SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PUBLISHING HOUSE

SCIENTIFIC PAPERS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY 2025
ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES NO. 233

THE ETHICS OF ROOTEDNESS AS A NEW ETHICAL-ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Katarzyna GUCZALSKA

Kracow University of Economics, Department of Philosophy; guczalsk@uek.krakow.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-8970-49

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to question the dominant paradigm of sustainable development as an insufficient response to the ecological crisis and to propose an alternative ethical concept – the ethics of rootedness. The text argues that authentic transformation of the human-nature relationship requires not only a change in practices, but also a reconfiguration of the ontological and cultural foundations of this relationship.
Design/methodology/approach: The article is theoretical and conceptual in nature. It is based on a comparative analysis of contemporary approaches to relational ecology (Haraway, Stengers, Wheeler) and on a reflection on the historical and epistemological transformations of the human-nature relationship – especially those associated with the shift to sedentary life, agriculture, and accumulation (e.g. Scott, Wengrow). The author integrates posthumanist perspectives, a critique of modernity, and local ecological knowledge to outline a new ethical-ecological model.
Findings: The article demonstrates that contemporary relational concepts, despite their innovativeness, remain embedded in academic discourse and do not lead to real changes in everyday life practices. In response, the ethics of rootedness is proposed – an approach based on local knowledge, care for specific forms of life, and ontological embeddedness in place. It is a culturally resonant, practical, and at the same time philosophically grounded proposal.
Originality/value: The article offers a new ethical proposal that combines posthumanist inspirations with the practice of everyday action. The ethics of rootedness goes beyond academic and ideological frameworks, proposing a local, inclusive, and ontologically grounded model of coexistence with the natural world. The text may be valuable for scholars in philosophy, environmental ethics, and practical ecology, as well as for all those interested in the cultural foundations of ecological transformation.
Keywords: relational ecology, ethics of rootedness, vernacular ecological ethics, sustainable development critique, posthumanist ethics, place-based ecological practice.
Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

Ecological ethics, instead of fulfilling a critical function, increasingly serves to legitimize the status quo – reinforcing dominant patterns of human-nature relations rather than challenging them. Many transformational models and ethical proposals are rooted in the logic of human interests – especially those of a human shaped by urbanized environments and a consumer-driven economy. This article attempts to go beyond this paradigm by formulating the concept of the ethics of rootedness – an approach grounded in local, affective, and material relations between humans and their natural surroundings[1]. In order to properly situate this idea theoretically, it will be presented in relation to what may be called an ontology of kinship – a mode of thinking that emerges within the framework of the new relational ontology and finds expression, among others, in Donna Haraway's concept of "making kin" (2016). In this approach, kinship does not mean shared DNA or genealogy, but rather ethical and relational ties that constitute both the subject and their environment (Haraway, 2016; cf. Stengers, 2005).

2. Rejection of the Sustainable Development Paradigm

The idea of sustainable development has grown into the dominant paradigm in thinking about the relationship between humans and nature – both as a symbolic framework of imagination and as a pragmatic formula for action (Bali Swain, 2017; Mansfield, 2009). Within its bounds, environmental policies are constructed, so-called "best ecological practices" are defined, and the limits of acceptable interference with the non-human world are established. Despite its widespread popularity, this concept has not led to a deep ethical or mental transformation. What has changed is the language – marketing, institutional, and media-driven – but not the underlying foundations of the human-world relationship. Green capitalism, although wrapped in ecological slogans, does not mark the end of the exploitation of natural resources, but rather their continued instrumentalization and commercialization (Foster, 2002; Kovel, 2007).

[1] The concept of the "ethics of rootedness" emerges from the author's experience of gardening practice and life in close contact with nature, with a particular attachment to the Podhale region and daily rootedness in Kraków and its surroundings. It was in the context of an urban eco-garden, at the intersection of natural and urbanized environments, that the idea of the "ethics of rootedness" was born. Genuine closeness to nature and the local ecosystem serves as a philosophical inspiration, linking the dimension of everyday experience of the environment with reflection on the universal aspects of ecological ethics.

