biotic components of the land; by doing so, he acknowledged the interdependent relationship that living things have with non-living things and indicated that moral restraint and respect must be given to soil, air and water in order to protect and conserve the natural resources essential for the survival of plants, animals and humans. In other words, one should not morally value an oak without considering the value of the soil and water that nourish it and one should not value a squirrel without valuing the oak that provides the mast that enables it to flourish. As environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston III argues in defense of Leopold’s inclusiveness: “the appropriate unit for moral concern is the fundamental unit of development and survival,” that is, the land as Leopold defines it (Rolston III 1988, p. 176). Caring for and protecting the bison but disregarding and destroying the prairie are misguided ethics. The habitability and accessibility of native grasslands and the survival of prairie wildlife species are inextricably intertwined (Hart 2006, p. 59). An effective and workable environmental ethic that intends to promote and protect living organisms (biotic) must connect those living individuals and species with the natural ecosystems (biotic+abiotic) that sustain them.

Community, for Leopold, is not simply an abstract concept or human construct, but a concrete and complex living web of interdependent relationships of ecosystems, species and individuals, all of which play a vital role in sustaining the health of the whole, which Leopold identified as the biotic community (i.e., biosphere). For the whole to remain productive and healthy, humans must acknowledge their role as fellow members of the larger community and accept and act on their moral responsibility when interacting with the whole, not solely as “conquerors” driven by economic self-interest,
but as citizens that are concerned for the well-being and continued existence of their nonhuman neighbors.

J. Baird Callicott describes Leopold’s land ethic as a thoroughly “communitarian environmental ethic” (Callicott 1989, p.104). However, this does not mean that Leopold’s land ethic is strictly ecocentric as Callicott and others propose. Callicott identified Leopold as an ethical monist, where moral value is determined by an individual’s contribution to maintaining the whole, that is, the whole possesses the greater moral value. The land ethic, Callicott argues “not only provides moral consideration for the biotic community per se, but ethical consideration of its individual members is preempted by concern for the preservation of the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. The land ethic, thus, not only has a holistic aspect; it is holistic with a vengeance” (Callicott 1989, p.84).

Environmental ethicist Bryan G. Norton challenges Callicott’s extreme holistic interpretation of the land ethic and describes Leopold’s holism as ecological contextualism: “If holism, with its implications of top-down values, is replaced by [Leopold’s] contextualism, understanding human activities as part of a larger, hierarchically organized whole, local values will be integrated into a larger… healthy, environing system” (Norton 1991, p.183). Norton further asserts that Leopold “never claims the value of the land community is similar, philosophically or otherwise, to the value we today profess to place on each living human individual” (Norton 1991, p.184). Consequently, Leopold’s land ethic is not strictly ecocentric in that it does not assign all moral value to the protection of the biotic community (Scoville 2000, p.63). Nowhere
does Leopold explicitly subordinate the importance and moral value of the individual, especially the human individual (Scoville 2000, p.62). However, the land ethic is ecologically centered because it focuses on relationships within the natural world, particularly between humans and the land (Scoville 2000, p.63).

Norton views the ecologically holistic aspects of Leopold’s land ethic as a working out of his pragmatic approach to resource management. Leopold recognized that land had both instrumental value (e.g. resources that are used by humans for economic gain) and non-instrumental value (i.e., an ecological function independent of human utility). Leopold argued that humans should not favor the conservation and management of natural resources with instrumental value to the detriment of resources with non-instrumental value. He envisioned the land ethic applied holistically, meaning that when humans manage and use the land, they must see it as an interrelational, interactive, and unified system, rather than as singular, isolated resources extracted from its ecological context (Scoville 2000, p.63). Land managers must determine whether or not resource use will significantly diminish the land’s ecological capacity to safeguard the health of the biotic community. An ecological, rather than a mere economical, sense of the value of these ‘natural resources’ as co-members of the biotic community that deserve respect is what Leopold’s land ethic is asking human land users to consider and apply to their management of the land.

This relational approach to community ethics emerges from Leopold’s study and understanding of ecology as propounded by pioneer ecologists Fredric Clements and S.A. Forbes who claimed that the earth is like a “living organism” where every organic and
non-organic part contributed to maintaining the health of the whole. Leopold employs this metaphor, with modifications, to explain his eco-holism and its ecological principles analogically in the formation of his land ethic. In Leopold’s essay, “Round River,” his propensity for ecological analogy and environmental holism is evident:

Harmony with land is like harmony with a friend; you cannot cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, you cannot love game and hate predators; you cannot conserve the waters and waste the ranges; you cannot build the forest and mine the farm. The land is one organism. (Leopold 1993, pgs.145-146)

A.L Herman, in his landmark analysis of Leopold’s biotic community, explains how important it is for nonhuman entities of nature to “belong” as members of the moral community as a means to achieve relational harmony with the land. He says, “It is that sense of belonging that defines the biotic community” (Herman 1999, p.61). In order for every member of the biotic community to belong to a moral community, humans must accept and respect the nonhuman members as legitimate co-members with certain rights (i.e., biotic rights, not legal/political rights) to exist within the community and must cooperate with these members in sharing the goods and resources of space, food, water, and shelter necessary for each to fulfill their respective roles as potential contributors to the health of the community (Herman 1999, p. 63). The goods and rights of each and every species member, their flourishing and fruitfulness, are connected to the health, stability, and integrity of the biotic community; the biotic community itself promotes them in its own way (Rolston, III 1988, p, 182). Furthermore, “what can make the extension of concern to nonhuman others more likely is the realization that the
flourishing of one’s self and the others occurs in, and is made possible by” an expansion of the moral community (Frasz 2005, p.126).

Of course, belonging to a community implies, at minimum, a degree of moral responsibility to fellow members. Since only humans are rational, moral agents capable of making choices that reflect what is in the best interest of the community at large, they are particularly obligated to practice restraint in their use of the common goods in order to protect the resources needed by the nonhuman members of the community who are sharers of a common life.

This does not mean, however, that the biotic community cannot be used by humans according to Leopold, nor does he insist that every member possess the same level of citizenry, only that consideration be given to each member’s biotic right to life (Sandler and Cafaro 2005, p.97). Leopold said, “A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these ‘resources,’ but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state” (Leopold 1949, p.204). Here, Leopold recognized the need for every creature, including humans, to use the land to meet life requirements, even if it meant manipulating the landscape (e.g., farming, logging, etc..) to supply those needs. Since the land also provides for the needs of humans, Leopold envisioned the landscape as a diverse mosaic of pastoral (i.e., humans ‘living lightly on the land’) and ‘pristine’ (e.g., wilderness) environments, where at various levels, spatial

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2 Leopold does not intend to equate human citizenship and nonhuman citizenship, especially on the level of individual citizenship. Nonhuman citizenship does not include certain individual rights and responsibilities that would be afforded to and expected of a rational human citizen, such as the right to vote, free-speech etc., nor would the nonhuman citizen receive the same protection from the law for the individual, such as the prohibition against murdering another human citizen. Nonhuman citizenship primarily entails the right for each individual species to exist and fulfill its contributive role in the community. Leopold’s focus is to protect species and the ecosystems to which they belong.
and temporal, individuals, species, and ecosystems co-exist and cooperate to the mutual benefit of the entire biotic community.

How does one achieve a ‘balance’ between responsible human use (disturbance and alteration) and ecological conservation of the land? Responsible and respectful use towards the biotic community is accomplished by evaluating and measuring human land use and its potential effects against the land ethic’s moral maxim, which is the normative dimension of Leopold’s land ethic: “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, p.224-225). What exactly does this moral maxim mean, especially when applied practically to the land? Perhaps the following example might clarify the meaning of this important moral maxim of the land ethic.

