

Reply to Norton, re: Aldo Leopold and Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

As a conservation policy advocate and practitioner, Leopold was a pragmatist (in the vernacular sense of the word). He was not, however, a member of the school of philosophy known as American Pragmatism, nor was his environmental philosophy informed by any members of that school. Leopold's environmental philosophy was radically non-anthropocentric; he was an intellectual revolutionary and aspired to transform social values and institutions.

KEYWORDS

Hadley, conservation, ecology, evolution, non-anthropocentric

We thank the editors for giving us the opportunity to reply to Bryan G. Norton's 'What Leopold Learned from Darwin and Hadley' (2011), which was provoked by our article, 'Was Aldo Leopold a Pragmatist' (Callicott et al. 2009).

We thank Norton for graciously acceding to the convention that we introduced in our article: let *Pragmatism* (with a capital 'P') refer to a brand of philosophy and let *Pragmatist* (with a capital 'P') refer to its exponents; and let *pragmatism* (with a lower-case 'p') refer to an approach to problem solving that is experimental and adaptive, in regard to both means and ends, and let *pragmatist* (with a lower-case 'p') refer to experimental and adaptive problem solvers.

Much of what Norton focuses on in his comment is not in dispute. Norton insists that Leopold was a lower-case-'p' pragmatist. In the very first sentence

of ‘Was Aldo Leopold a Pragmatist?’ we emphatically agree. But, to restate here what we stated there, one can be a pragmatist without either being a Pragmatist or ever having been informed by a Pragmatist. There were countless pragmatists before there were any Pragmatists; and now, a century or so after the advent of Pragmatism, there are countless pragmatists around the globe who have never heard of Pragmatism, much less became pragmatists because of Pragmatism.

Rather, this is what we set out to show. (1) Leopold was certainly not a capital-‘P’ Pragmatist. (2) Leopold’s mature environmental philosophy was not significantly informed by Pragmatism or by any Pragmatists – not his epistemology, not his metaphysics, not his ethics – and neither do the pragmatic natural-resources policies that he advocated nor the pragmatic resource management that he practised owe anything to Pragmatism or to any Pragmatists. Most important, we set out to show (3) that Leopold’s lasting legacy lies not in his skill as a pragmatic resource manager nor in his practical wisdom as a natural-resources policy maker, but in his exploration of an evolutionary-ecological worldview and an associated holistic and non-anthropocentric environmental ethic – a point which we reinforce here.

Regarding points (1) and (2) our argument was entirely empirical and evidential. Let us explain our methods and how we came about them.

The senior author taught a post-graduate seminar on the subject of Aldo Leopold and the land ethic in the fall semester of 2008. Instead of each of the fifteen enrolled students being required to write an individual term paper for an audience of one, the seminar leader suggested that we divide ourselves into three research teams, setting as a goal for each *team* submitting an article for publication to a journal, with the seminar leader serving as senior author. ‘Was Aldo Leopold a Pragmatist?’ is one such article and the junior authors constituted one such research team.

The ability to digitise and electronically search published materials and the recent digitisation of the entire Aldo Leopold archive in the Steenbock Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin enabled our team of mostly young, tech-savvy scholars to key-word search the entire corpus of Leopold’s literary remains, published and unpublished, for documentary evidence that he was (1) a Pragmatist and/or (2) that he was significantly informed by Pragmatism or by any Pragmatists.

Nowhere does Leopold (1) identify himself as a Pragmatist (or a pragmatist). Indeed in his entire literary corpus, Leopold never even uses the word *Pragmatism* (or *pragmatism*) nor does he align his thinking with that of any bona fide Pragmatist.

Norton offers (in the places we cited) evidence that Leopold was (2) informed by Pragmatism through the writings of one putative Pragmatist, A.T. Hadley. We discovered, however, that Hadley was not a member of either the inner or outer circle of Pragmatist philosophers. He was, instead, a political

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economist who had, rather late in his intellectual life, become acquainted with Pragmatism and had developed an enthusiasm for it, especially as expounded by one bona fide Pragmatist, William James. Whether a bona fide Pragmatist or a just a Pragmatist fellow traveller, Hadley's influence on Leopold's thinking was at best both early and ephemeral. Our exhaustive search revealed only three mentions of Hadley's name – none in documents that Leopold himself ever saw fit to publish. We found four redactions of Hadley's Pragmatic definition of *right* (as 'that which prevails in the long run') in Leopold's literary remains; only one of which Leopold published – and that without attribution to Hadley. These three unpublished mentions of Hadley's name and four redactions of his definition of *right* all occur between the years 1918 and 1924/25. After that early and short interregnum, Leopold's silence regarding Hadley or Hadley's definition of *truth* is deafening.

