

# Ecological Thinking and the Crisis of the Earth

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## Facing the Crisis

If a visitor from another galaxy were sent to Earth to report on the latest news here, it seems rather obvious what the alien observer would take back to the home planet. Our extraterrestrial investigator would certainly report that our planet is going through one of the six periods of mass extinction and biodiversity loss in its entire four and half billion-year history, and that other major disruptions in the biosphere are interacting to cause a major crisis for life on Earth.

In short, the big story from Planet Earth would be that we have entered a period of **massive planetary death**. In fact, among the many names that have been suggested for the emerging era or epoch of life on Earth, the most precisely appropriate would be the *Necrocene*, the “new era of death.”[\[1\]](#) Strangely, this rather shocking news is met with either denial or disavowal among the members of our own species, who are living in the very midst of this crisis. The deniers among us simply reject the clear evidence of global ecological crisis. The disavowers, on the other hand, accept the truth of the evidence but fail to undertake actions that are even vaguely proportional to the gravity of our predicament.

Information on the severity of the ecological crisis has hardly been a well-kept secret. For example, researchers at the Stockholm Resilience Centre and their colleagues have in recent years formulated a conception of “planetary boundaries” defining the limits in various areas beyond which there is likelihood of ecological disaster. They summarized their

findings in three concise articles that are readily available to the public.[\[2\]](#) The authors concluded that “transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems.”[\[3\]](#)

The boundaries were identified as lying in the areas of climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, rate of biodiversity loss, land-system change, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading. They found that at least three boundaries had already been passed and that most others are in danger of being transgressed soon. In the most recent article, the authors concluded that “two core boundaries—climate change and biosphere integrity—have been identified, each of which has the potential on its own to drive the Earth system into a new state should they be substantially and persistently transgressed.”[\[4\]](#)

It is not only scientists who have sounded the alarm about ecological crisis in rather clear and not uncertain terms. Recently, *The Guardian*, a major British newspaper, announced the gravity of the biodiversity crisis in almost alarmist language, saying that the “biological annihilation’ of wildlife in recent decades means a sixth mass extinction in Earth’s history is under way” and that “it threatens the survival of human civilization, with just a short window of time in which to act.”[\[5\]](#)

Yet, this seemingly inflammatory article was not at the top of the stories for the day, and if one reads the numerous readers’ replies to it, one finds very little sense of direction about how to respond to this developing global catastrophe. Furthermore, such news somehow quickly fades from the popular consciousness. One might therefore conclude that there is simply not enough good “environmental thinking” going

on in today's world. It might seem that the public is just not prepared to understand adequately the meaning of global ecological crisis, and is therefore incapable of facing it with full seriousness. Thus, there are injunctions that we need to work harder on creating good environmental education so that the public can engage in more effective environmental thinking.

Granted, this would be a very good thing. However, one of the problems with conventional ideas of "environmental thinking" or even "ecological thinking" is that it assumes that correct thinking will in itself have a significant transformative effect, or more to the point, the kind of effect that will be necessary in order to avoid disaster. For example, it is thought to be crucial that climate deniers be convinced that anthropogenic climate change really exists. This is not at all a bad idea, but it almost inevitably ignores the fact that the vast majority of *non-deniers* are in a state of *disavowal*, and that reformed deniers are highly likely to join the ranks of these disavowers. The disavowers are willing to admit that a problem exists, and may get certain satisfactions out of being on "the right side of history," and perhaps even from engaging in various beneficial activities that reduce greenhouse gasses. However, they are not willing to consider, and then actually work diligently for, the kind of deep, fundamental changes in society that will be necessary to change the ecocidal course of history.

A basic problem for the problematic of "better environmental thinking" is that the needed transformation cannot result from abstract thought and the understanding of concepts, but can only come from engaged thinking that is an integral part of an engaged participation in transformative social ecological processes. We need therefore to consider how such engagement might begin to take place. But first, we might consider further the implications of our modes of thinking.

*Part of the problem with the appeal to "environmental*

*thinking" is the very idea of the "environment".*

The dominant conception of "the environment" assumes a certain practical ontology. According to this ontology, there is a world that consists of individual egos surrounded by "environments," and societies that consist of collections of separate egos, surrounded in turn by larger "environments." This prevailing conception of the environment is an expression of the binary subject-object thinking that is built into to the dominant social ideology. Meanings are social, not merely individual. Thus, even when this ontology is not consciously intended, or when it is even abstractly rejected, such a problematic reinforces the pervasive hierarchical dualism that is the deep ideology of civilization. Given such problems, explicitly *ecological* thinking is a great advance over *environmental* thinking.