Suppose a farmer is considering the expansion of his row-crop operation by converting a woodland area to a cornfield. This woodland is positioned on a moderately steep hillside underlain with highly erodible soils. If he decides to change the land use by removing the trees, the hillside will become unstable, erode, and the run-off will carry sediments to a nearby stream, which will destroy spawning habitat for an endangered fish species. If the farmer is ecologically minded and responsive to Leopold’s maxim as a guide to his land use decision, he will recognize that to implement his plan, he would jeopardize the land community’s integrity (i.e., the land’s functional interrelatedness and wholeness) and stability (i.e., the land’s capacity for self-renewal and productivity) by causing soil degradation, deterioration of water quality, and habitat destruction.
The decision not to implement the plan requires economic sacrifice (short-term profit) on the farmer’s part and reflects responsible and respectful action towards the other members of the biotic community in adherence to the land ethic’s moral maxim. This action requires ecological knowledge, foresight, and skill to read the landscape and determine its sustainable capabilities and a willingness and moral openness on the farmer’s part to place his obligation and duty to protect other members’ needs and interests over his short-term self-interest.

This farmer, if acting in the true spirit of the land ethic, demonstrates ‘a sense of belonging’ to the biotic community by acknowledging the biotic right of each non-human member of the woodland to exist in the community. He possesses the real moral motivation for obeying the land ethic, that is, a “love, respect, and admiration for the land” (Leopold 1949, p.223). He also recognizes that the land is an extension of oneself and that to do harm to the land is, in essence, to do harm to oneself. (i.e., soil degradation would eventually render the land unproductive for crops or trees needed by the farmer and other living organisms).

**B. In the context of the land ethic, what value does the land possess?**

For Leopold, “when one attains membership in the moral community one attains what might be called moral standing,” (Leopold 1949, p.223) that is, one possesses value greater than mere instrumental value. Callicott suggests that Leopold can only mean, “what philosophers more technically call intrinsic value or inherent worth” (Callicott 1987, p.212). If land is to be considered a member of the moral community, it must possess a value beyond that of a mere commodity resource for human use and
exploitation. However, did Leopold mean to assign a dogmatic definition of intrinsic value to nature as Callicott suggests or did Leopold have a more flexible moral value in mind?

Leopold identified economics, as the primary factor that determined who in nature was perceived to be a valued nonhuman member of the land community. He complained that a “basic weakness in a conservation based wholly on economic motives is that most members of the land community have no economic value” (Leopold 1949, p.210). To remedy this weakness, Leopold suggested that members of the land community be valued “as a matter of biotic right, regardless of the presence or absence of economic advantage to us” (Leopold 1949, p.211). In Leopold’s thinking, every member of the biotic community should be perceived as possessing value, a value that is independent of its utility in satisfying human needs and wants. But what does Leopold mean by value or biotic right?

Typically, environmental philosophers, like Callicott, interpret Leopold’s meaning of value to be objectively intrinsic, that is, a strictly non-instrumental, unconditional and non-relational value in “isolation,” where a thing’s value is based on an attribute or property that it possesses in and of itself, independent of any relation or standing it might have with humans (Green 1996, pgs.34-35). I argue, however, that this contradicts Leopold’s emphasis on the need for humans to form an active and genuine relationship with the land as a means and condition to valuing it. He wants people to take an interest in the land and understand and accept it on its on terms, so to speak, because he believes that will create a desire to care for its welfare. Callicott’s view of intrinsic
value also counters Leopold’s ecological contextualism where each part of nature is in an interdependent and interactive biotic community and is valued because it contributes in some way to the health of the whole.

So, is there another possible explanation for what Leopold means by biotic value or good? In her paper, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” philosopher Christine Korsgaard points out that a more flexible and applicable understanding of intrinsic value would include drawing a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value on one hand and between value as an end and value as a means on the other. According to Korsgaard, things that are valued intrinsically are valued for their own sake; that is to say, the source of their goodness is not derived from another source (i.e., is non-conditional) (Korsgaard 1983, p.170). In contrast, the goodness of things with extrinsic value originates from some another source (i.e., is conditional) (Korsgaard 1983, 170). Korsgaard claims that things valued extrinsically can be valued objectively and as final ends. A thing can be “good objectively” if the conditions of its goodness are met and it “contributes to the actual goodness of the world; here and now the world is a better place for this thing” (Korsgaard 1983, p.179), which means a thing can be extrinsically valuable without being instrumentally valuable. The conditional value of a thing is a kind of extrinsic value that can produce an intrinsically good end. Since things that possess conditional value are good objectively under right and relevant conditions and promote good ends, and since humans have an interest and desire to attain good ends, it follows that every rational being has a reason to promote and realize things that possess objective
conditional value\(^3\) (Korsgaard 1983, p.182). What are the potential applications of Korsgaard’s distinctions of goodness to the environment?

Philosopher Karen Green, who applies Korsgaard’s two distinctions to the environment, claims that a thing in nature can have “objective extrinsic value” when that thing does not derive its value from human utility, but by its objective contribution (i.e., Korsgaard’s conditional value) to conserving the integrity, stability and flourishing of the biosphere, that is, Korsgaard’s better world (Green 1996, p.45). Green considers the biosphere to be the only possible unconditional good of environmental ethics (Green 1996, p.37). Species and ecosystems, on this view, would have objective extrinsic value—a value determined by their relationship to the health and goodness of the environment as a whole, independent of any human utility. Since humans have an interest and stake in the health of the biosphere, it behooves us to value and treat species and ecosystems in such a way as to acknowledge and respect their “objective extrinsic value” by protecting and promoting their contributive function in the biotic community.

I argue that attributing to the land objective extrinsic value coheres best with what Leopold meant by biotic value and best supports his land ethic, which is both relational and contextual. A species’ or ecosystem’s extrinsic value is its biotic good, its life function and service in maintaining the well being and wholeness of the biotic community. This is a biotic good that promotes both human and nonhuman flourishing. Ecological service(s) provided to the community by the biotic good of species and ecosystems include the purification of water, the assimilation and decomposition of

\(^3\) This represents Korsgaard’s interpretation of Kant’s view of value.
waste, the regulation of climate, the pollination of crops and natural vegetation, the mitigation of flooding, and the recharging of aquifers.

For Leopold, all species have a right to exist because their existence contributes a biotic good that is oriented or directed, in a relational sense, externally, toward the common good of others in the community. The objective extrinsic value, which might be called a “contributive value”, is the justification for a species’ right to continued existence: its existence contributes to the final good of a healthy biosphere. In other words, a species has the right to fulfill its contribution to sustaining a healthy environment for the biotic community.

For example, the biotic value of a hummingbird, its function as a species member of the biotic community, involves the important ecological process of pollination. This biotic value interacts externally with others (flowering plants) and as a consequence enables cross-pollination, which in turn enables plants to produce seed and fruit. This results in a self-sustaining good for the plants, as well as a good directed outwardly to the good of others in the community (species of birds, mammals, etc. that consume seeds and fruits). The hummingbird’s biotic value, its extrinsic and ecological value, is a value it possesses for its own sake, that is, to sustain its survival as a species. However, by function, the hummingbird’s biotic value extends to other species’ members, whose own good is interconnected with that of the hummingbird, where both collaborate as a means to conserving the corporate good of the biotic community. The biotic value of each species, which is a kind of contributing value it alone possesses, interdependently participates in the value of every other as it functions and operates relationally within the
context of community. Paradoxically, each species possesses an individual worth that is not individualistic in function, but interdependent as it gives to and receives the goodness of others in the community.

However, one could ask the following question: what is the contributing value of those biotic and abiotic members whose function seems to contradict the promotion of the corporate good? What value do things such as disease or parasites have in contributing to the good of the whole? Since the objective extrinsic value of species is both conditional and relational, it allows us to determine the value of a species in context to and in a proper relationship with the biotic community in which it belongs. In other words, there are situations where species play valuable roles in their indigenous ecosystems, but become invasive and noxious in other ecosystems (Green 1996, p.35). For example, the Euro-Asian plant bush honeysuckle has disrupted the structural development of the Eastern Deciduous Forest and is now considered a noxious weed throughout much of the United States, where management plans have been developed to eradicate the species.

