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Ecocentrism and Ecological Truth

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Abstract: *This paper explores how features of ecological systems, such as interconnectedness, resilience, and emergence, can be used as boundary conceptual objects to reframe standard epistemic assumptions in the classical debate regarding the nature of truth. It tentatively examines new ways of thinking about truth in order to mediate between different worldviews or social imaginaries, both anthropocentric and ecocentric. The paper advocates for alternative epistemological models that are not only theoretically coherent and useful, but also ecologically attuned, thereby promoting epistemic justice.*

Keywords: *ecological truth; epistemic sustainability; epistemic justice; environmental philosophy;*

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Introduction

An important idea in the field of environmental philosophy is that the ecological crisis has, among others, a cultural cause, namely what we can call strong anthropocentrism, a way of being in the world that sees nature as having instrumental value and takes development as implying adapting nature to the needs of the society (Plumwood, 1993, 1996). Given this perspective, an opposing, ecocentric, way of being in the world would be one in which nature has intrinsic value, and we are adapting to the natural world instead of adapting the world to our needs. Anthropocentric sustainability, or soft anthropocentrism, is a perspective that takes nature as devoid of intrinsic value, while being very conscious of the fact that we should, in fact, adapt to nature, not adapt nature to society. There is a tension here: if nature as intrinsically valuable then it should be protected and not entirely adaptable to human needs. An ecocentric view is, for the purpose of analysis, one that is oriented towards rejecting strong anthropocentrism and promoting ways of being in the world in which ecosystems have intrinsic value and are ontologically fundamental. An ecological system is a dynamic natural system characterized by the hierarchy, interconnectedness of its parts (organisms and environment, through energy flows), emergent properties, and a degree of resilience given periodic disturbances. In what follows I want to explore some ways of rethinking classical theories of truth considering some basic assumptions that characterizes the ecocentric perspective.

Worldviews, Social Imaginaries, and the Possibility of a Cultural Shift

There are many ways in which the cultural periods can be conceptualized, from those that are holistic or general, to those that are somewhat more particular or limited in scope and focused on a certain dimension of a general framework, like episteme, paradigms, normative horizons or cognitive schemas. These structures range from static/objectual to processual/dynamic forms and vary in generality. A Worldview (Weltanschauung) is a comprehensive framework of beliefs, values, and assumptions through which a society interprets the world (Dilthey, 1911). A social imaginary is a shared, often implicit and collective understandings and practices that shape a society's collective self-perception (Taylor, 2004). Episteme is the underlying, unconscious framework or structure of knowledge that shapes the conditions of possibility for thought, truth, and discourse within a particular historical epoch (Foucault, 1966), while a paradigm is a fundamental framework of shared assumptions, theories,

methods, and standards that guide a scientific community's research and understanding within a particular era (Kuhn, 1962). A normative horizon is the historically and culturally situated framework of norms, values, and expectations that shapes and limits our understanding and interpretation (Gadamer, 1960). Discourses are historically contingent systems of statements, ideas, practices, and knowledge that systematically produce and organize meaning about objects or topics (Foucault 1969). Cognitive schemas are basic mental frameworks or structures that organize knowledge and guides understanding and behaviour (Piaget, 1952).In what follows, I will remain at the level of high generality and structural complexity, focusing on the conceptual frameworks of worldview and social imaginary. A worldview can be understood as a comprehensive orientation toward reality, integrating ontological, epistemological, and axiological components. For example, a scientific or naturalistic worldview might synthesize a materialist ontology, an empiricist epistemology, and a utilitarian ethics, whereas a religious worldview may articulate a theistic metaphysics, a faith-based mode of knowing, and a divine-command moral framework. Worldviews are not merely intellectual constructions; they are shaped by a confluence of factors, including cultural heritage (myths, traditions, and shared value systems), historical context (events and collective movements that inform communal memory), personal experience (upbringing, education, and formative life events), linguistic and symbolic mediation (the semiotic frameworks through which reality is articulated), and religious or ideological structures (which provide overarching narratives of meaning, authority, and moral purpose).

