# A STOIC CASE FOR THE LAND ETHIC


## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to show the intersection of conventional Stoic thought with Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, which he introduces in A Sand County Almanac. I first explore the concept of a 'preferred indifferent.' Diogenes Laërtius, paraphrasing the early Stoics, describes it as "a certain intermediate potential or usefulness which contributes to the life according to nature." I then argue that the "land," as Leopold conceives it, is one such preferred indifferent, and that taking action to maintain it is therefore an expression of Stoic virtue befitting of the "life in accord."



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Alfred North Whitehead is famous for his description of modern Western Philosophy as "footnotes to Plato." In this treatise, I explore the interplay between Stoicism and Leopoldian Naturalism to illustrate how these distinct schools converge on similar conclusions about the significance of land. I first analyze the Stoic notion of preferred indifferents, which, though not virtuous in and of themselves, can aid an individual in pursuing virtue. Then I turn to Stoic conceptions of the cosmos and how their ideas of divine will and cosmic order are echoed in modern understandings of natural structures. I then explore the concept of natural equilibria through the story of the Aral Sea. Though not a consequentialist philosophy, Stoic doctrine holds that natural equilibria ought to be preserved, and the aftermath of the Aral Sea catastrophe illustrates the cost of their disruption. Finally, I analyze Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," which he introduces in *A Sand County Almanac*, and discuss how it fits into the Stoic tradition. I situate land among the preferred indifferents and thereby show that actions promoting the "goodness" of the land are virtuous in the broader Stoic account, insofar as they enable a state in which the persons residing within can more easily seek virtue. This, in turn, reinforces the notion that our contemporary concern for the environment is, to borrow from Whitehead, a footnote to ancient Stoic thought.

## II. PREFERRED INDIFFERENTS AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The Stoics hold that virtue derives from the "life according to nature," and that achieving this requires aligning oneself with the natural order by exercising reason; thus, virtue is accessible only to rational beings. Moreover, while external things can affect one's ability to achieve virtue, the Stoics consider them "indifferent," meaning they are neither good nor bad in themselves. Indeed, to preoccupy oneself with such things is inherently in tension with the Stoic way of life. This sentiment is found in such dictums as Epictetus's "It is not events that disturb people, it is their judgements concerning them,"[1] Marcus Aurelius's "Look within; within is the fountain of all that is good,"[2] and Seneca's "...that virtue is the sole good, and certainly that nothing is

1 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Robert Dobbin (Penguin Books, 2008), 29.
2 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Robin Hard, ed. Christopher Gill (Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.31.

good without virtue; moreover, that virtue itself is located in our better part, namely, the rational part."[3] Although differing in expression, these statements reflect the Stoic notion that "living in accord" is a fundamentally internal phenomenon that only manifests in action.

Within this framework, preferred indifferents are things that, while not inherently good, can aid an individual in their pursuit of virtue. Diogenes Laërtius, paraphrasing the early Stoic philosophers, describes them as "a certain intermediate potential or usefulness which contributes to the life according to nature."[4] He further notes the Stoics' use of the word "good" to refer to "that from which there is something beneficial."[5] In this context, "good" is an anthropocentric term used to describe things that further the human pursuit of virtue. However, there is a semantic difference between the descriptive "good" and the prescriptive "the good," the latter of which refers to "life in accord with nature," which is the highest form of human existence in the Stoic tradition—a state achieved by the "sage."

Stoic teachings about external things do not preclude the possibility of rational action involving them, provided such actions are in accord with virtue. If we recognize the land as a preferred indifferent, then the maintenance and care of the land enters the scope of virtuous action. Environmental stewardship, insofar as it entails rational action in accordance with nature, therefore becomes an expression of Stoic virtue. This bridge between disposition and conduct enables the Stoic to explain why we engage with the external world, while still conceiving of virtue as a fundamentally internal state.

