

# Chapter 14

## “Thinking Like a Mountain”: Ethics and Place as Travelling Concepts

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### 14.1 Placing the Ethics of Place

The phrase ‘ethics of place’ comes with a host of ambiguities. It is not simply ethics derived from specific locations, much less ethics applied to specific places. It is not ethics that is situational, or relativist, or historicized, or subjective. It is not ‘applied’ ethics, as opposed to meta-ethics.

Then what is it? Whatever else it is, ‘ethics of place’ is, in its recent uses, a term of resistance and opposition, much like the word ‘place’ itself. It has been used as a response to modernist forms of ethics, and even some classical ones. Modernist forms of ethics, some have argued, have too limited and restrictive a definition of both agency and standing, and an appeal to place can serve to extend both the range of who is seen as a moral actor and who can be the recipient of moral action. More significantly, modernist ethics has tended to lead to an arid moral landscape, as moral actors and options become reduced to their most basic level in an effort to establish universality. The problem, though, is that as a term of resistance, this version of the ethics of place can tend to take on the characteristics of that which it resists. Agency may be expanded, and the range of moral action may encompass more and different beings, but the nature of ethics itself may still remain unquestioned. We still draw a line between those who bear moral responsibility and those who do not, between those to whom we have duties and those to whom we don’t. We may even follow Rousseau in investing nature rather than humanity with the central good, but if we do, we have not necessarily rooted ethics in place, but have just changed the location or source of the universal foundation of ethics. In this paper, I wish to explore ethics that is rooted in place, but which does not merely redraw ethical lines for greater inclusiveness.

As a preliminary note, it is worth noting that ethics is rooted in *ethos*: the ways of a place, the characteristic spirit of a people or community, or, as the Oxford English

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Dictionary terms it, the 'genius' of an institution or system. Note the tension, at least with modernist senses of ethics. If ethics are supposed to be about systems of action, or the 'principles of human morals', as we currently think of them, we forget the rootedness of ethics in *ethos*, a particularized spirit or tone. Classically, the particularization in ethics usually comes in the application of general or universal principles; it is 'applied' philosophy. But *ethos* suggests that particularization may also be the source of those principles, and not merely the recipient. This does not mean that we can afford to rid ourselves of reflection or forget that reason extends particularities to new situations, but rather that we have to start from the fact that there is a tension between a major note, the universalist one, and a minor note, the particularist one, in ethics itself. The relationship has always been recognized, but the tension has generally been resolved by moving from the universal to the particular, from rules, laws, or principles to applications. But the root of ethics in *ethos* suggests that the move may not merely be a linear one. At any rate, the ethics of place is not so much an oxymoron, as a recovery, a placing in tension of elements that have always been present, and a way to re-think the all too easy move from universal to particular.

The same set of tensions, I would argue, is true for place. As long as we think of place solely as location (which is a universal, in that all particulars participate in it), we diminish it. We make it into something apart from human subjectivity, apart from us. But in fact, we are always rooted in place, and a long list of philosophers (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Edward Casey, Jeffrey Malpas, Andrew Light) have argued that it is our very human nature to exist and act within place. We are essentially platial beings.

The recovery of the platial nature of ethics becomes possible in the context of interdisciplinarity, in the specific sense of communication and creation across regimes of knowledge. Merely noting the dependence of ethics on place does not give current discourse on ethics its due, across several disciplines. The term 'ethics' has come to stand for a myriad of things, just as the term 'place' has. Philosophy has sometimes tried to claim the right to define the discourse on the nature of ethics, but just as with anthropology's putative claim on 'culture', or literature's claim on 'text', these claims to entitlement are rarely universally recognized, and almost always fail to reflect the variations of discourse even within those disciplines. Multiple discourses must necessarily be taken into account. Those coalesce into disciplinary models, sometimes exploring the boundaries with other disciplines, but more often moving centripetally toward the production of methods and theories adequate to internally defined questions. Indeed, disciplinarity may be defined as a reciprocal relationship between questions and methods of inquiry that has coalesced from its provenance. Objects of investigation are not the guarantee of the disciplinarity of disciplines, nor are a particular set of concepts abstracted from their production, or a canonical set of texts or figures. 'Provenance' is just the recognition that every disciplinary concept and method is the result of a history of inquiry that has shaped it, and that we cannot abstract or withdraw those concepts or methods without either recognizing that they are the answers to a set of questions that have a platial history, or rejecting that platiality and thus doing violence to the concepts and methods.

