AGENT-BASED LAND ETHIC:
A SENTIMENTALIST APPROACH TO
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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AGENT-BASED LAND ETHIC:
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Michael Slote, in *Morals from Motives*, offers a compelling moral theory, based on an agent’s motivations for action, as an alternative to current deontological or utilitarian ethics. However, Slote theory, which is an ethics of care approach, leaves out any account of environmental ethics. Without an account of environmental ethics Slote’s theory is incomplete. If an ethics of care is to be viewed as a freestanding moral theory, it will need to make sense of our obligations to the natural world. Fortunately, the groundwork of Slote’s theory does provide many possible ways to take into account environmental ethics. This thesis will explore an agent-based environmental ethic grounding in grounded in care to see if it is compatible with Aldo Leopold’s land ethic and J. Baird Callicott’s interpretations of the land ethic. Particularly, this thesis will focus in on the notion of empathy to see if it is useful to environmental ethics.

One problem facing an environmental ethic, which places a great deal of importance on something like an entire species or ecosystem, is it becomes open to charges of environmental fascism; meaning the interests and rights of an individual might become irrelevant or subservient to the interests and needs of the whole. If the interest of the whole is seen as primary or extremely important, then it might be permissible to kill various humans in order to ensure ecological stability. A major problem facing an
environmental ethic which takes these biotic wholes seriously is how to properly balance the interests of the whole with the interests of the individual. Slote’s theory and his emphasis on empathy, seems to be in a position to provide a moral theory which can take the importance of ecological wholes seriously, while at the same time providing a strong account of morality among humans. I argue that Slote can, and should, follow the lead of Callicott in looking for a holistic environmental ethic. In turn, if the synthesis between the land ethic and agent-based virtue ethics is possible, the environmental ethics of Callicott will have a theory which is holistic, cannot be charged with environmental fascism, and provides an account of morality for the human and non-human world.

I will begin in Chapter 2 by explaining how Slote attempts to derive a system of morality by making an agent’s motivations primary in assessing her conduct. According to Slote’s view, the moral quality of an act is found primarily within the agent’s motivation. Morally good actions are dependent on a person having a morally good motivation. A morally good motivation for Slote is care. In a recent work, Slote explored the notion of empathy as being a concept central to an ethics of care. Slote offers a criterion of wrong action based on whether the action reflects or exhibits a lack of a fully developed sense of empathic concern or care. There are two main forks to Slote’s ethics of care. One is the structure of an agent-based virtue ethic. The other is the nature of empathy and how it can be used to explain many common sense moral distinctions. Later chapters (Chapter 5) will see if Slote’s agent-based theory, and empathy in particular, is capable of explaining our obligations toward the natural world.

Chapter 3 will focus on Leopold’s land ethic as offering the best approach to explain our moral intuitions regarding our obligations to the environment. The unique
part of Leopold’s environmental ethic focuses on the moral considerability and importance of what he calls the land. I will offer some possible interpretations of Leopold’s land ethic to see if he is justified in viewing the land as an object of moral consideration. Since J. Braid Callicott is probably the leading defender of Leopold’s land ethic, this chapter will also pay close attention to his particular interpretations and philosophical arguments.

In Chapter 4, I will explore the notion of environmental fascism and how it relates to any holistic ethic. Does a holistic ethic automatically lead toward a subversion of individual interests to the interests of the whole? Ultimately I conclude that this is not necessarily the case, it merely depends on how strong or important one views the moral weight of a particular whole. As for Leopold, Callicott offers an answer to the charge of ecofascism that attempts to balance out the interests of the whole with the interests of the individual. It has been charged, however, that the method Callicott uses to balance these competing interests forces his environmental ethic away from his own goal of moral monism and into a type of moral theoretical pluralism. At the end of this chapter, I attempt to respond to this criticism by suggesting that the notion of empathy can be used as a common measurement for Callicott to maintain his theoretical moral monism.

Given that the notion of empathy might be helpful to at least Callicott’s particular environmental ethic, Chapter 5 will explore the notion of empathy in depth to see if it can offer any real assistance in explaining our obligations toward the natural world. Ultimately, the notion does seem helpful, but unfortunately, empathy cannot directly explain the moral importance of ecological wholes. It seems does seem capable of making an ecological whole morally significant, but only indirectly.
In the final Chapter, I will offer a conclusion to the thesis of this paper. I also briefly discuss whether an indirect consideration of ecological wholes is acceptable and suggest possibilities for future research.
CHAPTER II

AGENT-BASED ETHICS

When judging an agent’s actions as morally good or bad, we tend to look at or focus on the agent’s motivations, the act itself, or the consequences of the action to help ascertain the moral value of the act. Moral theories can take one of these aspects as being fundamental or foundational. Grounding the moral value of each other aspect of the action and grounding the moral value of the action as a whole. Consequentialist theories, like act-utilitarianism, place primary and exclusive importance on the consequences of an action. Deontological theories, like Kant’s categorical imperative, focus in on the act itself. Recently, Michael Slote offered an agent-based virtue ethic which dictates an agent’s motivations are primary and foundational (“Morals from Motives”). Slote formulates an ethics of care as a type of agent-based virtue ethics. His agent-based ethics of care offers a theory of personal and social morality arguably as compelling as standard formulations of utilitarianism or Kantian ethics. However, as it stands, Slote’s theory gives no account of environmental ethics.

Philosophers have explored the implications of utilitarianism and Kantianism for actions that affect non-human organisms and natural systems. While these implications are not always uncontroversial, the fact that each theory has something to say about such actions is important for our capacity to view each theory as complete. As environmental
issues become increasingly crucial, our capacity to bring our ethical theories to bear on environmental problems becomes increasingly important as well. But can Slote’s theory be adapted to these important questions? And if so, how? Answering this question will be the main topic of Chapter 5, but for now we should turn toward explaining Slote’s theory.

The most fundamental characteristic of an agent-based virtue ethics is its derivation of the moral value of actions from the motivation of the agent who performed the action. As Slote states, “An agent-based approach to virtue ethics treats the moral or ethical status of acts as entirely derivative from independent and fundamental aretaic ethical characterizations of motives, character traits, or individuals” (“Morals from Motives” 5). Any action performed is judged morally by the motivation the action expresses. If the action expresses a good or admirable motive, like care or a motive close to care, then the act will be right or permissible. If the action expresses a bad or deplorable motive, like hate or even a lack of care, then the action will be wrong or impermissible.

I should pause here to note that there are at least two ways of conceiving an agent-based theory. One conception makes the actual motivation of the agent primary in determining the moral evaluation of the act. The other gives a criterion of right action that is not dependent on the actual motivations of the agent but dependent upon whether the actions are in accord with what a hypothetical virtuous agent might do. Both versions take the agent’s motivations as a primary and foundational in determining the rightness or wrongness of any action. The only real difference is one focuses on the actual motivation of the agent performing the act and the other focuses in on a hypothetical virtuous agent’s
actions. Let us call the former version of an agent-based theory actualist and the latter hypothetical.

This actualist version seems counterintuitive at first glance, but I think it highlights one of the most important features of agent-based theories. Let’s look an example to help explain why I think this is important. Imagine two people, Lisa and Nelson, each about to have their respective child attacked and killed by some assailant, and the only way to stop this person is for each parent to use lethal force. Luckily, both people have a gun at hand and all each person need do is lift it up and shoot the assailant. Let’s assume here we have a paradigm case of justifiable or excusable lethal force in defense of one’s child. Lisa has always been a very peaceful, caring person (maybe she had the gun to give as a Christmas present to some hunting family member) and truly regretted having to shoot the assailant. She was motivated only by a desire to protect her child. Nelson, on the other hand, has always been a hateful person. When he saw the assailant he realized he would finally have a chance to fulfill his fantasy of killing someone. Nelson was motivated by a desire to feel what it is like to take another human being’s life. An actualist agent-based theory would have to evaluate these two actions differently. Lisa’s act of child-defense would be seen as right, because it expresses care, whereas Nelson’s act would be seen as wrong because it expresses a lack of care. This seems odd because as stated earlier, had either Lisa or Nelson not shot the assailant, he would kill their respective children, thus making each one’s act, a justifiable or excusable act of child-defense. Since the acts are outwardly the same, we might initially believe the moral evaluation of these acts to be the same.
I am not entirely sure that we want to say that each person’s action should be evaluated the same. While it does seem strange to say that on one hand what Lisa did was right, and what Nelson did was wrong, I think it seems equally unsatisfactory to say that what Nelson did was morally comparable to Lisa’s act.

The hypothetical approach can resolve this dilemma. This type of approach judges actions, not based on the actual motivation of an agent, but on whether a hypothetical virtuous agent might perform that action. Scott Gelfand’s hypothetical agent-based criterion of right action is “an act is right if and only if it is the type of act that a hypothetical virtuous agent might perform” (600). Thus, we can see how this places us outside of the potentially uncomfortable position of having the same act be evaluated differently. If a virtuous agent would (or might) use lethal force to defend one’s child in Lisa or Nelson’s position, then the act of child-defense is morally permissible. Assuming that a virtuous agent would defend his or her child, then the act of defense is right regardless of Lisa or Nelson’s actual motivation for the act, because the act is of the type a virtuous agent would perform. This resolves the oddity of evaluating two similar acts differently, but that is also the problem. I would like to think Lisa’s act was at least morally better than Nelson’s, but since a hypothetical virtuous agent would have done the act then both acts are right.