Leopold possessed a keen understanding of how complex and dynamic ecological relationships functioned on the land and realized the possible need for the active and ongoing management of it. He also understood that life sometimes derives from death and that oftentimes what appears as a negative relationship in nature is transformed into a positive for the community (Scoville 2000, p.67), that is, at least to a certain degree (e.g., a disease that would wipe out an entire ecosystem is not considered to have biotic value for the community, since the community would no longer exist under this extreme
situation). For instance, in his descriptive essay, ‘A Mighty Fortress’, Leopold described the following benefits derived from tree diseases (Scoville 2000, p.67). Tree diseases created vertical deadwood (i.e., snags) in his woodlot where raccoons denned in the hollow trees, grouse fed on oak galls, and prothonatory warblers nested in the dead snags (Scoville 2000, p. 67). “The flash of his gold and blue plumage amid the dank decay of the June woods is in itself proof that dead trees are transmuted into living animals, and vice versa. When you doubt the wisdom of this arrangement, take a look at the prothonatory warbler” (Leopold 1948, p.77).

For Leopold, the biotic value of the various species of the biotic community, a value of their own that is also a contributive good to the health of community makes it possible for them to be members of the moral community, at least to the degree that humans are obligated to respect their contributive good as their own and not merely as goods that meet human needs and wants. A workable land ethic requires that humans discover, understand, acknowledge, and accept the objective extrinsic value of other members of the biotic community.

C. **How does a person develop a moral awareness of the land’s worth and cultivate behavior towards the land that is in harmony with this awareness?**

Leopold observed, “Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the [extension] of a land ethic is that your true modern is separated from the land…he has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow” (Leopold 1949, p.223-224). Leopold considered the lack of moral awareness and empathic feelings towards the land a result of humanity’s separation from it, which in turn created a major obstacle to
the development of a relational consciousness that recognized the value of the biotic community. He said: “We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” and “when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (Leopold 1949, p.214). When humans participate in the drama of life enacted on the land and internalize these experiences through the contemplation of their meanings, they will begin to formulate an ecological consciousness of the land that creates sensitivity to its actual worth. As Michael P. Nelson points out: “Leopold seems convinced that once we begin to see [experience] the world as a biotic community, the Land Ethic will follow naturally” (Nelson 2004, p.362). According to Callicott, Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* “is crafted to cultivate a love for nature in its readers, from which, Leopold hoped, benevolent and respectful actions toward nature would flow” (Callicott 1999, p.103). This is why Jakob Liszka argues that Leopold’s narrative essays and stories in *A Sand County Almanac* are “often more profoundly persuasive than his theoretical argument alone, since they address the whole person, that is, in addition to his logical proofs and explanations, they provide what might be called character and emotive proofs…” that support his ethical theory for a land ethic (Liszka 2003, p.46). Leopold in his narrative essays attempted to move the reader toward adopting a renewed sense of kinship with nature by means of personal identification with and empathy for it (Liszka 2003, p.59).

This is made evident in his narrative essay, “Prairie Birthday” (Leopold 1949, pgs.44-50), where Leopold stresses the importance of having a personal, participatory experience with the land so as to better foster an understanding, love, feeling, and
empathy for it. In this essay, he speaks of a graveyard that harbors a sole floral remnant of bygone days in Wisconsin when tallgrass prairie dominated the landscape. The plant is the cutleaf *Silphium* or compass plant. The lone *Silphium* is a remnant, because it was protected from the plow, quite unintentionally, by its happenstance presence in a graveyard. It was, however, not protected from the scythe and Leopold predicts that the *Silphium*, after repeated mowing “…will die and with it the prairie epoch” (Leopold 1949, p.46). Leopold laments that no one “will notice its demise” (Leopold 1949, p.46). Why? Because most humans do not recognize its value or rightful membership in the community. Therefore, its erasure is largely painless to us, for “we grieve only for what we know” and for what is morally important and of interest to us (Leopold 1949, p.48). The disappearance of the “Silphium…is no cause for grief if one knows it only as a name in a botany book” (Leopold 1949, p.48). Possessing mere ‘scientific’ information of any member of the biotic community does not constitute a personal relationship and consequently does not inspire nor evoke care or empathy. Emotive attachments result from personal experiences with the land, and these ongoing experiences progressively change a personal perception of its value, which in turn can foster feelings that encourage care, concern and the possible extension of benevolent empathy.

Leopold grieved for the *Silphium* because he perceived it as a valued member of the community whose passing would be missed; he anticipated its blooming, enjoyed its beauty, understood and respected its role in the biotic community. The mower presumably lacked this personal knowledge and perception of the *Silphium’s* value, nor did he consider it a member of the moral community. He did not exhibit an ecological
sensitivity that may have spared the *Silphium* its fate. His actions towards the land reflected a lack of ecological knowledge and a deficiency in meaningful experiences with the land that could have changed his awareness of the *Silphium’s* value. A major impediment to the formation of a land ethic is the lack of “valuing experiences” and deeper encounters with the land that cultivate real emotive connections and affectionate attachments with members of the biotic community (Rolston, III 1988, p.210). For Leopold, there is a logical and systematic relational flow to the formation of a land ethic. It begins with an intimate personal knowledge derived from authentic experiences with the land. These close encounters with the land can cause one to reassess the value of each member of the biotic community. It was a close encounter with a wolf that changed his view of wolves and their value in the biotic community.

In his essay, “Thinking like a Mountain,” Leopold recorded his experience with a wolf he killed in the Gila Mountain range, where he worked as a forest ranger for the U.S. Forest Service (Leopold 1949, pgs.129-133). As Leopold told the story, he was cruising timber on the rimrock when he spotted a she-wolf with pups fording a creek in the ravine below him. “In those days,” he confessed, “we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf” (Leopold 1949, p.130). At that time, all predators were considered fair game because they preyed on deer, which were of greater instrumental value to humans. So he pumped lead into the pack and the old wolf fell. He reached the wolf “in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes” (Leopold 1949, p.130). He paused and pondered the significance of her passing: “I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire
die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view” (Leopold 1949, p.130). As a result of this experience, he suddenly realized, with a sense of moral regret, that perhaps the wolf played an important role in controlling the deer population so the mountain ecosystem could sustain its long-term ecological health and viability.

This story provides support for the idea that direct emotive experiences with the land can precipitate a change in both thinking and feeling about whether certain members belong and should be valued as fellow members of the biotic community. Leopold developed a sense of ecological empathy by seeing the ecological value of the wolf from the ‘perspective’ of the mountain’s ecosystem and its health. Leopold attributed human qualities to the mountain such as “thinking” and “fear” (i.e., “I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer” (Leopold 1949, p.132). He perceived, by employing imaginative empathy and anthropomorphic projection that the mountain “suffered” as a result of the depredation on its vegetation by a deer population unchecked by wolves (Frierson 2006, p.457). Bryan G. Norton insightfully notes that “Thinking Like a Mountain came to be the centerpiece of Leopold’s mature concept of humans in the natural world” (Norton 1991, p.47). Leopold, he comments, came to believe that “if we are to manage nature without havoc, we must think as the mountain thinks” (Norton 1991, p.48).

Leopold’s ability to evoke an imaginative empathy towards the land enabled him to see the value of a wolf from the mountain’s perspective, which transformed his perception of the wolf from a worthless varmint that depleted deer populations to a valued member of the biotic community. This change in thinking reflected a moral
maturity that was capable of extending empathy to others in the community who were previously viewed as non-members.

Holmes Rolston III suggested that “ethical maturity comes with a widening of one’s circle of neighbors, and, with this broadening, a recognition of this togetherness which promotes a growth in ethical sensitivity to the larger community” (Rolston III 1989, p.124). Extending the “circle of neighbors,” is essentially what Leopold means by moral inclusiveness, which comprises seeing nonhuman members of the biotic community from their perspective, understanding their roles and purposes in the community and extending a moral concern for them, because they matter to the health of biosphere (Deigh 1995, p.761-762). Leopold’s land ethic, if it is to be workable as an ethics of moral empathy, involves widening the sphere of empathy to all members of the biotic community. However, for humans to admit nonhuman members of the biotic community into the moral community, humans must reassess how they value and assign moral worth to nonhuman entities. Leopold calls for a change in how we value nonhuman members of the biotic community, which should precipitate a corresponding change in how we interact with it. This change in behavior towards the land is necessary to maintain the long-term health of the biotic community.