Mieke Bal has advanced a theory of interdisciplinarity known as ‘travelling concepts’ (Bal, 2001) that I believe is useful in addressing this problem of insularity. This can also lead us toward assessing recent moves toward ‘ethics of place’, which for many has been the move away from ethics that begin from the establishment of rules or meta-rules, toward versions of ethics that begin with particulars. But an ethics of place cannot simply take bald particulars as a starting point, because this just disguises a commitment to some version of a universalist ethics (often romantic in nature), and misunderstands the nature of place itself. However, it does make sense to speak of an ethics of place, if we recognize that place itself is the site for ethical reasoning, rather than either the object or the origin of ethical reasoning. The question is reversed – we are no longer simply asking about the ethics of place, but now we want to know about the place of ethics, that is, the ways in which ethics is necessarily emplaced, always related to place, always imagined in place rather than in some methodologically deterministic, utopian or abstract place.

## 14.2 Aldo Leopold and the Ethics of Place

This reversal, from an ethics of place to the place of ethics, a place where ethics can be imagined, can be understood (surprisingly, perhaps) by considering Aldo Leopold’s understanding of place and ethics, particularly his injunction that we should ‘think like a mountain.’ While this meta-rule seems to be a temporal one, that we must think on the time-scale of the mountain so as to properly order our moral universe, it is noteworthy and surprising that his focus in the section on thinking like a mountain in *A sand county almanac* deals not with time but space, in particular, the space of travel of the wolf and the wolf-pack, the ways in which wolves (and other creatures) recognized the order of the place, its *ethos*, as the hunter failed to do when he arrogated to himself the role of ‘managing’ nature. The *ethos* became possible both because of a temporal/historical axis, but also because of the ability on the part of the wolf to simultaneously read and create place.

Most readers of Leopold jump to the back of *A sand county almanac* for his land ethic, and find what could be called his central rule or 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.’ (Leopold, 1966: p. 262) The temporal/historical axis again seems to determine the platial axis, in the commonly accepted reading. Place matters because of time (‘preservation’ being understood as continuity over time), for Leopold, and the disregard of place by modern Western society is seen as the attempt to make place eternal by making it the subject of modern science and economics, a move which merely renders place a-historical. Ethics, then, exists on the temporal axis, and value is determined because some things have greater weight on that axis. When we think like a mountain, on the standard reading of Leopold, we recognize the ethic of time in its ‘true’ sense.

Indeed, while Leopold calls his ethic a ‘land ethic’, suggesting that it will privilege place, an initial reading of *A sand county almanac* suggests rather a temporalized ethic. The book is organized by the months of the year, and does not even proceed along any obviously natural temporality, but uses a conventional calendar

(January–December, rather than, for instance, seasons or other natural rhythms, despite the fact that Leopold in the introduction tells us that ‘These shack sketches are arranged seasonally’ (Leopold, 1966: p. xviii)). In his account of February, he works his way back through the events of history as a saw cuts through an oak, a move which establishes the compression of time within the material world. He speaks of the development of ethics in historical terms (Leopold, 1966: p. 238ff), as what will later be thought as the ‘expanding circle’ of ethics (a term often associated with the utilitarianism of Peter Singer).

There is a good reason for Leopold to make this move – modernist philosophical ethics had been thought to rise above temporality, to establish atemporal central principles which resisted revision and tended to be conservative in the worst sense, that is, tended to privilege those who were already seen to have moral standing and agency. Historicizing ethics by showing that there was a development over time meant that the circle might be broadened again; temporalizing ethics by making place dependent on time (‘thinking like a mountain’) meant that the conservative impulse toward anthropomorphization could be resisted. This represented progress over universalist forms of ethics rooted in the Enlightenment, but this is not yet an ethics of place. Indeed, the land ethic itself stands as a universal maxim, arrived at through historical process and dependent on the alteration of our temporal frame, but as applicable equally to all places as any categorical imperative or a principle of utility. It is not likely to be refuted, but only further broadened, and as such resembles Enlightenment forms of ethics.