So on one hand, if we use an actualist agent-based theory we will be forced to evaluate Lisa and Nelson’s action so differently that Lisa’s defense of her child is permitted and Nelson’s is impermissible. On the other hand, we could adopt a hypothetical approach which makes Nelson’s defense of his child permissible, but it places it on equal moral footing with Lisa’s act of child-defense and this seems
counterintuitive. One possible approach to resolve this dilemma is that for each and every act token, judge all possible act types by whether a hypothetical virtuous agent would perform this type of act.\(^1\) The idea here is that for Lisa, her act token would yield one act type, lethal use of force in defense of her child, and then apply our hypothetical agent-based criteria to this act type. Lisa’s act type is something a hypothetical virtuous agent might do, so therefore it is permitted. In Nelson’s defense of his child, we can see at least two act types, lethal use of force in defense of his child and opportunistic killing. In Nelson’s case, by judging each act type against the hypothetical criteria of right action, we get a mixed result. The lethal use of force in defense of a child seems permissible but opportunistic murder is not. This resolves the dilemma, allowing us to view Lisa’s act as wholly permissible and Nelson’s as somehow mixed. This maintains the moral difference between Lisa and Nelson’s act, while allowing us to view the defense of one’s child as still morally permissible. Fully discussing this topic would take us too far afield. All that I wanted to do here is to illustrate the differences and suggest a possible solution to this problem. For simplicity’s sake, I will mostly remain neutral to these two approaches, but adopt an actualist version of agent-based theories where needed since Slote seems to imply it in his theory and this is what I’m following here.

Slote argued in *Morals from Motives* that the best motive would be care or concern for the well-being of others, while the worst motive would be hatred or malice. However, in Slote’s most recent work he offered a version of care based on empathy. I am hesitant to accept a completely empathic based care for several reasons, some of which relate to our environmental issues, but others relate to the plausibility of our

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\(^1\) This solution was presented to me by Eric Reitan.
empathic relations with other human beings. To help clear this up we should look at Slote’s empathic caring and see exactly how it stands up.

Slote’s criterion of wrong action is “actions are morally wrong and contrary to moral obligation if, and only if, they reflect or exhibit or express an absence (or lack) of fully developed empathic concern for (or caring about) others on the part of the agent” (“The Ethics of Care” 31). Unfortunately, in *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, he is slightly vague about what exactly constitutes right action. Presumably, any action which does not reflect a lack of empathy on the part of the agent is permissible. Of course the obvious question is what is “empathy?”

Slote states, “Empathy involves having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain” (“Ethics of Care” 13). This is different from sympathy or feeling for another person. It is not that you see someone being humiliated and then feel sorry for that person, but that you actually feel humiliated yourself upon seeing someone else humiliated. Martin Hoffman’s definition, “the involvement of psychological processes that makes a person have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with his own situation” captures this distinction nicely (30). Since it will become important later in our discussion it will be useful to review the ways in which Hoffman thinks others engage our sense of empathy.

The first mode of empathic arousal is mimicry. Simply mimicking the physical responses of another human being can induce a feeling of what that the other person is experiencing or feeling (Hoffman 44). This is the most basic mode of empathic arousal followed by conditioning; an association of sad or happy feelings of another with one’s actual distress. Another mode, direct association, has the victim’s situation remind an
observer of a similar experiences in their own lives. For example, a person might see a child fall off a bike and scrape his or her knee. The feeling of pain and embarrassment might be aroused in an observer by recalling a similar past experience. This direct association with events in one’s past arouses empathic feelings in the observer.

The next two modes of empathic arousal will be of great importance to our discussions of the environment later on. First, mediated association can arouse empathic feelings in a person by mere verbal description. Hoffman uses the example of students reading a story and “feeling considerable empathic distress” (52). But this example also possibly contained the final mode of empathic arousal, role-taking. The next mode, role-taking, can come in three forms: 1) self-focused role taking where the observer imagines how they would feel in a similar situation, 2) other-focused role taking where the observer imagines how the other person might have felt in their situation, and 3) some combination of the above two where one moves between imagining how the observer might feel in that situation and imagining how the other might feel (Hoffman 54-58). An observer imagines oneself in the role or situation of another and this produces an empathic feeling. It is very helpful to point out the very important role imagination plays in our empathic arousals. I will have more to say about empathy and imagination in later chapters.

At the highest levels of empathy development Hoffman thinks that we can empathize with a group by generalizing the plight of individuals within a group or category and have an empathic response based on that generalization (85-86). Of course, much more can be said of empathy, but for the sake of brevity this outline should suffice.
Now that we very briefly examined how we empathize with others we can turn our attention back towards Slote’s agent-based empathic care.

Slote argues that this empathic caring can ground our entire morality. In that vein, Slote attempts to offer an account of deontology, autonomy, paternalism and justice using this approach. In very broad terms, he seems fairly successful in each of these areas. The general overview of his theory is that many of our common-sense moral distinctions can be explained in terms of empathic care. Things which increase our empathic juices like “through perceptual and/or temporal immediacy, through family connection, and through the kinds of sharing that occur between friends and life-partners” and also a type of causal agency (killing someone vs. letting them die) are morally relevant factors (“Ethics of Care and Empathy” 28, 44). Keeping in mind these and other relevant factors that determine how deeply felt our empathic response to others is, Slote systematizes a moral theory grounded in empathy and care using the criterion of wrong action given above.

To give a quick review, since we are more empathic with family and friends, we owe them more help than strangers and people we don’t see. This does not mean, of course, that we are morally permitted to give our children an Xbox 360 in every room of the house when our neighbors’ children are starving. A failure to respond to a child starving, anyone’s child, might reflect a lack of fully developed empathic concern. Preferring to feed my own children over someone else’s children would not, however, reflect a lack of fully developed empathic concern, because we normally have more empathy for our family and friends. Much more could be said of Slote’s theory, but for our present purposes this sketch should suffice. We only need to keep in mind the agent-based nature of the theory and the important role of empathic care in determining our
moral obligations. The only remaining detail which needs to be discussed is Slote’s agent-based concept of justice.

Slote argues that institutions and governments can be judged on analogy to the way agent-based theories judge individual actions, on whether or not the actions these institutions are undertaking reflect or exhibit empathic care or a lack thereof. Slote states, “an ethics of empathic caring can say that institutions and laws, as well as social customs and practices, are just if they reflect empathically caring motivation on the part of (enough of) those responsible for originating and maintaining them” (“Ethics of Care and Empathy” 94). At first glance it seems counterintuitive to base laws upon the motivations of those who passed them, but after further consideration, this theory is capable of pointing out moral injustice in ways that other moral theories seemingly cannot. To illustrate this point let us look at a few examples.

One way this theory can apply to views of justice is through legal justice. By looking at the motivations behind the lawmakers and legislators who enact a certain law we can, from an agent-based point of view, determine whether such a law is just or unjust. Imagine a democracy plagued by inept leadership. These poor leaders take office by pandering to the general public’s fears. They run campaigns designed to motivate their voters, not based on political issues, but based on appealing to prejudices and fears of the population. This practice prevents any real public discussion of the problems which might face this democracy. Now imagine some legislators, looking for a solution to this problem, enact a law which states that only those people who pass certain intelligence test can participate in public elections and discussions. They reason that this law will enable more profitable discussions at the national level and allow for genuine debate to
exist in the general population. Furthermore, let us assume that this law actually did what was intended and brought about a better overall government and leadership, i.e., it had good consequences for the country as a whole. The legislators responsible for such a law on a certain level had the genuine interests of their country at heart. Would this law be viewed as just from Slote’s agent-based empathic care theory? I think there is good reason to think that such a law would be found unjust.

But why would such a law be unjust? After all, we established that the law brought about better consequences for the country overall. While this consideration certainly has a place, an agent-based theory would look towards the legislator’s motivation in determining the injustice of this law. Even though the legislators in the above example had the overall interests of the country in mind, they neglected the interests and psychological well-being of those people who might fail the test. Imagine what it might be like for those who fail the test. What message must that send out to those people? Imagine shame and guilt felt by those who fail. The tacit message given in failing such a test is that you are not smart enough to participate in your own country’s decision making process. Failing this test would make someone feel horrible.

What is arguably wrong with our legislators in the above example is a failure to empathize with those who would fail the test. They failed to imagine what it would be like for those people who would fail the test. Thus, since enacting such a law would reflect their failure to empathize with these people, the law can be seen as unjust.

Not only can we judge particular laws and institutions by whether or not they reflect a lack of fully developed empathic concern, in a similar fashion, we can also judge cultural, social, and systemic practices as unjust. For example, it has been noted that in
our culture, women who work outside the home do more total work than their husbands.\textsuperscript{2} There is no specific law or action one is able to identify that allows for this asymmetry to exist in our culture. Rather, it seems to exist within our culture as a structure or social norm. Slote’s agent-based care is able to view the continued existence of such a cultural phenomenon as morally unjust. Not taking seriously the interests and well-being of those women who are forced to work the second shift can be seen as a lack of fully developed empathy on the part of the culture and people who maintain this inequality. If a culture or society did properly empathize with the plight of women doing twice the work, we would see corresponding steps to correct the social inequality. If a culture does not adjust in light of such facts an agent-based ethics of empathic care can infer that their cultural and social norms reflect a lack of care and are, therefore, unjust.

Now, the major question concerning the environment and Slote’s ethics of care is can we have empathy for animals, plants and even things like ecosystems or species? Slote seems reluctant to say whether empathy is possible with plants and the like but says “it’s not completely out of the question” (“Ethics of Care and Empathy” 19).\textsuperscript{3} I think anyone who has had a pet will argue that it is possible to empathize with animals, but it is harder to understand how we might empathize with plants or ecosystems. Exactly how this agent-based land ethic might look will be delayed until Chapter 5. The next chapter will focus on possible ways of conceiving our obligations to the non-human with a particular focus on Aldo Leopold’s land ethic.