As a result, we are witnessing the aestheticization of nature – for example, "ecological" flowerbeds (cultivars alien to native flora) instead of wild meadows; spectacular but empty gestures (insect hotels placed in ecologically dead zones); and standardized slogans ("for future generations", "for the good of the planet") that ultimately conceal the preservation of the economic status quo. From a critical perspective, sustainable development does not challenge exploitation – it optimizes it (O'Neill, 2001; Mansfield, 2009).

The ongoing loss of biodiversity is not merely an ecological crisis – it is a symptom of a civilizational crisis. There is an urgent need to ask: How should we think about nature today? What kind of risk are we willing to take to genuinely protect it? What normative ethics should we develop in order to break with the logic of exploitation? Answers to these questions emerge, at least partially, from the perspective of relational ecological theories, which redefine the ontology of human-nature relations and point to the necessity of a fundamental paradigm shift (Kovel, 2007; Gorz, 1979; Foster, 2002).

3. Relational Concepts in Ecology

3.1. Donna Haraway and the Philosophy of Kinship

Contemporary philosophy – particularly within posthumanist and relational currents – offers compelling proposals for redefining the relationship between humans and nature. One of the most influential figures is Donna Haraway, whose thought significantly destabilizes the classical oppositions of modernist thinking (nature/culture, subject/object), opening space for an ontology of interdependence and for practices rooted in everyday life. In her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Haraway argues for the necessity of practicing a way of life she calls "staying with the trouble" – a mode of living in tension, ambiguity, and in the constant interdependent entanglement of humans, animals, plants, soil, and technologies, without retreating into easy solutions. Her concept of *sympoiesis* – "making with" – proposes that being is not an autonomous process but a multi-species co-creation, opposing the idea of a self-sustaining subject (Haraway, 2016, pp. 55, 101). In parallel, she develops the notion of *multispecies storytelling*, which emphasizes the role of multi-species narrative as an ethical and creative medium for building community with other forms of life. This is not a narrative *about* nature, but a narrative *with* nature – one in which ethical and political values manifest through shared stories (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). The philosophy of relation does not formulate abstract norms; rather, it proposes a life lived with the ethics of coexistence: practices of *making kin*, stories that connect beings and places, and actions rooted in everyday co-being. In this way, Haraway redefines ethics: it is no longer a set of rules, but emerges as a way of life-rooted, local, and entangled.

3.2. Isabelle Stengers: Gaia as Intruder

Isabelle Stengers, drawing on the processual thought of Alfred North Whitehead, proposes an understanding of ecology as a politics of care, attentiveness, and sensitivity. Her reinterpretation of Gaia in *In Catastrophic Times* (2015) emphasizes that nature is not a passive backdrop but a force that cannot be domesticated by human cognitive, technological, or engineering systems. Gaia – whom Stengers names an "intruder" – functions as an *assemblage of forces* independent of our projects and expectations, introducing an element of unpredictability (Stengers, 2015a, p. 47; Clarke, 2017, p. 14).

Stengers firmly rejects universalism and what she calls the "solution imperative" (*le chantage à la solution*) – the reduction of thinking to management and optimization–and instead proposes an approach grounded in learning through situated, local practices: living relationships with place, and coexistence with Gaia's force. Ecological transformation, in her view, will not occur until we abandon the ambition of domination and recognize ourselves as one among many actors co-creating the world (Stengers, 2015b).

3.3. Wendy Wheeler and the World as a System of Signs

Wendy Wheeler, as a biosemiotician[2], brings a unique perspective: the living world consists not only of networks of material dependencies but also of systems of meaning. Organisms – including plants, insects, and microorganisms – possess the subjectivity of semiosis: they are senders, receivers, and interpreters of signs. In Wheeler's view, nature is not a resource but a living text – layered, situated, and local (Wheeler, 2006, 2016).