### 14.3 Places Know

Despite the fact that Leopold explicitly argues for a temporalized ethic, though, he constantly implicitly brings us back to an ethic of place. Indeed, time and place are not mutually exclusive; place routinely compresses, extends, distends, and summarizes time. He makes ethics platial not by attempting to isolate a central feature of the ethical system (even a universal maxim), but by presenting us with a kind of phenomenology of place, a way of attending to the other which simultaneously constructs the other as place, and de-centers us from that place, so that it is not merely our concerns which govern the ethic of the place. Leopold travels with us, throughout the book (and through his other writings as well), and that travel is more than anecdotal evidence for a temporalized ethic. It is the construction of places, and the uncovering of *ethos* in those places, that gives us successive models for living as if place mattered.

Leopold is, in a sense, forcing us to engage nature as if it were its own discipline, or regime of knowledge, posing its own questions and finding its own methods in response. The natural, at the platial level, is not merely known, but knowing. At best we are disciplined by it (although in modernity we have done all we can to rid ourselves of that discipline and impose our own upon it), but at the same time, we do not give up being human, that is, we do not lose ourselves in nature. Leopold argues that we are part of the *bios*, but that means that we act and interact with the

disciplines around us, rather than dominating them or imposing a new instrumental disciplinarity. Gilles Deleuze speaks of ‘intensities’, that is, the sites in which tension is productive (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). He also draws our attention to our nomadic existence, not just in the sense that we restlessly move about the earth, but also in the sense that our thought itself works itself out in its encounters with its others, as it traverses territory. Leopold is no Deleuzian, but I believe that the travel that forms the backbone of *A sand county almanac* at least recognizes that our ethics are worked out when *ethos* comes in contact with its other, and has to creatively negotiate those borders. The ethics of place is not about specificity, much less relativism, but rather about the ongoing task of working out an ethic in the encounter between forms of *ethos*.

Ethics in this sense does not rise above the *bios*, but exists within it. It makes no sense to find some Kantian principle, or engage in a consequentialist calculation, as if that could provide a sufficient guide to action, without recognizing the intricate level of self-discipline that places within the natural world exhibit. But how can ethics proceed, if we do not begin from an abstract principle, either one found in modernist ethical systems or even in the expanding circle? What does it mean for ethics to be based in place? It means that disciplined nature interrogates us. Recall that Leopold presents nature as a set of localized, self-sustaining processes that function the way a discipline does, by embodying knowledge. Places know – this is, without question, the most controversial claim of my argument. But I mean that places know in the same way that the body knows (while recognizing that the metaphor of the body only partially applies to places). Overcoming Cartesian dualism has meant, in part, recognizing that the body itself has a body of knowledge, that it navigates the world, sustains itself, responds to things, without our conscious self intervening. This is the message of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and many who have followed him (including recent work in phenomenological cognitive science) have come to the same conclusion. I would like to extend that insight to natural places, and argue that they too know in the same sense of being self-organizing, responsive, and disciplined. Natural places engage in both positive and negative feedback, they have memory (in the sense of temporal encoding and feedback within place), and they act on that memory. We do not require the metaphysical imputation of agency or veiled consciousness that is found in the Gaia hypothesis or some other inheritance of Rousseauian Romanticism, nor is it necessary to see nature as governed by social ecology, as does Murray Bookchin. What is needed, rather, is to recognize that the logic of phenomenological embodiment can, at least in part, be extended to the natural world. The claim is not that places think, or believe, but that they know.

What changes when we move from the phenomenology of the body to the phenomenology of nature is that we need to recognize that the impetus for much study about the body following Merleau-Ponty has been to unravel the problem of the nature of consciousness. That is not the driving question here. Nor is the issue to try to imagine that there is something metaphysical in nature that could be the container of knowledge – a mind or mind-analogue. This is the move many have tried in environmental thought, to place nature on an equal footing with humans, and to

thus ensure its ethical standing. To say that nature knows as the body knows has to do with how we might allow ourselves to be questioned by an other at the same time as we draw on that other for our own knowledge. Under universalist forms of ethics, even well intentioned ones (and that includes the land ethic, as it is classically understood), the other becomes obscured, since it is always a different form of the self in the end. Differences collapse into the self, since even universalist forms of ethics that reject anthropocentrism start from abstract principles, which do not exist in place. The content of the principles may focus on the other, but the form of the principles begins from human epistemology, which renders difference into sameness in the interests of human knowledge. This is so whether we see Leopold as having instituted ecocentric (or, as Kenneth Maly prefers, 'ecogenic') perspectives or is still mired in anthropocentric (or anthropogenic) ethics (Maly, 2004). What is needed in an ethics of place is to maintain the difference, and make it productive. Responding to the disciplined nature of the natural world makes possible a form of ethics in which human action does not proceed from abstract reason alone, but from the rational processes of nature as they both interrogate and provide the foundation for human action.