\textsuperscript{3} Emphasis in the original.
CHAPTER III

THE LAND ETHIC

For any normative moral theory, three broad options present themselves as plausible ways with dealing with our relationship to the non-human world. The first possible way to approach environmental concerns is to make them derivative of human concerns. That is to say that the non-human world has no direct moral standing on its own, it’s only in relation to human interests that the non-human world gets factored in morally. This view sees nature and non-human organisms as void of intrinsic value, and instead, argues for their moral consideration on instrumental grounds, if any. For example, Kant thought that “so far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties” (239). We only have duties towards animals as they impact our own humanity. The essential feature of this derivative model is that humans have some interest in the non-human world to the extent that we depend on it for certain resources, and it is therefore in our interest to use the non-human world properly. This instrumental value does not need to be seen in purely economic terms, the natural world could serve as a sort of moral practice towards other humans impacting our moral character. As Kant says, “If a man shoots his dog because it is no longer capable of service, he does not fail his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind” (239).
Let us call the second possibility the individual model. The most obvious example of this is Peter Singer’s utilitarian arguments for animal liberation. In brief, Singer attempts to argue on utilitarian grounds the moral considerability of animals. Since animals can suffer, they ought to be extended our direct moral consideration. This stands in sharp contrast to the response given by Kant above. As we can see, what would be morally wrong about abuses to animals would not be some indirect harm to the agent or some other humans, but actually harming the animal itself. Singer then has taken the utilitarian model of pleasures and pains and extended it outward to include certain members of the non-human community; namely those that can suffer. More inclusive, biocentric theories have also appeared allowing for the moral considerability of all life. The methods these theories use seem to follow similar lines of argument. Each one identifies criteria or a criterion in individual humans which are essential for moral consideration among humans. Individuals in the non-human world which meet the chosen criteria or criterion for moral considerability are directly included into our moral considerations. How many non-human individuals are included is a function of the criteria or criterion used and how many non-humans meet it. There is no need to survey all these possible theories; I only want to note that this is one possible way for a theory to approach our relations to the non-human world.

The third and final model is to go beyond the moral considerability of individuals in the non-human world, and instead take a more holistic approach which takes into account things like ecosystems and species. This holistic approach is seen in Aldo

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Leopold’s land ethic. Here, not only are individual organisms included in moral consideration but things like rivers, mountains, forests, species, ecosystems, and biotic communities are given direct moral consideration.

Of these three potential approaches, the holistic approach seems to offer the best chance of explaining our moral intuitions regarding our ethical obligations toward non-humans and the natural world. Let me offer a short example to illustrate. Imagine someone hunting and killing one hundred black bears. Depending on our personal views about the morality of hunting, and certain details of this particular case, we might feel that the action is either right or wrong. Personal opinions vary widely about the permissibility of hunting, so it is very difficult to assume any consensus would arise from the above case. With that said, now imagine that those one hundred black bears were the last of that species. The species was driven to extinction by one person hunting. Regardless of your opinions in the first example, this case clearly seems morally worse than the first, and I would venture to say that most people would feel that our hunter acted wrongly.

How are we to make sense of this in light of our previously mentioned approaches? The derivative model could argue that this case seems worse because someone has taken from the world something which is of value to humans. It would be perhaps morally equal or analogous to someone removing all the bowls of ice cream from the planet; someone destroyed something of value to humans. Just like in our bear example, someone who destroyed all bowls of ice cream (assuming there are only one hundred bowls of ice cream on earth) would have acted morally worse than someone who merely destroyed one hundred bowls of ice cream (assuming of course there are many
more bowls on earth). Similarly, by removing the possibility of there being black bears on earth, the hunter has done a great disservice to mankind. While this is certainly true, I do not think that we do, or would want to, equate the death of a species as morally on par with the destruction of ice cream, but given that derivative model gives no direct moral consideration to individuals outside their instrumental use to humans, this model will have difficulty accounting for this distinction. If the derivative model is to make a moral distinction between killing the last black bears and removing all ice cream from the planet, it will have to somehow argue that black bears are more valuable to us than ice cream. This, I think, will be a very hard case to make. Given the sheer amount of people who enjoy a nice bowl of ice cream, and given how few lives might be actually be affected by the loss of black bears, the scale of which is more valuable to humans would seem to tip in favor of ice cream. On the face of it, then, the derivative model seems inadequate or at least has some serious difficulties in properly explaining this distinction.

The individual model, however, can explain or provide for the distinction that killing bears is morally worse than destroying ice cream. To use Singer’s theory as an example, since individual bears can feel pain and suffer we have a moral obligation not to harm them. Furthermore, since ice cream can not feel pain we do not have any moral obligations with regard to ice cream. It seems that an individual model can easily explain this difference, but remember the example that started this discussion: killing the last one hundred black bears is worse than killing one hundred black bears. On the face of it, this model will have great difficulty explaining this distinction. Since it focuses solely on individuals as having moral considerablility, it lacks any appeal to wholes, as such, to ground this distinction. If certain aspects of wholes are not reducible to the sum of its
individual members, as this example suggests, then an approach that gives moral considerability to *only* individuals will have a difficult time accounting for those irreducible aspects of biotic wholes.

Since the holistic model gives us consideration of the species as such, we can call the obliteration of the last one hundred black bears morally worse than merely killing one hundred black bears assuming the species survives. Because of examples like this, I assume that the holistic approach offers the most direct route to explain or track our intuitions with regard to our obligations to the natural world. This of course does not prove that the other models are incapable of accounting for this distinction or that holism offers the most defensible environmental ethic, it merely offers a reason to aim for holistic approaches to environmental ethics. With this in mind, let us turn our attention toward a prime example of holistic approaches, Aldo Leopold and the land ethic.

Leopold starts “The Land Ethic” by recapping the story of Odysseus. When Odysseus killed twelve slave girls he was not doing anything wrong, he was merely disposing of property (201). Slaves were not included in ethical structures of the day and were therefore outside the notions of right and wrong. As time passed ethical relations expanded to include more members. As Leopold sees it, ethics first “dealt with the relation between individuals” (202). Then, “Later accretions dealt with the relation between the individual and society” (Leopold 202-203). “There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (Leopold 203). The land ethic, then, is merely the next step in that sequence. “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or collectively: the land” (Leopold 204). Leopold also gives the land ethic a
summary moral maxim, “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” (224). This statement presents the most obvious, and most quoted, evidence that Leopold was a holist. Obviously, the community has a very special place in the land ethic, but how special and how important is a very open topic. Many of the criticisms against Leopold’s ethics focus around this statement and its implications as to the importance of the community in moral decision making. We will return to this statement later on in the paper, but for now it would be needless to examine the summary maxim of the land ethic without first looking into the justification for extending our community to include the land. In brief, whatever mechanisms justified expanding the moral community to include human chattels should be able to justify our community expansion to include the land.

But how exactly does this extension of moral community take place? One possible interpretation, given by J. Baird Callicott, provides an explanation based in a Humean account of moral sentiments and a Darwinian theory of social evolution. The basis of the argument is that “natural selection has endowed human beings with an affective moral response to perceived bonds of kinship and community membership and identity; that today the natural environment, the land, is represented as a community, the biotic community; and that, therefore, an environmental or land ethic is both possible—the biopsychological and cognitive conditions are in place—and necessary, since human beings collectively have acquired the power to destroy the integrity, diversity, and stability of the environing and supporting economy of nature” (Callicott, “Defense” 83). That is the argument condensed into one sentence. Of course it would be helpful to unpack exactly what is going on here.
Hume argued that morality was essentially a function of our moral sentiments and not found in reason. Hume states that “An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind” (“Treatise” 303). He goes on to say, “To have a sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character” (“Treatise” 303). Thus, when observing a good act, a feeling of approbation arises in us. When we observe a wrong action, or vicious person, a feeling of disapprobation arises in us. This feeling of approbation or disapprobation amounted to our moral sense and determined whether we viewed certain actions as right or wrong. I do not mean to get into a full discussion of Hume’s theory here, only to provide a very general outline. At first glance, it looks as if Hume made all of morality a matter of personal taste. If what determines the rightness or wrongness of any action is my own sentiment towards that action, then we seem committed to some type of individual relativism or subjectivism. In the same way two people might differ in their response to seeing a particular work of art they might also differ in their response to seeing a particular act. Callicott does not think Hume is committed to relativism. He argues that the “moral sentiments are both natural and universally distributed among human beings” and “like physical features-the placement of the eyes in the head, two arms, two legs, an opposed thumb, and so forth-the moral sentiments are only slightly variable psychological features common to all people” (“Defense” 121). Why should we believe Hume on this? What reason to we have to think that our moral sense is so uniform across the board? What, if any, assurance can be given to conclude our moral sentiments are universal to human nature? Callicott uses Darwin to help bolster the uniformity of our moral sense.
Callicott uses Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* as providing an explanation of the uniformity of our moral sense. Callicott understands Darwin arguing that those members of our species which extended the parental-filial affections common to all mammals outward to other closely related relatives allowed them to have an evolutionary edge over those individuals who lacked such sentiments. These sentiments would then be spread by a process of natural selection. Callicott states, “Darwin then imagined the ‘social instincts’ and ‘moral sentiments,’ thus evolved from the emotional ties binding kinship groups, to have become ‘more tender and widely diffused’ as communities developed in size and complexity in response to the human evolutionary principle that if membership in comparatively large, complex societies is a good thing, then membership in even larger, more complex societies is better” (“Beyond” 108). As community membership expanded, our ethics expanded coextensively. “With each change in society came corresponding and correlative changes in ethics. The moral community expanded to become coextensive with the newly drawn boundaries of societies and the representation of virtue and vice, right and wrong, good and evil, changed to accommodate, foster and preserve the economic and institutional organization of emergent social orders” (Callicott “Defense” 80). The findings of ecological science show us to be members of an interdependent biotic community. Callicott states that a “moral response to the natural environment-Darwin’s social sympathies, sentiments, and instincts translated and codified into a body of principles and precepts-would be automatically triggered in human beings by ecology’s social representation of nature” (“Defense” 82). Just as we now have some notion of universal human rights as we approach something like a global community, we similarly should have moral concern for the land because of our
discoveries in ecological science inform us that we do in fact belong to a biotic community.