In the biosemiotic vision of ethics, life *is* communication: all biological processes are both conveyed and interpreted. The ethical message emerges not from the question of what humans do *to* nature, but from what nature communicates – what in its forms is growing and alive. All moral, cognitive, and ontological relations are embedded in the living world and depend on its internal interconnectedness. Morality does not concern human relations alone. On the contrary, it is *biorelationality* – life as a network of mutual relationships and interdependencies – that becomes the foundation of moral thought. A plant, an insect, a bacterium – these are not passive objects, but semio-active actors in the world (Beever, Hendlin, Tønnessen, 2015).

[2] Biosemiotics is an interdisciplinary approach, developed since the 1960s, that interprets life as a communicative and semiotic process – from the cellular level to interspecies relations (Sebeok, 1976; Hoffmeyer, 1996; Kull, 2001). Biosemioticians do not claim that living organisms act intentionally, but that they process signs: they respond to signals, modify behavior depending on the environment, and transmit information – chemically, behaviorally, or morphologically.

3.4. A Shared Message: Processuality, Relationality, Narrativity

The modern era was grounded in an epistemology of an ordered, classifiable world, in which the human stood as the central subject and nature functioned as a passive resource. Haraway, Stengers, and Wheeler – each in her own way – dismantle these foundations. These thinkers advocate for a processual, relational, semiotic, multispecies, and non-anthropocentric mode of thinking. Their visions shift the ecological transformation debate beyond the boundaries of classical ethical models (deontology, utilitarianism), redirecting it toward categories such as interdependence, affectivity, narrativity, locality, and the practice of everyday dwelling – as opposed to abstract principles and uncertain political declarations. This type of reflection constitutes the foundation of a new ethical paradigm, in which ecological transformation becomes a practice of dwelling, listening, and learning. It is no longer merely a moral or political obligation; it is a form of everyday activity.

4. The Ethics of Rootedness: Moving Beyond Academic Discourse

The reflections of these thinkers introduce important shifts in ecological thought. At the same time, they remain deeply embedded in the academic tradition and the language of high-level theorization. Concepts such as *multispecies storytelling* (Haraway), *cosmopolitics* (Stengers), or *biosemiotics* (Wheeler), while intellectually profound, are often difficult to apply in local practices and remain inaccessible to audiences outside academic circles. If ecological ethics is to genuinely influence the transformation of life, it must be communicated in more accessible ways. Paradoxically, it must also reach deeper – into the ontological roots of violence against nature. Haraway, Stengers, and Wheeler – each using a different theoretical language – identify in modernity a crisis in the human-nature relationship. They describe it as a consequence of the loss of our capacity to think in relational, complex, and embodied terms. This is a kind of shortsightedness. The instrumental treatment of nature, although intensified by modernity, has its roots deeper than Cartesian thought or the transformations of the Enlightenment. It reaches back to the agrarian revolution, when humans abandoned a nomadic way of life and began subordinating fire, earth, water, species, and life cycles to their will (Scott, 2017; Wengrow, Graeber, 2021).

4.1. The Concept of the Ethics of Rootedness

The concept of the ethics of rootedness calls for a reflective engagement with all (recognized) moments in which nature ceases to be a partner and becomes a resource or servant. From the history of humankind, we must extract instances of instrumentalization and the intensification of ecological destruction – name them, examine them, and seek to understand

why they occurred. For example, in the Middle Ages, nature and animals were exploited – albeit differently than in modern times (less mechanized, less systemic). Animals and plants occupied lower positions in the *scala naturae* – the great chain of being – and were expected to serve human purposes. Their existence had meaning only insofar as it fulfilled human spiritual or material needs. Forests were cleared, wetlands drained, animals treated as instruments[3]. There were occasional prohibitions against cruelty to animals (e.g., during religious festivals), and certain folk rituals signaled a kind of respect for the forces of nature. Yet such gestures did not stem from concern for the well-being of nature itself, but rather from the religious-magical order of the world.

