

Ethics and Ecology

Ivan Koprek¹, Mikolaj Martinjak²

ABSTRACT

Ethics as a “practical philosophy” should judge not only human actions toward their “neighbors” but also toward the wholeness of all living beings and the entirety of the world (cosmos)—nature—whose regeneration abilities are limited. As an important interlocutor in the scientific and social debate on ecology, philosophy (especially ethics) should clarify and reconcile the tensions between natural determinism and human freedom that shape collective (economic and political) life. In that sense, this article advocates moderate biocentrism, which emphasizes that all living and nonliving organisms (including nature) are, in an analogous sense, objective goals or goals in themselves. As means–ends in themselves, they are never the exclusive means for man’s subjective goals. Therefore, the idea of moral order in the realm of goals is not and must not be limited only to man but should also include nature—if not as a subject, then certainly as an object of the moral order.

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If we look for an interpretation of the term ethics in any dictionary, we will always find an expert explanation of the Greek words “ethos” and “eethos.” It is usually said that those words have a multitude of meanings, even those that exclude each other in the content. Thus “ethos” (that is, “eethos”) means nature, abode, place of residence, homeland, but also a place of grazing for animals, a place of presence, domestication, essence, and vigilance. It is indicated that ethics relates to our (human) deepest values and the busyness of life, with something to do with our personality.

Many questions are related to the topic of ethics. First and foremost is the one about human kindness. At the same time, man does not find goodness in the expansion of the knowledge he acquires but rather in the questions he asks himself. What does it mean to ask? Firstly, to enter a dialogue with the unknown. In a question, a person abandons his point of view and his attachment and goes somewhere else. If the question is the beginning of a genesis of philosophy, then the question about man is also the central question of ethics.

Man is a being who wants to experience what is good, who wants to know the truth, and who wants to rejoice in the beautiful. He feels bound to the laws of the world and matter, but at the same time, in his freedom and spirit, he transcends himself and the world in which he resides. Man cannot be encompassed, limited, or expressed by anything. In his existence, he crosses the boundaries of mere individuality into the dimension of his pro-existence in which the human being should, as Hegel said, be viewed as an “individuum” but also as a “community.” Living simply means “being-with,” being “to-gether.”

The root of our feeling that we are human beings among other people with whom (in our waking life—as Heraclitus said) we share a common world is recognizable in our call (an

^{1,2}Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Corresponding Author: Mikolaj Martinjak, Faculty of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia, Phone: +385 12094440, e-mail: mikolaj.martinjak@ffrz.unizg.hr

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obligation) to take care of ourselves, of others, and of what we call the environment, nature. In this concern for the future of man and the world, it seems that ethics has a justification for its existence.

Certainly, the world (nature, environment) is our home, our abode, and our birthplace. We shape it in our freedom. Playful with scientific and technical successes, intoxicated by his imagination and knowledge (power) but also passions, at the beginning of the 21st century, man came to a vague realization about his own freedom. Today, it is increasingly obvious that the natural and technical sciences are increasingly and violently suppressing the social-humanistic core. Man shows his power. It is necessary to recognize the calamity and devastation of man’s freedom, dignity, spirituality, and sociability—in simple terms, his psyche and personality. Nature is also being destroyed. That is why we need ethics.

The modern man, more than the ones from the past, stands before the graves of the words that are rusted and become empty wrecks. Such is the case with the meaning

of the word “ethics.” It has become nothing more than a “paleonym” or “old name,” a term that is “strategically rusted.”

Despite this, today, perhaps more than ever, the awareness of the need for ethics is alive. In the framework of technical, and especially biomedical sciences, responsibility is often called for, in fact, a “return” of ethics is called upon.

Some recognize the reasons for this return in the collapse of today’s politics, which often ends up in lies and injustices. The other reason is the increasing psychological distraction of man who is faced with a lack of meaning and sense. The return of ethics or morality, thirdly, coincides with the religious secularization and dechristianization that began in the Renaissance, continued in the Enlightenment, and still prevails to this day. Thus, according to some, the need and necessity for ethics is regarded as a kind of substitution for religion.

