

Lecture 10: Ecocentrism and Animal Liberation

- Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic” (1948)
- J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: A Triangular Affair” (1980)

Themes

- “A triangular affair?”
- Holism and individualism
- Three differences between ecocentrism and animal liberation
- Three arguments against animal liberation
- Critique of ecocentrism

Ecocentrism and Animal Liberation

- Rift between ecocentrism (of Leopold) and animal liberation (of Singer)



Ecocentrism and Animal Liberation

- “A vegetarian human population is therefore probably ecologically catastrophic.”
- “[Domestic animals] have been bred to docility, tractability, stupidity, and dependency. It is literally meaningless to suggest that they be liberated.”
- “An imagined society in which all animals capable of sensibility received equal consideration or held rights to equal consideration would be so ludicrous that it might be more appropriately and effectively treated in satire than in philosophical discussion.”
- “...the human population has become so disproportionate from the biological point of view that if one had to choose between a specimen of Homo sapiens and a specimen of a rare even if unattractive species, the choice would be moot.”



Ecocentrism and Animal Liberation

- Mountains, streams, and plants have as much 'biotic right' to exist as animals
- Leopold never considers factory farming to be an urgent moral issue; exhibits apparent 'indifference' toward suffering of domestic animals
- Celebration of hunting



Ecocentrism and Animal Liberation

- Callicott: “The urgent concern of animal liberationists for the suffering of domestic animals, toward which Leopold manifests an attitude which can only be described as indifference, and the urgent concern of Leopold, on the other hand, for the disappearance of species of plants as well as animals, and for soil erosion and stream pollution, appear to be symptoms not only of very different ethical perspectives, but of profoundly different cosmic visions as well”.

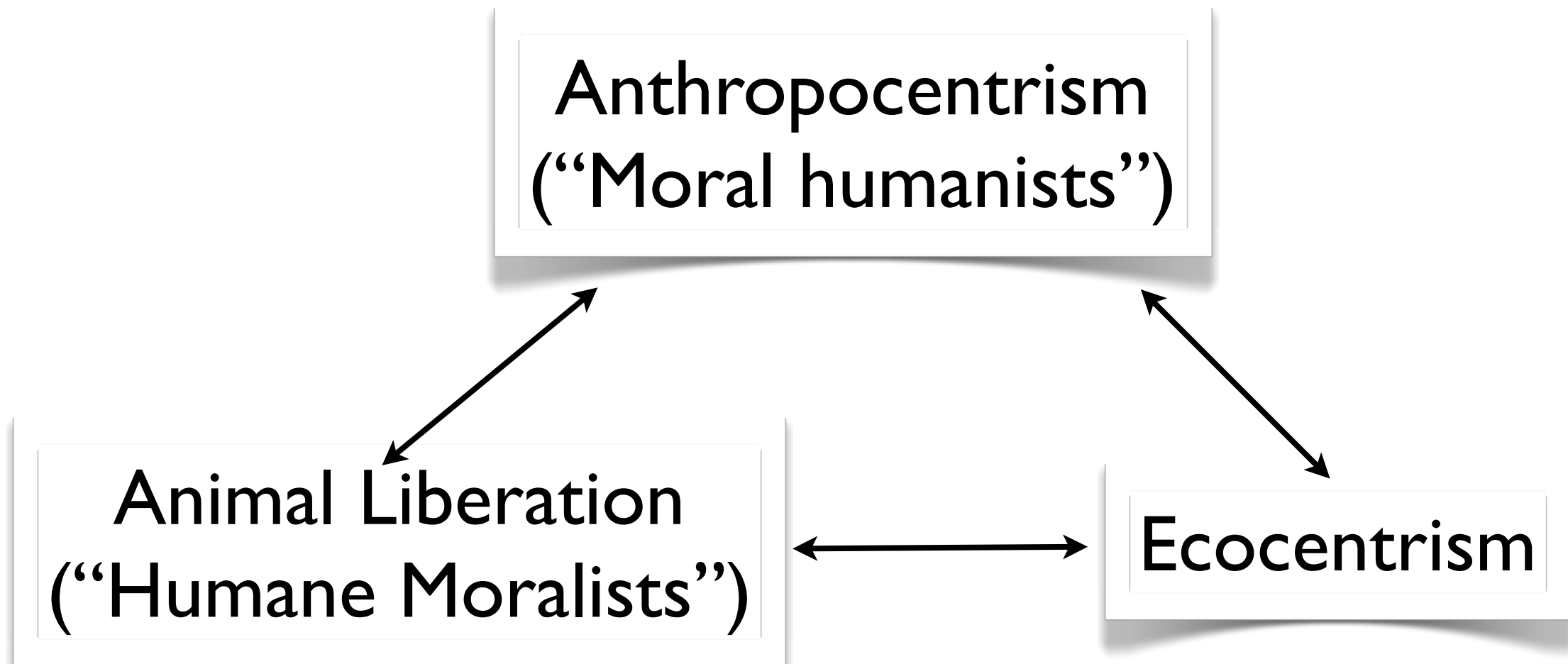
“Triangular Affair”