The ethics of rootedness does not propose a return to the sacralization of nature (as in some Indigenous cultures), nor does it invoke magic or metaphysics. Its foundation is scientific and practical knowledge, combined with local memory: familiarity with native species, ecological processes, soil and life forms – knowledge given through joy, emotion, community, and the experience of nature. This approach requires no abstract justifications; it draws meaning from place and community. It is strengthened by contemporary ecological science and oriented toward action. Everyday gestures – planting native species, abandoning lawns, creating wetland or insect zones in gardens and parks – are not aesthetic trends but forms of local ecological patriotism. This is not about restoring some idealized version of nature, but about renewing broken relationships: soil-amphibians-insects-memory of a place that once was different. It is an ontological reversal – not a correction of modernity: the human ceases to be the master of nature and becomes a co-creator of life. Belonging to a place – to its water, air, micro-worlds, and history – means remaining in a kin relationship, one that arises from scientific knowledge (particularly evolutionary theory), not from metaphysics.

The ethics of rootedness draws inspiration from the concept of kinship, understood as a conscious entanglement with what is wild, unpredictable, and fallen – with leaves, fungi, bacteria, and dead matter. In the spirit of *chthonic kin*, it is about being *with* the earth, not with an abstract idea of "nature" – a relationship that demands responsibility and the stance of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016, p. 103). At the same time, the ethics of rootedness goes beyond this vision and its hermetic language, adding to it a conscious, local gesture: action in one's proximate surroundings. This is a real transformation – quiet, consistent, pragmatic – carried out in gardens, parks, and forests. It is not a spectacular theory or ideology, but rather an activity that gives nature its rightful place. It is an ethics that cares for the well-being of nature – not its aesthetic. It says "no" to planting "pretty" but alien species. It says "no" to the importation of exotic animals kept in captivity – while caring for the possibility that local animals might find their place and be accepted in the realities of the present.

[3] White Jr. (1967) argues that medieval Christianity – particularly its Western form – established the human as the master of nature, which laid the foundation for modern environmental exploitation. This thesis has been nuanced (Berry, 1988) and historically expanded (Merchant, 1980/2019).

5. Novelty, Originality, and Overcoming the One-Sidedness of Contemporary Paradigms (Further Considerations)

The ethics of rootedness constitutes a new proposal within the field of ecological ethics. Its aim is to overcome the one-sidedness of dominant approaches: sustainable development – focused on efficiency and the rhetoric of the future – and relational ethics, developed within posthumanist feminist thought, which emphasizes ontology of relations at the expense of practical criteria for action. The current condition of the environment is the result of both centuries-long natural transformations and human activity. Therefore, a profound understanding of the past of ecosystems becomes a prerequisite for diagnosing contemporary problems and forecasting the consequences of human actions. The ethics of rootedness emphasizes that nature conservation cannot be designed solely with reference to the future – as is the case in the discourse of sustainable development – but must be grounded in knowledge of the history of nature and its protection. History is not determined exclusively by humans and their interests; processes independent of human activity remain equally significant.

In the reflections of Donna Haraway, Isabelle Stengers, and Wendy Wheeler, a pronounced thread of critique of modernity's legacy is present. Similar to Carolyn Merchant in her classic work *The Death of Nature* (1980/2019), they argue that the scientific revolution and the Cartesian–modernist nature–culture dualism laid the foundations for the contemporary exploitation of nature. In their view, the ecological crisis stems from the epistemology and ontology of modernity – from the rationalist, anthropocentric subject who separated the human from other beings and objectified nature. The ethics of rootedness adopts a different perspective: it calls for the examination of all possible historical moments in which humans gradually turned away from nature. The aim is to reconstruct the processes through which the instrumentalization of nature became a taken-for-granted reality – even though it had not always been so in the past. Only by identifying these historical turning points can we understand why today the exploitation of nature appears as a "natural" mode of action. In this sense, the ethics of rootedness opens up a unique research program: rather than attributing blame to a single epoch, it reveals the complex genealogy of humanity's estrangement from the natural world.