However, “ethics” these days is not only a desirable and sought-after substitute for religion but often also a masking word with which one wants to neutralize and soften the stench of human wickedness, or else, it is seen as a welcome addition for a possible improvement of life and benefit. Thus, in the temporal invocation of ethics and morality, modern man does not think of permanent, constant—rational—models and principles of doing; he does not think about his well-being, personal excellence, kindness, care for his home and place of residence. In essence, he is not looking for an answer to the question: how to live, how to act—how to be a good individual?

The questions posed certainly do not require an answer only according to some legal regulations, nor according to benefits, but according to human ethos, according to the marks and values that make up the human essence, in fact, a person’s psychological maturity: to be a good person. The meaning of ethics is to encourage the goodness (excellence) of human life—the realization of a good personality and healthy sociability. In this sense, ethics is not only necessary for occasions, and sometimes, it is not a welcome decoration or “perfume” but the basis of human life, an essential determinant, and a guide of human existence in responsibility (care) for oneself, for others and for the world (nature, the environment) in which he lives.

ETHICS AND NATURE

The fact is that the world (nature), which the modern science with the help of technology, turned into a lifeless, silent, researchable, and usable thing, should be in fact experienced and perceived as a life-giving community. While in the past we considered our environment (nature, the world) as an object of exploitation (and it seemed to neutralize all the consequences of our actions with a seemingly infinite capacity for regeneration), today we are becoming aware that this regenerative capacity has its own strict limits.

Irresponsible use of technology leads to irreversible consequences and actions.^{1,2}

Yet, what is “nature”? In a broader sense of the term nature, it means the whole world around us in all its infinite

variety of manifestations. In that sense, we can say that nature (physis or natura) is an objective reality that exists outside and independently of human consciousness. In the narrower sense of the term, nature refers to the entire material world, except for society, as the totality of the natural conditions of human existence.³

In the understanding of ancient philosophers, nature was everything that is—being. The first interpretations of nature were shaped by thinkers who appeared in the Ionian city of Miletus on the coast of Asia Minor of the Mediterranean Sea. The most famous representatives of that school were Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. Thales believed that the beginning of the world was water. Anaximander considered a certain substance “apeiron” to be the fundamental principle of the world. According to Anaximenes, the primary principle is air: when released, it becomes fire; when it thickens, it turns into wind, then into a cloud, it becomes water, then earth, stones, and other substances.

Classical Greek philosophers declared and treated nature differently. In contrast to Socrates, who neglected the study of the extrahuman world (nature), and Plato, who evaluated that same world as a nonindependent reflection of the ideal world, it was Aristotle who was the first to confirm the independent reality of everything in the natural world. No one before or after him understood nature as ontological substance. Namely, Aristotle believed that nature is a living organism, guided by a purpose in itself, which creates its own forms of events and at the same time produces a series of other forms, that is, nature itself creates the objects that are included in it. The source of this is not an external force, but the inner soul—entelechy, God’s mind, inherent in the very being, and its—as Aristotle said—nature (physis). Thus, the term “nature” (physis) in Aristotle had primarily an ontological and anthropological meaning. This meaning, or better to say understanding, was predominantly present in the philosophical thought of the ancient world and Middle Ages.⁴

In the new era, the original meaning of the term “nature” began to refer to the nonhuman, that is, material, plant, and animal world. Thus, in the Renaissance—the peak of culture and arts—views on the relationship between nature and man became different. Here, man became the center of everything. Nature as a wholesome entity ceased to exist for him. It became fragmented, and technology took charge.

The predominance of technology caused the transition from organic life to organized actions. Man realized his own power over nature, experimenting and inflicting more and more “wounds” on it, destroying forests, and polluting rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans. The true beginning of the experimental natural science approach to nature should be sought in the philosophical statements of F Bacon, R Descartes, and G Galileo.⁵

For example, Bacon’s scientific goal became the expansion of man’s dominion over nature. Nature must be mastered, tamed, exploited, used, stripped of its hidden

secrets and riches, and used for man's subjective purposes, and not only the nature that immediately surrounds man but the entire cosmos (stars, firmament, etc.). In this vision, nature loses its ontic identity and dynamic originality. She has become man's "slave" and "possession" with which one can do whatever one pleases.⁶

Until the industrial age, the moral considerations of our actions were within manageable limits. All ethical judgments took place at the level of man toward his fellow man. The radius of moral action was therefore narrow, and man only had to consider and answer for the direct or obvious spatial and temporal consequences of his act.⁷

It is true that man acts beyond his knowledge and power through the pressure that technical inventions exert on him. However, in the rules of our actions, we should also include the uncertainty inherent in every foreshadowing and interpretation of the future. Due to the unpredictability of future conditions, we can only act safely if we always assume that the worst forecast will come true. The possible unpredictability and independence of technical inventions teach us to take caution and predictions of doom about them seriously.

