



Essay

More-than-Human Ethics: A Complex Issue

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Abstract

This article explores the ecological crisis as a multidimensional phenomenon that engages humanity at an existential and therefore philosophical level. Starting from the recognition of the authentic human condition, as that of a being deeply rooted in an ecosystem whose balance sustains its well-being, it argues for moving beyond the anthropocentric fallacy that has driven humankind to pursue its dream of Promethean domination. Rather, the complex nature of the human being, at once biological and cultural, carries a message of universal solidarity. In ignoring this message, humanity has betrayed its true identity: that of a steward of life understood in its universal dimension. As a conscious part of nature, humanity is entrusted with caring for it, adopting a more-than-human ethics grounded in respect and love for the relationships that connect all things within the web of life. This calls for revisiting the anthropological question through a systemic lens, opening onto an alternative epistemological and ontological perspective, one that allows us to rethink humanity's relationship with the entire ecosphere and imagine a different way of co-dwelling on Earth.

Keywords: ecological crisis; ecosystem; complexity; reductionism; dwelling; global relationship; responsibility; eco-ethics

1. Introduction

The urgent need to rethink the relationship between human beings, other living beings, and the ecosystem resonates widely across contemporary scientific and philosophical debate. The emergence of the ecological question, namely the need to properly understand the relationship between the Earth and living species as interconnected parts of a complex and unified system, now calls upon us to reject reductionist and mechanistic approaches to an environment that is neither a reifiable resource nor a system to be managed purely through technical means.

Scientists are by no means inclined to acknowledge that the world has become impoverished in their hands [1]. What they describe is a disenchanted world and, as such, one that can be manipulated [2]. However, their ambition to present us with an overly simplistic universe, ordered according to synchronic laws, now appears decidedly unattainable. Scientific evidence itself currently attests to the diachronic development of an ever-evolving universe, of which human beings are a truly integral part [3]. Nevertheless, through the cultural evolution that characterises its species, humanity has become estranged from the very cosmos in which it was born. Even while still sensing the cosmos as secretly intimate [4], humans have transformed science into an instrument of control and power over it [5]. Indeed, with the emerging state of today's technological society, it is time to recognise that the natural environment no longer exists. The only environment that remains is the artificial environment of humankind.



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Yet now, more than ever, a vivid awareness of the unity between humankind and nature has come powerfully to the fore of collective consciousness. Growing environmental concerns are making it increasingly clear that human beings are putting their own survival at risk by degrading the environment to which they belong [6]. It is therefore possible to assert, in light of this increasing ecological awareness, that any creature that prevails over its environment is destroying itself [7].

Respect for life, in its global sense, is clearly inherent in human nature itself, and in its distinctive evolutionary trajectory: that of a being that is as much biological as it is cultural, which has interacted with the environment through technics since its origins. Human beings cannot deny their multifaceted constitution without annihilating themselves.

In choosing to ignore the message of universal solidarity inherent in nature's very structure, humanity betrays its role as a steward of life. In this way, the failure to respect the intrinsic value of every thread of the web of life, within which humanity itself is woven, has sustained its dream of Promethean domination. In doing so, it has undermined its own autonomy and, with it, the freedom to pursue humanity's true intrinsic purpose: to cultivate love and care for the relationships that connect all things.

Respect and love are therefore the two principles that shape the web that binds us to the whole of life; one in which our action should be guided by a third fundamental principle: responsibility. The question of our relationship with the world is, on reflection, eminently ethical, because it requires us to consider a relation defined above all by the power we are now capable of exercising over nature itself. Such power directly engages our sense of responsibility [5].

On this view, the ecological crisis emerges as a multidimensional crisis; a *polycrisis*¹ [9,10], which confronts us above all at an existential level. It therefore challenges the way we dwell on Earth and calls for philosophical reflection: we can no longer settle for purely technical answers that address isolated problems [11], while neglecting the deeper anthropological roots of the real issues that the global system is facing².

On this basis, the anthropological question should be revisited through a systemic lens capable of opening onto a different epistemological and ontological perspective, thereby extending the boundaries of what is ethically relevant. This entails recognising global relationship as the web within which the meaningful coordinates of existence are woven as an ethical programme. The environment is not merely a resource, nor is it simply the context for human life, but rather the system of which humanity is a part and with which it co-evolves.

2. From the Epistemological to the Ethical Perspective

The debate that has arisen from reflecting upon the emergence of a new anthropological scenario, in which human beings appear as an uncontrollable telluric force capable of altering the evolution of the planet [13], inevitably assumes tones that are no longer exclusively techno-scientific, but also historical, political, and above all philosophical. Scholars of every discipline are challenged by the questions raised by the expanding human footprint on our planet. Ultimately, it falls to philosophy to restore a horizon of meaning to these complex landscapes; one where humanity may find its identity in a continual openness to the task of giving meaning to reality and morally caring for it [14].