D. What is the ultimate goal of the land ethic?

The goal realized when one fulfills the moral requirements of the land ethic is land health: “A land ethic, then … reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land” (Leopold 1949, p.221). What is land health, according to Leopold? “Land-health is the capacity for self-renewal in the soils, waters, plants, and animals that collectively comprise the land” (Leopold 1949, p.221). Of course, Leopold is referring to
what is now called environmental sustainability, that is, the land’s capacity to maintain
its diversity of ecological productions, functions, and processes, which involve
interaction between its biotic and abiotic components, all of which are necessary to
promote and support life and endure human and nonhuman use over the long-term.

Leopold once again relied on analogy and metaphor to explain. For Leopold, land
health was analogous to a healthy organism. An organism is a composite of parts,
processes, and functions, all of which interconnect and interact in such a way as to
sustain its life. If a part is absent or a process disrupted, the organism may become sick.
In a similar way, Leopold claimed, the land is an integrated whole, a collection of various
and distinct parts and productive resources (abiotic and biotic), all of which are connected
and play a role in maintaining a healthy community. Land sickness occurs when these
parts and processes no longer operate because they are disrupted and impaired by the
deleterious effects of exploitive human development. Community health, broadly
defined, simply denotes a state of affairs where the land mechanism is properly
functioning and flourishing in all its complex and dynamic interrelationships, and where
human restraint and respect (i.e., core moral practices of the land ethic) results in the
mitigation of fragmentation, degradation, and destructive uses that cause land ‘sickness’
(Freyfogle 2006, p.181)

For Leopold, land health is also the proper community goal of the land ethic,
because the physio-ecological conditions and quality of the land are linked with the
social/cultural/economical health and well-being of human communities that are directly
dependent upon it. Agrarian philosopher and essayist Wendell Berry captures the
meaning of Leopold’s land heath and its relationship with social responsibility:
If we speak of a healthy community, we cannot be speaking of a community that is merely human. We are talking about a neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it. If the place is well preserved, if its entire membership, natural and human, is present in it, and if the human economy is in practical harmony with the nature of the place, then the community is healthy. (Berry 1995, p.14)

As environmental law professor Eric Freyfogle comments: “Leopold and Berry recognize that humans are embedded in social and natural communities and their long-term well-being is linked to the well-being of these communities” (Freyfogle 2003, p.155). In this social context, the health of human neighbors is bonded with the health of nonhuman neighbors, where the ethical actions of the human neighbors towards one another and towards the nonhuman neighbors ultimately determine the health of the integrated whole. Land health then is the result of a land ethic that considers the nonhuman members of the land community as important neighbors to be loved and respected in order to promote and protect the overall health and welfare of the larger community. As the next section will explain, this is also the ultimate moral objective of the Golden Rule.
CHAPTER 3: EXPOSITION OF THE GOLDEN RULE

Environmental philosopher Bryan Norton insightfully comments: “Leopold was searching for a set of shared [moral] principles adequate to limit destruction of the resource base, but that would also appeal to holders of a variety of worldviews…he was striving for an inclusive, integrative ethic that could build on common denominators of many philosophies, not a dogmatic formulation…” (Norton 1991, p.43). The Golden Rule seems to meet Norton’s/Leopold’s criterion as a widely accepted moral code, which shares “common denominators” with Leopold’s land ethic. However, before I discuss these moral “common denominators” and their relationship with the land ethic, I would like to review various interpretations and applications of the Golden Rule and consider which interpretation best fits with the land ethic.

The Golden Rule is an ancient code of ethics that in its most basic form morally obligates a human being to treat others as he/she would want to be treated by them. In its passive/negative form, it demands restraint and respect, that is, “to do no harm to others” and in its proactive/positive form, it is restorative, “to do good to others in need.” Jeffery Wattles, a philosopher who has written extensively on the Golden Rule, declares that the Golden rule was perhaps the most widely shared commitment among all the religions…the most fundamental truth underlying morality. Do to others as you want others to do to you…is of our planet’s common language, shared by persons with differing but overlapping conceptions of morality. Only a principle so flexible can serve as a moral ladder for all humankind. (Wattles 1996, pgs. 91,189)
Theologian Ernest D. Burton adds that the “Golden Rule is a principle of wide application and can apply to all the various relations a human experiences in the world” (Burton 1918, p.131). In addition, and more importantly to the argument presented in this paper, he suggested that the Golden Rule forces the individual to recognize that he/she is “a member of the community, and that the welfare of every member of the community is as valuable as my own, and that should shape my conduct accordingly” (Burton 1918, pgs.131-132). The virtually worldwide acceptance of the Golden Rule and its ecumenical and egalitarian features facilitate the formation of an environmental ethic that potentially appeals across ethnic/religious/cultural boundaries.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the Judeo/Christian interpretations of the Golden rule, which contain nearly all the ethical elements represented in other religious and secular interpretations. Within the Judeo/Christian tradition, the Golden Rule is sometimes interpreted as an ethics of reciprocity and oftentimes as an ethics of empathy expressed in altruistic benevolence. I will argue that the Golden Rule (i.e., as per my interpretation of the Good Samaritan story found in Luke 10) should be understood as an unconditional ethics of empathy. However, for the sake of comparison and contrast, I will below briefly discuss its alternative interpretation as an ethics of reciprocity.

The Golden Rule understood as an ethics of reciprocity is an amalgamation of Greek and Judeo/Christian thought primarily influenced by the Greek Sophist, Isocrates

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4 Matthew 7:12 reads as follows: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” Leviticus 19:18 reads as follows: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people but you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord” (English Standard Version 812, 869, 98).
(436-335 BC) (Isocrates 1928-1945). This version of the Golden Rule emerged from Greek culture as a moral principle of social convention understood as a “repayment ethic” (Wattles 1996, p.27). As an ethics of reciprocity, the moral agent acts only on a conditional in-kind response by the recipient. The Golden Rule would read as follows: “If you do good by me, I will do good by you.” The moral agent’s good will is then based on a self-oriented advantage the agent will receive in return for the good given. For instance, Isocrates counsels “jurors to give a just verdict, and prove yourselves to be for me such judges as you would want to have for yourselves” (Wattles 1997, p.31). The repayment principle can also be interpreted as an “eye for an eye,” and “tooth for a tooth” maxim: “We should repay good with good and harm with harm.”

Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III interprets the Judeo/Christian version of the Golden Rule as an ethics of reciprocity: “The Golden Rule urges one to love neighbors as one does oneself, but this is not other love instead of self-love. “Do to others as you would have them do you seeks parallels in self doing for others with others doing for self, suggesting reciprocity…” (Rolston III, 1999, p.216) Rolston, who is an altruistic ethicist, does not consider the Golden Rule interpreted as an ethics of reciprocity a moral maxim that can be applied effectively as an environmental ethic. I disagree with Rolston’s conclusions, but for the sake of argument, let’s examine what a land ethic based on an ethics of reciprocity would look like. If nature is neighbor, that is, if it is included as a member of the moral community, as Leopold believes it should be, then in what way can an ethic of reciprocity apply to the land? Is it possible for the land to respond in kind to good acts done to it?
The land is a composition of abiotic and biotic components and processes, all of which, besides humans, are non-rational and therefore lack a moral conscience necessary to make ethical decisions and behave morally. Therefore, the land cannot be morally obligated, nor expected to fulfill the moral principles of the Golden Rule interpreted as an ethics of reciprocity. The land, however, does possess an inherent capacity to ‘respond’ (a causal, not a moral response) to acts done to it, good or bad. Leopold, in the essay “The Farmer as Conservationist,” argued that, “when land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation. When one or the other grows poorer, we do not” (Leopold 1999, p.161).

Leopold clearly considered the interaction between humans and the land a reciprocal relationship where mutual benefits are exchanged, when the good and benevolent treatment of one benefits the other. In Paradise of God, Norman Wirzba cites William Brown concerning Adam’s symbiotic relationship with the garden: “As Adam is then product of the adama (soil), the fertility of the adama, is a product of Adam’s work. By tilling the soil, the man sustains himself and the soil reaches its productive potential. Far from one-sided, the relationship between the soil and the first human is naturally mutual, indeed symbiotic” (Wirzba 2003, p.34).