The term "ecology," derives from the Greek terms *oikos* and *logos*. It is concerned with the *logos*, or underlying meaning, truth, and way of the *oikos*, the local, regional, or planetary household. In its emphasis on the *oikos*, ecological thinking replaces both the egocentric and the anthropocentric perspective with the perspective of the larger ecological whole. This is a whole that is never a completed or closed totality, but rather a whole that is always in a process of becoming whole. The ecological whole is an ever-becoming-one that is also an ever-becoming-many, a dynamic unity-in-diversity.

Ecological thinking is inspired by the quest for the social-ecological equivalent of what Hegel called the "concrete universal," the universal that must always be expressed through the particular and the singular, the regional and the local, the communal and the personal. This implies that we need to contemplate how we fit into the planetary dialectic of developing parts and wholes. Our question here is how we might begin to develop a thought and practice that is in accord with

such a truly social-ecological perspective, and that will open a clear pathway out of our planetary crisis.

## Finding the Way

Though it cannot be developed in any detail in this introductory discussion, the answer that seems most promising is that we begin to create a well-grounded and multi-dimensional social and political base for the regeneration of human community and the community of life on Earth. This means reorganizing our social world into networks of awakened and caring transformational communities that are dedicated to undertaking whatever actions are necessary to put an end to the Necrocene and initiate a new era characterized by the flourishing of life on Earth. We might call such a new era the ***Eleutherocene*** – the era of a liberated humanity and a liberated nature.

In this endeavor, we can find inspiration in the ancient Buddhist concept of Appamāda. “Appamāda” is a Pali word (“Apramada” in Sanskrit) that conveys the ideas of both “mindfulness” and “care.” The practice of Appamāda implies that we must be awakened to the world and all the beings around us, and that in such an awakened state we become capable of responding to and caring for them effectively. In this, it has much in common with concepts in contemporary feminist, and especially ecofeminist, care ethics, which rejects the patriarchal model of an abstract ethics of principles in favor of an approach that non-dualistically recognizes the inseparability of moral rationality, moral sensibility, and moral imagination.[\[6\]](#) It affirms that what we need more than anything is neither environmental thinking, which takes us in the wrong direction, nor even ecological thinking, which takes us only part of the way, but an *ethos* of Appamāda that pervades and shapes both our everyday practice and our social institutions. The practice of care involves attention to the truth of all beings, acceptance of the way of

all beings, and responsiveness to the needs of all beings. It also implies engagement in the personal, social, and political practice that is necessary to establish mindful care for all beings in our purview and for the Earth itself as our overriding priority.

Such an outlook of attentiveness, acceptance and responsiveness helps us discover what we might call the “Four Noble Truths about the Earth.”[\[7\]](#) These truths are that the Earth is suffering, there is a cause of the Earth’s suffering, there is a cure to the Earth’s suffering, and there is a way to achieve the cure to the Earth’s suffering.[\[8\]](#) As in the case of the ancient Noble Truths, we find that our craving is the cause of all this suffering. This craving has a transhistorical element, but develops to differing degrees and takes on different qualities in different historical contexts. So, in order to cure our own suffering and that of the Earth, we must come to an understanding of the very particular, historically conditioned, nature of the craving that causes it. We all have knowledge of its nature at some level. If we cannot express it consciously, we do so through our symptoms and our defense mechanism. However, to authentically confront our predicament we must develop a clear, fully-conscious awareness of its nature, and the ways that it causes the suffering of the Earth, the suffering of a myriad of other living beings on Earth, the suffering of billions of other human beings, and our own personal suffering. We must understand, for example, how the craving that causes of the suffering of the billion human beings who live in a world of absolute poverty also causes the suffering of another billion who live in an affluent world of nihilistic egoism.

We must, moreover, understand that the craving that causes so much suffering has, in turn, a cause of its own. This cause is the world in which most of us live, which is best described as the late capitalist society of mass consumption. It is this society, as a powerfully functioning yet self-contradictory

social whole, that generates a certain form of selfhood that is inclined to obsessive desires, powerful addictions, and sick attachments. As Jason Moore has aptly stated it, the crisis we are facing is above all “capitalogenic,”<sup>[9]</sup> though this should not lead us to neglect the degree to which it is simultaneously “statogenic” and “patriarchogenic.” There is an entire system of production that depends on the generation of such craving to operate successfully (at least in the pre-catastrophic short term). There is an entire system of consumption that feeds such craving. There is an entire culture of consumption that socializes us into believing that a world of obsessive craving is the only one possible, or, if we do not believe that this is true, socializes us into resigning ourselves in practice to the inevitability of that world, and to living our lives as if it were true.

As in the case of the ancient Noble Truths, the cure to the suffering is not merely knowing the cause of the disease, or even knowing that the cause must be removed. The teaching was that the cure can only be carried out through following the Way, which was called the Noble Eightfold Path. There was no onefold, twofold or threefold path. The cure was not effected by choosing one or more forms of practice that appealed most to one personally, or that seemed to be leading generally in the right direction, or that might “hopefully” have some kind of mysterious “snowball effect.” This would be succumbing to mere whim or superstition. The path consisted of all the forms of practice that were necessary to carry out the radical transformation that was needed. The promise was that if the path is followed “another world is possible.”