The ethics of rootedness distances itself from the hermetic and poetic language characteristic of some strands of posthumanist reflection. Its premise is communicative normativity, grounded in a language accessible to a wider audience and rooted in local names of species, places, and practices. Understood in this way, language – alongside history, geography, and politics – becomes a tool of nature conservation, facilitating decisions concerning specific plants, animals, and landscapes in Poland. It is crucial to maintain binary distinctions (native-alien, local-invasive, wild-utilitarian) as indispensable instruments of protection. Approaches that programmatically blur these categories fail to provide sufficient decision-making criteria in conservation policies and practices (cf. Braidotti, 2013/2022, p. 12).

Practical distinctions – such as "healthy-poisonous", "wet-dry", or "local-global" – are not relics of the past but conditions of effective protection and precise communication.

The ethics of rootedness combines sensitivity to local practices with the rigor of nature conservation. Unlike standard models of community-based management or co-management (cf. Berkes, 2018), the ethics of rootedness allows for zones of impersonal protection, where the priority is not the utility of resources for communities but rather the ecological balance and the need for the regeneration of endangered species. This approach is more stringent than traditional community-based resource management (CBRM)[4], as it presupposes the necessity of leaving certain areas free from use pressure. In this sense, the ethics of rootedness defends the value of ecosystem self-regulation, pointing to the need to maintain strict protection wherever the well-being of particular species (e.g., the Eurasian lynx, golden eagle, or Eurasian eagle-owl) requires it.

The proposal of the "ethics of rootedness" is a normative and ontological project that combines the rigor of nature conservation with local practices and language, while renouncing metaphysical justifications in favor of scientific knowledge and practices embedded in the Polish context. This concept introduces a new form of ecological conservatism – capable of overcoming political polarization and presenting nature conservation as a common good, independent of the left/right divide. In Polish public debate, ecological issues are often framed in terms of threats to sovereignty and national interests, as evidenced by discursive strategies toward the European Green Deal (Dulak, Kułakowska, 2024). The ethics of rootedness may serve as a counterweight to politicized narratives, highlighting local species, language, and landscapes as a shared foundation of care – beyond ideological divisions.

In summary, the ethics of rootedness introduces novelty on several levels. First, it does not limit itself to the future or to the "guilt of modernity," but reconstructs various historical moments of humanity's turning away from nature in order to explain the process of the growing instrumentalization of the natural world. Second, it preserves binary distinctions (native-alien, local-invasive) as indispensable tools of practical conservation – something largely absent in relational approaches. Third, it introduces a stringent demand for zones of "impersonal" protection, along with a communicative language rooted in local names and landscapes. In this way, it advances a new form of ecological conservatism, capable of overcoming political polarization and presenting nature conservation as a common good.

[4] CBRM – community-based resource management, a system of managing natural resources in which the local community plays a key role; its aim is the sustainable use of resources through participation and co-decision-making (Berkes, 2018, pp. 163-185).

6. Conclusion

The currently dominant discourse of sustainable development – combining technocratic environmental management with the rhetoric of intergenerational responsibility – does not challenge the exploitative nature of the human – nature relationship; rather, it optimizes it. In the face of accelerating biodiversity loss and a global ecological crisis, what is needed is not only a change in social practices, but also a transformation of the ontological and ethical foundations of how we think about the world.

Inspired by the relational concepts of Donna Haraway (2016), Isabelle Stengers (2015a, 2015b), and Wendy Wheeler (2006, 2016), this article proposes the ethics of rootedness as a way to move beyond the limits of academic discourse and respond to the need for a deep, grounded transformation. In contrast to abstract ethical models, the ethics of rootedness is based on everyday practices of coexistence: knowledge of local ecosystems, care for specific life forms, and the continuation of relationships with place. This kind of ethics does not require linguistic sophistication. It draws on the traditions of native flora and fauna. It can be deepened through scientific tools – plant and animal lexicons, ecological classifications – but it doesn't have to be; the "ordinary" person knows that the nettle is a native plant. Here lies the paradox: the nettle is not as beautiful as *Buddleja davidii* (a plant native to China and Tibet), but it truly supports the existence of butterflies.