Though I do not consider the Golden Rule an ethics of reciprocity, the brief argument presented above appears to support an application of the Golden Rule to the land based on an this sort of interpretation. On the other hand, as Leopold pointed out, not all land components are necessarily mutually beneficial for humans and in fact seem
to oppose or obstruct human interest (e.g., the spotted owl and commercial timbering the northwest forest). I suggest that the interpretation of the Golden Rule as presented in the New Testament (i.e., Matthew 7:12 and Luke 10:25-37), which conceives of it in terms of an ethics of empathy, fits better with both the Judeo/Christian perspective and the core conceptual principles of Leopold’s land ethic.

As Jeffery Wattles clearly elucidates: “On the whole it is misleading to link the golden rule with repayment thinking,” especially from a Judeo/Christian perspective (Wattles 1996, p. 30). Wattles argues that, “Jesus insists that beneficence not be restricted to returning favors…Jesus clearly calls for a higher standard than returning favors and retaliation…the golden rule is given not only to the individual but also to the community” (Wattles 1996, pgs.57-58). The Golden Rule is a non-conditional moral maxim that is intended to be practiced in such a way as to promote individual well-being as well as social harmony.

In the New Testament, there is no clearer explanation of how the Golden Rule is to be apprehended and applied than that given in the story of the Good Samaritan. The New Testament records the story in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10:25-37. The story is initiated by a Jewish lawyer, an arbitrator of the Torah, who approached Jesus to ask the following question in order to test him: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In Socratic fashion, Jesus answered with a question: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer responded correctly: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength and with your entire mind and
you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus then challenged him with this exhortation: “do this, and you will live.”

However, the lawyer wanting to justify his shortcomings in fulfilling this law redirected with the question: “Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer’s question is significant, because Jesus’ reply would determine whom Jesus considered a neighbor and therefore those to whom the Jews were morally obligated to “love as their neighbor.” At that time, traditional interpretations of the law considered neighbors as fellow Jews only. Jesus was about to revolutionize and expand their moral world.

Jesus responds with a story. In brief, the story involves four main characters: a man victimized by a robbery in need of help, a Hebrew priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The Levite and priest are key figures in the story because they represent religious leaders who should have understood the moral meaning, obligation and practice of the Golden Rule. By contrast, the Samaritans were considered unclean half-breeds, religious pariahs, who were despised and rejected by the Jewish religious community.

The story is told by Jesus of a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was attacked and assaulted by thieves and left to die on the road. First, a priest encountered the man, and avoided contact by going around him. A second man approached, who was a Levite, and he too offered no help and passed by the wounded man. Finally, a Samaritan saw the man and extended help by meeting his every need. Jesus then asked the lawyer “Which of these, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer correctly answered, “The one who showed him mercy.”
In this story, as legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron points out, Jesus “does not focus on the content of the commandment; he focuses on its scope” (Waldron 2003, p. 335). Jesus, through the telling of this story, broadened the concept of neighbor by redefining it according to two basic parameters. First, a neighbor is not defined by social status, economic class, religious affiliation, ethnic group, or by any human-centered categories at all. The Good Samaritan possessed no prior knowledge of the injured man’s background or social status; he simply extended help to another he perceived to be in need. Jesus deliberately expanded the concept of neighbor by not confining it to any particular person or human community.

The etymology and definition of the word “neighbor,” as it is used in the Good Samaritan story, further demonstrates its broad meaning and potential application. The word translated “neighbor,” plesion in the Greek, is derived from the Hebrew word “rea,” which connotes the idea of a direct dealing with something or someone other than self (Bromiley 1985 p.872). The etymological root of the English term translated from the original Hebrew via the Greek is formed from the two words neah and gebur, which denote “near” and “dweller”, respectively (Chantrell 2002, p.340). Thus interpreted, rea’ can be anything or anybody other than self that dwells in proximity to self in time and space. Therefore, any other that dwells in a place near self can be subject to the practice of the Golden Rule. According to Jewish scholar Edward Schillebeeckx, the concept of neighbor in the Old Testament evolved over time until “my neighbor became universal; it included everybody and everything…because God created everything and everybody” (Schillebeeckx 1981, pgs.249-250).
In fact, the traditional interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, which is where the Golden Rule first appears in the Old Testament, implies that love is to extend beyond the circle of those to whom one is linked by physical or spiritual relationships. That is, a neighbor can be anything or anybody that is different from or other than self. For example, in Leviticus 25:2-7, a landowner is commanded, during the Sabbatical year, which occurred every seventh year, to rest the land and leave grain standing in his fields for the stranger (human neighbors) and for wild animals (nonhuman neighbors) to glean for food. Thus, a case is made that the Hebrew concept of neighbor, as Jesus interpreted it, potentially broadens the application of the Golden Rule to nonhuman others in the moral community.

The New Testament teaches then that opportunity, spontaneity, and relational proximity have more to do with the application of the Golden Rule than classifying the other (i.e., neighbor) to whom the Rule is to be applied. The Samaritan, on a routine trip to Jerusalem, came upon the aftermath of a robbery, saw a man in need, and gave aid to him. It was a moral situation, an opportunity that immediately presented itself; he did not consult a list of those who he was obligated to help or considered to have moral value. The Good Samaritan simply acted spontaneously to help another in need who was in close proximity to himself. Jesus’ teaching focuses on the opportunity to act neighborly to another of a different kind, rather than discriminating among the recipients of our neighborly action based on person, place, or thing.

Secondly, a neighbor includes anybody or anything where self-love and empathy can be extended. The Good Samaritan expressed his love and compassion for the
wounded stranger through extending altruistic benevolence towards him, which required no reciprocal response. This act of benevolence is based on and measured by one’s love (i.e., value) for self. Here, self-love is not an excessive self-centered egoism, but a kind of self-love that acknowledges the inherent value of one’s self. Self-love is naturally disposed to self-respect and is inclined to pursue one’s good and to care for one’s own basic welfare and well-being. Consequently, the application of self-love in the Golden Rule involves acknowledging and respecting the self-value of others as equally of importance to one’s own and by voluntarily sharing and stretching one’s own interests and goods in order to care for the well-being of another, especially when the other is in need. The Good Samaritan extended his good(s) to meet the needs of a stranger in order to restore him to health and prosperity. Self-love then, is “extended in such a way that there is a union of the heart with other’s; a kind of enlargement of the mind, whereby it so extends itself as to take others into one’s self and therefore implies a disposition to feel, to desire, and to act as though others were one with ourselves” (Edwards 2000, p.20). In other words, “loving others as yourself” is an ethics of altruistic empathy. Empathic relationships with others provide opportunities to expand self, not limit self (diZerega 1995, 254).

The broken and helpless man lying in the road was hurt, hungry, and homeless; the Good Samaritan imagined himself in the same condition, perceived the man’s situation from his perspective, and acted to care for the injured man with his needs and interests in mind. As Wattles says, “The mature practice of the golden rule involves an identification with others that includes understanding plus an appropriate level of shared
feeling plus an appropriate practical response” (Wattles 1996, p.121). Thus, the basic moral and psychological requirements necessary to practice the Golden Rule as an ethics of empathy include the following:

a. **Empathy.** It requires an empathetic imagination that involves the capacity to sympathetically and sensitively take up the perspectives of others and to imagine oneself in the situation of those others.

b. **Comparability.** It requires that the moral agent can identify with concrete aspects and interests of the recipient’s predicament (e.g., hurt, hungry, and homeless) that would be similar to that of the agent if the agent were in the same situation (Wattles 1996, pgs. 19-21).

c. **Relationship.** It requires that the moral agent have a relationship with the recipient in time and space and the opportunity to exercise the moral rule.

d. **Benevolence.** It requires an altruistic benevolence that is expressed in actions undertaken to meet the needs of the recipient.

