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INVITED ARTICLE

Towards a Planetary Ethic of Becoming

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Abstract

(This article explores the emergence of a planetary ethic through engagement with contemporary eco-critical thought, particularly New Materialism and posthumanist discourse. It critically examines modern humanism and globalization, which have reinforced anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, contributing to ecological degradation and the climate crisis. Drawing on thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Donna Haraway, Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett, the article proposes a transition from anthropocentric perspectives toward a planetary ontology that recognizes interconnectedness among humans, nonhuman beings, and material realities. It argues that ethics must move beyond fixed transcendental systems toward an immanent, relational, and dynamic ethics rooted in embodied experiences and ecological interdependence. The article further examines the concept of Earth as an active and self-organizing reality and develops a theological framework for understanding planetary becoming. Such a perspective contributes to contemporary discussions in theology, ecological ethics, and climate

justice by envisioning a more inclusive and relational understanding of life within the Earth community.

Given the fact that human impact upon the world and its inhabitants are still immense, there is a great need for new forms of ethical thought and practice.

—Stacy Alaimo 2011: 283

The philosophy of globalization, intertwined with modern scientific and technological advancements, is rooted in a sense of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. This worldview promotes a political notion of human domination over the Earth and its inhabitants, often referred to as the “Anthropocene.” There is no need to search for additional explanations for the ongoing ecocide and climate crisis. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, globalization is symbolized by a globe that resides on our computer desks, where no one truly occupies space. For her, it represents an epistemological practice of “othering” and “worlding.” Spivak asserts that the planet is far more than this; it embodies a tangible, multi-faceted experience of interconnected life—a planetary ontology.

According to Spivakian planetarity, human beings are not exceptions but rather integral components of a complex and interconnected world—the “Earth Planet.” Donna Haraway calls human beings and nonhuman beings as “companion species.” This evolution in our understanding of planetary identity, as noted by Whitney A. Bauman, signals a shift in ethics, theology, ecology and politics—from an anthropocentric viewpoint to one of planetary humanism. Stacy Alaimo emphasizes that this transition is imperative, as highlighted in the epigraph. This new ethico-political framework finds significance in our material connections and “inter-actions,” as well as in the transient moments that reshape our understanding and lived experiences on this “Earth Planet.”

This essay examines the shift in our ethical understanding, evolving from a notion of “phenomenal love” (love for the other) to “planetary loves,” which challenges the monological concept of love between the self and the other that is often associated with colonization and globalization. Furthermore, it explores a theological foundation for a planetary ethics of becoming in which we affirm our differences along with our connectedness, engaging with contemporary eco-critical thought, particularly New Materialism. New Materialism offers a shift from the Anthropocene to planetary humanism where human beings are placed in the process of becoming planetary creatures.

From Modern Humanism to Planetary Humanism

Paul Crutzen’s concept of the “Anthropocene” highlights the negative effects of human activities on the Earth, illustrating the destructive relationship that modern humanism has with the environment. The core spirit of modernity is closely linked to the expansion of human reason and to

the myth of progress and development. Human supremacy based on the power of the human reason has led modernity to a detrimental edge that rejects the agency of nonhuman beings and matter. The industrialization process initiated by modernity rendered nonhuman beings and matter as instrumental for development and progress, which often justify not only Europe's political dominance over non-Western cultures and peoples but also the human exploitation of the natural world. It is for this reason that Bruno Latour makes the claim that we have to choose now between modernizing and ecologizing.

Postcolonial thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques this Western political process of "othering" and "worlding" the nature as well as non-Western people who live at the other end of globalization. She introduces the concept of "planetary ontology" to affirm the political agency of marginalized entities in the world. Spivak advocates for a sense of "planetary love" that challenges the political project of "otherization" and "worlding," where the dominant forces define the identity of the "subaltern other." This new approach encourages a different way of relating to ourselves and to others, including nonhuman entities.

Furthermore, Spivak critiques traditional Western ethics, which rely on transcendental a priori concepts that validate authoritarianism, anthropocentrism, and the notion of human exceptionalism. She emphasizes the material bases of our relationships with the planet in contrast to the act of globalization. The idea of planetarity underscores the interconnectedness of humanity with other nonhuman life forms, urging us to rethink our understanding of human identity as part of a broader planetary existence.

In line with Spivak, contemporary eco-critical thinkers associated with New Materialism propose a materialistic political ontology of humanity. Timothy Morton calls it "flat Ontology." Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, discusses the political agency of nonhuman beings and highlights the symbiotic connection between human and nonhuman agency. She argues that "human agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like—indeed, that is an agentic assemblage." This radical concept of "agentic assemblage" encourages us to embrace a sense of humanity that transcends division, discrimination, and separation. It represents a vibrant vision of posthumanism.

Gilles Deleuze, the most influential thinker in New Materialism, articulates the essence of posthumanism by stating that "the human becomes more than itself or expands to its highest power, not by affirming its humanity, nor by returning to an animal state, but by becoming hybrid with what is not itself. This creates 'lines of flight'; from life itself, we imagine all the becomings of life, using the human power of imagination to overcome the human." Echoing Deleuze, Whitney Bauman notes that "Planetarity opens up to different ways of becoming human and possibly posthuman."