The land ethic, as viewed by Callicott, then involves a continuation of our ethical expansion process; from a restrictive class of individuals to a larger class of individuals, then from individuals only to social orders and institutions, and the most certain step is to include all living organisms and natural systems.

Callicott’s interpretation seems to lay out the philosophical and psychological possibilities for the land ethic but also seems to miss some of its more pragmatic components. Another way to justify the land ethic’s holism is by appealing to our own interest in survival. We are certainly dependent upon the natural world for the basic necessities of survival. Ecological science explains and demonstrates the interconnected ways organisms interact in their relations with each other and the environment. If ecological science shows that we are damaging the stability and integrity of ecological systems, on which we depend for our very survival, we are also damaging ourselves and future generations. Given our current tendency to misuse the land, we might be better off adopting ethical holism, applying direct moral considerability to the land, in order to better safeguard ourselves against our own ecologically destructive practices. Here we can see Leopold arguing for the land ethic based almost entirely in practical, pragmatic terms: “A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually eliminate, many elements in that land community that lack commercial value but are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning… it tends to relegate to government many functions too large, too complex, or too widely dispersed to be preformed by the government. An ethical obligation on the
part of the private owner is the only visible remedy for these solutions” (214). This type of argument suggests that in our own self-interest, we would be better off giving up our self-interest and treating the land with love and respect.

There are potentially many other ways in which one can interpret the Leopold’s justification to extend moral considerability to ecological wholes, but the one used by Callicott seems to be the standard so it might be beneficial to explore how Callicott thinks Leopold can deal with the problem of ecofascism.

A major objection raised against the land ethic is that, since it supports ethical holism, it might support or lead to a type ecofascism. The criterion of right and wrong action is given by Leopold as “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” (224). This criterion would seem to allow, or perhaps even praise, the killing of thousands of humans in order to ensure biotic stability. Callicott’s reply is that, “The land ethic is an accretion—that is, an addition—to our several accumulated social ethics, not something that is supposed to replace them” (“Beyond” 71). Two questions immediately arise: 1) what exactly is our accumulated social ethics? and 2) What happens when environmental concerns conflict with our current accumulated social duties?

To the first question, Callicott does not exactly respond. Instead he calls the land ethic committed to a type of moral pluralism, meaning various social obligations generate various duties, not moral theoretical pluralism. He argues that the unified moral theory he uses begins “with Humean social instincts and affections that evolve into ethics proper and grow more expansive and complicated apace with the Darwinian scenario of social evolution” (“Beyond” 72). If Callicott uses Hume’s normative theory to ground the land
ethic, I think he runs into several problems. By arguing that Hume stands as your
champion theory with regard to our moral requirements among humans is to
unfortunately adopt the many flaws of Hume’s theory. For one, Hume’s theory seems far
more descriptive rather than prescriptive. The only thing truly prescribed in Hume’s
moral theory, is to follow my own moral sense, and perhaps take steps to ensure that it is
not tainted by my own personal biases. This essentially means that on any hard case, the
theory cannot offer any real guidance. Is abortion permissible? Since I do not have any
strong moral sentiment, I lack a feeling of disapprobation or approbation, I am left with
nowhere to turn as far as Hume’s theory goes. Perhaps then I just need more moral
education. But who decides the content of our moral education? It would seem that
natural selection and evolution decide part of it, but for the rest it seems like our cultural
norms would decide. The answer, then, could be a “consensus of feeling” (Callicott
“Beyond” 108). Presumably, the problem with a case like abortion is the very fact that
we lack a consensus of feeling. Now, of course, by considering all the relevant facts and
feelings which go into a hard case we might come to some consensus of feeling in the
future. This is certainly a possibility. But it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that a
moral theory should provide some type of guidance on hard cases, like abortion, and not
merely describe how we make moral decisions psychologically.

Another problem for Hume seems to be his account of justice. For one there is
great disagreement as to what exactly is Hume’s account of justice. “Justice, for Hume,
has to do only with material possessions” (Nuyen 43). If this view is true then Hume
gives a very limited account of justice that might not be able to contribute to discussions
about voting rights, social inequalities, and international justice. Of course, this is not the
only reading of Hume’s theory of justice. Some see him as offering a broader account of justice which includes promise keeping and a sense of fairness. Slote reads Hume as arguing for justice as a virtue, but believes that “Hume's attempt to justify or explain justice as an individual virtue via empiricist sentimentalist (associationist) mechanisms cannot succeed” (“Justice”). If Slote’s analysis is correct and Hume has problems accounting for the social sentiments, like justice and promise keeping, then what makes Callicott think a Humean theory will be able to account for moral sentiments that concern ecological wholes? If Hume’s theory of social justice is on shaky ground, then the philosophical foundations for the moral considerability of ecological wholes might also be on shaky ground.

Even more problematic for Callicott’s use of a Humean theory of moral sentiments is whether Hume allows for the possibility of the environment or even animals to have something like a biotic right. Hume argues that if we were to come into contact with some rational being that was inferior to us in strength so that they would be unable to “make us feel the effects of their resentment,” we could not strictly speaking act unjustly towards them. For, “Our intercourse with them could not be called society, which supposes a degree of equality; but absolute command on the one side, and servile obedience on the other. Whatever we covet, they must instantly resign: Our permission is the only tenure, by which they hold their possessions: Our compassion and kindness the only check, by which they curb our lawless will: And as no inconvenience ever results from the exercise of a power, so firmly established in nature, the restraints of justice and property, being totally *useless*, would never have place in so unequal a confederacy…This is plainly the situation of men, with regard to animals” (Hume,
“Enquiry” 88). It seems then that Hume does not think that animals will be able to have anything like a “biotic right” or even enter into a society with us because they cannot demand equal treatment; they can only hope for our compassion.

Another consideration for grounding the land ethic in the moral sentimentalism of Hume is the mechanisms in place by which we might have, as Callicott puts it, “affective moral response to perceived bonds of kinship and community membership and identity.” I presume that what he is referring to here is Hume’s notion of sympathy. If sympathy is, “the process by which feelings are shared or imparted between people… [or] what we might today call empathy,” (Debes 44) then to truly make the case that Hume’s theory serves as the foundation for land ethic, Callicott would have to make the case that we can have sympathy for animals, which, as far as I know, he has yet to do. The reader will note, then, that by exploring whether Slote’s empathic ethics of care can make sense of our intuitions regarding our obligations toward the natural world, we might potentially give the Callicott’s interpretations of the land ethic a stronger foundation (or potentially destroy it).

How Callicott answers the second question (What happens when environmental concerns conflict with our accumulated social duties?) will determine if his interpretation of the land ethic is open to the charge of ecofascism. If Callicott answers the question by having environmental concerns take precedence over other conflicting interests then he opens the door to ecofascism. If Callicott argues that our human interests take priority

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6 Callicott does seem to be aware of this problem near the end of “Can a Theory of Moral Sentiments Support a Normative Environmental Ethic?” In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989. However, he thinks these are “epistemological problems.”
over environmental concerns, then he must explain how the land ethic advances the moral
considerability to the nonhuman world in some meaningful way.

Before we turn to Callicott’s answer to this question, I would like to take pause
and explore possible ways one might conceive of holism and which, if any, leads us to
something like fascism. Exploring this question will help determine whether or not a
theory like Slote’s empathic care will even want to support a form of holism like the land
ethic, regardless of whether or not it can. Then it light of this discussion of holism, we
should return again to Leopold’s land ethic and see if it alone leads to a type of fascism.
After that we will consider Callicott’s interpretation of the land ethic and his response to
ecofascism, so that we can determine whether he adequately addresses the issue at hand.
This issue becomes extremely important because as I stated earlier, at least on the face of
it, holism is the best way to explain our ethical obligations regarding the natural world,
but if holism leads to unacceptable conclusions, we might do well to ground Slote’s
theory in some other environmental ethic.
CHAPTER IV

HOLISM AND THE PROBLEM OF ECOFASCISM

Several commentators on environmental ethics have expressed concern that a holistic approach will lead toward a subverting of individuals for the good of the whole leading to a type of environmental fascism or ecofascism.\(^7\) If holistic approaches to ethics necessarily lead to a type of ecofascism, then this amounts to an unacceptable implication of the theory and therefore the theory should be rejected. But the question is, do holistic approaches lead toward or imply ecofascism? I think to fully answer this question one would have to explore the relationship between the interests of individuals and the interests of groups, explore the nature of identity, and potentially decide on the metaphysical reality of groups. This, obviously, would be a massive undertaking and would be far beyond the scope of this paper. However, since, the question is important to whether Slote’s agent-based empathic care should seek a holistic theory, we can explore what a few commentators have said on the subject and see if this can at least point us in the right direction.