The essence of the ethics of rootedness is not the restoration of some idealized vision of nature. Its aim is the renewal of relationships – with the soil, with species, with local biological history. It is an existential, ethical, and even political act. The ethics of rootedness disrupts the simplistic message of contemporary politics, which tends to frame environmental protection as a left-wing idea. On the contrary, rootedness affirms an ecological conservatism: a care for the persistence of what is old, local, and life-giving. It does not require complex theory – only a garden without a lawn, a home for insects, and everyday knowledge of what is local and alive. This concept proposes a new ethical – ecological model – one that can be both philosophically grounded and accessible to everyday practice: beyond academia, beyond metaphysics, in defense of what is shared and rooted *here and now*.

References

1. Bali Swain, R. (2018). A critical analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals. In: W. Leal Filho (Ed.), *Handbook of sustainability science and research* (pp. 341-355). Springer.
2. Beever, J., Hendlin, Y.H., Tønnessen, M. (2015). Interview on biosemiotic ethics with Wendy Wheeler. *Zeitschrift für Semiotik, 37*(3-4), 177-187.

3. Berkes, F. (2018). *Sacred Ecology*. New York: Routledge.
4. Berry, T. (1988). *The dream of the Earth*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
5. Braidotti, R. (2013/2022). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
6. Clarke, B. (2017). Rethinking Gaia: Stengers, Latour, Margulis. *Theory, Culture & Society, 34*(4), 3-26.
7. Dulak, M., Kułakowska, M. (2024). *The European Green Deal in Polish Political Discourse*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo UW.
8. Foster, J.B. (2002). *Ecology against capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
9. Gorz, A. (1979). *Ecology as politics*. Boston: South End Press (Original work published 1975).
10. Graeber, D., Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. London: Allen Lane.
11. Haraway, D.J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
12. Hoffmeyer, J. (1996). *Signs of meaning in the universe*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
13. Kovel, J. (2007). *The enemy of nature: The end of capitalism or the end of the world?* London: Zed Books.
14. Kull, K. (2001). Biosemiotics: To know, what life knows. *Cybernetics & Human Knowing, 8*(3), 81-92.
15. Mansfield, B. (2009). Sustainability. In: N. Castree, D. Demeritt, D. Liverman, B. Rhoads (Eds.), *A companion to environmental geography* (pp. 123-142). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
16. Merchant, C. (1980/2019). *The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution*. New York: HarperOne.
17. O'Neill, J. (2001). Markets and the environment: The solution is the problem. *Economic and Political Weekly, 36*(21), 1865-1869.
18. Scott, J.C. (2017). *Against the grain: A deep history of the earliest states*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
19. Sebeok, T.A. (1976). *Contributions to the doctrine of signs*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
20. Stengers, I. (2005). The cosmopolitical proposal. In: B. Latour, P. Weibel (Eds.), *Making things public: Atmospheres of democracy* (pp. 994-1003). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
21. Stengers, I. (2015a). *In catastrophic times: Resisting the coming barbarism*. London: Open Humanities Press.
22. Stengers, I. (2015b). Accepting the reality of Gaia. In: C. Hamilton, C. Bonneuil, F. Gemenne (Eds.), *The Anthropocene and the global environmental crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch* (pp. 77-93). New York: Routledge.
23. Wheeler, W. (2006). *The whole creature: Complexity, biosemiotics and the evolution of culture*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

24. Wheeler, W. (2016). *Expecting the Earth: Life, culture, biosemiotics*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
25. White, L. Jr (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science, 155*(3767), 1203-1207.