If the ecological crisis is thus primarily a matter for human beings, and the way they dwell on Earth, and they now face a single complex crisis³, a socio-environmental *polycrisis*, it becomes necessary to return to humankind itself in order to set a paradigmatic anthropological revolution in motion.

Philosophy is then, once again, called upon to play a key role in interpreting the current ecological question: it can clarify the concepts that may guide us towards the development

of a paradigm that is capable of addressing the issue. It is upon reflection of the true human condition that philosophy can now provide us with the tools to understand the present, by rethinking the past, and in order to imagine a different future. Environmental issues ultimately compel us to investigate the ontological status of nature and human beings' place within it. In this sense, "dwelling" reveals its ontological meaning, serving as a bridge between the ontological sphere and the practical one [16].

Envisioning a more coherent way of dwelling on Earth today, remembering that it is *our home and our garden* [10], means accepting a worldview consistent with an ethical paradigm that opens onto a more-than-human perspective, or more precisely, *an ethics of the Earth* [17]. Such reflection can take shape only within a horizon of meaning illuminated by a renewed capacity to show respect, love, and responsibility towards all other living beings.

To this end, it is essential to move beyond the dichotomy between Promethean and Orphic attitudes towards nature [18]: there is no need to persist in subjugating it through technics, nor is there a need to simply try to intuit its secrets. Once we are fully conscious that nature is not hostile to human beings, but rather that it is the whole of which they are a part, then we ought to understand that lifting the veil of Isis means accepting that there is something radically mysterious and problematic in the origin of reality itself, just as in the existence of human beings in the world.

Indeed, the history of humanity consists of the history of our dwelling on Earth [19]. This inevitably entails a profound interaction with nature and with the ecosystem as a whole. So much so that, faced with ecological guilt, we eventually witness a reversal of roles, where human beings are revealed as the true victims of the severing of their bonds with the real world [20].

It should be noted that a genuinely ecological perspective, based on the principle of interdependence [21]—grounded in the fact that everything is interconnected—necessarily calls for a systemic and historical philosophy [22,23], one that is capable of conceiving knowledge of reality as organised wholes of interacting elements. This allows us to imagine a transition from ethics to eco-ethics⁴ [26].

Such a view suggests the need to develop an ideal theoretical framework that accommodates this new ethical paradigm, bearing in mind that ethics, understood as a critical reflection aimed at providing guidance in the sphere of human practice, is shaped by the way we perceive ourselves and the world. Accordingly, if we reconsider the human condition in light of an ecological worldview, the paradigm of thought from which we determine the scope of moral relevance is inevitably transformed.

2.1. The Systemic Lens

The issue is best addressed first from an epistemological standpoint since it is impossible to appreciate the complexity of the human being by thinking in a disjunctive way that conceives humanity in isolation, separate from the cosmos that surrounds it and the matter which forms us [27]. Grasping the true human condition and its essence therefore requires a process of reorienting our understanding towards the principles that govern life itself, consistent with an evolutionary rationality⁵ capable of recognising the emerging meanings from the constant interweaving of the web of life. Only an understanding that is capable of taking context and interconnectedness into account can foster solidarity and responsibility, which constitute the true sources of ethics [28].

If we consider the development of the relationship between humankind and nature through the transformations of Western science, it becomes clear that, starting from an original mythic-religious cognitive attitude [19], modern understanding has ultimately confined the world to a mechanical structure. It has detached the world from time, history, and becoming, reducing it to a mechanism governed by a few universal laws⁶.

The divorce between humankind and nature ultimately stems from the calculating rationality enshrined by classical science which, in pursuing the myth of omniscience, seeks to attain an absolute point of view; one that can be achieved only through a position of abstract separation from the context. It is from here that the modern dissociation between subject and object originates. By separating the knowing subject from the known object, the mechanistic gnoseological paradigm isolates humanity from its environment⁷, and undermines awareness of its belonging to nature and of the place it occupies within it. This mutilating approach reduces nature to reified objectivity [2] and emancipates human beings from any responsibility towards it. In this way, it legitimises a predatory attitude that has caused the degeneration into the current ecological crisis. Modern science has given us control over nature at the cost of a disenchanted world and promotes the initiation of Baconian nexus of knowledge and power: the world is placed at humanity's disposal.