Don E. Marietta, Jr. offers a good place to start this discussion. For one, Marietta notes that the discussion of holism has been ambiguous. One can talk of holism as a scientific notion, meaning that as a matter of fact, all living things are related and “share a

common dependence on the nonliving parts of the world” (Marietta 254). Or one might talk about holism axiologically meaning that the source of value is somehow related to the whole. Finally, one might even refer to holism as “deontic holism” meaning that “moral duty and moral standing derive from memberships in the biospheric community” (Marietta 255).

Furthermore, each of these possible views of holism admit of varying degrees. For example, if one argues for deontic holism one might mean that “duty to the whole system of nature [is] one aspect of moral duty,” or one might mean that such duties are primary and override lesser duties or one might even take the extreme position that the whole is the only source of duty (Marietta 255).

Now, it seems clear that the extreme position, of regarding the whole as the only source of duty, leads toward fascism. If duties toward wholes are primary, but not exclusive, and always override other duties, then we can also see how this would lead to fascism. So the modest version of holism, that duties toward wholes are one aspect of our moral duties, seems free of fascism. If this analysis is correct then only certain forms of holism are open to the charge of ecofascism; namely, those that take holistic concerns as the only source of moral obligation or those that take holistic concerns as primary and always overriding other obligations. We can now see that if Leopold’s land ethic takes holistic concerns as either the primary or exclusive source of moral obligation then he will be open to charges of ecofascism. The remaining question is, of course, is there any reason to think that Leopold’s land ethic views our ethical obligations toward our environment as primary or exclusive.
As for my own reading of the land ethic, it seems fairly clear that Leopold was not implying a holism which was exclusive. Does Leopold’s famous moral maxim, “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,” imply primary or exclusive importance to the biotic community? (224) This sentence, taken on its own, might support viewing Leopold as ascribing exclusive importance on the land. However, the very next sentence reads, “It of course goes without saying that economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done for the land” (225). This sentence implies that there is at least something, other than the biotic community, that might be the source of an obligation or at least something which limits our obligations. If Leopold recognizes something which places limits on our obligations, then it is hard to make sense of Leopold placing exclusive importance on obligations toward the land. Also, Leopold says that, “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (204). This sentence suggests that we have obligations to both the members and the community; again showing that Leopold at least does not place exclusive importance on the whole.

However, one can admittedly read Leopold as placing a great deal of importance on the good of the biotic community. Even with that said, there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that Leopold advocated the community should always override individuals. Even those sections which might suggest the primary importance of the community usually contain a certain pragmatic tone. “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodidity belonging to us. When we see the land as a community to which we
belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture” (Leopold viii). As mentioned in the previous chapter, this seems to be a type of pragmatic argument. If the land cannot survive the impact of mechanized man without us viewing it with love and respect, and man is dependent upon the land for survival, then man should regard the land with love or man will not survive.

Admittedly, a case can be made that Leopold was arguing for the biotic community to have primary importance. In light of potential conflicting interpretations of how important the biotic community was to Leopold, it seems reasonable to accept that Leopold was ambiguous on this issue. However, it is at least good to note that a strong case can be made against the charge that Leopold’s land ethic leads to ecofascism.

Unfortunately, since this ambiguity exists within the land ethic, we do not know exactly how Leopold might answer the question posed in the previous chapter: What happens when environmental concerns conflict with our normal social duties? Even if one takes Leopold as not committed to any type of ecofascism it is still very unclear how he might answer this question. Through his interpretation of Leopold, Callicott does give an answer to this question. He argues that “The first second-order principle is that obligations generated by membership in more venerable and intimate communities take precedence over those generated in more recently emerged and impersonal communities….The second second-order principle is that stronger interests (for lack of a better word) generate duties that take precedence over duties generated by weaker interests” (“Beyond” 73). So, if we use the metaphor of overlapping nested communities
as concentric circles, we can see that circles closer to the center take priority, unless the interests of a circle further out are strong enough to override that duty. Presumably, the center here is your immediate family or most intimate community. Even though the notion of interests is extremely vague, I think the approach has intuitive appeal and successfully resolves the problem of ecofascism while maintaining a strong moral commitment to the environment.

Unfortunately, we are given no reason to accept these ordering principles other than their initial intuitive appeal. He states, “For example, while duties to one’s own children, all things being equal, properly take precedence over duties toward unrelated children in one’s municipality, one would be ethically remiss to shower one’s own children with luxuries while unrelated children in one’s municipality lacked the bare necessities of food” (“Beyond” 73). While this might certainly be true in common morality, it is precisely this type of preference that impartialist theories, like act-utilitarianism, seek to challenge. In the face of convincing utilitarian arguments, Callicott needs to provide some reasons to accept his principles or at least some theoretical explanation about how they are derived.

According to Y S. Lo, Callicott can manage to explain his first second-order principle (SOP-1) by appealing to the communitarian foundations of the land ethic. However, in the case of the second second-order principle (SOP-2) “it is not so easy to supply the missing explanation in terms of the ‘communitarian foundations of the land ethic’. For unlike SOP-1, SOP-2 does not employ the ‘vocabulary of community’ at all…if SOP-2 can be ‘derived’ from anything, an obvious candidate is Peter Singer’s utilitarian egalitarianism, which proposes equal moral consideration for equal interests, a
position which Callicott constantly attacks and distances from his own communitarianism” (Y S. Lo 349). This of course might not be a terrible problem, but Callicott sees this theory as providing for moral monism. SOP-1 and SOP-2 seem to derive their moral weight from competing and conflicting moral principles, which would indicate a type of moral theoretical pluralism.

Furthermore, Y S. Lo points out that even though Callicott thinks his moral monism will be able “to compare and weigh the priorities of conflicting duties in ‘commensurable terms’ and on ‘a single scale, calibrated in a single metric,’” he ultimately fails (350). Y.S. Lo states that for two qualities to be commensurable they must be measurable in some common unit or units. Since “SOP-1 measures the priority of a given first-order community-duty in terms of (a) the temporal length of one’s recognition of one’s membership in the community, and (b) the degree of one’s intimacy with the community,” in order for (a) and (b) to be commensurable, they must have some common unit in which they both can be measured (Y.S. Lo 347). “But there is no established common unit, nor has Callicott proposed one…furthermore given that there is no essential or conceptual connection between (a) and (b), it is very implausible that a common unit…could ever be devised for measuring both” (Y.S. Lo 347). The case that SOP-1 and SOP-2 are commensurable seems even worse than the case for the commensurability within SOP-1 since the SOPs derive their standing from competing moral principles.

Y.S. Lo also points out that Callicott actually has a third-order principle in play which she calls “TOP.” This third-order principle orders the SOPs, so that SOP-2 countermands SOP-1. Callicott does not say where this principle comes from or gives
any reason why we should accept it. But since the SOPs might often conflict, and have no way of resolving this conflict on their own, Callicott needs to introduce this third principle to regulate the other two. At the end of the day Y.S. Lo seems to think that Callicott has three separate incommensurable principles in play: SOP-1, which is incommensurable with its own internal prioritizing mechanisms; SOP-2 which is incommensurable with SOP-1; and TOP, which is needed because the two second-order principles by themselves are “unable to settle priorities of conflicting first-order duties” (351) leading one to assume that TOP is incommensurable with either SOPs. Y.S. Lo says that, “it is very clear that his moral monism is incompatible with his ethical system…the higher-level managing parties of which do not all share [the communitarian] vocabulary but instead prioritize conflicting moral duties in terms of a plurality of incommensurable factors…so I suggest that [Callicott] should either openly discard his moral monism or else further revise his ethical system to deliver the promise of his moral monism” (355).

Given Y.S. Lo’s thorough and in-depth analysis, we might conclude that Callicott is able to get the land ethic out of ecofascism but in the process he loses some of the land ethic’s theoretical unity and sacrifices his monistic ambitions. But I wonder if the SOPs and TOP are truly beyond commensurability. It is true, that as it stands, Callicott gives no reason to accept that these ordering principles are commensurable. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of there being some common measure between them. One plausible candidate for these ordering principles commensurability is, of course, empathy.
Recall Y.S. Lo’s analysis of SOP-1. She argued that the SOP-1 determined the priority of any duty based on (a) temporal length of perceived membership in that community and (b) the intimacy with that community. Both (a) and (b) seem explainable in terms of empathy. The more intimate I am with a community, say my immediate family, the more I will empathize with them, thus generating a stronger duty to those communities I am more intimate with. Even though (a) is admittedly harder to make sense of in terms of empathy, there are still some indications that it is explainable in terms of empathy. Imagine a person, James, who has played on a certain softball team for several years but recently joined a curling team. A scheduling conflict arises and James must choose which team to support. Given that the greater length of perceived membership in the softball team SOP-1 seems to dictate that James supports them. For one, the length of perceived membership in a group might give rise to a greater sense of identification with that group. This greater sense of identification seems to open the doors to a more deeply felt empathic response to that group’s needs. Imagine the level of betrayal James’s softball team might feel if he chose to support his new team. Given their long history together it does not seem unreasonable that the team might feel betrayed by his sudden departure. The duty generated here then might have something to due with a stronger sense of empathic identification with groups one has associated with for longer periods of time.

This, of course, follows much of what was previously said about empathy. But what about SOP-2? “[S]tronger interests (for lack of a better word) generate duties that take precedence over duties generated by weaker interests” (“Beyond” 73). Even though, as Y.S. Lo points out, this principle seems more in line with an egalitarian theory than
Callicott’s communitarian one, I think empathy can, again, make some sense out of this. Imagine two children, one with a foot stuck in active train tracks and another who has fallen off a bicycle and scraped a knee. Both are calling for your assistance. Let us also assume that the child caught on the railroad tracks has a stronger interest in your help than the child who scraped a knee. We would be more empathically responsive to the child whose life is potentially threatened than we would to the child who merely scraped his knee. Empathy then, seems quite capable being the common denominator between SOP-2 and SOP-1.