Anthropocentrism
 (“Moral humanists”)

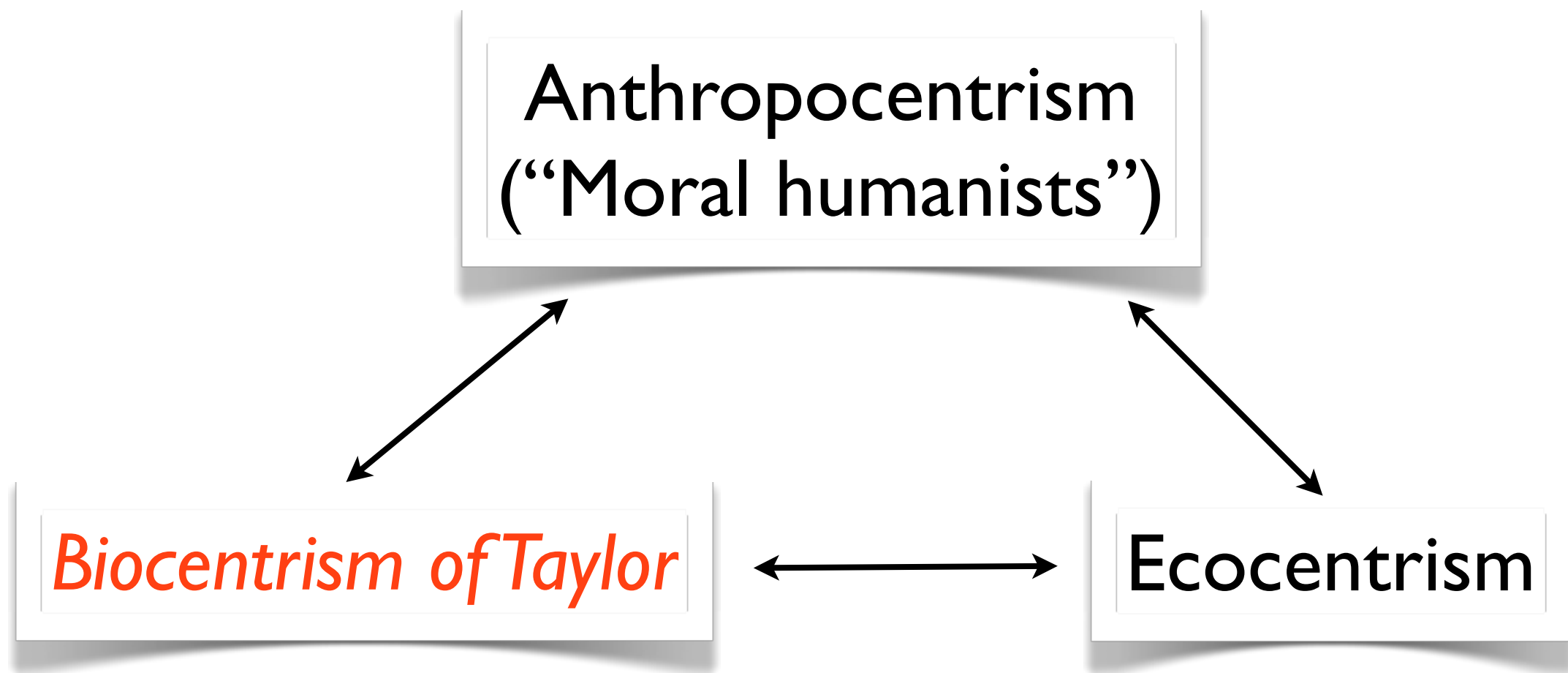


Animal Liberation
 (“Humane Moralists”)

