Flood Plain Ethics: The Conflicts Between Utilitarianism And Aldo Leopold’S Land Ethics Essay, Research Paper

This paper will discuss the conflicts between the utilitarian ethical theory and the ethical theory put forth by Aldo Leopold known as The Land Ethic. The question chosen to express the philosophical differences central in the two theories is, what should we do with flood plain land use? The land use issue in general requires careful consideration. The flood plain land use issue illustrates the utilitarian and Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic philosophical conflicts.

Utilitarianism derives from: 1) Actions which result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. 2) Promote efficiency by comparing actions. 3) of Our judgments are universalizations (Van DeVeer, 1998). An example is the laws passed that “try to please everyone…” which result in confusion. The first doctrine evaluates options based on whether their consequences produce happiness or unhappiness. That is, we judge what actions give us the most happiness with the least pain — the utilitarian calculus. We sum the goods, positives and then the bads, negatives. Then subtract the negatives from the positives. This result must have a net good for the action to be considered right, however, this is not without weaknesses. A principal weakness is that by concentrating on consequences in the interest of broad human welfare, individual human rights can be trampled. Another weak point to this theory is, that in order to properly maximize happiness, we need to have a way to quantify the amount of happiness produced by an act and a way to compare those results with the happiness produced by other possible acts (Griffin, 1998). “How do we measure pleasure?” We connect enjoyment with preference fulfillment and associate this with the capacity to purchase those preferences in the marketplace. Measuring the fulfillment by the dollar amount used obtaining the preferences. In addition, the defining of happiness may be impossible. This results in difficulty in agreeing on an evaluation for the overall good or to minimize the overall bad (Smart, 1997). The utilitarian associates the economic value of a commodity only and does not take into account any non-economic value it may have. Using only the economic viewpoint associated with utilitarianism there are also entities or values that do not merit any economic value, and thus are not considered (Van DeVeer, 1998).

The basic premises for Aldo Leopold Land Ethics theory are: 1) The land is a community (a basic concept of ecology). 2) The land is to be loved and respected (an extension of human ethics to include land). 3) Land has a cultural and (aesthetic) value. 4) Humans are community members only. Leopold’s principle brings into focus the broader environmental ethical concerns: “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” (Van DeVeer, 1998). Leopold’s main premise is that the individual is a mutually dependent component community member. The individual’s intuitions stimulate him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate. Originally, Aldo Leopold tells us, we see ourselves as land subjugators. However, as we evolve, we see ourselves as a mere community member and this community includes the land. These elements are essential to a belief that humans have a duty to interact with the soils, waters, plants and animals that collectively comprise the land in ways that ensure their well being and survival. Land Ethics tends to be eco-centric and not anthropocentric and is concerned with the wholes and not the individuals.

This advocacy of environmental obligation, however, is open to several criticisms, both in its consequentialist formulation. Leopold’s principle is a consequentialist formulation in view of the fact that the rightness of an action depends on how its consequences benefit the whole environment. However, as a consequentialist ethical principle, it can be counter intuitive since it will not give rise to morality’s conventional rules, such as prohibitions against stealing or killing of individuals in pursuit of bettering the whole. It fails to be persuasive as a consequentialist principle since some traditional moral rules may be understandably incompatible with the critical environmental goal well being (Internet, 1996).

People have settled near waterways for the advantages offered in transportation, commerce, energy, water supply, soil fertility and waste disposal and for numerous other reasons. The attraction to settling along rivers and streams is not, however without its problems. Floods cause a greater loss of life and property loss and disrupt more families and communities than all other natural hazards combined. The nation may choose to use these flood-prone lands for the primary purpose of economic development, or it may take action to better balance the economic and environmental outputs (Floodplain, 1999).

The utilitarian flood plain land use view is that it is more economical to use the flood plain area because of the accessibility of resources needed to improve the overall well being of the aggregate is easier than the cost of using other resources in places that are more difficult to utilize. An example of this is the settling of low lands by the early explorers allowed them access to the river that was the main transportation and food supply. It was easier and more economical to settle the low lands than to settle farther away from these resources. In the utilitarian calculus, the total net utility (TNU) is maximized more readily in the flood plain area. This calculation, in which only human well-being is considered, does not take into account the harm done to the other members of the environmental community, i.e. river dams (for flood protection and navigation) stop the salmon from getting to their spawning grounds. The utilitarian theory along with the economic theory does not consider the well-being of the other community members except in so far ash they may maximize human satisfaction or utility (Van DeVeer, 1998). Thus, in some version of the utilitarian theory and in economic theories the parties that count are only humans and economic growth. This has resulted in a consistent fight by humans to conquer the flood plain area by deepening channels, draining estuaries and other techniques to control the environment.

In contrast, the land-use ethics approach promoted by Aldo Leopold implies that proper land-use is not exclusively an economic dilemma. We ought to analyze each question for what is ethically and aesthetically right and as well as what is economically beneficial. It is right when it preserves the veracity, strength and splendor of the biotic community and wrong when it does not. The flood plains, as a community, are a microcosm of interacting individual species with man as an integral part (Van DeVeer, 1998).

The problem with settling in a flood plain is the value and strength of the biotic community and the destruction and changing of the environmental elements that keep the flood plain’s ecosystem in tack are not considered. An example is the settlement of the Mississippi delta below New Orleans, LA. This area is a complex and diverse buffer zone for the inland areas. As activities destroy or change it this natural filter system and buffer zone depletes. With this, naturally developed areas used to protect the inland areas from floodwaters produced by hurricanes each year are not available. This reduction in buffer area allows the destructive forces of a hurricane to proceed unchallenged to deep inland areas that are not as well equipped to deal with its forces as the lower delta areas.

The conflict between the two ethical theories is evident in the human use of the flood plains lands. The utilitarian/economic theory sees the value only as portion of the Total Net Utility formula not considering the whole or that the individual is a part of the whole. This theory does not give any weight to things that does not increase human happiness. A person cannot destroy land that protects him from natural forces and expect not to be affected by those forces. In Aldo Leopold land ethic theory the individuals of the community have worth and that the individual need the rest of the members of the whole to continue. A person can expect if works with the whole both will be better off.

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