Similarly, TOP seems measurable in terms of empathy. Let us return to James and the conflicting schedules between his long-time softball team and new curling team. As stated earlier, SOP-1 dictates that James should play with the softball team instead of his curling team. But imagine that the softball team has more players than is required to play their exhibition game. Furthermore, since the curling team is shorthanded, if James does not show up, they will be forced to forfeit their long awaited game at the Olympic trials. Thus SOP-2 dictates that James should go with his curling team since they have stronger interests. SOP-1 and SOP-2 are now seen in conflict. TOP then steps in to declare that SOP-2 countermands SOP-1. But why would TOP do such a thing? In terms of empathy, James might be more empathically responsive to the devastating blow dealt to his curling team by him bailing out on their most prized game, even though his closer community might be his softball team. This case is analogous to a parent faced with giving a candy bar to their own child or giving it to a neighbor’s child who is starving. Though the parent might be more empathically sensitive to the needs of his own child,
the stronger interest given by the child who is starving would seem to outweigh the small inconvenience brought about in his own child’s life by not receiving the candy bar.

Thus, it would seem possible that each of Callicott’s principles are commensurable in terms of empathy. If Y.S. Lo’s criticisms of Callicott’s environmental ethics are correct, Callicott would seem to need some notion like empathy in order to maintain his moral monism. The main focus of this paper, exploring whether an agent-based ethics of empathic care make sense of our ethical obligations with regard to the natural world, would seem to have some import at least to Callicott and his interpretations of the land ethic. With this in mind it is probably time to turn our attention towards directly answering that question.
CHAPTER V

AGENT-BASED LAND ETHIC

Having seen that a holistic environmental ethic, like Leopold’s, does not necessarily lead to environmental fascism, we should now ask if an agent-based approach to morality is compatible with the land ethic. Subsequently, we can see if Slote’s notion of empathy can make sense of our obligations toward the natural world and if it can ultimately embrace or support something like the land ethic.

Given that some have recently interpreted Leopold as offering a virtue ethics, we might have reason to suspect that Leopold’s land ethic might be compatible with an agent-based virtue ethics. However, these interpreters argue from an Aristotelian perspective rather than the agent-based ethics of empathic care supported by Slote. Consequently, what they have to say might be only of limited use to our current discussion. What will be useful to us is that they all agree that Leopold is interested in our dispositions and character, just as much, if not more so, than the consequences of our actions. This can be seen when Leopold says, “By and large our present problem is one of attitudes and implements” (225-226). And again when he says,

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“It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense” (223). Time, and time again, throughout the land ethic, Leopold makes distinctions which focus on character and the role of humans in the environment: he mentions man as a conqueror versus man the biotic citizen, and he repeatedly states that we need to view the land with love and respect. I suggest that these statements indicate that it is possible to conceive of the land ethic in agent-based terms.9

Furthermore, the emphasis on an agent’s motivation allows an agent-based theory to track our intuitions regarding our obligations to the environment rather nicely. To illustrate, imagine a certain patch of forest, burnt by a recent fire. In this example, let us assume that the forest fire was beneficial to the overall health of the forest ecosystem. Now, with this in mind let us look at three potential causes of the fire. The first case is caused by a natural wildfire; lighting struck during a storm and sparked the fire. In the second case a man, who hates trees, attempted to burn down the forest, simply to experience the joy of watching the trees burn. In the third case, the fire was started by an ecologist as a controlled burn for the benefit of the ecosystem. Imagine, again, that in all three cases the consequences are the exact same; that the fire brought about clear benefits for the forest ecosystem.

Now obviously in the first case we lack human agency, so this would not be a moral act at all, but rather simply something that happened naturally. In the second case, it seems intuitively clear that what the man did was wrong. Burning a forest simply to

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9 Of course, even if it turned out that Leopold’s land ethic cannot be interpreted in agent-based language, this does not exclude the possibility of using Leopold’s ecological insights in creating a land ethic which is compatible with an agent-based virtue ethics.
watch it burn is the stuff Disney villains are made of. The third case seems to be a morally good act. An agent-based land ethic can easily make sense of our pretheoretical intuitions of the above case. On strictly agent-based lines, the first case lacked an agent and thus does not count as a moral act. In the second case, the agent did not care about the forest, in fact despised it, and in error assumed the best way to inflict some harm to it was to burn it. The agent’s action reflected or expressed the hate the agent feels for trees and would therefore be considered morally impermissible. The third case expressed a concern for the health of the forest and therefore is right or morally permissible. An agent-based theory of care will yield these distinctions, which match up very well with our intuitions of this case. But this of course does not say anything about Slote’s agent-based ethics of care in which *empathy* takes center stage.

Does the notion of empathy help explain our obligations toward the natural world? Slote is hesitant to say either way. He says, “I have found this question to be even more complicated and daunting than the issues that arise in connection with abortion…caring about and even empathy with plants, the environment, and the biosphere may not be completely out of the question: but…I propose to limit the rest of the project to discussing care and empathy directed at, or responsive to, people or groups of people” (“Ethics of Care and Empathy” 19). Given the daunting nature of our task, I think it would be wise to break up our discussion into a few parts. First, we should explore the nature of empathy with regard to individual organisms. Is empathy capable of explaining our ethical obligations with regard to our treatments of animals, and what of plants? If it is, then Slote’s empathic care will, at least, be able to give an account of our environmental obligations that will be similar to those individualist approaches.

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10 Emphasis in original
mentioned in Chapter 3. After that, we will explore Slote’s empathic care and see if it can accommodate a more holistic approach like Leopold’s land ethic.

Empathy is roughly thought of as feeling the feelings of another or sharing in someone else’s feeling. Martin Hoffman defines empathy as “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own” (4). From this, we might conclude that we can only empathize with those things that can feel or have an emotion. This conclusion seems reasonable and would seem to allow an ethics of empathic care to make sense of our obligations with regard to sentient beings. To illustrate this, I’d like to modify an example given by Shelly Kagan.11 Imagine a person, faced with the choice of saving either a dog or a small child from a burning building. If the person emerges from the building having saved the dog we would think this person has done something morally wrong. Imagine a similar case where a person must choose between saving a dog and a box of office pens. If the person emerged from the building holding a box of pens, I for one, am inclined to think that the person has again done something wrong.

Now it seems that given the various modes of empathic arousal, I would be far more likely to empathize with the child than the dog. This would then generate an obligation to save the child over the dog. Similarly, even though a dog would not generate empathic feelings as deeply as a child would, I can still on some level empathize with its feeling pain and this would arouse certain empathic feelings. These empathic feelings would give rise to an obligation to save the dog over the box of office pens. I can still recognize the dog as being in distress, through its barking or yelping, and can imagine or feel the pain and agony of the dog being burned alive. The box of pens, on the other hand, cannot engage my empathy in these ways so I might not have any

empathic response to a box of pens. Empathy, then, can be useful in making these kinds of distinctions with regard to our obligations towards animals. Given that we empathize with fellow humans far more than we might empathize with an animal, we owe far more to humans than we do to animals, but this is not to say that we can treat animals any way we want.

For example, even if an ethics of empathic care allows the killing of animals for food, it will still be in a position to condemn those practices which abuse, mistreat, or otherwise do not limit the suffering of those animals killed. Though we might find that our obligations toward humans and ecosystems and species allow for hunting and the eating of animals, this does not permit us to act in such a way as to neglect the suffering of those animals we might use as resources. An ethics of empathic care will be able to say meaningful things regarding the permissibility of things like hunting, farming, meat eating, and animal research. What exactly the ethics of empathic care might dictate we do with regard to hunting, animal research, and the like, will depend on the facts relevant to each case at hand. But regardless of what it decides, the ethics of empathic care will be forced to give significant moral consideration toward sentient animals. Of course, I do not mean to say whether an ethics of empathic care would or would not condone a practice of hunting or animal research. All I mean to suggest here is that the notion of empathy has the potential for providing a meaningful account of our obligations to those animals that we consider sentient. But what of plants and those other creatures who cannot feel? Will an ethics of empathic care allow us to do as we please to organisms that cannot feel? Can the notion of empathy be useful in determining our obligations toward these organisms?
The most difficult challenge is, of course, that these organisms lack feeling, and given our earlier definition of empathy, the capacity for the other to feel seems a necessary part of my ability to empathize with it. But I wonder if things are really that simple. To help explore this issue, I would like to take a moment to challenge Slote’s agent-based ethics of care and see if it is able to make sense of our obligations toward the dead.

Imagine a mad scientist who is attempting to finish his newest creation, a PeopleMaker 3000. This device is designed to make a fully functional adult human being. Unfortunately, our mad scientist has yet to perfect his machine and the people who currently come out of the PeopleMaker 3000 only live five minutes before dying. The mad scientist’s assistant, Igor, is charged with disposing of the bodies in the basement broiler. Now, ignoring all of the other potentially immoral acts going on with this case, and ignoring all questions of personhood and identity that are sure to arise with people being created and dying within a five minute span, is it morally permissible for Igor to violate the bodies before disposing of them?

I think most people would, after ignoring all of the other immoral things going on in this example, think it wrong for Igor to violate the bodies. If this case is far too outlandish, let me put it another way. Is it wrong for someone to violate a deceased body, even if the deceased person had no family or friends who would care about the violation, no one would ever find out about the body being violated, no one knows who this person was or is, and no one has any current interest in the deceased individual? To restate, is it wrong to violate a dead body without appealing to any interest outside the dead body
itself? Even with all these variables bracketed off, I think most people would declare it morally wrong to violate a dead body.