However, it is often overlooked that Nature, beyond being *physis*, is also what binds, articulates and brings the anthropological, the biological, and the physical together. It therefore becomes necessary to rediscover Nature in order to find our own selves [31]. By becoming aware of the cultural dimension of the ecological crisis, we understand the need to redefine the meaning of the relationship between humankind and nature within a systemic mindset.

As Pope Francis observes in his second Encyclical Letter, *Laudato si'*, in 2015, fully understanding the ecological crisis requires acknowledging its human roots, which lie in the hegemony of the technocratic paradigm, an expression of a logic grounded in domination, and in the worship of unlimited human power [32].

Thus, behind the crisis of our age that is now unfolding lies the overall failure of the gnoseological paradigm of instrumental rationality [33]. Within this horizon of meaning, perhaps the time has come to abandon the mechanistic and reductionist paradigm which, under the banner of a naturalistic ontology whose defining feature is separation [34], confines a wholly alienated human being within the world of mute matter, as described by Monod [35]. The web of life remains invisible to the myopic gaze of a calculating and instrumental way of thinking, which teaches us to proceed through rupture and disjunctions where reality instead presents continuity and connections. Conversely, we ought to cultivate a conjunctive rather than disjunctive logic, one capable of restoring to us a systemic perspective [36] through a different approach to knowledge, such as that promoted by Complexity thinking [37–39]⁸.

An honest consideration of the complex set of environmental issues, focused on the study of the implications and effects of human actions on nature, brings us to the full awareness that effective solutions cannot be achieved without a preliminary ecological conversion. At this critical juncture, we can draw support from philosophy, calling on it to provide a theoretical framework in keeping with the human condition. For even though humanity has, having recently evolved from a branch of the animal world, subjugated the animal and plant life, it nonetheless remains intimately dependent on the biosphere for its survival.

For this reason, the unprecedented global scale of today's issues calls into question the very definition of human identity and therefore cannot be addressed by local and contingent responses. In this sense, there is an urgent need to change course [40] by ushering in a new paradigm of thought. It is naive to believe that specific technical solutions can address problems when they are considered in isolation, neutralising them within the usual mechanistic approach. This leaves us subjugated by the very logic of the technocratic paradigm. Instead, what is required now is a move into an integral dimension. To seek only a technical remedy for every environmental problem that presents itself is to

isolate things that are in reality connected, and to obscure the true and deeper problems of the global system [41].

2.2. *The Global Relationship: Towards a More-than-Human Ethics*

If the ancient alliance between humankind and nature has been broken, then overcoming modernity now means gaining access to a higher level of awareness, through a process that, beginning with the negation that has made us strangers to the world, turns, through a new synthesis, towards the affirmation of a more conscious dialogue.

Moreover, that ancient sense of belonging that has always made us feel at home in the cosmos, knowing that what is good lies in the harmony among its parts, now reaches us also through the medium of scientific discoveries. In fact, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, innovative scientists working at the cutting edge have been rediscovering the integral nature of reality, shifting private experiences from the domain of unverifiable intuition into the realm of public, interpersonal, and verifiable knowledge [3]. And yet, science will probably never be able to provide a sufficiently deep explanation for our experience of the natural world [41].

Once we adopt the perspective of complexity, in which there is no dualism between humans and nature, it becomes clear that any change we trigger within the system produces a new overall configuration to which we will have to adapt. In other words, once duality falls away, the problems themselves change [42].

This brings to light the scientific and philosophical coordinates through which it becomes possible to access an epistemological and ontological perspective that allows us to rethink the role of human beings within the ecosphere [16]. Indeed, in systemic thought, the metaphor of knowledge [18] takes the form of the image of the network, rather than the building [43], revealing itself to be a revolutionary epistemological tool. As a model of organisation shared by all living systems [21], this image thus takes on ontological significance [34,44].

A theoretical constellation has therefore taken shape, capable of incorporating that ecological paradigm which, from an ethical standpoint, now calls for upholding the well-being of the entire ecosystem as the supreme value.

In the 1970s, with the development of so-called 'environmental ethics' [45], the ecological question began to take shape also as a moral issue. The theoretical assumption of the dominant anthropocentric view was thus called into question: namely, that only human beings are morally relevant, to the extent that any abusive attitude towards the environment has no intrinsic disvalue so long as it does not harm the human species. Yet even if the nature of value is anthropogenic, insofar as it is situated in a horizon of meaning that emerges from the exercise of ethical judgement, a distinctly human capacity, this does not imply that human beings should only direct such judgement exclusively towards themselves [46].

Once we become firmly aware of the ecological perception that all living beings are members of communities bound to one another in a network of deeply interdependent relationships, a radically new ethical system emerges⁹. This system inevitably leads to a commitment on the part of human beings to recognise their moral obligations towards a nature understood as a good to be protected in itself, not merely as a means to an end. Such an approach to knowledge therefore gives the environmental question a specific ethical connotation.