“Triangular Affair”



“Triangular Affair”



Individualism and Holism

People



Sentient Creatures



Non-Sentient Creatures



Inanimate Objects



Individualism and Holism

People



← Anthropocentrism

Sentient Creatures



Non-Sentient Creatures



Inanimate Objects



Individualism and Holism

People

Sentient Creatures

Non-Sentient Creatures

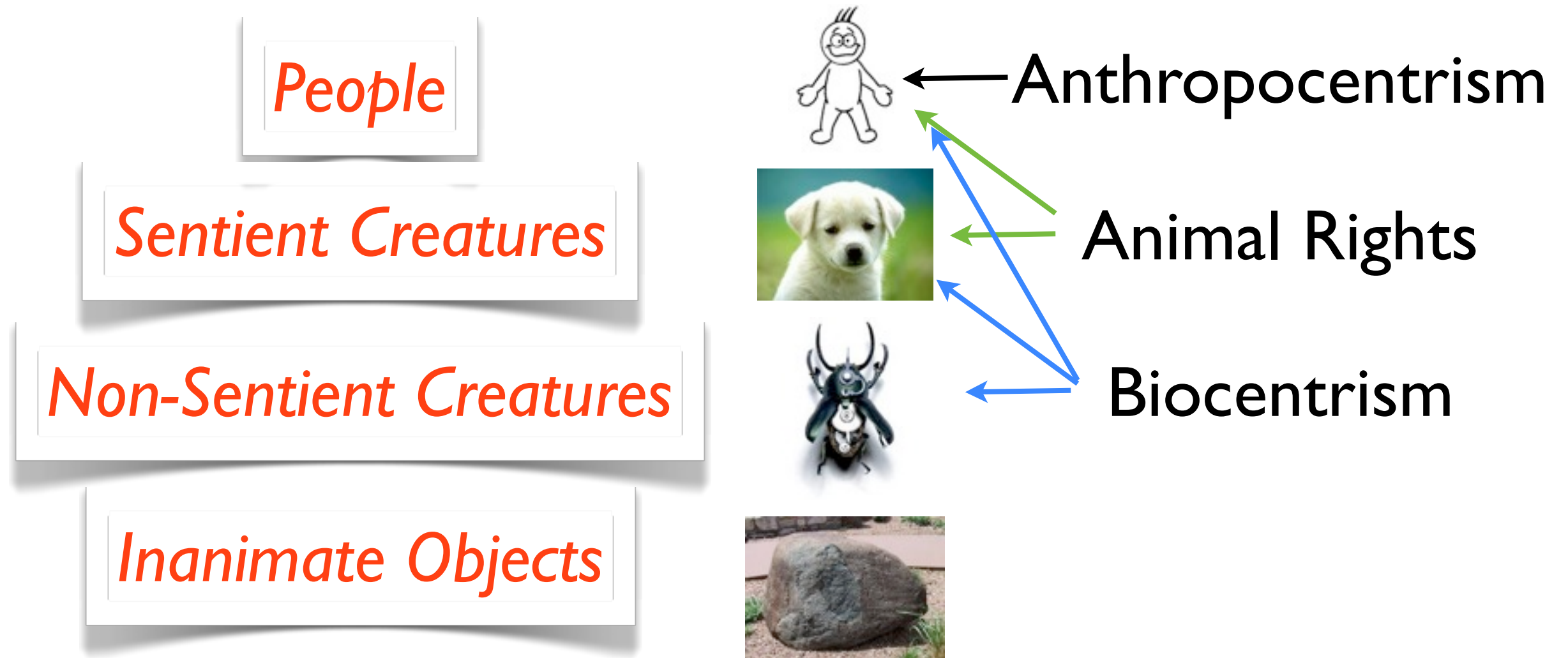
Inanimate Objects



← Anthropocentrism

← Animal Rights

Individualism and Holism



Individualism and Holism

- Both animal liberation as well as biocentrism are *individualistic*: They hold that only individual entities possess moral worth.
- “Every man is an island”

Individualism and Holism

- The ecocentrism of Leopold is *holistic*: It holds that our moral obligations extend first and foremost to *communities* or *ecosystem*
- The relative moral worth of an *individual* is judged by its relative benefit to, or harm to, the ecosystem as a whole

Animal liberation, Biocentrism, and Ecology

- Animal liberation has imperfectly grasped the moral implications of modern ecology
- To their credit, they understand that the claim of human superiority is arbitrary
- After all, we have the same origins and face the same challenges as other creatures.

