

Relationships over Entities

Editorial¹

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There are countless relationships that connect all of us to the other forms of life, as well as all life to the abiotic environment. These relationships have existed since life appeared on Earth, and perhaps even earlier in a different form. Yet, it is less than a century that we hold not only a local, but also global connection to nature. Many thinkers and cultures of the past had intuitively sensed the existence of thick bonds and their interconnection with nature. While they formed part of this network of relationships, we are the first human beings in history to have a thorough, scientific, and increasingly widespread knowledge of it. We are now realizing in a more meaningful way that we are taking part in a network of natural relationships.

Unfortunately, the more we gain a thorough awareness of this relationship, the more we realize that we have to rectify the errors of the past, if we still want to live on this planet. We must, in essence, correct the exploiting, the abusing, and the damaging of nature, that were made out of superficiality or ignorance. We must strive to build a world vision, a culture, and a world that does not yet exist. Even if we focus our energies on solving basic, practical problems such as climate change, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity, the solution lies in something which is much more deeply rooted in human cultures. An important step is to become aware of the global environmental crisis our earth is facing, but if we really want to take effective measures, we need to change our cultural principles and our way of thinking first.

We need to endorse a new philosophical worldview and develop a new way of being in the world. To perceive ourselves as part of both several relationships and one wide network of relationships at the same time,

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we certainly need to develop a cross-cultural perspective. But even more than that, we need new interdisciplinary thinking. To put it another way, we need new stories that reintegrate our stories within the whole story of nature.

In order to be co-authors of these kinds of stories, it must be clear in our minds who the protagonists are and what the setting is. The characters and setting must in fact come together and merge with nature. We already know that the triggering event, our endangered present, gets our plot underway. So, the first task on the to-do list becomes: SAVE THE PLANET! But what is missing?

Contemporary scientists tell us a story of nature that was completely unknown only a few decades ago. They have been explaining who the characters of the story are and their respective roles. The story begins far far away from life as we know it, and describes a universe in which our Earth is just a tiny little planet in the middle of nowhere. In this planet, we are just little knots in a complex network of forms of life. This network, scientists claim, is what we call nature, a system characterized by a continuous change, also known as evolution. Furthermore and for the first time, we are told that life is neither an organism aimed only at reproducing, nor an organism struggling for survival. We are told that what makes something 'alive' involves more than itself. To be alive is to connect with a dynamic environment. These relationships allow life forms to survive and potentially reproduce.

Their story continues with a big twist. We come to realize that while species could be either real or not, the term 'species' is one of convenience. It only makes sense on a narrow time scale and tells only a small, and sometimes misleading, portion of the wider story of the variety of life, that is necessary to keep life itself vibrant and lush. Furthermore, it is impossible to identify any single hierarchy in this deeply interconnected living world. Life, we learn, is made up of rings of inclusive hierarchies in which each level – from cells up to the ecosphere – is connected to the others and holds a profound relationship. It is arbitrary, unfair, and misleading to think that human beings are 'superior' just because of their complexity, amazing technical skills, and language. There are different levels of complexity and each living being has several distinctive features, but nothing could ever objectively justify the assumption that a certain feature is 'better' than another one. If we consider the ability to dominate and suppress nature a valid criterion, then it would be appropriate to put human beings at the pinnacle of creation. Criteria like this, however, are not only arbitrary, but can even be counterproductive in light of the need to couple dynamically with nature. In fact, any criterion is arbitrary.

In short, contemporary scientists' story has not only life and the environment as co-protagonists: they blend into one another. Thus, the boundary that separates life and the environment is very blurred: nature is a complex system of life forms, which have co-evolved and co-adapted and we, humans, are all both dependent on and implied by this network of relationships.

Another slightly gloomier story has been told by several activists who tell the story of a few small groups enriched at the expense of many larger communities. The health and environmental effects suffered by these impoverished civilizations are alarming, but so are the economic, social, and psychological crises affecting developed societies. Furthermore, we are told the wrongs that we perpetrate on the world of nonhuman animals. Let's think – just to name a few – about our (non-)relationship with animals: farm animals bred, raised, used, and killed for food; animals used for fur and clothing, bred or captured and then killed to produce luxury goods; wild animals, hunted and captured for experimentation or for entertainment in parks, shows, bullfights, rodeos, festivals and zoos. It is very easy to see that something is deeply wrong with this story. Activists tell a disturbing story of our past and present, but also give us the chance to start a new, very exciting story.

We usually think of nature as an unlimited resource available for human use. Moreover, the continuous growth of our technological power has led to at least three major contemporary crises attributable to irresponsible human activity. First, the environmental crisis, which involves landscapes and natural resources and affects the supply of cultural and vital services emerging from life-environment relationships. It addresses humans indirectly, through their desires, and consists of a rapid and exponential process of deterioration, whose consequences will reverberate for a long time. Second, the ecological crisis which affects the ecosystem services that protect life on the planet. We are referring to irreversible damage of more than half of these services. It addresses both humans and other living beings indirectly, through their needs. Lastly, the crisis of life in a broader sense, which involves directly all of life. The speed and the rate of extinction of various life forms have increased dramatically, while biodiversity has declined.

These crises, while alarming, provide a pretext for efforts to bring about change. In fact, this pretext is raised by philosophers and writers especially, who tell us the story of how the future should be. They tell us about a future where it is easier to think in a way that focuses neither on humans nor on the nonhuman world, but on the different kinds of relationships in which humans and nonhuman entities coexist. We are told that

future is not only made up of rational thought, but also of our emotions: for example, empathy can play a key role in helping us build a balanced relationship with nonhuman nature. In the future, we are told about ethics as that which comes from the desire to live in harmony with each member of the natural community to which we belong. In this beautiful future, we have understood that preserving nature does not just mean to protect some of the means to our ends. It is to recognize a value in nature that is independent from our judgment or – at least – from our present utility. To put it another way, it means to go *beyond anthropocentrism!*

That is the impetus for this journal.

LED publisher and I have launched this peer-reviewed journal just to create a professional interdisciplinary forum to discuss moral and scientific issues that concern the increasing need to question the narrow anthropocentric paradigms in studying both interspecific and intraspecific relationships between all biological ‘species’ – humans included – and between these and the abiotic components of the environment.

We all need to be personally involved in the network of natural relationships, and we need it because every relationship is important when making the above sketched never-ending story a reality. *Relations* will play a key role both in making the never-ending story of these relationships truly worth telling and in going beyond the anthropocentric approach to them. Now the characters, the setting, and the plot have been put into play. So, if you are interested in fleshing out this narrative, perhaps your time has come: tell us your story!