Secondly, nature and man coexist; we are a part of the ecosystem around us and never above them—respect for nature and its vital functions should be the same as respect for other people.^{8–10}

ECOLOGY AND ETHICS

Today, ethics is increasingly becoming an important interlocutor in scientific and social discussions about nature and the environment. Two directions are predominant in these discussions. On one side are those who are against the "moralization of the ecology,"¹¹ and on the other side are those who claim that eco-ethics is of crucial importance in a scientific and technical civilization.

Different approaches are found in contemporary literature. Their spectrum is broader if the distinction between a shallow and a deep ecology is applied.¹² The goal of "shallow ecology" would be general health and well-being. The highest ecological norm of "deep ecology" would be the preservation of the vital needs of all living things.¹³

There is also a discussion about "classical and modern eco-ethics." Usually, biocentrism, pathocentrism, and holism, as well as mixed forms from these positions, are included under the classic positions of eco-ethics. Modern eco-ethics, on the other hand, want to reach the political, economic, and legal horizon in the discussion about the collapse and saving of the ecosystem.

Biocentrism

Within the framework of an increasingly destructive model of the economy and technology, the first ecological-ethical thoughts date back only to the last century. Thus, at the beginning of the century, the German physician and missionary Albert Schweitzer explained his ethics by referring to "reverence for life."¹⁴

Respect for life is absolute and without exception because life is the most holy. It is sacred.¹⁵ Thus, with the formula on respect for life, Schweitzer formulated the first and the broadest position of philosophical biocentrism. Life of everyone and everything alive has an imperative for man. Such ethics dictates behavior that approaches all living things with awe and avoids everything that would hinder or destroy life itself.

However, if a man relies on the principle of respect for life, other problems arise and are impossible to hide. Here, as Schweitzer himself observed, the consequences that appear cannot be denied if we do not relativize this principle by pointing to the scale and hierarchy of life's values. For Schweitzer, a clear consequence of respecting the values is the prohibition of consuming animals as food. However, what about the cases where human life can only be preserved when another life must be destroyed instead? Schweitzer himself pointed out the example with bacteria from his medical practice. Human life can only be saved if the bacteria are destroyed. The idea that man gives (sacrifices) his life to save the life of bacteria becomes a completely absurd ethical principle that conflicts with the principle of awe that man should apply to himself.

Pathocentrism

Pathocentric orientation of eco-ethics is closely related to biocentrism. If biocentrism is what "being alive" is and gives the direction of ethical action, then pathocentrism refers only to one specific partial aspect of life, on suffering (pain).¹⁶ Therefore, man's action should consider not only another man but also the whole nature if it can feel (suffer). This thought was repeated and represented in different forms in the interpretation of Bentham's thesis, for example, as ethics of compassion in Schopenhauer or as a utilitarian calculation of interests in the philosophy of P. Singer. Singer's critique of "speciesism"¹⁷ does not want the scope of ethics to end only with man. The limits of morality are not determined by the mind but by the suffering.

If nature is in this way focused on the principle of pathos, then this happens at a great cost: strict adherence to the fundamental principle of equality cannot exclude the attitude that man is against nature without acknowledging the assumptions of value. In an extreme case, this can mean that human well-being should not be given more protection than what is given to nature.

Holism

If ethical orientations toward suffering and toward life are viewed as arbitrary and ultimately unfounded theses, then this leads to a further expansion of the area of ethical thinking, namely to a complete and comprehensive area of ethics—to holism. Different holistic ethics agree that they do not recognize exclusive boundaries of ethical meaning. Analogous to the political-theoretical discussion, which understands certain forms of exclusivity as discrimination and therefore marks them as politically incorrect, so for the



holistic position, any exclusion from the sphere of ethical space should be marked as ethically incorrect. Not only those who can suffer, not only living nature but also nature within its limits possesses ethical relevance. Holism tries, as was formulated by Arne Naess, to think “deeper” and not to value nature only in its isolation, but to co-think also of a man in nature.¹⁸ Such “deep ecology” revises the modern division of the world and brings the holistic hope that, in a theoretical context, man and nature can be brought to unity.