Further, we contend that in one crucial instance – that in 'Some fundamentals of conservation in the Southwest' (posthumously published in *Environmental Ethics*) – Leopold's (1979) mention of Hadley and Hadley's definition of *right* (as *truth*) is, as we put it, 'dripping with irony'. Norton remains unconvinced of that. The briefs for both the ironical and the non-ironical interpretations of the contested passage have now been filed – by us and by Norton, respectively. We are content to submit the case to a jury of our peers.

The portrait of Leopold drawn by Norton in sepia tints is that of a mild-mannered Dr. Jekyll. Norton positions us as drawing a lurid portrait of Leopold as a wild-eyed Mr. Hyde, raging against all the polite beliefs, values and religion of his contemporaries. We do not disagree with Norton's portrait of Leopold, but neither do we shrink from his characterisation of ours. Leopold was, we think, something of a Jekyll-and-Hyde character.

Leopold was the scion of a prosperous, upstanding bourgeois family of German descent, well established and prominent in Burlington, Iowa. He was educated at a fancy Eastern prep school and Yale University. He married into one of the oldest and most patrician Spanish American families of New Mexico, *los Lunas*. He was a public servant, first with the US Forest Service and later the University of Wisconsin. He was comfortable in expensive tweeds, drinking fine whisky, and smoking big cigars with financiers. He was equally comfortable with the yeoman farmers and the 'one-gallus hunters' that he served as a game-management experimenter. He was a respected and popular conservation professional, presiding over both national scientific and conservation societies; a venerated college professor, colleague and mentor; a devoted family man, a loving and beloved father, faithfully married to a Roman Catholic spouse. He did not transmogrify into a werewolf (to mix allusions to tales of shape-shifting) at the sight of the full moon; rather, he did so at the sight of a blank page of writing paper, pencil in hand.

The intellectually rebellious Mr. Hyde comes out in Leopold's prose. Consider two very different pieces with the same title, 'The Arboretum and the University'. One is the text of a speech that Leopold gave at the dedication ceremony of the University of Wisconsin Arboretum and Wildlife Sanctuary in 1934.¹ Present at the occasion were university administrators, Wisconsin politicians, and many leading citizens of Madison. In the *speech*, Leopold pulls no punches when he describes the deleterious effects of plow and cow on Wisconsin ecosystems, but his tone is decorous and muted. A few months later, an *article* by Leopold titled 'The Arboretum and the University' appeared in *Parks and Recreation*. It is very different from the speech. In the published version, Leopold comes off as a raving metaphysicist and raging social revolutionary:

For twenty centuries and longer, *all civilized thought* has rested on one premise: that *the destiny of man is to exploit and enslave the earth*.

The *biblical injunction* to 'go forth and multiply' is merely one of many *dogmas* which imply this attitude of *philosophical imperialism*.

During the past few decades, however, a new science of ecology has been unobtrusively spreading a film of doubt over this heretofore unchallenged 'world view.' Ecology tells us that no animal – not even man – can be regarded as independent of his environment. Plants, animals, men, and soil are a community of interdependent parts, *an organism*. No organism can survive the *decadence* of a member. Mr. Babbitt is no more a separate entity than is his left arm, or a single cell of his biceps. Neither are those aggregations of men and earth which we call Madison, or Wisconsin, or America. It may flatter our ego to be called the sons of man, but it would be nearer the truth to call ourselves the brothers of our fields and forests.

The incredible engines wherewith we now hasten *our world-conquest* have, of course, not heard of these ecological quibblings; neither, perhaps, have the incredible engineers ...

It can be stated as a sober fact that the *iron-heel attitude* has already reduced by half the ability of Wisconsin to support a cooperative community of men, animals, and plants during the next century. Moreover, it has saddled us with the repair bill, the magnitude of which we are just beginning to appreciate.