The basis for this rethinking of ethics is precisely to redefine the scope of ethical relevance, insofar as it encompasses a community that is not only human but also terrestrial. In Western tradition, by contrast, the sphere of ethical concern has long been confined exclusively to the realm of relations among human beings. From the ecoethical point of

view, the meaning of human action must be considered in a relational context; one of essential interdependence with the ecosystem.

In essence, eco-ethics embraces the well-being of the ecosystem as an intrinsically foundational ethical value, thereby promoting the emergence of an ecological humanism, under which humanity can recognise itself as an integral part of a system of complex relationships. The future of humanity can therefore be considered in conjunction with that of nature, as they are inextricably linked, by undertaking a genuine paradigm shift that overturns our traditional system of values [48].

It is also worth specifying that the way in which eco-ethics conceives and values life, both human and non-human, within the global relationship, finds its foundation in a systemic approach to knowledge and ethics. This is a novel perspective, capable of reconciling and thereby moving beyond both the anthropocentric interpretation, which is tied exclusively to an instrumental view directed towards the survival of the human species as dependent on the entire biotic community, and the biocentric interpretation¹⁰, purely anchored in an ontological foundation of meaning¹¹.

By identifying intrinsic ends in the systemic wholes that emerge from the complex of relationships between the parts, rather than only in individual beings, there arises the affirmation of a more radical value: one capable of encompassing the various possible nuances and understood as the manifestation of a meaningful relationship. This value surpasses the need to refer either to extrinsic conditions or to assert a moral meaning in itself. It gives rise to the need to recognise the moral fullness of systemic wholes: for human beings, the home and dwelling is the global relationship.

Therefore, an awareness of the intrinsic relatedness between each being and every other being automatically gives rise to a different picture of reality: one which projects the positive value of interconnection from the ontological to the ethical perspective [50] and fosters an *ecosophical* reflection [51]. According to Arne Næss, the founder of deep ecology [12], *ecosophy*¹² [52–54] is, in fact, a philosophical system of the world inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere and, as such, one that takes into account the ecological responsibilities of human beings. In this sense, it becomes important to reactivate that *ecological self* [55] that speaks to us of our fundamental openness to the other and to the whole, since the individual and the environment can only be thought of separately through abstraction. However, in reality, they exist only in the complexity of interaction. Fritjof Capra, physicist and systems theorist, and founder of the *Center for Ecoliteracy* in Berkeley, California, also explains that the power of abstract thought has led us to consider the natural environment as though it consisted of separate parts, which, by alienating us from Nature, has diminished us. At this point, in order to regain our full human nature, we may need to reactivate the experience of connection with the entire web of life, which is the true essence of the spiritual foundation of deep ecology [21].

Adopting a systemic view allows us to restore the parts to the whole, and reintegrate human beings to their environment, thereby moving beyond the dichotomous logic that sustains the traditional opposition between subject and object, humankind and nature. Indeed, the first piece of knowledge that is important to grasp if we are to find a new path to follow is that of the true human condition as a part of a larger system, on whose balance our own well-being also depends.

An ecologised way of thinking, therefore, revolves around an eco-auto-relational perspective, which prevents us from thinking reductionistically about a static environment and living beings as isolated from their environment. In Western culture, however, the concept of the environment was developed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and, unlike that of nature, which was understood as a class of entities, possesses an intrinsically

relational character. An environment always belongs to someone or something: it is a unity that comes into being through its relationship with the living [56].

If everything is connected and we are nodes in a network, then clearly there are no objects that are completely separable. It would therefore be accurate to say that *we live an environment*, rather than *in an environment* [53]. This point of view ends up complexifying every way of thinking and acting, eventually developing into a fully fledged paradigm: the ecological paradigm, which is fundamentally anti-disjunctive, anti-reductive and anti-simplifying [57].

When we reinterpret the human condition in light of an ecological perspective, ethics must ultimately be the expression of the imperative of *reliance* [58]: a neologism¹³ adopted by Morin to indicate the dynamic nature of a bond that sets in motion an alliance rooted in the physical, biological and even cosmic destiny of the human being. Therefore, every ethical act is, in fact, an act of *reliance* with humanity and with the ecosystem, and within a cosmic *reliance* [58].

3. From Domination to Care: Enlightened Anthropocentrism

The ecologist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), a pioneer of environmentalist thought [59], had already emphasised the importance of rethinking humanity's relationship with nature in the first half of the twentieth century, promoting the birth of a *land ethic* [17], a concept that was authoritatively advocated by the American oncologist Van Rensselaer Potter (1911–2001), founder of global bioethics¹⁴, a perspective that resonates more than ever in the contemporary era [61].