Leopold continually shows us this sort of ethics of place. Almost every description of a natural process comes with some self-reflection on his part. Sometimes it is not so much reflection on his own self as it is reflection on the processes of the modern West (and so, an interrogation of the collective or social self). One might wish for more reflection by Leopold on his own individual self, on his own ethical assumptions, at times. And, Baird Callicott and others have argued that Leopold's metaphors are anthropocentric (he suggests human motivations and scenarios for natural occurrences – the 'rabbit as epicure has "preference" and "insistence".' (Maly, 2004, p. 292)), but in fact this just means that he has not yet allowed the disciplinarity of the place to sufficiently interrogate him. He has, though, set up the means for such an interrogation to occur. And in admitting that ethics has developed over time, he admits that it will develop further, in particular, further than he himself can see.

True interdisciplinarity occurs when disciplines make the space for new questions to be asked for themselves, in the context of the interrogation of the other. For example, as philosophy cedes its entitlement to the term 'ethics', and recognizes that there are useful things to be found in other disciplines' approach to ethics, it will be able to ask new questions of itself. It will find ways to not reduce ethics to either universal abstract principles or situational, subjective impulses. Those binary oppositions rooted in Cartesian thought may not exist in the same way in ethics in other disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, following Bal, as a term moves across disciplinary boundaries and is appropriated into a new place, it bears the traces of its past, but must exist in the context of a new set of questions. Concepts travel, and in doing so enable new forms of knowledge, and open new worlds. In our example here, we have multiple travels: that of place, ethics, and knowledge. In each case, the use of a term in a new context is jarring, but in each case, the violence inherent in travel forces a re-examination of the questions that produced the concept in the original discipline.

Is there a fourth travelling concept, that of disciplinarity? Disciplinarity in the traditional sense requires conscious reflection, while the idea that ‘nature knows’ does not. The value of using disciplinarity of nature is that it allows ethics itself to be disciplined by natural processes. This requires close attention to those processes. Large-scale claims about nature are insufficient for this task, just as large-scale claims about humans within traditional disciplines will do little but establish that we are driven by instinct or are at the mercy of determinist forces. The ‘focal length’ of our examination of both humans and the natural world determines the kind of account that is possible. Leopold is a master of focus – he notices the small forms of rationality inherent in and inscribed upon nature. Sometimes these small forms of rationality become apparent in the breach, and he often turns to the consequences of paying insufficient attention to the discipline of nature. This is not taken as evidence of God, or a higher intelligence, or even some romantic *Weltgeist*, but is taken in its own right. The idea that place has knowledge suggests that place also has reason, just as the body has reason – ways of coping with conditions, ways of creating stable adaptations, ways of interacting for mutual benefit, ways of encoding and accessing the past (that is, compressing and interpreting time). Reason here is simply the ability to use knowledge to advantage. There is no need to suppose that the reason of nature yields, contains, or is caused by a higher consciousness to take the discipline of nature seriously, and to recognize that the difference that occurs when divergent forms of reason come into contact can be a constructive one without being teleological.

Leopold recognized that the discipline of nature was not merely a negative, restrictive idea.

His teaching began to highlight perception – as opposed to manipulation – as the first priority. Ironically, ecology had wrought a revolution in the old conservation debate: keen perception had *survival value*; aesthetic sensitivity, as enhanced by the new science, was *useful*; development that left land ugly, oversimplified, and dysfunctional was fundamentally flawed from an economic standpoint. (Meine, 2004, pp. 101–102)

In other words, there is creative potential in allowing nature to discipline us, that is, to question us. As an environmentalist who was also a hunter, a preservationist who believed that there was a place for tourism in the wild, he sometimes holds a vexed place in environmental thought. But it is exactly this set of seeming contradictions that makes him most interesting. His wilderness was not the wild, untamed, desolate Romantic image. He had, as Curt Meine puts it, a ‘contrast value of wilderness.’ (Meine, p. 104) It was a ‘matter of scale and balance: roads were not inherently good or bad; their utility, or lack thereof, was a function of time, place, and density. Viewed on a national scale, and in historical context, the rise of the automobile culture demanded a parallel commitment to wilderness preservation.’ (Meine, 2004, p. 105).