In summary, planetary humanism invites us to acknowledge our intersubjectivity, bio-historical agency, and the political ontology of connectedness, in contrast to the modern, colonial, and imperial (mono)logic of "othering" and "worlding." Planetary humanism goes beyond traditional humanism; it enhances it by considering its nonhuman entanglements.

From Naïve Earth to Earth Planet

The problem with modern humanism is its exclusive focus on human identity, which results in the denial of agency for nonhuman entities and the Earth itself. This viewpoint has contributed to ecological degradation and the climate crisis. Jacob Signas emphasizes this issue by stating, “The modern humanist ideology has led to an anthropocentrism that overemphasizes rationality, human autonomy, sovereignty, and a sense of separateness from the rest of the world. Such disconnection has facilitated the exploitation and abuse of the non-human world, which has been denied subjectivity and agency, as only humans are regarded as proper subjects.”

In response to modern anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, New Materialists such as Rosi Braidotti, Stacy Alaimo, and Jane Bennett advocate for an agential Earth that affirms the irreducible subjectivity of the Earth itself. The idea of the agential Earth moves beyond the outdated dualities of the human and nonhuman worlds, and of nature and culture and offers a radical vision of an emerging or becoming Earth that is always in the process of reconfiguring itself from within.

According to Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the most influencing thinkers of New Materialism, the agential position of Earth substantiates a radical notion of an Earth ontology that destabilizes the dichotomy between humans and nonhuman identities. It invites us to think with and through the Earth. It is not to objectify the Earth to think about it and care for it from outside, but to think as the Earth thinks about itself. Deleuze and Guattari pose the important question: “Who does the Earth think it is?” This vision of Earth ontology encourages us to think about Earth Planet as a self-organizing life system in which human beings becomes “companion species” (Dona Haraway 2003).

Agential Earth or Earth subjectivity, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not a static subjectivity, but an ever-becoming subjectivity. Earth is a complex self-organizing system in which all species find their home without relinquishing their irreducible singularities. Earth is a multifaceted system of life that never repeats the original life (an idea of a pristine earth), but finds its new form through differentiation. Clayton Crockett asks, “What if we stop thinking about ourselves as subjects and Earth as an object, but turn it around and view Earth as subject and humans as objects, but of a very special kind? Of course, agential Earth is a radical desire to envision life otherwise!

Earth exists as a source of transformative energy, Gaia, as Bruno Latour and James Lovelock call it, which never remains static but reconfigures itself from within. For Deleuze and Guattari, Earth embodies a radical process of being and becoming Earthlings, rejecting transcendental interference in favor of an imminent process that is materialistic rather than mystical. They remind us, “We do not have another Earth; thus, we must transform our relationship with this one, ideally creating a new Earth.”

The transformative energy within the agential Earth is further explained by Deleuze in his work *Difference and Repetition* (1994). Becoming Earth is not just a repetition of the status quo, but is involved in a process of difference. It is nothing but the repetition of differences (for Jacques Derrida, it is *differance*). The differentiation within human beings and between nonhuman beings is a deconstructive as well as a destructive process as it seeks to become radically new beings. Slavoj Žižek calls it “parallax,” which is a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis is possible.” This parallaxal connectivity offers a radical view of life which will radically reflect in our ethical, political, and theological thinking and practice.

In summary, Earth Planet is a radical vision of Earth that engages with the complexity and the interconnectedness of life in it. As Jeffrey W. Robbins and Clayton Crockett contend, “It’s a new way to think about Earth, not as an object of human exploitation or a harmonious womb from which we have become alienated and need to return, but as an intensive space of theological becoming and change.” This perspective marks a shift from environmentalism to political ecology, from “caring for the Earth” to become Earthlings as we find ourselves as “companion species.”

Toward a Planetary Ethics of Becoming

Traditional ethics is built on a fixed system of judgment, often derived from natural laws or *a priori* moral imperatives that come from an external source (transcendence). It is mainly metaphysical and predetermined. In this ethical framework, all entities, including humans and the Earth, play their role according to the predetermined values of morality. In contrast, planetary ethics is situational, pragmatic, and immanent. It is not founded on any transcendental values, but the immanent needs of life. Planetary ethics is not metaphysical; it is materialistic and political. As Brian Massumi states, “Ethics, in this sense, is completely situational. It is completely pragmatic. And it happens between people in the social gap. There is no intrinsic good or evil.”

This new form of ethics is shaped by people’s immediate life experiences and the material necessities of everyday life. It is highly political as it affirms ultimately life over against the forces of death. As Deleuze contends, ethical needs arise from the desire to become, yet what that becoming entails is not predetermined or evaluated in advance, but is open, fluid, and temporal.

Deleuze further argues that this radical ethics prioritizes immanence over transcendence, affirming life as it exists in this world—focused on the realities of existence rather than what lies beyond it. It concerns not only the factual matters of the world but also issues of concern in which truth is circulatory and embodied rather than judgmental and predetermined. As Bruno Latour establishes, knowledge or truth is embedded in the material conditions of life, rather than being distant or abstract; it incorporates non-essentialist perspectives, material practices, and insights from various dispositions.