According to Charles Taylor, social imaginaries are dynamic, generative structures that play a pivotal role in shaping and transforming societies. Unlike abstract theories, social imaginaries circulate through narratives, myths, and embodied practices that are intimately connected to the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Their power lies in their affective and pre-reflective resonance: they provide the background frameworks through which people make sense of their world. When prevailing imaginaries become dissonant with everyday realities, they may trigger significant cultural reconfigurations or even revolutionary shifts. A paradigmatic historical example is the transition from medieval Christendom to modern secular society, a transformation marked by the gradual displacement of hierarchical, God-centered imaginaries with more egalitarian, human-centered ones.

My working hypothesis is that anthropocentrism and ecocentrism should be understood not merely as ethical positions or environmental ideologies, but as components of broader worldviews and expressions of distinct and competing social imaginaries. These imaginaries structure how societies conceptualize the human-nature relationship, articulate value hierarchies, and define what counts as legitimate knowledge, agency, and responsibility within ecological systems. Anthropocentrism, as the dominant imaginary in modern industrial societies, positions human beings as the central or superior entities in the moral and ontological order, often reducing nature to a resource or background condition for human flourishing. In contrast, ecocentrism represents a minority worldview, marginal within current institutional, economic, and political structures, but also functions as an anticipatory imaginary (in Charles Taylor’s terms), one that carries the potential to reconfigure collective perceptions of value, agency, and interdependence. Ecocentrism de-focusses the human subject and affirms the intrinsic value of ecosystems, species, and planetary processes beyond their utility to human goals. I argue that the increasing intensity of lived experience, particularly under the accelerating pressure of climate disruptions, biodiversity collapse, and socio-ecological instability, will place existential and moral strain on the dominant anthropocentric framework. As these lived realities become more palpable, pervasive, and at times devastating, especially through phenomena such as heatwaves, resource conflicts, climate migration, or ecological tipping points, they will destabilize the legitimacy of the current imaginary and may catalyse a cultural shift toward more relational, ecologically

attuned frameworks of meaning. In this sense, ecocentrism may evolve from a peripheral vision into the seed of a new collective narrative, a transformation that is not only desirable but, I would argue, increasingly inevitable.

I think that ecocentrism must be conceptually developed through a sustained process of conceptual exploration and refinement. In pursuing this task, I will concentrate on the epistemic dimension, particularly on classical theories of truth and the role of epistemic contexts in shaping our frameworks of understanding. There are two primary reasons for this focus. First, it is not only lived experience that exerts pressure on our conceptual apparatus; rather, the conceptual frameworks and vocabularies we inhabit also shape the very structure of our experience, influencing how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world. In this sense, conceptual innovation is not merely cognitive, but it is also affective and experiential, capable of reconfiguring how we inhabit our lifeworld. Second, it is important to recognize that anthropocentrism is not simply a theoretical construct or a consciously held belief within a worldview. It functions as an implicit, pre-theoretical orientation, embedded in the tacit understanding shared by a community. It is embodied and intuitive, shaping the background assumptions through which people navigate their social and ecological environments, often without explicit articulation. Moreover, anthropocentrism is normative and practical: it structures expectations about how life should be organized and provides a background framework for everyday practices. These features, its embeddedness, its normativity, and its capacity to shape collective behaviour, are precisely those that characterize what Charles Taylor calls a social imaginary. Thus, to challenge anthropocentrism meaningfully, one must engage not only in ethical critique but also in deep epistemic and conceptual reconfiguration, opening the way for new imaginaries that are ecologically attuned.

Epistemic Injustice, Boundary Objects, and the Need for Ecological Hermeneutics

Conceptual exploration related to epistemic concepts is relevant when we focus on the idea of epistemic injustice in the context of environmental knowledge. According to Miranda Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice can be testimonial or interpretative. Testimonial epistemic injustice occurs when a testimony (in the sense of a communicative act of conveying information) is not considered credible because of a bias, not because the testimony itself is problematic. The result is an epistemic mistake (important knowledge is not shared) as well as an ethical mistake (the agent is harmed relative to his moral status). The second type of epistemic injustice, hermeneutic, relates to the lack of a vocabulary that allows the understanding and communication of experiences by individuals in a group. Conceptually limiting prejudices in this case are structural, depending on wider social practices. Lack of communication resources can also lead to a personal, and even social, identity crisis.