## **How is this World Possible?**

So, we are in need of another world—another world that we find in many ways by returning in a more awakened and compassionate way to this one. However, the means by which “another world” might be actualized (the Way) has not been given enough of the

kind of diligent thought that is inseparable from effective social practice. "Another world is possible" becomes mere abstract escapist ideology unless it is expressed through transformative action that is not only prophetically "pre-figurative," but also immediately "figurative." Such action announces the arrival of another world and shows us the very "face" of that other world, here and now. It is in an important sense "world-making," for no world ever exists, including the present one, except by unceasing, moment-to-moment efforts on the part of all its inhabitants to make that world.

But it is also in a very important sense *openness* to the world and to its common Logos, in opposition to the privatized or "idiotic" [\[10\]](#) *logoi* that are egoically generated artifacts. "Another world is possible" in part because that other world is a creative possibility. But another world is also possible because that other world has existed and still endures in the midst of the present one. We must therefore give much thought to the questions of *how the present social world is possible*, and *how it can be made impossible*. This means that we need to undertake a thorough inquiry into the major spheres of social determination that are the grounds of possibility of any world, either actually-existing or imagined.

There are four spheres of determination that are essential to the analysis of how social reality is generated, how it is maintained, and how it might be transformed. These spheres are the social institutional structure, the social ideology, the social imaginary, and the social ethos. [\[11\]](#)

Since there is a dialectical relationship between these spheres, they should not be thought of as discrete realms. For example, no social institutional structure is conceivable without reference to the social ethos, since structures embody, in part, structures of social practice. Thus, mass media as an institutional structure is inseparable from forms of concrete social practice that make use of and are in turn



deeply conditioned by mass media technologies.

Similarly, no social imaginary signification is conceivable apart from its relation to social ideology, since images in many ways reflect and interact with concepts. For example, the imaginary signification "rugged individualist" reflects and interacts with moral injunctions about the virtues of "hard work" and "self-reliance" that form part of the social ideology. Very significantly, the megastructures of the society of advanced consumer capitalism, the technobureaucratic militaristic state, and the technological megamachine all immediately generate awe-inspiring images of power and wealth. In short, the spheres of determination are theoretical constructs or systemic abstractions that are useful in analyzing a social whole that consists of constellations of phenomena that interact dialectically and are internally related.

It will perhaps be helpful to summarize the nature of these four interrelated spheres of social determination. The social institutional sphere consists of the objective and external structures of social determination (when abstracted from the simultaneously internal-external and objective-subjective social whole). It includes, notably, the structure of capital and its various sectors, the structure of the state apparatus, and the structure of the technological and bureaucratic systems. It includes the external, formal structure of social practices, and the material infrastructure, since institutions consist not merely of structural principles, but of the actual structuration of material resources in accord with such principles.

The other three spheres are the internal and subjective realms of social determination (given all the qualifications just mentioned). It is important that we not look upon the relation between the "objective" institutional sphere and the three "subjective" spheres as a "base-superstructure" relationship, but rather one of mutual determination and internal relation.

Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the "external" is *internally* related to the "internal."

The second sphere of social determination consists of the social ethos. "Ethos" is used in the sense of the constellation of social practices that constitute a way of life. Ethos is the sphere of social psychological reality. It can only be understood through a very specific analysis of everyday life and all the habits, practices, gestures, and rituals that it entails. Ethos consists of the way that we live and enact the social and cultural world in which we live, and which lives in and through us. The common weakness of counter-ideologies to which many give lip-service, and in which some believe very deeply, results from the fact that they abstractly theorize that "another world is possible," but the adherents proclaim and legislate through their everyday lives, through their immersion in the dominant social ethos, that "this world is inevitable."

The third sphere of social determination is the realm of the social imaginary. This is the sphere of the society's or community's collective fantasy life. It is the realm of the "fundamental fantasy," a self-image that is much more highly invested with psychic energy than any mere "self-concept," and which is a central determinant in the life of each person. The social imaginary includes socially-conditioned images of self, other, society, and nature. It encompasses the images of power, success, heroism, and personal gratification expressed in the prevailing myths and paradigmatic narratives of the community and culture. The study of the social imaginary explores the social dimensions of desire and demand. Because social imaginary significations are so intimately related to our quest for meaning, and, in the contemporary world, for self-justification, they are invested with intense levels of psychic energy. Much as in the case of the social ethos, this sphere has been generally neglected not only in mainstream social theory, but also in most leftist and radical social

thought.