Starting from a very broad understanding of the concept of nature, which extends from the individual being to global ecosystems, Naess advocates for the protection of nature as an assurance of its self-development. The same thought that man is a part of nature is observed in the philosophy of Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich. Man, as a specially trained part of nature in this regard, should bring that nature to its “expression.”¹⁹

Biocentrism, pathocentrism, and holism are not only represented in their pure forms, as we have described them, but are also recognized in their mixtures. For example, such a mixed form is represented by R Spaemann. He starts from biocentrism and refines it theologically. Respecting the living as a value leads to the ethics of “awe,” which can only be found in “religious attitude toward nature.”²⁰

A similar mixed form is represented by the ethics of one of the creators of bioethics, H Jonas, author of the well-known work *Principle of Responsibility*. Jonas extends biocentrism teleologically. This teleology, from the assumed self-realization of the living within the ethics of nature, shapes moral duties. Nature has goals. And therefore, they can be justified.²¹ Yet, only the man is responsible for everything.

All models of eco-ethics presented so far have in common the idea of a critical rejection of emphatically anthropocentric ethics. “Reckless anthropocentrism,”²² which is how Jonas pointedly expresses the extended belief, has characterized all previous ethics until now.

Anthropocentrists reject the objection that with their thinking, they have prepared the way for the downfall of the world. On the contrary. For example, John Passmore, in nonanthropological eco-ethics, recognizes old and always new attempts to suppress rationalism in favor of irrationalism and mysticism. Thus, speaking about the “sanctity of nature” strengthens nature less than it weakens man as a critically autonomous subject. Passmore, therefore, in order to overcome the ecological crisis, advocates abandoning everything that limits man’s position. He rejects every attempt at a new ethics. He considers classic anthropocentric ethics sufficient, which, for him, is not necessarily destructive. In that ethics, it is possible to find a sufficient program for establishing a correct attitude toward nature. According to Passmore, both should be preserved: the nature that makes human existence possible in the first place and the freedom that arises from it.

The fronts in the ecological-ethical debate, on one side, biocentrism, pathocentrism, and holism, and on the other, anthropocentrism, as we have noted, can be reduced to two

great traditions of thought. One can be called classic, and the other modern. Therefore, the classic types of ethics are those which, in their founding process, refer to the subject as an external and immutably conceived instance. Accordingly, biocentrism, pathocentrism, and holism derive their own valid theories directly from nature.

For classical ethics, which wants to avoid the harms of scientific and technical civilization in a normative way, it is true that many causes of such harms are directed from the ethically oriented individual to the ethically oriented collective. Such a foundational program cannot be achieved modernly according to the norm of the constructed power of the subject, but only premodernly with the help of a material, moral theory, which in the specific case is carried by “nature,” whereby this term, as a rule, keeps it in an unreflect void.

Modern ethics, on the contrary, is based on the subject—immanent. According to Heiner Hastedt, modern means: “what one’s own criteria creates from itself, (...) premodern are all forms of foundation, which attribute the direct founding function to tradition, divine instance, government, cosmos, or nature.”²³ Subject—immanent-based ethics is more (as in modern discourse ethics) or less (as in Kant) dynamic and liberal. Unlike classic eco-ethics, modern ethics move away from the practice and remain theoretical.

Man’s primordial need to get rid of material scarcity, increase material wealth, and secure and affirm his life has always been the noticeable expression of a constant desire to subjugate nature and master his own life. However, even in these circumstances, man is faced with an absolute requirement to bring meaning to his universe and his life. This is his moral responsibility, which, among other things, must decide whether the man of the technical epoch will do everything he can.

The expansion of science and technology, and the increase in man’s power correlated with it, not only caused profound changes in nature but also became an appeal (perhaps initially only within philosophy) for a change in man’s consciousness, his fundamental attitudes toward the world, the future, and his own responsibilities. The world, as E Husserl rightly demonstrated, is essential in relation to the ability of synthesizing consciousness and must not be objectivistically distorted. The core of these fundamental positions is the consciousness of moral responsibility. Man needs to justify his behavior in sense of integration into a wider meaningful horizon. That is the key for the discussions of anthropocentrism or biocentrism of eco-ethics today.