When practiced, the Golden Rule represents a principle in the philosophy of living that expresses a personal standard of morality that guides proper conduct between individuals (i.e., neighbors) and promotes moral/social harmony and community justice (Wattles 1996, p.171). As I will now argue, the Golden Rule potentially extends the application of neighbor beyond the human community to all biota. “People are called to make themselves neighbors to humankind, to earth, and to extended bio-kind” (Hart 2006, p.219).
CHAPTER 4: INTEGRATION OF GOLDEN RULE AND LAND ETHIC

Can the Golden Rule, when practiced as an ethics of empathy, be extended to the land as Leopold defines it? Can the stated requirements of the Golden Rule be applied by humans to nonhuman entities of the biotic community, such as ecosystems and species?

The final section of this thesis demonstrates how the requirements of the Golden Rule can be applied to the land. I will explain how these requirements, that is, empathy, comparability, relationship, and benevolence, can be integrated with those expounded by Leopold in order to develop a sound and practical land ethic. I will begin this discussion with empathy because it is perhaps the most problematic and controversial requirement that must be met when making an ecologically integrated Golden Rule plausible as a land ethic. In fact, empathy, in my estimation, is the primary common denominator that links Leopold’s land ethic to the Golden Rule. Callicott has argued that Leopold’s land ethic was partly founded on a theory of moral sentiments proposed by Hume and Adams, where “unselfish feelings, such as sympathy and beneficence” are necessary for extending moral ethics to the land (Callicott 1999, p.103). For the land ethic, as well as for the Golden Rule, ethics is partly “grounded in instinctive feeling, love, sympathy, and respect” (Callicott 1999, p.103).

To begin the discussion of empathy, I would like to define the term and explain how empathy might differ from sympathy, given that the Enlightenment philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith use these two notions interchangeably. As Gus diZerega points out, Smith understood sympathy as the human capacity for what we would today call empathy (diZerega 1995, p.250). For Smith, sympathy is the human ability to use the
imagination to identify with another’s situation or condition that does not require a mutuality of passion or feeling between the moral agent and recipient. Hume understood sympathy as a result of a causal relationship where the feelings of sympathy in the moral agent are triggered (i.e., caused) by distressful feelings in the recipient.

However, renowned ethicist Martha C. Nussbaum argues that sympathy, as it is typically understood today, is very different from empathy; she claims that a “malevolent person can imagine the situation of another and take pleasure in her distress, which might be empathetic, but surely not considered sympathetic” (Nussbaum 2001, p. 302).

*Sympathy* as Nussbaum understands it is similar to *compassion* in that it includes a determination that the other person’s distress is bad (Nussbaum 2001, p. 302). Sympathy, like compassion, involves a painful emotion that recognizes another’s undeserved misfortune and is compelled to act to relieve it (Nussbaum 2001, p. 302). I acknowledge Nussbaum’s distinctions between empathy and sympathy and will incorporate her thoughts on sympathy into my definition of empathy in practice.

For the purposes this discussion, empathy will be given a three part definition, which incorporates the thoughts of Smith, Hume, and Nussbaum:

1. Empathy is the imaginative reconstruction (i.e., cognitive process) of another’s comparable situation or condition (e.g., needs and vulnerabilities).
2. Empathy involves the capacity to judge that the situation matters for the well-being of the other in question.
3. Empathy requires a proper emotive response (i.e., compassionate benevolence) that motivates the agent to action in alleviating the bad situation of the other.

That said, empathy, as I have noted, is an important moral ability required for practicing the Golden rule (the Good Samaritan empathized with the man on the road) and Leopold’s land ethic (Leopold empathized with the mountain). Of course, there is little dispute that empathy is possible between fellow sentient human beings, as in the case of the Good Samaritan. However there is much debate and controversy over whether a sentient human being can show empathy towards non-sentient entities such as mountains, muskeg, and meadowlands. Even Callicott, who defends the application of moral sentiments to transorganismic entities like species and ecosystems, expresses concern with empathy-based approaches to environmental ethics: “I should expressly acknowledge that in the moral philosophy of [David Hume] one finds little ethical holism. Sympathy means with fellow feeling. And that all important emotion of sympathy, as Darwin styles it, can hardly extend to a transorganismic entity, such as society per se, which has no feelings per se” (Callicott, 1999, p.68).

Despite Callicott’s misgivings, environmental ethical theories and practices based on empathy are possible. Patrick Frierson suggests that Adam Smith “provides the possibility of extending [empathy] and thereby benevolence and justice to nature” (Frierson 2006, p.443). He argues that Smith rejected an empathy based on the mutuality of feelings between agent and recipient that requires the agent to identify with the “feelings” or passion of the recipient in order to trigger empathy and act morally on that
emotion. Frierson claims instead that Smith’s model of empathy suggests that empathy is dependent upon one’s (i.e., the moral agent’s) feeling when one imagines oneself in the same situation, condition, or position as another (i.e., recipient) (Frierson 2006, p.450). Smith further points out, Frierson suggests, “that, in general, one does not [empathize] merely because one believes that another feels something, but because one puts oneself in the place of the other” (Frierson 2006, p.451). Smith’s most persuasive example that empathetic feelings are not based on the actual feelings of another, but on the feelings that one experiences by imagining oneself in the place of another is the situation where one empathizes with the dead, which is worth quoting at some length (Frierson 2006, p.452):

We [empathize] even with the dead…It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in the world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. Surely, we imagine, we can never feel too much for those who have suffered so dreadful a calamity. The tribute of our fellow feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by everybody; and, by the vain honors which we pay to their memory, we endeavor, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune. That our [empathy] can afford them no consolation seems to be an addition to their calamity; and to think that all we
can do is unavailing, and that, what alleviates all other distress, the regret, the love, and the lamentations of their friends, can yield no comfort to them, serves only to exasperate our sense of their misery. The happiness of the dead, however, most assuredly, is affected by none of these circumstances; nor can the thought of these things ever disturb the profound security of their repose. (Smith, I.i.1.6, 8, 2002, p.11)

Here, Smith suggests that a moral agent’s sincere empathy for the dead is not based on the circumstantial feelings of the recipient, for the dead have none, but relies solely on the agent’s capacity to empathize for their loss of life and feel sorrow for the calamity that cut them short of enjoying a longer life, because the agent can imagine himself as being vulnerable to the same situation. According to Smith, then, neither empathy, nor any act of benevolence that follows, is dependent or conditioned upon the correspondence of feelings with the object or subject for which the empathy is directed. As Smith points out elsewhere, “we sometimes feel for another a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable… we feel upon this, as upon many other occasions, an emotion which the person principally concerned is incapable of feeling” (Smith, I.i.1.10, p. 2 & II.i.2.5, 2002, p 71). In other words, humans could show empathy towards a non-sentient entity based on an understanding and feeling that is not shared by the object of their empathy, if there exist between them a comparable situation or condition that the human agent can identify with.

Smith’s example of empathy with the dead is important because it potentially expands the notion and scope of empathy, especially in relation to its application to non-sentient environmental entities such as ecosystems and species (Frierson 2006, p. 453).
However, the application of empathy to nonhuman entities requires that humans identify with a comparable interest or a comparable situation in the object of their empathy in order to demonstrate empathy for it. Smith concludes that empathy “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (Smith 2002, p.12). The capacity to exercise human empathy requires analogous situations and conditions more than analogous emotions, passions or feelings (Smith 2002, p.12).