Claims like this might almost seem to disqualify Leopold from the pantheon of environmental heroes, but in fact, he is saying that the human impulse to follow the logic of technology must be met with another kind of reason, one which can face technological reason in extent and scope. Leopold is, in effect, recognizing that

just as technology is a discipline, with its own set of questions and resulting methods (which serve to legitimate its questions), that epistemological positive feedback loop needs to be met with another, equally significant form of reason, with its own questions and its own methods. Leopold is a realist. He is not hoping for a utopian world in which technological reason is abandoned. Not only would that be a fool's dream, it would merely put into place another dominant, self contained, disciplined form of reason, which would also turn to excess.

The ethics of place, then, exists on the edges of encounter between forms of reason. Mieke Bal is useful in understanding what this means – clearly both ‘reason’ and ‘knowledge’ have become travelling concepts along with ethics and place (and, perhaps also disciplinarity). Violence occurs when concepts travel – their historical references cannot be transported intact, and more importantly, their formative questions change from one place to the next. It may well be jarring to see the word ‘reason’ used of nature, and that sense of dislocation is the violence inherent in allowing concepts to travel. We have a choice – we could simply reject the travel, and claim that reason must remain tethered to its original questions. Or, we could allow this travel to question us, to force us to ask whether our sense of reason within the human context has been too narrowly imagined, and whether our conception of knowledge might be challenged, not by the knowledge inherent in another individual, but within the *bios*. I would argue that the predicament of ethics within the modernist context is a result of too narrow an imagination of reason and too individualist a conception of knowledge. Instrumentalism is what happens when we do not allow reason to be interrogated and when we come to think of knowledge as requiring consciousness. We come to think that reason is ours alone, to do with as we wish, and that knowledge inheres only in individuals.

What does it mean, to be disciplined by place, that is, to have an ethics of place? I have already argued that it cannot mean that we simply extend traditional ethics to a new agent or object. That includes ethical theories which attempt to imagine a *genius loci*, a spirit of the place. Deep ecology, the Gaia hypothesis, and other quasi-romantic ethical positions fall into this pattern, and in doing so, simply posit a metaphysical entity that can have agency or standing. In doing so, they merely follow traditional abstract ethics.

Leopold's concept of the biotic might seem, to some, as another *genius loci*. It is crucial to realize that he is not suggesting that there is some metaphysical presence to an ecosystem that gives it moral standing. It is, rather, that there are a set of relations within the biotic which form a coherent whole, what I have been comparing to the knowledge that a body has. Those connections contain within them the memory, the provenance, the questions that a place has asked and the answers it has come to. This is a totally material set of relations, but that materiality, and its stable functioning, makes it a form of knowledge.

The biotic, then, is the key to Leopold's ethic of place. It contains (compresses, elongates, summarizes) time, but is not primarily temporal (we are not asked to extend our imagination to a longer or shorter scale). But the biotic also does not treat time as if we could suspend it – there are no snapshots of place, images that tend to make us think that nature is frozen and does not constantly change in countless

ways. This micro-temporality of place, the countless minor orderings and sequences that make up the biotic mean that (as Mick Smith, following Bourdieu, suggests) activity follows implicit strategies rather than explicit rules. (Smith, 2001, p. 198) Bourdieu makes this distinction about human activity, but it seems equally applicable to the place as well. Activity, both human and natural, are not mechanistic, following rules or striving for a teleological purpose. They rather continually adapt to conditions, and leave traces of those adaptations as they go, either in the material record around them, or in their effect on surrounding actions. These are the creative moments within the ‘discipline’, the encounter with difference at a local level.

How is it possible for humans to be interrogated by nature-knowledge? The key is focal length. If we suppose that collective human knowledge – ‘Science’ – is being interrogated by ‘Nature’, we simply pit two grand systems against each other. The longer the focal length, the more likely that we will see these knowledge systems as totalizing, encompassing the other, and placeless. Even if the objects of science are specific, the modes of knowledge in science will remain as universal, and hence not available for critique or inquiry. Knowledge is not a database, and reason is not a calculus, but at a long focal length, both human knowledge and natural organization can tend to look that way. Hume was correct, in the end, to see reason as a ‘slave to the passions’, if by that we recognize that place-based concerns govern and undergird universal processes.