For the Stoics, what it means to live virtuously, or "in accord with nature," varies slightly by account. Diogenes, paraphrasing the views of the early Stoic philosophers such as Chrysippus and Cleanthes, defines Stoic virtue as "that which is perfectly in accord with nature for a rational being, qua rational."[6] The consensus among early Stoics is that to live in accord with nature is to live in accord with prudence, which he defines as "the knowledge of which things are good and bad and neither."[7] Cicero, a notable Stoic-adjacent thinker, makes a slightly stronger claim. He argues that, concerning the "cosmos" and everything it contains, "a good and wise man, who is familiar with the laws and is not ignorant of civil duty, consults the welfare of all more than

3 Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, trans. E. Phillips Barker (Clarendon Press, 1932), 71.32.
4 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Tiziano Dorandi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7.105.
5 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.94.
6 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.94.
7 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.92



that of one person or his own."[8] Notable here is Cicero's use of the words "laws" and "civic duty" in the context of the cosmos as a whole, which is consistent with his subsequent claim, originally articulated by Chrysippus, that "all other things [besides men and gods] were created for the sake of men and gods."[9] This view sets Cicero apart from many of the Stoics in that he directly acknowledges the importance of the cosmos's particular structure and intricacies.

The mechanisms of the cosmos, whose function and purpose are not always apparent, work together to produce an environment in which humans (and, in the ancient account, gods) can thrive. For humans, who lack omniscience, it is difficult to ascertain exactly what effects these mechanisms have on us. The prudent course of action is to preserve these mechanisms as best we can, since, due to the Stoic belief in their divine provenance, they may further our well-being in ways that are not immediately obvious. As prudence is a cardinal Stoic virtue, this course of action aligns with the "life in accord," bringing one closer to the status of sage.

Marcus Aurelius takes a similar view: "That rational essence by which the universe is governed is for community and society."[10] While we may nowadays question the notion of intelligent design, or that our universe is the product of a divine will, we might still ask: Does rationality necessarily imply intention? The dynamic systems that promote our survival in the absence of conscious intent operate in a manner that appears rational, in the sense that we exist to observe them. Seemingly, then, we are indeed governed by such an essence—perhaps not a singular or even conscious one, but one that accords with the Stoic understanding of the natural order, and which is reflected in the principle of *logos*. Logos, for the Stoics, is the active principle that describes the structure and behavior of the universe, and it is to this active principle that we ascribe the term "essence." The precise character of this essence varies slightly by account; for our purposes, we may refer to this essence as the laws of nature. These natural laws operate systematically, in accord with a set of immutable principles that define the scope of possible occurrences. While perhaps not rational in the human sense of the term, the land itself and the qualities it affords us are included in this scope and contribute directly to our "community and society." Our relationship with the land, which is shaped by environmental conditions, is in this way an expression of a rational natural order. When land exists in an equilibrium in which

8 Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 2006), 3.64.
9 Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 3.67.
10 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.24.

life can prosper, we might call it *good*. Such land is a preferred indifferent because its existence furthers our livelihood as rational beings and thus facilitates virtuous action. Just as health or wealth can enable an individual to engage more effectively in virtuous activities, so too can good land enable communities and individuals to thrive and cultivate virtue.

## III. THE LESSON OF THE ARAL SEA

Having established that actions concerning external things can be consistent with Stoic virtue, we now turn to a more concrete example that demonstrates the importance of environmental stewardship: the Aral Sea. Through this example, I aim to illustrate both how land contributes to our continued existence in a stable state and the consequences of excessive tampering with natural structures.

For a long time, the Aral Sea was one of the largest lakes in the world. Many local communities relied on it as the staple of their livelihood, well into the 1950s. In the late twentieth century, Soviet Russia, seeking to grow cotton in the region, began a series of irrigation projects to divert the Aral Sea's tributaries into the surrounding desert. As a result, the sea began to dry up. Communities reliant on fishing and agriculture were permanently affected, and the exposed seabed released pollutants into the air, causing health problems for local populations. The environmental effects were severe and widespread, tearing at the region's socioeconomic fabric. This area of the world has yet to recover from this catastrophe, and the damage done is a direct consequence of our attempting to assume a godlike role that exceeds our understanding.