In the context of the ecological crisis, hermeneutic injustice is a type of structural and social injustice involving, for a community, a lack of terminological resources to conceptualise and communicate their environmental-related experiences. Marginalized communities affected by environmental degradation are in such precarious positions: they cannot adequately express their perspective on the world given their new lived experience. They experience a new relation with their environment and have new intuitions.

There is also another case, of indigenous communities that may have a type of knowledge and relation with their environment that is non-anthropocentric and is oriented towards adaptation to their environment. In such a case the problem is not the fact that they do not have the expressive resources for understanding and communicating their experiences, but that the particular conceptual resources they have require, in order to be understood, an interpretative effort that might not be available for the mainly anthropocentric community, or even to another ecocentric community that conceptualizes the environment in a different way.

In such cases, what I think is needed are boundary objects, understood as concepts or entities that facilitate communication and collaboration across different social worlds or communities of practice (Star and Griesemer, 1989). Focusing on conceptual structures, we can say that they serve as "boundary" elements between groups that may have distinct goals, languages, or methods but need to cooperate in some way. In contexts concerned with resilience and sustainability, they operate as shared conceptual interfaces that mediate between diverse epistemic communities while preserving a functional unity. These objects, such as "resilience", "ecosystem services", or "sustainability", are not reducible to a single disciplinary meaning, yet they enable interconnected thinking across domains like ecology, engineering, policy, and philosophy. Their conceptual strength lies in their ability to remain stable enough to support collective coordination, while also being flexible enough to absorb the interpretive needs of various actors.

In this view, boundary objects facilitate systems-level dialogue, enabling stakeholders with different priorities and vocabularies to co-produce knowledge, frame problems, and imagine responses to complex socio-ecological challenges. Rather than seeking full consensus, they provide a resilient conceptual infrastructure, one that supports pluralistic understandings while anchoring collaborative practices aimed at long-term sustainability and adaptive transformation. Boundary objects are conceptual bridges. So, the question is how can we reframe some epistemic concepts as *truth* and *epistemic context* in such a way as to become conceptual bridges between different ecologically oriented communities focus more, on one hand, on anthropocentrism or, on the other hand, on ecocentrism.

My proposal, thus, is to reframe some epistemic concepts that might be used in an interpretative process in order to give hermeneutic resources, in some cases, for understanding and communicating important environmental-related lived experiences, and to extend the hermeneutical possibilities of communities in our ongoing and collective conversation. I will thus explore some possible ways in which ecological truth and epistemics sustainability might be adapted to be used in an ecocentric framework. Ecological truth, in one sense, is just a set of truths about environment and out relation to it, one set that is the result of the scientific process and of philosophical thinking about ontological, ethical, political and esthetical dimensions of nature and our place in nature. There are objective facts about the natural world that we must understand and respect. The ecocentric view is the thesis that that nature has intrinsic value and that the most usefully long-term strategy is to adapt as much as possible to the environment, and not to adapt it to society's needs. Usually, the ecological thesis that living things are interconnected in systems is also blended in the ecocentric view.

Epistemic injustice, as I said, occurs when someone's ability to contribute to knowledge is undermined due to prejudice or inequality. This can happen when marginalized groups are silenced or their expertise is devalued. Ecological truth is often marginalized in mainstream knowledge systems, leading to epistemic injustice against indigenous and local communities who hold ecological knowledge. This lack of respect for ecological truth undermines what epistemic sustainability. Epistemic sustainability means ensuring that our knowledge systems and practices are sustainable in the long term. This involves valuing diverse ways of knowing, fostering critical thinking skills, and enabling knowledge to be passed on to future generations.

Focusing on epistemic sustainability and seeing our epistemic practices through the lenses of ecology is fruitful. There are different ways to develop epistemic sustainability. Some are general. Scheman (2014) argues, for example, that research ethics has typically been shaped by a conception of science as intrinsically ethics-free. She develops, instead, a conception of research ethics grounded in an ethics of epistemology, specifically for a norm of epistemic sustainability: research methods and practices that cultivate, rather than

undermine, the ground on which especially less privileged others can successfully pursue knowledge, meeting their epistemic needs as they define them.