## 14.4 Questions About the Ethics of Place

If considered from the model of ethics that currently predominates, that of rights/duty based ethics or consequentialist ethics, many questions arise:

1. Can an ethics of place exist in a world in which modernist, human-centered, totalizing ethics predominate?
2. Can an ethics of place offer any guidance? Can it tell us what we *should* do, or will it merely tell us what we *do* do? Is this a form of naturalized ethics?
3. How, specifically, can human knowledge be critiqued by the knowledge inherent in the *bios*? How can this be a creative, rather than a restrictive possibility?
4. Do places really know, or do they come to know as they come in contact with other regimes of knowledge? That is, does knowledge emerge as places are put to the test, or stressed?
5. What happens if platial knowledge differs at different topemic levels?
6. Is this ethics, or a model for the production of ethics? That is, does this enable any normative judgments, or does it describe pragmatic production in a complex system, in which the sustenance of the system becomes the ethical standard?
7. Is this an ethics of *natural* place only? If not, what would it look like to consider other kinds of place as being the sites of knowledge as well?
8. If place knows the way a body knows, does that mean that place (or in Leopold’s case, an ecosystem) is a pseudo-body? Doesn’t that make it into too bounded an entity, too discrete in its knowledge?

Leopold clearly has a meta-ethical standard (the land ethic), which at least on the surface does not seem to be derived from the land itself. And yet, if we take the land ethic to be a generalized statement on the common features of encountering place, rather than an *a priori* principle designed to direct future judgments, it is possible to see the land ethic as the result of the encounter with place. This account of ethics assumes that the central (but not only) problem of ethics is the problem of knowledge, that is, making knowledge about the other available in such a way that it retains the otherness of the other, and allows the self to use that knowledge in its own self-construction.

This problem of knowledge is two-fold, in that the ethical problems we are faced with are in part the result of both a lack of knowledge and a misunderstanding, and secondly the basis of ethics itself is the recognition that the knowledge of/by the other (that is, the knowledge that is in places) is necessary for a true ethical framework to emerge. But one might think that knowledge-in-place means that places are bounded like bodies, and that they are essentially rural. This is not necessarily the case, though. The inscription of place that the wolf engages in is both bounded and creative, as the wolf de-territorializes and re-territorializes its space. Thus, place should not be thought as the equivalent of home, region, or territory. The model of the ecosystem is apt – no ecosystem is a discrete entity, unrelated to adjacent or even distant ecosystems (think of migratory birds or wind-borne seeds as engaged in multiple ecosystems). And, we might see these ecosystems as moving into urban areas as well, despite the disruptive nature of human urban industrial society. And finally, urban places also know, in the sense of having closely inscribed sets of practices, both among humans and other fauna and flora (Fig. 14.1).

The point is, this is not merely a romantic appeal to some primary site of knowledge, but a recognition that knowledge always owes its debt to the place from which it comes, and therefore, any ethical action must also proceed from there, inasmuch as ethics is based at least in part on knowledge.

There is another possible misunderstanding that should be addressed about this version of the ethics of place that I am advancing here. That is, it might seem like we just have naturalized ethics here, or a description of how action actually does occur, rather than a plan for judging, justifying, directing or prescribing action. That is what we expect from ethical systems after the Enlightenment – either prescriptions or justifications of moral intuitions. The ethics of place is not an Enlightenment ethic, though, and so we should not expect a calculus or a set of duties (or their analogues) that will enable us to identify the right. But the assumption here is that better ethical actions occur in the context of better knowledge (although that is a necessary, not a sufficient condition), and that they take the form of negotiations of one sort or another. This is where the much-discussed idea of moral imagination meets what I will call ‘place-making imagination’. Moral imagination is the recognition that better moral decisions are made when we both have better knowledge and also when we are able to see a set of possibilities of reconfiguring that knowledge. So, the moral stance which insists that there are only two options (you’re either with us or against us) is not evidence of a better moral calculus or higher ideals, but of a lack of moral imagination. It may play to moral intuitions, which themselves may

**Fig. 14.1** Crystal creek wolf pack in Yellowstone National Park. Photo: US National Park Service



be rooted in any number of places (divine revelation, evolutionary development, natural law), but a greater moral imagination recognizes the conflicted nature of some of our intuitions, and the role that adequate knowledge, and reasoning about that knowledge, can play in forming action. If we can imagine moral options outside of the yes/no dichotomy, we have a more adequate moral system, and one better able to preserve and enhance highly differentiated forms of life.