But can the notion of empathy make sense of this intuition? After all, the person is currently dead and, as such, this person lacks feelings and psychological states. If feelings and psychological states are necessary features that the other needs to have in order for someone to empathize with them, then it would be impossible for anyone to empathize with a dead body. Recall Slote’s criterion of wrong action: “actions are morally wrong and contrary to moral obligation if, and only if, they reflect or exhibit or express an absence (or lack) of fully developed empathic concern for (or caring about) others on the part of the agent” (“The Ethics of Care and Empathy” 31). If it is impossible for one to empathize with a dead person, then it seems as if Slote’s criterion would allow Igor to do as he pleased with those dead bodies, since doing so, presumably, would not reflect or exhibit an absence of fully developed empathic concern. This amounts to an unacceptable implication of to Slote’s theory. Even through the process of reflective equilibrium, most people would not be willing to give up their belief that violating a dead body is abhorrent and morally wrong.

But is empathy so strict that the other must have psychological states or feelings in order for one to have an empathic response? I think there might be reason to question this premise. For one, Slote says that “empathy becomes capable of penetrating behind superficial appearances, and we may for example, feel an acute empathic sadness on seeing a person we know to have terminal cancer boisterously enjoy himself in seeming or in actual ignorance of his own factual condition. In general, as we become more aware of the future or hypothetical results of actions and events in the world, we learn to
empathize not just with what a person is actually feeling, but with what they will feel or what they would feel, if we did certain things or certain things happened” (“The Ethics of Care and Empathy” 15). Note that Slote says we can learn to empathize with what a person “might” or “would” feel. Also recall the importance of role-taking as one of the modes which engage our empathic feelings. In both of these instances, the imagination plays a very important role.

One imagines the feelings that the other might or would have in certain situations or if certain things occurred and this arouses and engages our empathic feelings. The other, it seems, does not strictly need to have those particular feelings. Hoffman says, “Empathy can thus be aroused when observers imagine victims: when they read about others’ misfortunes, when they discuss or argue about economic or political issues, or even when they make Kohlbergian judgments about hypothetical moral dilemmas…in other words, cognitive development expands the bystander model to encompass an enormous variety of situations, limited not by the other’s physical presence but only by the observer’s imagination” (92-93). In order to make sense of Igor and our obligations toward the dead, I suggest that what might be going on here is similar to the way one feels an acute empathic sadness at a person who is currently happy but will suffer later on. Since we imagine the pain and suffering which a terminal cancer patient might or will go through and this engages our empathic sense regardless of whether the person is actually feeling anything at the moment, why would it be unreasonable to assume that one could role-play and imagine what it would be like for this dead body to be violated or mutilated? Given that a dead body still closely resembles a human in physical features, it seems like only a small step for the imagination to project feelings onto the dead body.
This process is probably similar to the feelings one might get by watching a scary movie and seeing someone’s knee torn apart. So long as some level of realism is maintained, it seems that even though we are quite aware this is not actually happening, we cannot help but cringe at the sight.

If this is correct, and it is not impossible to empathize with the dead through imaginative role-playing and association, empathy will be in a position to explain why it is wrong to violate a dead body. Violating the bodies might show that Igor failed to imagine what this person would feel in this given situation, even though the dead person cannot feel at all. Igor was unresponsive and unmoved by the strong physical resemblance to other humans and failed to empathically feel what this deceased person would or might feel in this situation. If this analysis holds up, we will have shown a possible way for Slote’s theory to deal with a case like Igor’s, and at the same time perhaps paved the way for empathizing with other organisms that do not have feelings.

In a similar fashion to the way we analyzed the above case, if I mistreated a plant, could this not also reflect a lack of fully developed empathic concern? A plant, so far as we know, does not have feelings, but neither do the dead bodies in the case of Igor. If I burn my plants because I hate them, this could arguably reflect a lack of a fully developed sense of empathic concern. What I have done is I have failed to imagine what it would be like to be burned. Now, of course, some may point out that a plant has no feelings, or that it lacks a nervous system, so to imagine what a plant might feel by being burned or mutilated is simple nonsense. But how is this any different than the case with Igor and the dead body? Presumably, the dead bodies that Igor handles have no more brain function than plants do. Just because the dead bodies at one time did have feelings
and psychological states does not mean that they currently do at the time in question. Some might still push the point, indicating that imagining the feelings of an organism which has the capacity to feel is different than imagining the feelings of an organism which cannot feel. This is certainly true, but merely shows that it is naturally easier to empathize with a dead human than it is to empathize with any plant, not that it is impossible to empathize with something like a plant.

Given the close physical resemblance among humans, even recently deceased ones, it seems likely that we would have an easier time imagining what a dead person would feel than we would imagining what a plant might or would feel. This conclusion actually matches our intuitions. It seems reasonable to suggest that our strongest duties are towards our fellow humans, followed by duties towards animals, then lastly duties toward other living organisms. These various degrees of obligation are explainable by degrees in our ability to be empathically responsive to the other.

This argument, of course, has only indicated that it might be possible for us to empathize with plants. It has not explained how we might actually go about doing so. If we can meaningfully understand how an organism can be harmed or benefited I think this could provide a common ground for one to empathize with it. Now to understand how a plant might be harmed or benefited we might employ notions of a plant’s flourishing, well-being, or interests. Which argument or approach one uses to explain how a plant might be harmed or benefited will make no difference for our account of empathy. What this base notion of being harmed or benefited will do is provide some links for direct association to arouse empathic feelings. To the extent that we can understand what it is to be harmed or benefited from our own experience, we might be able to project those
feelings onto a plant. For example, depriving a plant of sunlight or water might arouse an association in one’s past with being hungry. Again, this empathic arousal will be very limited since a plant will lack most of the other modes in which one can engage our empathy, but this seems acceptable. After all, most of us would feel a greater duty to our fellow humans and animals than we would to almost any plant.

Thus it seems possible for the notion of empathy to explain or take into account our obligations toward animals and even plants. Since sentient animals can arouse our empathy through mimicry, role playing, and association easier than a plant can we would have a stronger obligation toward these animals than we would toward plants. Since it seems reasonable to assume that plants and non-sentient creatures can be harmed or benefited this would provide a common ground for association and imaginative role-playing to engage our empathic feelings even if only in a very slight way.

But what of a holistic approach to ethics? I think the same type of argument which applied to plants will also apply to species, ecosystems and biotic communities. Ecosystems and species may or may not have members who can feel or have psychological states, and thus we will have to explain how we can empathize with those groups that do not have sentient members. This explanation would make strong use of the imaginative and role-playing aspects of empathy and argue that actions which harm an ecosystem or biotic community can be felt empathically, in the same way we might be empathically sensitive to the harm done to a plant. Of course, a species or ecosystem presents an extra problem for the notion of empathy. Can something like a species or ecosystem be harmed or benefited at all or is it just the sum of harms and benefits attributed to individual members?
Lawrence Johnson presents a good case that we can meaningfully talk of species and ecosystems as having interests that are not reducible to the aggregate sum of the interests or well-being of its individual members. Johnson notes that in the case of the Kaibab deer, it is in the species’ interest to have predators, but does not seem to be in the interest of any particular deer to be preyed upon by a mountain lion (153). The mountain lions serve a valuable function for the species of Kaibab deer. It kept population under control and removed the weak and sickly. This illustrates that it does not seem to be in the interest of any particular deer to have predators but it does seem to be in the interest of the species and community as a whole. The interests of the species are not the aggregate sum of the individual members of that species interests. The point is if we can properly speak of harms and benefits directly done to species, this should, again, provide the common ground for empathizing through imaginative role-playing and various forms of association.

Another possible way for us to make sense of empathic feelings with entities that do not feel or have psychological states is to use a definition of empathy like Martin Hoffman’s: “an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own” (4). This definition might potentially allow us to take into account Igor’s case and empathic feelings aroused by even a plant or ecosystem. If we use this definition and have empathic feelings aroused in us by witnessing someone mutilating a plant, ecosystem, or dead body, it does not mean that the other must have these feelings, it would mean that the feelings aroused in us are simply more appropriate to the other’s situation than our own. This type of definition could potentially circumvent the entire problem. But, of course, to truly work out this definition we would need to explore
whether the feelings aroused in us are actually more *appropriate* to the other’s situation than our own and I do not propose to go into that here, just merely point out yet another possible way we might not be limited by the notion of empathy to only sentient beings.

Now I understand that the above account contains some armchair psychology and a lot of speculation about our ability to empathize with entities that do not have feelings. It most certainly could be the case that science and psychology might find the above descriptions and arguments ultimately false. But since the above seems reasonable given what is currently said about empathy, I conclude that it seems at least possible to make sense out of our obligations toward the natural world in terms of empathy. The case of Igor and our obligations toward the dead represents a challenge to Slote’s criterion of wrong action and I have attempted to show how it might plausibly be defended. In doing that, I’ve also tried to show how it might be possible to empathize with things that do not have feelings. Then I attempted to argue that it might be possible to empathize with something like a plant or species or ecosystem since we can on some level understand, and be empathically sensitive to, the harms and benefits done to them even though they do not have psychological states or feelings.