Thus, objects of knowledge are constituted relationally and are knowable through the relationships in which they are embedded, and that taking vulnerability as an epistemic standpoint can help to ground sustainable inquiry. There are also other projects that develop epistemic sustainability in relation with the notion of epistemic injustice. Their project is to map different types and nuances of epistemic injustice, and to draw an action-oriented framework for sustainable development focused on fair treatment in knowledge-related and communicative practices relevant to environmental issues. The notion of epistemic sustainability can be usefully developed using the ecological intuition of the interconnectedness of elements in a system. Ecological truth can refer to the fact that statements about environment and our relationship with it have complex truth conditions. For example, climate change is not just "true" because data corresponds to atmospheric CO_2 levels, it is also true because it manifests through systemic interactions (climate, ecosystems, human activity).

Towards an Ecologically Informed Theory of Truth? Interconnectedness, Hierarchy, Resilience, Emergence

There is another possibility to understand ecological truth, in terms of an ecological theory of truth, one that is constructed in parallel with classical theories of truth like the (correspondence theory, coherence theory and pragmatic theory of truth). I will not explore fully such a route, but I will go on a more modest one given that I do believe there are elements of ecological thinking that are relevant and valuable in exploring ways in which we can reframe (not replace) some ideas from the classical debate regarding the nature of truth in order to reflect general ecological intuitions.

While correspondence theory sees truth as a relationship between beliefs and an independent reality, an ecological theory of truth might take reality itself as not independent, but rather interconnected. Reality, as ecologically conceived, is not independent but interconnected, dynamic, and co-constitutive. The separation between "beliefs" and "independent reality" becomes problematic in a system where everything is interdependent. The ontological speculative thesis is grounded in the ecological intuition that reality is fundamentally relational. This view posits that entities do not possess fixed, self-contained essences but emerge through networks of interdependence and dynamic interaction. In my view, this is a radical and conceptually demanding position, requiring a significant departure from substance-based metaphysics and a rethinking of ontological categories in terms of process, context, and mutual constitution. The fact that p is true, in this view would mean that the statement p interacts with the fact that p. If this is thought of as a logical connection, then the attempted ecological reframing of truth is redundant. In the correspondence theory of truth, the relation between p and the fact that p is logical. Not-p is also logically connected with p, but in a different way, one that makes p false. Thus, an ecological theory of truth would have to go further in order to have some interesting and positive features. One way is to understand the interconnectedness in a way that is causal and not just logical. However, it is hard to understand such a claim.

Coherence theories of truth focus on the internal consistency of a set of beliefs. This set can be thought of, in our reframing effort, as an ecosystem of beliefs. One option is to think that p is true if there is a consistency relation with the larger ontological system, not just with the system of beliefs. This does not make sense if one wants to maintain the thesis that there are objective and independent ecological truths. If truth is a function of how beliefs, practices, and systems interact with and transform each other, then ecological truths are also dependent on our thinking of different ecological issues one way or another.

What I think it is useful and can be imported in a sketch for an ecological theory of truth is the idea that in a system there are hierarchical relations and some elements are more important that other for the equilibrium of the system. In the classical coherence theory of truth, the main relation is that of incompatibility between a statement and a set C of all statement we take to be true. If there is a statement non p that can be derived from the hole set C of coherent statement, the p is an incompatible relation with C. Implementing the hierarchical view would mean assigning an epistemic strength to each statement in the set C, such that that, let's say, p is incompatible with C only if the strength of the derived non p statement is above a certain threshold. The strength could be represented by a probability strength or in other ways, as assertability level.

Pragmatist theories define truth in terms of what is useful or beneficial to believe. An ecological take on this idea would be to extend this to consider what is useful not just for humans, but for the entire community of life. An ecological theory could extend this by emphasizing sustainability and resilience as criteria for what "works." Systemic truth would be define in the following way: A belief or statement is "ecologically true" when it sustains, coheres with, or enhances the health and integrity of interconnected systems.