Following Deleuze, the New Materialists suggest that human agency is no more an isolated or substantive identity, but rather a distributed agency that correlates with nonhuman agencies.

Human agency is a distributed agency as it is materially connected to the surroundings. Human feelings and experiences are not predetermined; instead, they are entangled with both fellow humans and the nonhuman world. The role of the “other” is crucial to our understanding of identity, as elucidated by Spivak, Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas. The reconfiguration of the other shapes the new self, establishing a sense of alterity based on mutual relationships.

Recognizing the limitations of human understanding of truth and the truth about their own identity and consciousness, New Materialists define ethics as an affirmation of life that emerges out of the collective social experiences confronting the forces of death. It is not merely an appreciation of existing systems; rather, it engages with material emergencies, social movements, and technologies as they are developed in response to the everyday desires of people. Thus, ethics makes life the transitory nature of life into a political and ethical challenge.

Catherine Malabou posits that the connection between self and other is not merely a philosophical question; it is a political and materialistic issue, which she refers to as plasticity. Plasticity, according to Malabou, represents a differentiated relationship that envisions a common life on Earth Planet. Here, ethics becomes an act of performativity—a radical aspiration to embody Earth Planet—a polyamorous place of entanglements. This ethical practice is not fixed or static but uncertain and temporal, as Deleuze expresses through the concept of schizophrenia—a radical ethical act in the era of neocapitalism. This schizophrenic act, according to Deleuze, demands us to adopt a rhizomatic approach in our efforts to affirm life in the current era of neocapitalism.

Delineating the idea of these materialistic entanglements and addressing the need of new ethical thought, Bruno Latour, in his work *Politics of Nature*, demands for a “parliament of things,” where there is no dichotomy between the politics of nature and the politics of humans. In an era of ecological crisis, Latour contends that humans need to act as “spokespersons” for nonhumans and furthermore, since he understands knowledge as embodied and circulatory, he urges us to listen to farmers, local scientists, and Indigenous communities who live in close affinity with the Earth.

Taking inspiration from Latour, Timothy Morton advocates for an ontological equality of all forms of being—human, nonhuman, matter, nature, and society. This approach seeks to establish a new ethical subject by acknowledging the subjective formations arising from the entangled “intra-actions” among diverse agents, including bacteria, minerals, ecosystems, and political and cultural environments. Offering an idea of a vegetal democracy and public politics, Jane Bennett raises a critical question: “Can worms be considered members of the public?” Stacy Alaimo calls for an eco-friendly democracy, ethics, and political thought in light of this situation, urging us to embrace our roles as citizens within this flat ontology of Planet Earth.

Conclusion

Planetary ethics, driven by the current demands of neocapitalism, envisions a new perspective on planetary ontology as influenced by advocates of New Materialism. This concept involves an idea of planetary humanism and an understanding of the Earth as a dynamic entity. As Philip Hefner argues, human agency is not static or essentialist, but always evolving, and there may be no final destination or endpoint. Human agency is not isolated; instead, it is intertwined with nonhuman agencies and fundamentally connected to the Earth, which we inhabit as “companion species.” And furthermore, Earth is not a naïve reality; rather, it is an emerging entity—an Earth Planet.

The idea of becoming Earth Planet represents a radical approach to counteracting capitalism, which commodifies both human beings and other forms of life on Earth. This vision reimagines a community based on love, free from the constraints of predetermined ethics, laws, divinity, and politics. It demands a temporal, immediate, and political act that affirms life over against the forces of death. As Deleuze suggests, this involves a complete deterritorialization of our thoughts, practices, and methods of defining life in contemporary society.

Today, planetary ethics embraces an immanent political act that moves away from transcendent, predetermined moral laws. It embodies a radical politics of spirituality that acknowledges the agency of the material Earth and its intrinsic spirit, allowing for reconfiguration. Clayton Crockett refers to energy as a name for God—a secular spirit that manifests as “geontopower” (Elizabeth Povinelli 2026) within materiality. In this context, the politics of becoming human is relationally connected to the politics of the Earth, aiming to establish the Earth as a Planet—a place of intertwined existence that is perpetually evolving.

Human politics must recognize its intrinsic connection to ecopolitics. This connection calls us to consider our political actions as ethical expressions that contribute to becoming part of the Earth Planet. Whitney A. Bauman rightly emphasizes the need for a new way of understanding our species as nomadic organisms, progressing toward an open future. We must acknowledge that we are always part of a multitude of earthly others in motion.

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- New Materialism is a shift to objective and material realities of life from the subjective and phenomenological constructions of life. It accepts the agency of the material world and the inherent political becoming of the body and its “liveliness” to become something new. It emerged from post-feminist thinking initiated by Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad in the 1990s and extended to a post-essentialist idea as it was reformulated by Quentin Meillassoux, Bruno Latour, and Catherine Malabou. Gilles Deleuze offered a clear post-capitalist theoretical framework to New Materialism and thereby exposed the neoliberal religious ideology in service of the repressive economic order. See Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; and Dolphijn, Rick, and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012.
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