J Passmore’s radical anthropocentrism, as was shown, advocates the thesis that man is not only the only subject of morality but also its only object. An example of this is Kant’s dichotomy between persons and things, according to which only and exclusively mental beings, persons, are means and ends in themselves; all other beings are just things and means (Kant, A IV 428). In that sense, radical anthropocentrists maintain that the protection of animals and plants can only be sustained or justified only anthropologically.²⁴ There is,

of course, no duty that in itself should protect plants and animals.²⁵

Proponents of radical anthropocentrism in philosophical eco-ethics are opposed to biocentrism in which they recognize the endangerment and destruction of the Western tradition, in which the person and scientific-technical rationality have priority. For them, biologism is primitivism, mysticism, fatalism, the enemy of science, and ultimately just an uncritical metaphysics.^{26–28}

We think that we should distance ourselves from such radical anthropocentrism and once again soberly examine the biocentric position. What do biocentrists object to in anthropocentrism? The central objection of biocentrists against anthropocentrism is “speciesism,” which should also be discarded like racism and sexism, and which states that human interests take precedence over extra-human nature.²⁹

Biocentrists in their radical version claim, as does S Hampshire for example, that the natural order as a whole is the object of unconditional interests and unconditional respect, which we label as moral. In their opinion, it makes no difference whether a tree or a man dies, and they argue that in both cases, a living being dies and returns to the earth. Therefore, Meyer-Abich wonders how it is that the “dying” of a tree has no ethical connotations. At the same time, he believes that nature thinks and feels in us.³⁰ Man’s freedom is nothing more but the freedom of nature.

An even clearer notion of radical biocentrism can be found in Taylor.³¹ There is no doubt that one should stay away from such a radical biocentrism. Personally, we adhere to the thesis of moderate biocentrism, which focuses on the ambiguous meaning of the word “life.”

The life of a plant differs from the life of a human. How is it, then, that Taylor, Hampshire, and Meyer-Abich claim unconditional moral respect for both cases? They can because they represent Spinoza’s metaphysics and thus deny the analogy of the term “life.” Different forms of life, according to this metaphysics, are the expression (*natura naturata*) of the life force (*natura naturans*), which as a whole is found in everyone. We do not want to criticize this position of Spinoza. It is true that ethics can lead to metaphysics. However, in order to ensure as much consistency as possible, she should remain stingy in the use of metaphysical terminology.³²

Therefore, we should ask whether direct duties, given their insensible nature, can be formed with less use of metaphysics? Here, it is important not to lose sight of the analogy of the term “life.” For this purpose, we need to refer to the classical thought of Aristotle.

For Aristotle, “life” is the being of the lived (Aristotle, *II* 4, 415 b 13). In our time, H Jonas took over the Aristotelian ontology of organisms and highlighted its significance for eco-ethics. Jonas interprets life with the help of the descriptive concept of freedom. He notes that at the level of vegetative life, freedom is manifested in the phenomenon of substance exchange. The need of an organism is a form of intentionality.

We can summarize the moderate biocentric thesis in eco-ethics as follows: everyone, even those non-sentient organisms, to use Kant’s terminology, are in an analogous sense objective goals, or goals in themselves. Therefore, they are the subjects of the goals. In their activity, they have themselves as their goal, and, in that sense, they are there for themselves. As means in themselves, nature and other living organisms are never exclusive means for the subjective goals of man. Therefore, Kant’s moral order idea of the realm of ends must not be limited to man only but must also include nature and subhuman organisms, if not as subjects, then as objects of moral order. The biocentric thesis relies on the analogous notion of self-aim or goal.

It is certain that anthropocentrism and biocentrism in many substantive issues lead to the same conclusions and demands. A change in posture is important for the biocentric position. Ethics does not stop at establishing norms. She also mediates ethos, an emotional posture that motivates to act correctly. That is why a purely aesthetic attitude toward nature is not enough. The danger is that attitude toward nature is reduced to a matter of subjective taste. The biocentric thesis requires an attitude that starts from the esthetic³³ toward the ontological value of nature, which it acknowledges and values. A model of cooperation and coexistence should take the place of thinking, which, in nature, is only a means to satisfy human interests. Man should treat nature in such a way that he lives up to its goals.