Animal liberation, Biocentrism, and Ecology

- However, ecology is *holistic* and not *individualistic*: It sees people, animals, and plants as interconnected members of a community
- It doesn't see them and as isolated units that have their own "moral worth".
- As a consequence, it is strange that their moral philosophy primarily centers on insisting on the moral worth of each individual

Inversion of Values: Examples

- Whether something is harmful or painful or deadly isn't the key to understanding its value.
- The hunting of white-tailed deer may be a moral obligation in some cases
- The protection of rare and endangered species such as the lynx is an obligation despite the suffering and harm they bring to other animals
- Many native plants have greater worth than domestic sheep

Three main differences

- I. *Moral Status of Endangered Species*: If biodiversity contributes to ecosystem stability, then rare or endangered species may have a stronger claim to moral consideration than non-endangered ones.

Animal liberation and endangered species

- For animal liberationists, being endangered doesn't, in and of itself, make a creature more valuable



Three main differences

2. *Moral Status of Sentient Creatures:* A non-sentient creature like the honeybee (which plays a crucial ecological role) has higher moral priority than a sentient creature like the rabbit or vole.

Three main differences

3. *Moral Status of Domestic Animals:* To the extent that domestic animals contribute little to ecosystem (or even harm ecosystem) they are not accorded significant moral status

Three main differences

- “From the perspective of the land ethic a herd of cattle, sheep, or pigs is as much or more a ruinous blight on the landscape as a fleet of four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles.”
- “There is something profoundly incoherent in the complaint...that the ‘natural behavior’ of chickens and male calves is cruelly frustrated on factory farms.”

Arguments against animal liberation

- I. Animal liberation is individualistic, not holistic, and hence does not understand the implications of modern ecology

Arguments against animal liberation

2. The principles of animal liberation, if followed consistently, would lead to absurd or ecologically disastrous consequences.



Arguments against animal liberation

- What would happen if we promptly put an end to farming?
Either:
- Most livestock would quickly starve or freeze to death, or:
- Keeping them alive indefinitely would be ecologically disastrous



Arguments against animal liberation

- To this extent, 'animal liberation' is fundamentally different from other liberation movements
- “It is literally meaningless to suggest that they [domestic animals] be liberated”



Arguments against animal liberation

- Moreover, vegetarianism on a world-wide scale would be ecologically destructive
- The increase of global food supplies would cause a human population explosion
- (*Against* factory farming, for hunting of wild animals)



Arguments against animal liberation

3. From an ecological view, pain *as such* is not a moral evil
 - Pain is just a physiological symptom of inner disturbance
 - It's functional and healthy



Arguments against animal liberation

- The reason that factory farming is wrong is *not* primarily because of the suffering it imposes
- After all, animals in the wild experience an equal if not greater pain
- Rather, it's wrong because of its devastating ecological consequences, such as its contribution to soil erosion, stream pollution, and climate change



Problems for Callicott

- Is his philosophy really *anthropocentric*?
- One of the suggestions that Leopold himself makes is that the *reason* we should protect the natural world is because it's vital to our *human* needs and interests.
- We don't understand negative consequences of ecosystem disruption, so for our own sake we should be cautious

Problems for Callicott

- *“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.”*
- Why is the destruction of the ecosystem immoral? Perhaps because humans *need* it to survive and flourish. IF that’s the main reason, then his philosophy is actually human-centered

Problems for Callicott

- Is his philosophy really *misanthropic*?
- “the best thing would be to just let the people there [Ethiopia] starve...” -Dave Foreman, founder of Earth First!, in an interview with *Simply Living*, an Australian magazine, in 1982

Problems for Callicott

- Is his philosophy really misanthropic?
- Although Callicott never explicitly endorses the view that famine is a good thing, he states that allowing human famine or disease to run its course may be ecologically wise.
- He points out that overtly misanthropic views (such as Edward Abbey and Garrett Hardin) are consistent with his philosophy

Problems for Callicott

- “...the human population has become so disproportionate from the biological point of view that if one had to choose between a specimen of Homo sapiens and a specimen of a rare even if unattractive species, the choice would be moot.”
- He retracts this idea in the new introduction, where he states that “the land ethic leaves our traditional human morality quite intact”