Place-making imagination recognizes that our constructed and understood places sometimes can have the same oversimplified character to them. We can make urban spaces which fulfill only a single function. Their vocabulary is limited, and as such, their ability to thrive as places is limited. Just as with moral imagination, places too require a rich vocabulary to thrive. What we do not realize is that this is a problem of knowledge, not of place itself. That is, the places usually are already rich, but we are just unable to recognize them as such. Our knowledge is superficial, driven by insufficiently examined questions. We see natural land as ‘resource’, and thus simplify it, limiting its vocabulary and as well its ability to challenge our

own systems of knowledge. We construct strip malls and chain stores, rendering the urban landscape's vocabulary superficial, single-purposed, and minimally legible, while simultaneously training ourselves to only see a limited range of platial signifiers, thus missing any complex natural or social ecosystem that might in fact exist there. Our moral imagination is limited, and so our imagination of places is also limited, and as such, we fall into the illusion that places can just be regarded instrumentally.

A rich moral imagination, and place-making imagination, takes tradition into account. Tradition, in this case, is that which we are willing to let remain in our peripheral vision, as we direct our rational gaze at objects of inquiry. Places always have those peripheral regions, all the more so as we use a close focal length in understanding them. Peripherality does not mean that elements of a place *cannot* be rationally considered, but that they are considered at the cost of letting other elements become part of that peripherality. The Enlightenment dream of total rational mastery is an illusion – there is always something in our peripheral range, and the more deliberately we try to rationally comprehend the world, the more that slips into peripherality. But the poorer the imagination, the less peripherality we imagine there is, and the more we tend to suppose that an element exists independent from the meaningful place in which it exists.

This account of tradition as peripherality is also about knowledge, and as such, veers away from the uses of tradition in place studies which serve as a backstop for ethics, or as a guarantee of the legitimacy of some ethical impulses over others. That form of tradition does allow the longevity of a place (e.g., the sustainability of an ecosystem, or the continued existence of a community) to serve as a moral guide, but at the same time it tends to undermine individuality, as well as the dynamic nature of place. In fact, even those places are always shifting at their borders, and there are always negotiations (or, in Deleuzian terms, reterritorialization). Peripherality simply recognizes that all systems of knowledge are enacted by the actions of those within them, those who act based on particular ends while being competent in knowing what can reasonably be left as peripheral. The stress points of these systems of knowledge come not when they are presented with the potential for change, but when their form of knowledge is overwhelmed, and their inherently rich vocabulary is forced into an oversimplified form. This is what Lyotard means when he speaks of 'terrorism' in *The postmodern condition* (Lyotard, 1984: p. 63–64), and what I mean when I equate moral imagination with place-making imagination.

If, on the other hand, knowledge of place is respected, and understood at a close focal length, that knowledge can serve to challenge the knowledge borne within the inquirer. It is the moment of interdisciplinarity I spoke about earlier. And it is also the moment of ethics, as one's assumptions about action are challenged by a renewed place-making, and moral, imagination. This model of ethics collapses the site of the production of ethics with the site of its application, description with normativity, and moral imagination with place-making imagination.

For those rooted in modernist forms of ethics that demand prescriptions, this still may not be an adequate account of ethics. There is no new meta-ethical formula here, no new expansion of the ethical circle. This ethical approach resists the

assumption of temporalized ethics, which is that greater value is associated with greater longevity. Leopold’s principle that we should ‘think like a mountain’ is seen not temporally, but platially, as the thinking of the mountain becomes the site on which the knowledge inherent in different places works itself out, and allows humans to come to greater moral and place-making imagination. Ethics does not start, then, from the assumption that all is permitted, and then the task of ethics is to restrict those freedoms based on some principle such as ensuring autonomy for all, or maximizing utility. Ethics is rather about creating options where there were none before, in the face of competing or alternate systems of knowledge. Leopold’s ethics of place answers Kenneth Maly’s question in the affirmative: ‘Is Leopold’s land “ethic” an overturning of “ethics”?’ (Maly, 2004, p. 298) And while Maly does not argue specifically for an ethics of place, he recognizes what I have also argued for – that the re-casting of ethics takes place precisely because of Leopold’s recognition of the interconnections (what I am calling the disciplinarity of the place, or the recognition that places know) of the natural.