If this analysis fails, are we then forced to conclude that an ethics of empathic care is limited, like Peter Singer’s utilitarian arguments, to only those animals that are sentient? Perhaps. But this only shows the limits of the notion of empathy and not the limits to an agent-based ethics of care. An agent-based ethics of care can always allow there to be a limit to the notion of empathy and potentially employ a seemingly related notion of identification to carry the theory through our environmental obligations.
If we define identification as treating another’s well-being, or interests, as if it were your own, we might be able to extend moral consideration to anything that might be properly said to have a well-being, or interests, while at the same time, retaining many of the insights of Slote’s agent-based ethics of empathic care.\textsuperscript{12} For one, the notion of identification seems closely related to empathy. Slote even notes this in passing when he says that “later-developing empathy” involves “identification” with the other (“The Ethics of Care and Empathy” 14). By using the notion of identification, we can potentially avoid the problems we had by stretching the notion of empathy to include things which cannot feel. By identifying with a plant, species, or ecosystem we would take on the interests or well-being of a plant or species or ecosystem and treat their interests or well-being as if it were our own. By identifying with a plant or ecosystem, we would then have feelings aroused in us, which would not be the feelings that the plant or ecosystem would or might have, but feelings generated from taking on the well-being or interests of the other as if they were our own. By taking on the interests or well-being of a plant or ecosystem as if they where my own, when it is harmed or its needs not met, I would then have a corresponding emotional response, I might feel as if I were harmed or my needs not met. These feelings are not any that the non-sentient being has, but one that is generated within me because I’ve taken on the well-being or interests of the non-sentient being as my own.

This will maintain the sentimentalist nature of Slote’s theory and possibly make room for things like plants and ecosystems to have moral standing without stretching the notion of empathy. The notion of identification also need not undercut Slote’s overall moral theory since what he says concerning our obligations toward sentient others would

\textsuperscript{12} I am indebted here to discussions with Eric Reitan.
still stand in terms of empathy, but our obligations toward non-sentient others might be best understood in terms of a related notion such as identification. I am, of course, not exactly sure of the relation between empathy and identification and I do not mean to explore that here. If we have some restricted notion of empathy which limits it to sentient beings, then we might be in need of a notion like identification to extend the moral realm to include the various insights of a holistic ethics like Leopold.

But can the notion of empathy (or identification) explain why it seems morally worse to kill the last one-hundred members of a species rather than merely killing one-hundred individual members of that species?

Unfortunately, the notion of empathy (or identification) seems unable to directly explain this distinction. For one, it would seem that we would have a stronger empathic response to the individual members of a species (assuming that those members are sentient), than we would with the species as a whole. Furthermore, given my own arguments for how one might empathize with plants or ecosystems, it seems reasonable to conclude that we might empathize with an ecosystem as much as we would a plant. What extra mode of empathic arousal is available to an ecosystem which is not available to a plant? Since they both seem almost entirely dependent on our imagination, it seems unlikely that such a mode exists. If we have the potential to empathize with both equally then our duties towards ecosystems will be as weak as those towards individual plants. This conclusion does not follow a holistic environmental ethic or even our own intuitions. It seems very clear that I have a stronger obligation toward an ecosystem than I do towards any individual plant. But unfortunately, neither empathy nor identification seems capable of directly explaining this distinction.
With that said, it certainly might be possible for empathy to explain this distinction indirectly through various other factors we might be empathically sensitive to: we might feel empathic sadness towards future generations of humans who will not be able to see or experience this particular species, we might feel empathic sadness at the harm done to the species itself and/or its individual members, we might feel empathic sadness at the loss of a valuable member of the biotic community, we might be empathically sensitive to the harm done to the ecosystem by losing this particular species, or we could be empathically responsive to all these various factors at once. Even more than all of this, the society or agent who is willing to kill the last of a species might exhibit a great deal of insensitivity or lack of care and concern towards each of the factors mentioned above. This type of heartless act could be viewed as one which expressed a lack of fully developed empathic care on the part of the society or agent. So even though Slote’s ethics of empathic care seems unable to directly account for this distinction, it has the theoretical tools available to make this distinction indirectly.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to focus on the notion of empathy and an ethics of care and explore whether it is capable of explaining or providing some insight into our obligations regarding the natural world. I suggested that a holistic approach to environmental ethics seems to, at least at first glance, provide the most promise in explaining these intuitions. I offered Aldo Leopold’s land ethic as a paradigm example of a holistic ethic and followed many of J. Baird Callicott’s interpretations. I attempted to look to the problem of environmental fascism, and ultimately concluded it was not a real problem for either Leopold’s land ethic or Callicott’s interpretations. Empathy seems capable of providing Callicott with a common unit of measurement between SOP-1, SOP-2, and TOP, but it does not seem capable of grounding, at least directly, a strong commitment to ecological wholes. I then looked to see if an ethics of empathic care was compatible with a holistic approach to the environment. Given Martin Hoffman’s modes of empathic arousal, we would seem to be able to empathize with plants and ecosystems equally and thus we would have an equal moral obligation toward both. This conclusion presented a problem for empathy since most would feel that we have a stronger obligation towards an ecosystem than we do to any particular plant. To resolve this problem, the last chapter concluded by saying that the notion of empathy could maintain a stronger obligation toward ecological wholes, but only indirectly. But is indirect moral
consideration of ecological wholes enough? While I am not going to fully take on this issue here, some concluding remarks might be useful if only to point the way towards future research. But before I do that there are a few contributions that an agent-based ethics of empathic care can give toward environmental ethics that I want to mention just briefly.

Environmental issues are so complicated and intricate that it might turn out that those actions which are best for the environment are ultimately unknowable. That is to say in any given situation we might not ever be able to tell what is best for the environment. But by using an agent-based conception, with its emphasis on motivation, we can still declare certain actions as right or wrong even though “the biotic mechanism is so complex that its workings may never be fully understood” (Leopold 205). Since the rightness or wrongness of an act depends, not on consequences, but on the agent’s motivation, an agent-based theory can provide moral guidance and judgment in the face of indeterminate consequences. This, I think constitutes a real advantage over consequentialist approaches to environmental ethics.

Slote’s theory also gives environmental ethicists the theoretical tools to argue for or against certain cultural or systemic societal practices. Analogous to the way he views justice among humans, one could use Slote’s moral theory for support or criticizing of those laws designed to protect or impact the environment. Does our society display or reflect a lack of fully developed empathic concern for the environment? Exploring environmental issues with an emphasis on society’s motivations will potentially shed a new light on any number of environmental concerns.
Another area for future research and potential contributions to environmental ethics is empathy and animal rights issues. By examining issues like animal research, animal rights, and factory farming through the notion of empathy, we might be able to provide a unit of common measurement between the various competing interests. It seems like the notion of empathy could be very fruitful in these particular areas. For example, animal research might seem permissible if it is necessary to save human lives, but it also seems impermissible to blind rabbits simply to test a new cosmetic product. By having a moral theory capable of maintaining these types of distinctions will certainly be of some help in areas of animal rights. But now it is time to return to the question of whether indirect moral consideration of ecological wholes is acceptable.

I think we might have at least a few reasons to think indirect consideration is enough. For one, even Leopold seems to argue for the moral considerability of an ecological whole pragmatically or indirectly. Looking at the whole might help us “think like a mountain” (Leopold 130-133). By thinking like a mountain, it might best insure our own survival and the survival of the land. Focusing on an ecological whole or the land might be the most practical or prudential way to view environmental ethics. It allows for a view that is broader and more inclusive; broader in terms of time and includes all members of a biotic community. An ethics of empathic care can certainly make this type of argument. The best way we might be able to exhibit or express our care for the environment and its individual members is to examine and focus on biotic wholes or the land. So even though an agent-based land ethic might not be able to give an ecological whole strong direct moral consideration, an agent-based ethics of empathic
care can still argue that we ought to focus on the land as a matter of practical decision making or prudence.

Even more than this pragmatic argument, I am not even sure what it would mean to give a biotic whole moral consideration without considering its individual members. It seems far too reductive to argue for the moral considerability of a whole without any reference to its essential parts. A biological whole is made up in terms of its parts, the two are inextricably linked. To reduce wholes to either its individual members, or to argue that wholes can have moral consideration apart from all of its individual members, is to oversimplify the situation. It is like talking about the health of a person without referring back to any of those aspects that define health. What would it mean to talk of a healthy person without referencing biological functioning, emotional stability, human flourishing, or psychological states? It would be a nonsensical reference. What health is seems to be some combination of factors working together. To care about a person’s health is to care about those things which make a person healthy. Though we might define health through those parts that go into a making a healthy being, it is not reducible to those individual parts. When you say you care about a person’s health you are also referring to the totality of the being. Perhaps the land should be viewed in a similar fashion. We could care about the land in the way we care about a person’s overall health. It is not one thing that goes into the concept of a person’s health, but a combination of many factors. It is not one particular thing that the land refers to but the inter-working and combination of many different things. We can meaningfully speak of the whole and have care for the whole even if that care is somehow derived from caring about its members. Proving this case goes far beyond the scope of this paper, but I think this
preliminary discussion, however brief, shows at least some promise in this vein of argumentation.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, the notion of empathy seems useful to environmental ethics. It gives someone like Callicott a notion that can ground the type of distinctions he wants to make. Also Slote’s ethical theory seems very capable of providing a robust environmental ethic. Though it can unfortunately not provide a strong direct reason to favor something like an ecosystem it can easily provide for the moral considerability of an ecosystem indirectly. Whether this is an acceptable position to those who espouse a holistic environmental ethic remains to be seen.
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Findings and Conclusions: Slote’s agent-based empathic care is in a unique position to explain many of our moral intuitions about our duties to the non-human world. The notion of empathy seems very useful in discussing our obligations toward the natural world. Also, Slote’s agent-based virtue ethic does seem useful as a theoretical moral framework to analyze environmental issues.