Leopold hoped for the advent of an ethic that governed humanity's relationship with the land, animals, and plants, grounded in the recognition that, if it is not to compromise its own survival at this stage in its evolution, humanity must develop a sense of radical solidarity towards the global community.

According to Leopold, adopting an ethical attitude means curbing one's freedom in the competitive process of evolution and culturally fostering socially beneficial behaviour. It therefore becomes urgent for humanity to acknowledge its condition as to one of belonging to a community of mutually interacting parts.

In conclusion, a *land ethic* transforms the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the Earth community into a simple member and citizen. This entails respect for the other members of that community, as well as respect for the community as such [17,62]. This gives rise to the need for critical reflection on human knowledge so as to bring humanity to embrace its true condition, to rethink the meaning of limits, and learn to exercise power consciously [6].

Throughout human history, it has become clear that it is impossible to aspire to the role of conqueror without falling into one's own self-destruction, for such a role requires a true understanding of the rules by which the community functions and of the purpose of each part of the system. It is precisely because human beings do not have a real grasp of any of these things that conquests ultimately turn into defeats [17].

If, as Leopold argues, ethics is an evolving community instinct, we are now called to take the third and final step. The first and second stages of *the ethical sequence* have already been fulfilled, concerning respectively the rules that govern the relationship between individuals and those that govern the relationship between individuals and society. It is now time for ethics to focus on developing the principles that govern the relationship between human beings and the land, animals, and plants [17]. According to Leopold, embarking on this stage of ethics is not only an evolutionary possibility, but also an *ecological necessity* [17]. We are now aware that there is a close interrelationship between all parts of the ecosystem; one which humanity cannot ignore, and which requires the

adoption of an ethic of respect for every form of life¹⁵, thereby capable of grasping the inextricable connection between human interests and environmental values [57].

As regards the need to promote the transition to the third stage of ethics, we now know that Fritz Jahr (1895–1953), a German Protestant theologian, philosopher, and educator, had already expressed this view. In particular, in a 1927 editorial [66] titled *Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze* [Bioethics: a reflection on the ethical relationship between humans and plants and animals], concerning the ethical relationship between human beings and the plant and animal world, Jahr refers to what he would have liked to have become the bioethical imperative: *Respect every living being on principle as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such* [66–71].

Respect for every expression of life, rooted in the recognition of the non-instrumental value of nature, is therefore intrinsic to a systemic view of reality. Yet from this same systemic approach there also comes a feeling of connection with the whole, from which love also springs. As Pope Francis observes, the connection of all creatures with one another gives rise to a sense of their value, felt with affection and admiration, since all of us created beings need one another [32]. As stewards, rather than masters, of our common home, human beings are called to care for it¹⁶.

Human Responsibility Towards the Entire System of Life: Against All Reductionism

For human beings, caring for nature means caring for themselves, since the bond that unites them to the world is so close that it conditions their very survival. At the same time, however, it is clear that while all obtuse anthropocentrism must be dismissed, this should not open the door to other forms of reductionism. In rejecting a despotic and distorted anthropocentrism, we should also avoid the risk of slipping into an opposite biocentrism. It is precisely the emphasis on the specific identity of the human being, which values the additional responsibility that this identity introduces, that still enables us to appeal to its commitment to protecting the environment. The systemic view of reality thus introduces, in all its nuances of meaning, the question of the specific responsibility that burdens human existence as a conscious manifestation of nature.

Rejecting the primacy of subjectivity and individuality does not mean denying human beings any form of epistemological or ethical centrality. On the contrary, it is the very awareness that human beings are at the pinnacle of evolution, by virtue of their biological and cultural complexity, that gives rise to the burden of a more articulated responsibility, one that is expressed in the care and preservation of the health of the Earth. Indeed, every form of life expresses an intrinsic value that only humanity, as the source of ethics, is capable of recognising and obliged to protect. It is, in fact, through the human species that nature expresses its most advanced level of evolution, such that one may agree with Reclus's famous statement: *humanity is nature becoming conscious of itself* [72].

When we consider the ecological crisis, if we cannot ever set humanity aside, then it becomes essential to imagine a new humanism that, by drawing on different fields of knowledge, can promote a more integral and integrating vision [32]. This is the same vision proposed by Van Potter's global bioethics, which can truly present itself as the new language for a different kind of humanitarianism: one that recognises that we are citizens of the world¹⁷, with responsibilities that extend to the entire system of life. Without losing sight of the real configuration of human problems, Potter introduces a perspective that he defines as *enlightened anthropocentrism* [6,59].