The ecological crisis forces us to look at the human community. We need to realize that we are largely dependent on nature and other organisms and thus recognize their contribution to us if we respect their interests and needs. This does not threaten the man’s privileged position; on the contrary, it is highlighted.

The biocentrism we are advocating is not naturalism because the distinction between the subject and the object of morality remains prominent. By respecting the goals of nature and seeing a partner in it, in the long run, it can mean that he bears responsibility for himself. Man is “a part of nature.” He does not exist “apart from nature.” As a spiritual, physical being, he is a part of nature and, as such, is determined by the laws of material life. In this sense, a moderate biocentric attitude belongs to both moderate holism and anthropocentrism.

There is no doubt that only man is a moral being, a being endowed with freedom. This was prompted by GJ Warnock, distinguishing between “moral agent” and “moral patient.”³⁴ Namely, man, as the bearer of personal responsibility, is the subject of morality and the addressee of moral duty, that is, he is the only “moral agent.” Other living creatures of the earth are touched and shaped by man’s morally good or evil deeds and omissions. To that extent, they are also “moral patient(s),” and, cautiously speaking, “object of morality.”

The prominent analogical way of speaking about the moral status or demand of subhuman living beings directs attention to the moral duties of a man in dealing with them,



which means—man's responsibility in nature, and not only in front of nature. Man has goals and needs of a nonhuman nature that must be weighed and thus make moral decisions. He must use nature by taking it as a goal that should be appropriate to its own goals.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: MORE THAN JUST ECO-ETHICS

Modern eco-ethics remains incomplete until its normative skeleton is supplemented with purpose. In doing so, we follow the previously expressed thought that ethics should remain stingy in metaphysical statements and deductions. Meaning in ethics is lived and understood in what, after antiquity, can be designated by the term a good life. A good life does not seek and strive for quick happiness and easy success but for what an anticipated view of the whole can make successful.

In that sense, eco-ethics must remain a permanent theory that will succeed in establishing a concept of action that will be able to fit into the global model of good living. The ethical form of life that could do this (realize) does not need to be invented by the ethicist; it is already described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Man acts ethically if he designs life in the face of battle, in awe and benevolent love, in thinking of life. In this sense, his responsibility also depends on retrieving purpose.

It should be said that, in a certain way, purpose precedes man. He finds it while in it; he is called to pursue it himself, to preserve it in the world. Religion certainly helps in these endowers.

We can find confirmation of what has been said in all religions (firstly in Abrahamic). They awaken our ecological consciousness in a special way. It is about humbly acknowledging the sanctity of life. Without a sense of the sacred and awareness of the importance of religious contribution to environmental protection, the doors of our common home—nature—are opened wide to barbarism of all kinds.

Nature and the world, which modernity has turned into a lifeless, "silent," exploratory, and usable something, can be reexperienced through religion as living, as something alive. Pope Francis warned about this in his encyclical letter "Laudato si."^{35–37}

In the commentary on the mentioned encyclical of Pope Francis, B Latour explains how we have wrongly assigned the earth to science and that, at the same time, we pointed to heaven when we talked about religion. We should do the opposite. When we talk about science, we should raise our eyes to heaven, and when we talk about religion, we should be down on earth. As it is obviously objective knowledge that has access to the far, far away—it reaches everything, without limitation, as long as it is provided with the means to do so. Religion, on the other hand, is the one that has a certain chance of allowing access to the neighbor, the one who is near.^{38–39}

In that sense, eco-ethics would actually remain a kind of spirituality, "cosmic mysticism"—pan-en-theism (P. Th. de Chardin). In this context, it is good to remember the three key points on which ecological spirituality rests: awareness and eye for the sanctity or sacramentality of nature, awareness of kinship and harmony with nature, and compassion and responsibility for all creation. This was perhaps sung in the most beautiful way possible long ago by St Francis in his *Song of Creatures*, which speaks of the fact that every creature glorifies the Creator in a unique way, and thus, in the respect of every creature, one can recognize a sign of universal reconciliation, the establishment of the state that the Creator wanted "in the beginning."

This, however, as Pope Francis says, "does not mean equalizing all living beings and taking away from the human being that special value that at the same time includes a terrible responsibility. Nor does it include the divinization of the earth, which would deprive us of the call to cooperate with it and to protect its fragility."

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