What about the last features of ecosystems, namely emergence and resilience? Can they be reframed epistemically? An ecologically informed reframing of classical theories of truth invites us to take seriously not only interconnectedness and the notion of hierarchy in epistemic systems, but also their dynamic properties, notably resilience and emergence. These two features, central to the ontology of ecological systems, can offer conceptual resources for thinking about truth not as a static relation (between proposition and fact) but as a systemic feature of adaptive epistemic ecologies. Resilience, understood ecologically, refers to the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances without collapsing into a qualitatively different regime. Translating this into epistemic terms, we might ask: Can a belief system or knowledge framework maintain its coherence and truth-conduciveness in the face of epistemic disruptions, whether empirical or theoretical? A truth theory informed by resilience would not merely focus on isolated truth claims, but on the robustness and adaptive stability of the entire epistemic framework in which those claims function. In this sense, ecological truth is resilient truth that survives epistemic shocks, accommodates plural perspectives, and integrates new data without disintegrating into relativism or epistemic closure.

Similarly, emergence challenges reductionist models of truth by foregrounding the idea that meaning, coherence, and justification can arise at higher levels of organization and are not reducible to the sum of atomic propositions or isolated correspondences. In classical correspondence theory, truth is located in a binary relation between a statement and a fact. But if reality itself is emergent, constituted by multi-level interactions, feedback loops, and context-sensitive patterns, then a theory of truth must account for these ontological complexities. From this perspective, truth emerges not only from direct referential alignment, but in a more complex way.

The ecological epistemic reframing pushes classical theories beyond their original limits. It asks us to consider, for instance, that coherence might be understood not only as internal logical consistency among beliefs, but as resonance across levels of a complex adaptive epistemic system. Likewise, a pragmatist account of truth gains depth when reframed ecologically: beliefs are true not merely when they "work" for individual agents, but when they enhance the systemic integrity, resilience, and ethical sustainability of the communities and ecologies in which they are embedded. Thus, the incorporation of resilience and emergence into truth theory does not amount to an abandonment of classical concerns with objectivity or justification. Rather, it reorients those concerns within a broader ontological and normative context, one where truth is not only about what is the case, but also about what allows us to live well and sustainably in complex, interdependent systems.

Ecological Truth as an Epistemic Boundary Object: Reframing Knowledge for a New Social Imaginary

Different classical theories of truth can be partially reframed starting from a set of features essential for ecological systems. The interconnectedness thesis, while not directly relevant, in my opinion, to the correspondence theory, is more relevant in the effort of reinterpreting the coherence and the pragmatic theories of truth. Such amended theories of truth can be epistemic boundary objects in the hermeneutical effort to accommodate in the mainstream knowledge system different local and often marginalized ways of knowing and relating to the environment, ways that sometimes assume the interconnectedness of all things, the intrinsic value of nature and the adaptability to the environment.

Epistemic concepts are not merely abstract tools but are deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and ontological frameworks that shape how societies understand themselves and their place within the natural world. In this context, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism appear not only as competing ethical positions but as rival social imaginaries, each having different constellations of values, norms, and ontological assumptions. The dominance of anthropocentrism has contributed to forms of epistemic injustice, particularly the marginalization of ecologically oriented knowledge systems. Reclaiming these suppressed ways of knowing requires more than ethical recognition. It demands a conceptual and hermeneutic reconfiguration of the epistemic space in which such knowledges are either legitimized or excluded. Epistemic sustainability might be thought of as a criterion for evaluating knowledge practices according to their capacity to support long-term ecological integrity and intergenerational justice. This leads to the need for epistemic boundary objects, conceptual tools that can mediate between disparate epistemic communities and foster dialogue without collapsing their differences. Concepts such as ecological truth, resilience, interconnectedness and systemic emergence and resilience can function in this way, as boundary epistemic object that can help us find the epistemic discourse for a new social imaginary and thus, hopefully, a new ecological worldview. My hermeneutical conceptual exploration in light of ecological ideas does not seek to replace classical theories, but to reimagine them, making space for alternative modes of knowing and living that may guide us more wisely in an era of global environmental instability. Our lived experience might be soon disrupted by a deep environmental crisis. We will live then in times for which we will need a new vocabulary. Maybe a new epistemic vocabulary will help us more easily adapt and navigate the new world to come.

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