The question, perhaps, is what difference this makes. The pull of temporalized Enlightenment ethics is strong. And yet, that has also been its weakness. In expanding the circle of ethics, we have also made it more abstract and rarified. It is one thing to argue for the rights of an autonomous human individual, and quite another to argue for the rights of an animal, or a tree, or an ecosystem. At best, ethics justifies the wider circle by showing that nature in its various forms is useful (an anthropocentric perspective, linking value back to human value); at worst, it justifies it by rendering a metaphysical ‘other’ to which rights are accorded, but which requires humans to speak for it and defend it. In the first case, the anthropocentrism is overt, in the second, covert. But if we work from this Leopoldian/Deleuzian perspective, the problem becomes a different one. It becomes the problem of the knowledge of the place, and how it is acquired, justified, and made creative. Places know, and that knowledge is both useful to its inhabitants (the ones equipped to read and interact with the place), and serves as the context and creative force for other disciplinary systems they come in contact with (particularly human ones). We do not simply instrumentally use a place (or its elements), nor do we speak on its behalf; rather we allow our form of knowledge to be interrogated by the knowledge of the place.

## 14.5 Olfactory Poems

In part one of *A sand county almanac*, Leopold takes us through the year in nature. His ‘year’, as already noted, is the calendar year, not the year of seasons or natural cycles (it is, after all, an ‘almanac’). And, his descriptions of nature are filled with anthropomorphic images and analogies, suggesting that more might be done to truly allow place-knowledge to interrogate Leopold’s own knowledge. And yet, despite the framing within human time-ordering and human social relations, this almanac hearkens back to part of the original sense of the word. While there are few tables (a feature which is all but necessary; almanacs had tables ‘containing a calendar of

months and days, with astronomical data and calculations, ecclesiastical and other anniversaries, besides other useful information, and, in former days, astrological and astrometeorological forecasts.<sup>1</sup>), ordering is certainly evident. That ordering does not lie solely in the literal temporal structure, the month-by-month account. It lies also in the platial structure.

Consider, for instance, Leopold's account of July. It is an account of daybreak, before the world shrinks 'to those mean dimensions known to county clerks' (Leopold, 1966: p. 47), that is, before place is ordered and organized according to human purposes. Before daybreak, there is a different ordering, and a different form of land ownership and stewardship. It is, in some sense, his land, but not in the Lockean sense of property ownership. Leopold frames the early morning world as one of competing territorial claims on the part of the birds, whose calls establish boundaries and creates a text of sound which is understood by other birds, and the contrasting literacy experienced by his dog, for whom 'the evidence of tenantry is not song, but scent.' (Leopold, 1966: p. 46) Indeed, the dog's literacy is quite elaborate:

Now he is going to translate for me the olfactory poems that who-knows-what silent creatures have written in the summer night. At the end of each poem sits the author – if we can find him. (Leopold, 1966: p. 46–47)

As the day unfolds, the plants are the ones inscribing upon the land, imprinting knowledge there. This inscription is one we are only dimly aware of ('Tell me of what plant-birthday a man takes notice, and I shall tell you a good deal about his vocation, his hobbies, his hay fever, and the general level of his ecological education.' (Leopold, 1966: p. 48)), but which nevertheless affects us. Leopold speaks of the 'compass plant', or the cutleaf *Silphium*, as legible ('How could a weed be a book?' (Leopold, 1966: p. 50)), recording in its shifting growing season, patterns of growth, local erasures, and deterritorialiation its history, and the knowledge of the place. The whole picture is one of subtle interrelations, not of a static equilibrium but a dynamic creation, made possible through the close knowledge of the place that the daybreak inhabitants possess.

We might suppose that we have come a long way in our environmental knowledge since 1948, when Leopold drafted *A sand county almanac* shortly before his death. And we have – we are far more adept at reading place-knowledge than we were at his time. And yet, our hermeneutic of place is still in its infancy. As we come to see that our moral universe is made richer when we interrogate, and are interrogated by, place-knowledge, we will also be able to create new concepts, new forms and ways of life. Our concepts will travel between forms of knowledge, and become newly integrated, enabling a richer vocabulary of both place and ethics, a new appreciation of *ethos* and peripherality, and a richer life. We will, in short, develop an ethics of place.

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<sup>1</sup>Almanac (Oxford English Dictionary)

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