Van Rensselaer Potter's work is entirely driven by the intention of opening up a broader ethical perspective: bio-ethics, combining biological facts and human values to promote a better balance between the human species and the rest of the ecosystem [73].

To this end, the scientist hopes to achieve a *knowledge of knowledge* [6,74], which, by combining scientific and humanistic knowledge, can give human beings a higher level of awareness that can guide their behaviour ethically. In this way, Potter seeks to encourage a reflection on knowledge that may be translated into a *science of survival* [75], what Morin defines as a wisdom for one's own life [4].

Having explored the clear connection between knowledge, power, and responsibility, Potter highlights that, in the contemporary era, a time of relentless expansion of humanity's capacities for knowledge, the concept of responsibility will inevitably play a central role in ethical reflection. The task is now to develop a forward-looking responsibility, guided by an ethic of conservation [5,6].

The initial question should therefore be one that asks us not where begins this "power" that humanity has always exercised over a reality of which it is an integral part, by virtue of the abilities that have made it feel "other" to nature, but where it should end. For this reason, Potter believes that every particular human competence should be put at the service of a broader vision, in which a sense of responsibility towards the general well-being is practised. Given the gap between, on the one hand, the enormity of the possibilities opened up by recent techno-scientific developments and, on the other, the limited ability to predict and evaluate their consequences, Potter combines the interconnected concepts of responsibility and humility with bioethics [74].

If, ultimately, human beings are distinguished by their unique ability to organise the information they exchange with the environment at an extraordinary level of abstraction, giving them an exceptional role in the biological world, their task is then not to turn their special aptitude into a threat to life in general, but rather to turn it into a *biological wisdom* [76]¹⁸. Indeed, Potter observes that if it is true that every form of life is an expression of dignity, we human beings, in addition to our dignity have a responsibility, which extends beyond such dignity [77]. Such a form of *practical knowledge*, namely bioethics [6], would teach us to safeguard the well-being of all living beings, while also providing answers about our way of dwelling in the world [78]¹⁹.

4. Conclusions

Despite having risen to the top of nature, humanity still remains a part of nature and is subject to the ecological determination to which all life is subject [56]. In fact, humanity's ecological dependence increases in direct proportion to its independence, since its autonomy grows within that relationship and is nourished by it.

Human society, in striving to conquer the biosphere, cannot escape the biosphere, nor can it evade the fundamental principles of the ecological relationship. Through its global subjugation of the biosphere, humanity has become the hyper-parasite [56] of the living world. With this comes the threat, implicit in the power conveyed by human knowledge, of disintegrating the eco-organisation, a threat which in turn becomes a danger to humanity's own survival precisely as a parasite. The misunderstanding that leads humanity into the anthropocentric fallacy lies in the mistaken perception of the self as confined within the boundaries of one's own skin, ignoring that the possibility of realising its potential requires transcending and deepening one's individuality. Thus, by hindering the self-realisation of others, humanity also hinders its own [55].

Given where we are now, in this Anthropocene era in which the human species has become a geological superpower²⁰, *homo deus* [11] ought seriously to ask itself what it intends to do with its immense power, since *the nature of the conquest of nature* could prove fatal for it²¹. In this sense, the perspective of complexity also provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the interpretation and use of this power, beginning with a different way of

thinking about dwelling on Earth: the environment is not merely a resource, but the reality that welcomes and constitutes us.

Today, we are called upon to interpret the complex socio-ecological challenges facing the planet, strategically reconfiguring the various interests at stake. Now more than ever, we ought to rediscover nature, form a relationship with it and relativise all human problems within its context. But we also need a new praxis that overcomes the crippling limitations of our technology, adapting fully to eco-natural complexities [56].

Taking a systemic view of reality can provide the epistemological and ontological foundation for rethinking the relationship between human beings and nature and for guiding human behaviour [82], insofar as it dissolves the dangerous antinomies that run through Modern thought. At the same time, however, the specificity of the human condition cannot be denied. Instead, it is enhanced: the argument appeals precisely to this additional awareness that, in human beings, translates into an explicit assumption of responsibility towards all forms of life.

The call to care for our common home ultimately stems from the scientific and, at the same time, ethical understanding that environmental problems and human needs are intimately and inevitably connected. Each of us has our own terrestrial identity card: we come from Earth, we belong to Earth, and we dwell on Earth [10]. Beyond vain narcissistic illusions, every individual existence is shaped by our being woven into the fragility of the bonds and the shared world of which we are a part [34]. Understanding the human condition therefore means accepting that we belong to a community of destiny shared by humankind and nature and recognising that the fate of humanity is collectively at stake across the globe [40]. This inevitably implies embracing the telluric responsibility that derives from our terrestrial matrix [10]. This is clearly a responsibility that humanity cannot in any way evade, since it characterises its very existential condition, and is today fuelled by a more discerning understanding of the real issues [83].

