

# Reflecting on the Experience of Environmental Epiphany in the Lives of Aldo Leopold, Thomas Hill Jr., and Albert Schweitzer

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## Abstract

*Can a very short event change one's outlook on the natural environment? Environmental awareness can be attained through formal and non-formal education, as well as through active engagement in environmental activities. However, there were historical figures who witnessed a change in their outlooks in the blink of an eye. This article sets out to explore the impact of environmental epiphanies on humans during a human/non-human encounter by showing their role in triggering powerful emotions and a new type of awareness in the lives of three key environmentalist figures belonging to the twentieth century: Aldo Leopold, Thomas English Hill Jr., and Albert Schweitzer. The article investigates the importance of such revelatory experiences in a world of climatic challenges.*

**Keywords:** Albert Schweitzer; Aldo Leopold; emotional experiences in nature; environmental epiphanies; human-nature interactions; Thomas Hill Jr

Several definitions have been given to environmental epiphanies. According to environmental psychologists Joanne Vining and Melinda Merrick, they are emotional ‘experiences in which one’s perception of the essential meaning of their relationship to nature shifts in a meaningful manner’ (Vining & Merrick, 2018: 157). Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas refers to these experiences when he states that a sudden encounter with the other may cause unexpected ethical obligation on the part of the subject. These are occasions when we become inadvertently ethically responsible for an agonizing other. This responsibility emanates from our corporeal response to their suffering (body agency); it takes place before any rational decision on our part (pre-reflexivity); it is characterised by immediate rather mediated communication (immediacy), and it makes the agent lose control in the presence of the other (loss of control) (Marais, 2012: 118–23). In brief, Levinas’s theory suggests that we do not always resort to rationalization in order to sympathise with the other. In addition to his view, it should be noted that before environmental epiphanies can create such inadvertent ethical obligation towards the other, they stir strong emotions in the agent, and after they create the ethical obligation, their impact triggers new thoughts. In the case of a human/nonhuman encounter, the unexpected meeting with a pathetic or awe-inspiring animal or natural view triggers a feeling of unexplained emotional attachment in the human agent. This feeling pushes her to behave in responsible ways towards that nonhuman other, thus making her ask deep questions about the value of nonhuman life on Earth in general.

I began reflecting upon environmental epiphanies during a group forest walk in a natural park in Oujda, Morocco in 2021. After walking for some time in the park, my friends and I decided to take a short break. The topic of our discussion shifted towards our lived experiences with the natural environment and those of various Western environmentalists. When it was my turn, I started talking about the life of American environmentalist Aldo Leopold, his experience with the forest, and how a single epiphanic event turned his outlook upside down. Leopold (1887–1948) is an American wildlife ecologist and author who is famous for his seminal posthumous book *A Sand County Almanac*, in which he calls for the consideration of ‘soils, waters, plants, and animals’ in our ethical decisions and for the necessity to change our roles from conquerors of nature to mere members of it (Leopold, 1968: 204), through the maintenance of its integrity, stability, and beauty (Ibid: 224–5). Leopold loved hunting deer, but more predators in his region meant fewer of them. That was the main reason for his decision to kill wolves, bears and other predatory animals. The turning point in his life was when he shot a grey wolf and saw a ‘fierce green fire dying in her eyes’ (Ibid: 130). This brief scene was so powerful that he ‘realized then that there was something new to [him] in those

eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain’ (*Ibid.* 130). Although that new thing remained unexplained in his book, he seems to suggest that the gaze in the wolf’s eyes stirred up his emotions and changed his convictions. This could be noticed in Leopold’s pioneering role in the shift of American environmentalism towards more holistic conservation policies based on the importance of preserving predators as vital regulators of biodiversity.

Leopold was not the only person to have had such an epiphanic experience based on a single event. The American professor of philosophy Thomas Hill Jr. (1937–) underwent a similar experience that affected his emotions and reshaped his approach to the natural environment. Known as the interpreter of Kant’s moral and political philosophy, Hill wrote on respect, dignity, and justice among other moral themes (**Thomas, 2022**). Seeing his ‘wealthy eccentric’ neighbour cut down a lovely tree to pave his way with asphalt as an economical strategy made Hill wonder ‘what sort of person would do that?’, rather than ‘whose rights have been violated?’ or ‘how has this action minimized overall happiness?’ (**Hill, cited in Cafaro, 2015: 1–2**). It was the first time Hill questioned the character of a human being regarding a nonhuman entity rather than just considering the possible rights-based or utilitarian underpinnings behind such unmindful action. The environmental epiphany of seeing the tree being cut down left him ‘puzzled over how to explain his own intuitions regarding the wrongness of such situation’ (*Ibid.* 1). Small as it might seem, that scene made Hill wonder why there was nothing more behind his discomfort and why humankind was solely concerned about the potential use and enjoyment of the natural world. It also made him conjure up memories of human alteration of the Appalachian wilderness (**Hill, 1983: 1**). Undoubtedly then, that scene was so unexpected that it further deepened his reflection upon the interplay between human character and the environment.