If some foreign invader attempted *such loot*, the whole nation would resist to the last man and the last dollar. But as long as we loot ourselves, we charge the indignity to 'rugged individualism,' and try to forget it. But we cannot quite. There is a feeble minority called conservationists, who are *indignant about something*. They are just beginning to realize that their task is the *reorganization of society*, rather than the passage of some fish and game laws. (Leopold, 1991: 209–210, emphasis added.)

That's strong stuff. Norton, however, thinks that our interpretation of 'Some Fundamentals' is so far out of character for Leopold that it is beyond belief that he would advocate the 'rejection of the beliefs of all of his colleagues and friends [and endorse] nonanthropocentrism in opposition to his culture's deepest beliefs'. Well, what else do we find in 'The Arboretum and the University' (as

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published)? Norton thinks it is improbable that ‘Leopold arrogantly dismisses the most deeply held beliefs of his colleagues and neighbours as worthless ... [and] “excoriated” anthropocentrism, and engaged in an ethical rant, revealing a dogmatic Leopold who ridicules the views of other scientists and religious people’. In ‘The Arboretum and the University’ (as published), he ridicules the views of religious people as ‘dogmas’ of ‘imperialism’. As to ‘neighbours’, to whom else does he refer by ‘Babbitt’? – a real-estate agent, a booster, and a thoroughgoing materialistic character in the novel, *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis. In ‘The Arboretum and the University’ (as published), his opposition to his culture’s deepest beliefs, summed up in that most American of shibboleths, ‘rugged individualism’, is not implausibly inferred by us; it is trumpeted by Leopold himself. What about the views of other scientists? Unless those other scientists are ecologists, they are the expositors or at least the enablers of the ‘iron-heel attitude’ implemented by the ‘incredible engineers’.

Norton’s Leopold is ‘This open-minded, cooperative Leopold [a]s described by Minter ... [who] fits comfortably into a pattern of “civic pragmatism” with his friends and fellow reformers (including, for example, Benton MacKaye and Liberty Hyde Bailey), who emphasised not ideology but pragmatic pursuit of a variety of public values’. We do not doubt that this is the Leopold who went about his day-in-day-out *practice* as a conservationist, scientist, educator, citizen, husband and father. But there was another Leopold, the one who watched the green fire dying in the eyes of the old she wolf (whom he later lamented murdering), a green fire that smoldered and then flamed up in his own eyes. The Leopold (1949: ix) who passionately advocated ‘a *shift of values* ... achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free’ is our Leopold – the one who is decidedly not content with the ‘variety of public values’ prevailing in his culture. Our Leopold revealed himself in his many essays and finally in his masterpiece, *A Sand Count Almanac*. He is indignant about something. He aims at nothing less than the reorganisation of a ‘decadent’ society and culture.

Which Leopold is now the towering beacon of the contemporary American environmental movement, the monumental giant on whose shoulders now stand virtually all contemporary conservation biologists?² The author of *A Sand County Almanac*, not the practising resource manager. Who now reads Benton MacKaye and Liberty Hyde Bailey for inspiration? Few, if any. Is the inspiring Leopold the one who fits comfortably into a pattern of civic pragmatism with his friends and fellow reformers, pursuing a variety of public values? No. You turn to *A Sand County Almanac*, *Round River*, and *The River of the Mother of God* to find the Aldo Leopold who ‘lives *alone* in a world of wounds’ (1953: 165) and who swells your heart and mind with the prospect of a new evolutionary-ecological ‘world view’ (in his own words) and the holistic, non-anthropocentric ‘land ethic’ that he derived from it. The still living Leopold is the brash thinker

and bold visionary who offers you, based on that worldview, the prospect of a society and economy respectfully embedded in the biotic community and in harmony with the economy of nature. Leopold's inspired and inspiring vision and values – as he left them to you in his own writings – departed radically from those of his neighbours, friends, colleagues, most other scientists, and religious people. His spirit lives on today – more robustly now than ever – because of what he wrote, not because of who he was or what he did.

NOTES

¹ For the full text, see Callicott 1999; the scene is set and excerpts from the speech are quoted by Meine 1988.

² The authors of the leading post-graduate conservation-biology textbook write, 'Leopold's Evolutionary-Ecological land ethic is the most biologically sensible and comprehensive of any approach to nature and should serve as the philosophical basis of most decisions affecting biodiversity' (Groom et al., 2006).

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