As citizens of the Earth community, we are in fact inscribed in a planetary consciousness [84]. From this follows the commitment to recognise ethical dignity in new subjects hitherto unacknowledged, who, as full members of the moral community, call for the assumption of a responsibility directed towards safeguarding their well-being and their very possibility of existence: future generations and the Earth as an ecosystem [5,6].

In conclusion, there is no ecology without an adequate anthropology, for to diminish the role of humanity within nature also means running the risk of weakening the awareness of its responsibility. One cannot demand a conscious commitment to the world from human beings without at the same time recognising their distinct capacities for knowledge, willpower, freedom, and responsibility [32]. Therefore, rather than environmental ethics, it would perhaps be better to refer to *human ecology*, so as not to neglect the anthropological dimension [85].

Without indulging in various forms of ideological tribalism or straying into *New Age* visions, and instead maintaining a perspective of *enlightened anthropocentrism* [6], it is now clear that caring for our common home is, both in fact and in principle, one of humanity's priorities, and among its specific responsibilities.

Finally, if it is true that we cannot be cured of the condition of belonging to the world, through care we can, however, be cured of the belief that we do not belong to it, that what is essential lies elsewhere [86]. In addition to respect, love and responsibility towards Homeland Earth, it would thus be fitting for human beings to learn to cultivate a certain reverence for their planet, given that Gaia may well prove rather merciless towards those who transgress her rules [87]. As Potter says, perhaps the beginning of wisdom lies in *fear* [6].

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Notes

- ¹ On the polycrisis as a compass for steering transformational pathways, see [8].
- ² As Næss explains, deep ecology differs from shallow ecology due to the radical nature of the questions it asks [12].
- ³ See [15], where it is emphasized that the concept of polycrisis underscores that interdisciplinary approaches are essential for addressing interconnected global challenges.
- ⁴ On the need to move beyond environmental bioethics toward a more encompassing ecoethical approach, see [24]. For a discussion concerning the emergent necessity of a planetary health bioethics see [25].
- ⁵ On the project of modern science aimed at promoting the myth of an ahistorical reason, which abstracts every phenomenon from its context in order to objectify it, see [2].
- ⁶ Edgar Morin [29] writes that Western science was founded on the positivist elimination of the subject based on the idea that objects, existing independently of the subject, could be observed and explained as such. The idea of a universe of objective facts, stripped of all value judgements by means of the experimental method, enabled the prodigious development of modern science, ultimately painting a bleak picture in which the subject is perceived either as noise, or in other words, a disturbance and error that must be eliminated in order to achieve objective knowledge, or as the mirror of the objective universe.
- ⁷ For an interpretation of the concept of environment in its historical development, see [30].
- ⁸ Complexity theory questions the epistemological attitude conveyed by Western rationality in its drift expressed by the absolutisation of calculating reason, which, despite the remarkable successes achieved at the technical and scientific level, proves otherwise inadequate for grasping the real meaning of life.
- ⁹ For an attempt to formulate a comprehensive set of ethical principles for navigating emerging environmental challenges, see [47].
- ¹⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between the concepts of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism, see [46].
- ¹¹ On this point, see the arguments advanced in [49].
- ¹² According to Naess, for ecosophy, the vast complex of interrelationships is a characteristic of our existence, which we cannot always grasp due to our severely limited knowledge. However, the connection with the whole is experienced and conceived as a positive value. We participate in it and take care of it [52].
- ¹³ According to the definition provided in the Glossary, the notion of *reliance*, coined by the sociologist Marcel Bolle de Bal, fills a conceptual gap by giving substantive status to what had previously been conceived only adjectivally and by conferring an active character on this noun. *Relié* (bound) is passive; *reliant* (binding) is participatory; *reliance* (binding) is activating. One may also speak of *deliance* (unbinding) as the opposite of *reliance* [58].
- ¹⁴ On the specific consonance between the concept of integral ecology introduced in Pope Francis' encyclical [32] and Van Potter's reflections on global bioethics, see [60].
- ¹⁵ Reawakening ecological awareness, in keeping with an ancient practice of acceptance towards the true nature of existence, means mobilising that ethic of absolute *reverence* for life which Albert Schweitzer sought to promote, in contrast to the mechanistic and materialistic view of a fragmented and de-spiritualised nature conveyed by the paradigm of modern science [63]. On the concept of inherent worth as the result of a moral attitude towards nature, see [64,65].
- ¹⁶ The theme of *care* is closely connected to the line of inquiry advanced, particularly with regard to the concept of "integral ecology" [32], which calls for fostering our common home on the basis of the vulnerability shared by all the inhabitants of this Earth and the recognition of our profound interconnectedness. Moreover, as an anonymous reviewer aptly noted, the question of an ethics "beyond the human" could be approached from many other valuable perspectives, including feminist ethics, animal ethics, plant ethics, and multispecies-ethics. In my view, these approaches are fully compatible with the theoretical framework presented in this essay. However, given their significance, each would require a dedicated and in-depth treatment of its own.
- ¹⁷ The perspective opened up by Van Rensselaer Potter's global bioethics can foster a paradigmatic shift toward ecological literacy, grounded in the recognition that we are citizens of the world and, as Edgar Morin argues, belong to a shared community of destiny embracing both humanity and nature [10]. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the remarkable convergence between the thought of Van Rensselaer Potter and that of Edgar Morin. While Potter seeks to develop a humanistic biology [6], Morin advocates the integration of biology and anthropology, nature and culture, thereby overcoming the rigid dichotomies of the

