

Ecophilosophy in a Nutshell

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The writer Thomas Berry once said that the 20th century was the time when the glory of the human at last became the desolation of the Earth. Now, in the 21st century, our time has come to ask anew, and vigorously: *Who are we humans really in relation to this larger Earth?* What human institutions, activities, and programs can we shape today that will help us foster a different kind of human-Earth relationship, one that is not marked by systematic exploitation but that is mutually beneficial? What new stories can we tell of our place inside this planet?

Berry has also said that it is especially the larger stories, the ones that tell us about our relationship with the more-than-human living community and the cosmos, that are our “primary source of intelligibility and value.” It is through such stories that a person will “come to appreciate the meaning of life or to derive the psychic energy needed to deal effectively with those crisis moments that occur in the life of the individual and in the life of the society.” And, says Berry, the flip side of the coin holds true as well: “The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.” A growing number of philosophers and Earth-scientists are now beginning to recognize that the many *ecological crises* we are witnessing in our days are symptoms of a more fundamental *crisis of perception*; they are symptoms of an outdated worldview or story.

We inhabitants of industrial civilization still live inside a story which first took a firm foothold in 17th century Europe. The story articulates itself in the ways we speak, what we think, how we listen, what we hear. It expresses itself in our legal, political, and economic institutions. It gives structure to the way we conceive of, and inhabit, both space and time. It shapes our encounters with other-than-human living creatures as well as with the larger planetary presence as a whole. This is the story of the human as a separate self, or of the human as apex. It is also known as anthropocentrism.

Ecophilosophy, as a school of thought, works in close dialog with other disciplines such as ecology, biology, or geology. What we are seeing is that through this cross-pollination, “nothing less than a radically new conception of life” is now emerging, as the systems scientists Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi have recently written. This new understanding of life no longer understands Earth as a machine composed of discrete building blocks. Instead, it recognizes that Earth can be much more accurately understood as a vast network of finely interwoven *patterns of relationship*. And being fully of this Earth, being fully within this Earth, humans are woven

deeply, and complexly, into these patterns of relationship, both biologically, cognitively, socially, ecologically.

Ecophilosophy works to unweave such habits of thought that continue to hold humans apart from this vast, windswept Earth community. In this sense, the philosopher David Abram has written that “we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.” To ask anew who we are as humans in relation to the Earth community, then, is to recognize the life of so many others alongside us, such as the great whales, or the expanses of tropical and temperate rainforests, or the great flocks of migrating birds that travel seasonally across the globe. How can we reweave new patterns of thought, new ways of speaking that resonate more fully with what we now are now learning about this living Earth community? How can we speak a language of relationship and complexity? How can we create political and legal institutions that do not ignore or destroy life’s diversity, but that honor and protect it? How can we use the astonishing gift of our creativity, our wit, and our symbolic consciousness to become once more not a disturbance, but an integral participant of Earth’s unfolding? How can we build cultures that are fully life-affirming?

The philosopher Neil Evernden has written that “man’s freedom lies primarily in the choosing of his ‘story’, rather than his actions within that story.” Therein lies our responsibility, and also our hope: We are not determined to be agents of destruction. We do not have to accept ways of living that destroy the continuity of life.

Incidentally, ‘human’, the word, has an astonishing linguistic ancestry: Its etymology shows that it is related not only to ‘humus’, and not only to ‘earth’, but also to the word ‘humility’. And does this not mean that a kind of humility in relation to the living Earth at large is utterly basic to being human?

When we act as we do in the modern mode, as if we humans are somehow separate from, or above, Earth, then it seems as if we are not really being human at all. The very gesture we commonly associate with humility is, precisely, this: taking a bow. Turning towards the ground. Moving closer to Earth. Becoming, in this way, more fully human.