Standard modern practice for assessing an event like this is to put it in terms of expected cost-benefit, or to use a similar consequentialist method. In fact, the Stoic perspective, although *pre hoc* and outcome-agnostic, is equally instructive. Recall that prudence, as the Stoics conceived it, is "the knowledge of which things are good and bad and neither." The goodness of an action, then, cannot derive from its output, even in cases where its output is desirable. Epictetus further counsels us to, "reflect on what every project entails in both its initial and subsequent stages before taking it up."[11] Prudence thus requires us to acknowledge the limits of our understanding and not alter what we have determined is preferred without due consideration of what the alteration entails. Had the Aral Sea project succeeded, then, the fact that

11 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, 29.1



it required tampering with a nominally good thing would have made it imprudent in the Stoic account, hence, not virtuous. The frameworks of Aurelius and Cicero likewise support the view that the Soviets, in not consulting the "welfare of all" and neglecting to consider the land's contribution to "community and society," failed to meet the standards for goodness articulated in the two accounts. Thus, whereas a consequentialist account considers the outcome, the Stoic one considers the goodness of the *reasoning* behind the action. In this way, virtue, as it is classically understood, can be preserved.

The Aral Sea is a testament to the era-agnostic human tension between hubris and fallibility. Leopold warns us against this in his Almanac: "In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, ex cathedra, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worth less, in community life."[12] This quote embodies a core tenet of the Land Ethic: to act as a conqueror of nature is to misunderstand our place within it. Like the Stoics, Leopold is wary of human fallibility and therefore careful in making normative claims about the natural order. Both parties understand that human attempts to categorize natural things according to their impact on well-being are prone to errors, both because of our limited grasp of nature's mechanisms and because we tend to overestimate ourselves in this respect. Therefore, according to Leopold, "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."[13] His reasoning follows from the principle that there exists a strong, interdependent relationship between individuals and the land upon which they reside. Land, he argues, enables communities to come together and thrive, and the community, in turn, allows individuals to flourish. As such, our relationship with the land should be underpinned by an ethical framework that explicitly accounts for it. The land's well-being is the community's well-being and, by extension, the individual's.

## IV. FINDING VIRTUE IN RECIPROCAL PRESERVATION

The notion of reciprocal preservation outlined here is reminiscent of Stoic ideals first articulated two millennia ago. In Cicero's words, "Every animal, as soon as it is born, has an affinity to itself

12 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, ed. Kurt Brower and Michael Sewell (Oxford University Press, 2001), 193.

13 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 211.

and is inclined to preserve itself and its constitution and to like those things which preserve that constitution."[14] It follows, therefore, that a rational person, recognizing that the flourishing of the land is inextricably linked with their own, would be disposed to care for the land as a means to preserving their own constitution. Failure to do so would amount to a form of self-sabotage, since it would undermine their own well-being. Thus, prosperous land supports Cicero's notion of self-preservation, which in turn engenders more opportunities to pursue virtue. In this sense, land exemplifies the primary characteristics of a preferred indifferent.

Moreover, among the preferred indifferents, land may be the most foundational, given its potential to impact the accessibility of others. Harsh environmental conditions restrict the availability of external goods such as health and wealth, thereby hindering the individual's capacity for virtuous acts. It follows *ex contrario* that actions that promote goodness in the land simultaneously enhance the accessibility of other preferred indifferents, thereby endowing the land's inhabitants with a better means to express virtue.

I further argue that these actions are virtuous in themselves. Virtuous action for the Stoics is action that is in accord with nature, and specifically in accord with prudence. It follows that a virtuous person, recognizing the extent to which we benefit from the land's prosperity, would endeavor to preserve this prosperity. Therefore, actions that promote the good of the land accord with prudence, and thus with virtue.

## V. CONCLUSION

The integration of Stoic philosophy with Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic is a significant development for contemporary environmental ethics. The Stoic concepts of "preferred indifferents" and living "in accordance with nature" are a strong conceptual foundation for the more granular, environmentally oriented ethical framework that Leopold advances, and serve to ground Leopold's ideas in the Western philosophical tradition. Actions that promote the well-being of the land align with Stoic virtue, and thus realizing these actions becomes a Stoic imperative.

The Stoic and Leopoldian perspectives converge through their mutual recognition of the importance of being a responsible member of the natural order. Although differing in methodology and scope, the mutual consistency of these two schools reflects the enduring nature of the moral tenets that underpin them. The Stoic case for the Land Ethic, as built in this treatment, considers environmental stewardship as an expression of virtue in accordance with nature. In showing this to be the case, I demonstrate that Leopoldian naturalism, often dismissed as too radical or unfounded, has a firm basis in Western thought, which lends it a stronger claim to both academic discourse and real-world practice.[15]

14 Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 3.16.



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