mechanistic paradigm [29]. Both thinkers begin from the premise that human beings are embedded within their environment and form part of a wider ecosystem on which their well-being and survival depend. They therefore call for an expanded conception of ethics that acknowledges the biocultural nature of the human species. Reaffirming humanity's rootedness within the ecosystem entails recognizing a general acceptance of responsibility toward life in all its forms. As Morin observes, we can no longer sustain the illusion that human beings have an essence entirely distinct from that of other living beings, since we are inseparably part of life itself [28]. The paradigm of Complexity makes it possible to develop an ecological understanding of reality that reinterprets the relationship between human beings and other living entities within a broader ethical horizon. Through its systemic approach, complex thought teaches us to recognize the web of relationships that constitutes us and to conceive of ourselves as relational beings interconnected with other entities within the ecosystem. This epistemological shift gives the environmental question an explicitly ethical significance by requiring recognition of humanity's moral responsibilities toward nature as a good possessing intrinsic, and not merely instrumental, value. Morin also emphasizes the connection between contemporary scientific developments and the emergence of a genuine ecological consciousness [57]. The awareness that we belong to the Earth's wider community of life calls for deriving a normative principle from an ecological one. The circular relationship between intellectual and moral knowledge, science and ethics, knowledge and duty [58], thus points to the need for a new moral order capable of transcending particular cultural frameworks while rejecting the modern assumption that individuals can be isolated from their environment and nature reduced to an inert resource. From this perspective, understanding the human being means not separating humanity from the universe but situating it within it. Although humanity has subordinated both animal and plant life, it nevertheless remains vitally dependent upon the biosphere by virtue of its earthly, physical, and biological identity [4]. Within the same theoretical framework, Potter's global bioethics provides a privileged avenue for reviving a reflective practice grounded in a complex understanding of the human condition as simultaneously physical, biological, psychological, cultural, social, and historical. Since knowledge should account for all these dimensions, Potter sought to establish the epistemological foundations of a new interdisciplinary field, which he called bioethics [10]. In his view, morality must be rethought through the close interrelationship between nature and culture, biology and ethics. It is therefore no coincidence that Morin regards Potter's perspective as a genuinely theoretical and practical form of knowledge capable of responding to the principles underlying life itself [4]. Potter's bioethics thus integrates biological knowledge with human values, overcoming the traditional separation between the scientific and the humanistic domains. In this sense, bioethics is conceived as a bridge both between the two cultures and between humanity and the environment [6].

- 18 For this concept, which he discusses at length in his 1988 essay [76], Potter acknowledges his debt to the British biologist Conrad Hal Waddington.
- 19 For a reading of planetary ethics as a form of wisdom for inhabiting the Earth, rooted in the frameworks of Van Rensselaer Potter and Edgar Morin, see [79].
- 20 In contrast to the restrictive anthropocentrism and technocentrism of the dominant discourse on the Anthropocene, Kelly instead speaks of the "Gaianthropocene" as our new geological epoch. It is an epoch in which, even as humanity faces the existential trial of planetary initiation, we can awaken to our deepest nature as living members of Gaia, the living Earth in and through which we have our being [80].
- 21 On this subject, Van Rensselaer Potter's reflections on *the fatal flaw* of evolution are noteworthy: namely, the biological mechanism whereby a species that has achieved a high degree of adaptation to its environment becomes incapable of making long-term predictions, thereby exposing itself to the risk of rapid extinction, as has already occurred in the past. By contrast, the distinctive nature of the human species could make it the only one capable of directing the mechanisms of environmental adaptation towards survival. On this point, see [81].

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