A final example of ‘Aha’ moments activating new environmental mindsets can be found in the life of the French-German philosopher Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965).<sup>i</sup> As mentioned in his autobiography, Schweitzer was born to a practising Christian family in Upper Alsace. He pursued his higher education in France and Germany before he got a PhD on the religious philosophy of Emmanuel Kant (**Schweitzer, 1998: 24–25**) before getting appointed to different academic positions (*Ibid.* 43–81). Years later, he significantly changed his life plans when he decided to become a jungle doctor in Africa to help the needy (*Ibid.* 81–92). While travelling upriver on a barge in equatorial Africa, ‘at the very moment when, at sunset, [he and his wife] were making [their] way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon [his] mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase reverence for life’ (**Schweitzer, cited in Desjardins, 2013: 155**). As further explained by the philosophy professor Joseph

Desjardins, that epiphanic moment triggered in Schweitzer a spiritual mix of wonder and awe at nature. Translated from the German phrase *Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*, reverence for life, for Schweitzer, is based on the compulsion to value all other organisms which are capable of development by preserving them and promoting their well-being (**Ibid: 155**). Such revelatory experiences, according to the American historian Philip Ivanhoe, produce humility, obliterate arrogance towards nature, and warn against objectifying and disenchanting practices (**Ivanhoe, cited in Jordan & Kristjánsson, 2016: 13**). In this light, Schweitzer's worry that material progress in Europe would not be accompanied by ethical progress (**Schweitzer, 1998: 148**) vanished with that mind-blowing more-than-human scene because he finally found that the feeling of reverence for life was the answer (**Ibid: 155**). Schweitzer was mindful of the natural environment even before this scene. Still, his realization that we can become ethical only when we consider life as sacred to us, and only when we devote ourselves to supporting all life in need of help, was a new insight gained through this epiphanic experience (**Ibid: 157**).

To wrap up, these reflections on environmental epiphanies came at a time when international parties were meeting at the COP26 conference in Glasgow to make sure that the promises of the Paris Accord were kept.<sup>ii</sup> The 2015 Paris Accord set a goal to keep the global mean surface temperature below 2°C. Introducing a democratic innovation, this Accord stipulated that 'member states decide individually, in the form of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), what actions they will commit to taking toward the common goal of climate risk reduction.' (**Lawrence & Schäfer: 2018, Abstract**). Countries were then expected to stick to their commitments through these NDCs. Still, inspiring global climate action needs a particular type of awareness that does not occur only through official meetings and detailed action plans which do not usually lead to big results for different reasons. Some polluting countries might step out of climate agreements at any time (the case of the US threat of withdrawal under Trump administration), and unexpected events might slow down the process of coordination and create a rebound in global carbon dioxide emissions (the case of the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic) (**Tollefson, 2021**). In light of this, environmental awareness through unexpected encounters with the natural environment can be a primordial step to meet the big challenges of the 21st century provided this gets popularised worldwide as part of sustainability education programs. This might not only transform our view of sustainability from being a burden to being a resource, as Jordan and Kristjánsson (**2016: 20**) highlight but might also transform our view of the natural world altogether. This is supported by a study of fifty American adults revealing that 80% of them reported drastic changes in their attitudes, values, or

behaviour after experiencing environmental epiphanies (Vining & Merrick, 2018: 164). What about you? Have you ever come across a strong unexpected scene, like a heart-breaking view of a wounded animal, the fall of an ancient giant tree, or a majestic natural view that has opened your eyes to the value of nature?<sup>iii</sup>

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### Editor's Note

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<sup>i</sup> 'Aha' is a German and English exclamatory expression of surprise at discovering something. Vining and Merrick call it a 'lightbulb' moment (2018: 165).

<sup>ii</sup> The Conference of the Parties (COP26) took place from 31 October to 12 November 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> This contribution might pave the way for new lines of thought, namely the experience of environmental epiphany in different parts of the world as well as the possibility to have this experience in other natural environments such as the deserts, the world summits, or the Earth from Space.

<sup>iv</sup> Available at: <https://arcadiana.easlce.eu/2021/12/04/the-experience-of-environmental-epiphany-in-the-lives-of-a-leopold-t-hill-and-a-schweitzer/>