The comparability requirement of the Golden Rule entails the identification of similar possibilities between the moral agent, and recipient, such as the another’s needs and vulnerabilities are similar to one’s own needs and vulnerabilities in a given situation. “The situation and condition of another entity could be an object of my concern, if I acknowledge some part of commonality exists between me and that entity” (Nussbaum 2001, p.317). The identification of the needs we share with others coupled with the recognition of our common vulnerability to the loss of what we need, enables us to extend empathy to another who experiences a disruption of well-being due to a situation that deprives them of what they need. For example, I live in a house that I need in order to maintain my well-being, and I acknowledge the possibility that I can lose the house in a fire. My neighbor shares the same need for a house and the same vulnerability to loss. If his house is destroyed by a fire, I can identify with his loss and extend my empathy to him. Hence, the judgment of similar possibilities is part of the cognitive connection that could bridge the gap between human and non-human entities and potentially enables humans to empathize with nature (Nussbaum 2001, p.320).
However, are there similar possibilities of common need and vulnerability that exist between human and nonhuman entities and that are not opaque to us? Are there comparable needs, conditions, and situations that are identifiable between humans and nonhuman entities such as species and ecosystems? I would argue so. Plants, animals, and ecosystems all have a biotic existence similar to that of humans. Biotic existence for species and ecosystems involves reproduction, life processes, ecological functions, natural growth and population expansion. Biotic existence also necessitates the availability and accessibility of basic life requirements and resources such as a suitable living space to reproduce and propagate the species, adequate and varied food supply, breathable air, clean water and productive, uncontaminated soils (Hart 2006, p.68). And like humans, nonhuman species members are also vulnerable to the loss and deprivation of these basic life requirements. Since humans have comparable interests, common vulnerabilities to loss, and similar life situations with nonhuman species we are more than capable of showing empathy towards these entities. Rolston refers to empathy with nature as “sympatry,” that is, humans have a shared biological existence with other organisms with similar and corresponding biological and ecological needs, therefore humans can find comparable interest and conditions to demonstrate empathy towards nature (Rolston III 1989, p.125). This commonality of life’s needs and conditions provides a basis for developing the capacity to empathize with nature (diZerega 1995, p. 250).

For instance, is it not possible to empathize with the member of a wildlife species on the brink of extinction because it has been deprived of its essential resources of food, water, and shelter (i.e., habitat), the same basic resources needed to sustain human life?
Surely, we can imagine the human species in the same predicament. Humans empathize with people of another nation, whose natural resources have been ravished and impoverished by drought and other maladies, causing widespread starvation and death. This evokes feelings of compassion, which in turn move people to benevolent action to help people of these other nations. Surely it is not a far reach for humans to show empathy for nonhuman species members that are impoverished of their basic needs, when their habitat has been destroyed to the extent that their very existence is in jeopardy. In fact, some cases, empathy may be what compels humans to champion the cause of individual members of the biotic community that are considered endangered species and undertake actions to reverse their desperate situation.

An extended empathy based on comparable situations and interests would also apply to ecosystems. However, as with species, this requires that a person possess an informed and sensitive ecological conscience, which arises from an active relationship with nature (i.e., a relationship in proximity by the moral agent with the recipient is required by the Golden Rule as well as by Leopold’s land ethic). As with all applied ethics, a relationship between humans and the land is necessary in order to practice the principles of an ecologically-sensitive Golden Rule. As Leopold notes, an active relationship with the land is essential to the development of an ecological conscience. A discerning ecological conscience requires sufficient knowledge and experience with the ecosystem to identify needs and comparable interest. Leopold observed, “The ecological conscience …is an affair of the mind as well as the heart. It implies a capacity to study and learn, as well as to emote about the problems of conservation” (quoted in Meine & Knight 1999, p.267). This informed ecological conscience is important to the exercise of
empathy because it enables a person to identify a comparable interest or situation on the land, which excites the imagination and stirs the emotions necessary to prompt empathy. Ecological knowledge and experience based on empirical observation and environmental education, coupled with a genuine working and interactive relationship with the land are what shape the sensitive conscience needed to practice an environmental empathy. The degree and depth of one’s ability to extend empathy to the land depends directly upon the degree and depth of one’s knowledge of, interest in, relationship to, and affection for the land.

An eco-imagination, like an informed ecological conscience, is a key ingredient of environmental empathy, particularly when applied to non-sentient entities. Environmental ethicist Sara Ebenreck asserts, “imaginative work is required to even partially envision the perspective of a nonhuman entity” (Ebenreck 1996, p.3). Therefore, she suggests that “becoming morally insightful requires the development of empathetic imagination and the ability to envision constructive action” (Ebenreck 1996, p.9). Of course, this presupposes a relation with the land in time and space where one can gain knowledge of the land’s biotic needs, operations, and vulnerabilities. This is a human/land relationship that develops an awareness of land’s biotic value and actively seeks to protect and promote its sustainable viability. It is this ongoing, active, participatory, and working relationship with the land that facilitates and fosters the formation of an environmental empathic imagination. In other words, humans can discover through this relationship with the land that what is needed for humans to live might be what other non-human biotic entities need to live as well (Frasz 2005, 127). As Frasz notes, “Humans must cultivate an openness that heightens our sensibility to the
concerns, behaviors, subtle features and goal directed activities of non-human entities” (Frasz 2005, p.127). Once this is realized, then one can engage an empathic imagination by analogizing one’s biotic needs with those discovered through a relational knowledge with the land in order to identify and meet the biotic needs of species and ecosystems. Once similar needs, vulnerabilities, and interests are identified through empathic imagination, restrained behavior or benevolent actions can be extended towards the land. The steps (modified after Frasz, 2005, p.125) to this process can be systematically conceived in the following way:

i. The moral agent considers his/her biotic needs and interests in relation to the needs and interests of the land through empathic imagination and recognizes comparable needs and interests. This evokes an emotive concern for the health and well-being of the land.

ii. The moral agent considers whether his/her or others’ actions will or have deprived and/or destroyed the land’s capacity to fulfill its purposes and sustain its health and well-being.

iii. The moral agent decides to act to prevent such detrimental actions or, if the damage has been done, moves to restore the land’s capacity to provide for its biotic needs, which promotes its continued existence and health.

The final step and external manifestation (i.e., moral action) of environmental empathy (i.e., a land ethic integrated Golden Rule) is benevolence reflected in the moral agent’s decision to act in the manner described in (iii). Benevolence is a virtuous action that involves a direct concern and care for the welfare of others expressed in tangible actions.
It arises from feelings of compassion, kindness, and empathy. A benevolent person does not seek to merely avoid wrong action, but rather seeks to promote the good of others and their best interest (Frasz 2005 p.124). As it relates to a human relationship with the land, a benevolent person “takes an active interest in promoting the flourishing of all the other members that make use of the land” (Frasz 2005, p.126).

Practically, a person who practices an ecologically-sensitive Golden Rule, can extend benevolence towards the land through environmental protection and conservation activities (i.e., Leopold’s sustainable use with restraint and respect and the Golden Rule’s do no harm principle) and ecological restoration (i.e., the Golden Rule’s do good to others in need or restoration to health principle).

Having now shown that an ecologically integrated Golden Rule can extend to the land, providing a basis for a coherent and workable land ethic, in the next section I will provide some illustrations of how this would be applied in practice.
CHAPTER 5: AN ECOLOGICALLY-SENSITIVE GOLDEN RULE IN PRACTICE

What sort of actions would an ecologically-sensitive Golden Rule call for in practice? Consider a person who possesses an ecologically informed conscience, with the capacity to perceive a situation where an ecosystem’s integrity and its ability to function are compromised by human use and exploitation. She encounters a situation where old growth woodland\(^5\), which is known and loved by her, is in the process of development. Trees have been cut and bulldozers stand by at the ready. This person understands the ecological consequences caused by development, which includes displacement of wildlife and eradication of rare native plants associated with old growth forest systems. She realizes that like a human household, the old growth ecosystem is an ecological household\(^6\) that consists of abiotic and biotic components with interdependent relationships that provide goods and services that meet the subsistence needs of the plants and animals (i.e., ecological family) that live there. She imagines what it would be like to be without such a home. She expresses empathy regarding the loss for she can imagine the effects of the deprivation of life-giving resources and the injustice of having them taken away. This knowledge and her experience with the woods evoke emotions of concern for the welfare of the species dependent upon the woods for their livelihood and empathy for the loss of their home. This provokes her to an empathic action on behalf of those species in attempt to halt the development or perhaps mitigate the detrimental

\(^5\) My intention here is not to “privilege” unique ecosystems like old growth forest as if they deserve greater moral consideration than “backyards” or the “back-forty.” In fact, these “working landscapes” have been ignored by environmental ethicists for the most part, even though this is where most of us relate to the land and make decisions that impact it for good or bad (see also Cronon 1996, pgs. 69-90).

\(^6\) The prefix of “ecology”, “eco”, is derived from the Greek word, oikos, which connotes house, dwelling, or household, hence the potential comparability between a human household and an ecosystem (Bromiley 1985, p.674).
effects of the development so that both the woods and the human benefits of the
development could mutually coexist.