Finally, the fourth sphere of social determination is the realm of social ideology. A social ideology can mean simply a system of ideas that is socially significant and contains a greater or lesser degree of truth and value to the society. However, in the critical sense, an ideology is a system of ideas that purports to be an objective depiction of reality, but, in fact, constitutes a systematic distortion of reality on behalf of some particularistic interest or some system of differential power. Though we might be tempted to say that we need to replace the dominant institutional structure, social imaginary, social ethos and social ideology with new liberatory ones, in the case of ideology it would be better to say that we aim to replace all social ideology with a new form of ecological and communitarian reason (thus, restoring the common Logos).

What is important for liberatory social transformation is an understanding of the ways in which the spheres of social determination interact dialectically to create a social world. Among the major goals of the project of a dialectical social ecology are the following: to theorize adequately, and in a historically and empirically-grounded manner, the spheres of social determination as spheres of dialectical mutual determination; to explore the ways in which the interaction between these spheres of social determination shapes the nature of the social whole; to explain the ways in which many elements of these spheres also contradict and subvert one another, and thus to point the way toward possibilities beyond the existing social world; and to demonstrate the relation between the modes of functioning and the dynamic movement and transformation of these spheres and the social ecological crisis of humanity and the Earth.

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## Notes:

[1] This would focus quite logically on the fact that the current “new era of death” follows an era called the “Cenozoic,” meaning the “new era of life.” The current era is a radical break with the Cenozoic, but is continuous with the developments in the brief epoch called the “Holocene” (meaning the “entirely recent”).

[2] Johan Rockström et al. “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” in *Nature* 461 (Sept. 2009): 472 –75. Johan Rockström et al. “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” in *Ecology and Society* 14, no.

2 (2009), online at <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/>; and a recent update, Will Stefens et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet” in *Science* (13 Feb 2015): Vol. 347, No. 6223 (Feb. 13, 2015); online at <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/347/6223/1259855.full>, in which there is a new focus on five planetary boundaries that have “strong regional operating scales.” The delineation of areas in which boundaries are located was also revised slightly.

[3] Rockström et al. (2009)

[4] Stefens et al. (2015)

[5] Damian Carrington, “Earth’s sixth mass extinction event under way, scientists warn,” in *The Guardian* (July 10, 2017); online at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn>.

[6] The most advanced form is materialist ecofeminism, which situates the ethical most explicitly in real-world practice and everyday life. It shows that the most significant sphere of ethical practice today, and our model in many ways for social-ecological transformation, remains the caring labor of women and indigenous people around the world. See Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997); new edition forthcoming.

[7] “Truth” should not be taken in the sense of “object of belief,” but rather in the sense of a “truth-process” that encompasses both understanding and engagement.

[8] By “suffering” is meant damage to the good of a being and interference with the flourishing of that being. Suffering is manifested in all dimensions of a being’s existence. The ancient teaching pointed out that the subjective manifestation

of suffering is a feeling of pervasive dissatisfaction with the world. Accordingly, the Earth's objective suffering is manifested subjectively (within the Earth's self-conscious dimensions or "organs of consciousness") through an ethos of anxiety and depression and through a nihilistic sensibility and ideology.

[9] See, for example, Jason W. Moore, "The Myth of the 'Human Enterprise': The Anthropos and Capitalogenic Change" on *World-Ecological Imaginations: Power and Production in the Web of Life* (Oct. 30, 2016); online at <https://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/2016/10/30/the-myth-of-the-human-enterprise-the-anthropos-and-capitalogenic-change/>.

[10] From the Greek *idiōtēs*, a private person.

[11] See John P. Clark, *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). The conceptualization of "four spheres" of social determination seems the most useful theoretically. Yet, there are, of course, valid alternative conceptualizations of a social topology of such spheres. The social imaginary as discussed here encompasses the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic orders (or "registers"). Some theoretical advantages would be gained and some lost by dividing the sphere of the social imaginary into two spheres in a Lacanian manner. Furthermore, there are, of course, other useful social topologies, such as a topology of fields, that are not discussed here, but which may further deepen and enrich the analysis.

[12] This story is summarized concisely in Clive Ponting, "Destruction and Survival" in *A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 67-86, though perhaps no one has summarized it more succinctly than the anarchist Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in his poem "Ozymandias."

[13] As subsequent discussions will show, we find powerful

evidence of progress in this direction in the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, in the Democratic Autonomy movement in Rojava, and in indigenous movements in Bolivia and elsewhere.

[14] To revise and ecologize further a famous formulation of Marx that was restated in a more visionary form by Herbert Marcuse in his concept of the “liberation of nature.” See Karl Marx, “Private Property and Labor” in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/3rd.htm>, and Herbert Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution” in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 59-78.

[15] We would thus achieve the kind of ecological sensibility expressed in Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme’s *The Universe Story From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: Harper, 1994), but the rebirth would also entail creating the material and social-ecological basis for such a sensibility to prevail historically.