An ecologically-sensitive Golden Rule can also allow for balancing human and
nonhuman needs through use with restraint. Shade grown coffee provides an example of
using the land for human benefit while at the same time respecting the needs of other
species. Coffee is produced in the tropical regions of the world. In order to increase
yields, industrial farming approaches to coffee production require the wholesale removal
of the tropical forest, which negatively impacts the use of these forests by neo-tropical
migratory bird species (e.g., North American species such as the wood thrush, scarlet
tanager, prairie warbler) as well as indigenous wildlife.

A significant number of coffee growers in these regions have recognized a decline
in wildlife populations due to their production methods and have voluntarily chosen to
cultivate coffee under the existing forest, protecting the tree canopy as habitat for local
and migratory bird species. Their act of restraint in use of the tropical forest involves a
reduction in material and economic gain as well as avoidance of various harms to
wildlife. Choosing such an action is what would be expected if the coffee growers were
applying an ecologically sensitive Golden rule to the land that considers the interests and
needs of both humans and nonhumans in the biotic community.

Without over-speculating as to their actual motivations, we might imagine that
the shade grown coffee growers could be led to their decision in the following way. They
have identified a comparable need with other members of the biotic community, that is,
the common space of tropical forest that both humans and neo-tropical bird species need
to satisfy their respective life requirements. They have acknowledged the biotic value of
these species and have extended empathy by their heightened awareness and feelings for
the plight of these birds (i.e., dramatic population decline) and their willingness to act in
order to alleviate their desperate situation. They have developed a relational eco-
consciousness, that is, an awareness that the nonhuman and human communities are
linked and their mutual well-being (i.e., the long-term productivity of the land for coffee
as well as for birds) is dependent upon the health of the tropical forest and its
sustainability. They act benevolently by unselfishly giving up higher coffee yields that
damage the land for short-term profit in favor of fostering a kinship with these birds that
is expressed by land use restraint and restoration of the tropical forest.

Empathetic benevolence can also be expressed through ecological restoration,
which is defined as reversing the damage done to an ecosystem and returning it to a
healthy condition. Ecological restorationist William R. Jordan III describes restoration as
a healing art, a heuristic work that involves treating the “hurt” caused by abuse and
wanton exploitation of the land (Jordan 2003, p.52). Restoration begins, as Jordan puts it,
“by seeing the land clearly and sympathetically” (Jordan 2003, p.72). This, he claims,
requires a purposeful engagement that fosters an attentiveness and awareness of nature,
which creates a relational consciousness that views nonhuman nature as a valued other,
producing a respect for the land and a desire to ensure its survival (Jordon 2003, p.75).
The ecological restorationist, according to Jordan, is an empathetic participant with
nature through active and passive wildlife and ecosystem management:
He is the wolf, carrying out the wolf’s job of killing deer, learning to see deer from a wolf’s point of view. He is a pollinator and disperser of seed, filling in for various birds and insects in their role of creating and maintaining an ecological community. He is a crane, teaching young cranes to fly by clumsy example, or dancing with them to promote mating. And, firing the prairies and woodlands, he takes on the role of Aboriginal people, and the elemental force of lightning itself. (Jordon 2003, p.92)

So, like the Good Samaritan, the ecological restorationist identifies an “injured” and broken landscape, empathizes with its condition and actively seeks to recover what it’s lacking to restore its functional and structural well-being.

The interactive work and purposeful engagement of ecological restoration in effect reunites humans with the land and contributes to the formation of a relational awareness, attentiveness, and sensitivity towards the land which becomes the groundwork for building an environmental ethics of empathy. The idea that ecological restoration can transform our ethical relationship with the land and foster the development of environmental empathy became evident to me after a teaching experience I had with a group of youth. The subject was the ecological value and need of restoring and protecting Ohio’s tallgrass prairie and wetland ecosystems. I first told the group that prairie and wetland ecosystems are the most endangered landscapes in Ohio. Their reactions ranged from disinterested sighs to apathetic yawns. I pondered their responses and concluded that maybe they lacked a concern for these natural systems because they had no personal knowledge or experiential relationship with them. The information presented by me was
not relevant to them because they had no meaningful experiences with prairie or wetlands that would have helped them develop a genuine care and concern for the well-being of such ecosystems.

They hadn’t seen the marvelous mosaic of colors created by the mixture of wildflowers found on a verdant summer prairie or heard a flock of cackling southbound geese taking rest on a wetland refuge during the fall migration. They had not been tickled under their chins by a plume of Indian grass or smelled the sweet fragrance of purple coneflower. They hadn’t smelled the pungent organic odor emanating from a swamp after a January thaw or heard and seen the airy song and dance of bobolinks in pre-nuptial display over a June prairie. They had no experiences with a prairie or wetland to help them develop a concern for their disappearance. They lacked a participatory relationship with these landscapes that would have fostered a concern for their loss. They lacked a relationship because they lacked an opportunity to connect and form a relationship with these natural systems. After all, how many prairies and wetlands occur near suburban America for young people to experience today? There were no prairies or wetlands out their backdoors. None of the youth I had spoken to lived in a “Little House on the Prairie.” How could I expect young people who lived in a “big house on the golf course,” cut off from their natural heritage and from natural landscapes, to sympathize with my concern for the loss of prairie and wetland? As Nussbaum points out, “the need of another [wetland and prairie] will be an object of my concern [empathy]”…only if I

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7 The contents within the brackets represent my added interpretation of Nussbaum’s comments to my illustration.
acknowledge some part of community between myself the other” (Nussbaum 2001, p.317).

So, to address their lack of personal knowledge and relationship with these two systems and extend their sense of community, I invited them to join me in the restoration of a nearby wetland-prairie complex. I assigned them the task of collecting plants from an existing wetland and transplanting them on the restored site. This task required, to say the least, intimate contact with the wetlands, which the youth actually enjoyed. After all, what young person doesn’t like to play in the mud? During the two-day project, they were able to see, feel, smell, and hear the rich and varied life of a wetland. The information I shared in the classroom became more relevant to them; the facts taught were transformed in light of a real relationship, an ecological awareness, which supported the shaping of a genuine value and empathetic concern for the plight of wetlands and prairies. To this day, many of these young people revisit the site to check on its welfare and have since become involved with a local conservation organization that exists to promote the restoration and protection of regional wetlands and prairies. In other words, many of these young people came away from this experience with the makings of a working land ethic.

In this situation, the purposeful engagement and interplay with wetlands and prairies through the practice of ecological restoration changed these young people’s relationship with the land from one of apathy to empathetic concern. Ecological restoration played an important role as both a means to form an environmental ethic of empathy and as a practical outworking of it. Ecological restoration provided a dimension
of experience where value and meaning was developed from a direct sensuous experience with nature, which led to the formation of an empathetic relationship with nature. Participating in ecological restoration can encourage empathy for ecosystems in the same way that serving the poor at a homeless shelter can encourage empathy for the poor. Our capacity for empathy grows towards the poor as we personally participate in providing for the needs of the poor. The poor become real living “faces” that we can identify with as fellow human beings with comparable needs, cares and aspirations that are subject to the same vicissitudes and vulnerabilities of our own lives. The practice of ecological restoration can encourage a similar kind of empathy towards the land.

Conclusions

Based on the arguments and analogies presented above, an ecologically integrated Golden Rule, understood as an ethics of empathy, can apply to the land and is a plausible means of interpreting and practicing Leopold’s land ethic. It satisfies Leopold’s moral requirements necessary for the extension of ethics to the land community. Firstly, as analyzed above, the Golden Rule is inclusive; it allows us to consider nature as neighbor, making nonhuman entities subject to human moral concern and care. Secondly, the Golden Rule assigns to humans a responsibility to love (value) nonhuman entities as themselves to the extent that they are able and to demonstrate this love by the extension and practice of benevolent empathy, which involves both protective restraint when using the land and ecological restoration that “heals” the “hurt” caused by abusive and destructive land use. Finally, the ecologically-integrated Golden Rule’s goal is to foster and maintain relational harmony between humans and the land and thus aims to achieve
Leopold’s ultimate land health goal, “a state of harmony between men and land” (Leopold 1949, p.207).
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