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Article

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STEPHEN GARDINER'S IDEA OF ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY: ETHICS, JUSTICE, AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

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Abstract

Stephen M. Gardiner's environmental philosophy represents one of the most rigorous moral examinations of the contemporary ecological crisis. His thought transcends the boundaries of scientific and policy-oriented approaches, situating environmental degradation within a deeply moral and philosophical framework. Central to Gardiner's philosophy is his notion of the "perfect moral storm," which captures the convergence of global, intergenerational, and theoretical challenges that together render climate change an unparalleled ethical dilemma. The global dimension exposes inequalities between developed and developing nations; the intergenerational dimension highlights our moral obligations to future generations; and the theoretical dimension reveals the inadequacy of prevailing moral theories in addressing such complex issues. For Gardiner, these overlapping crises expose a form of moral corruption a collective tendency toward denial, rationalization, and self-interest that undermines genuine ethical response. His approach therefore insists on expanding the moral imagination to include duties to distant others, future persons, and non-human life forms. Gardiner also argues for institutional reform and the cultivation of virtue-oriented ethics as necessary complements to policy measures. Environmental responsibility, in his view, must be grounded in moral integrity, civic virtue, and global justice rather than mere economic or technological solutions. This paper explores Gardiner's philosophical contributions, focusing on the moral and institutional implications of his work for environmental ethics, climate justice, and governance. It argues that Gardiner's environmental philosophy challenges humanity to confront the ethical dimensions of ecological neglect and to reclaim moral responsibility as the foundation of sustainable coexistence with the natural world.

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Keywords: Stephen Gardiner, Environmental Philosophy, Moral Storm, Climate Ethics, Moral Corruption, Intergenerational Justice, Global Responsibility.

Introduction

The growing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation has transformed the twenty-first century into what many scholars describe as a moral and existential crisis for humanity. Beyond the scientific evidence and political debates, the ecological problem poses profound philosophical questions about human responsibility, justice, and the ethical relationship between humans and the natural world. Within this intellectual landscape, Stephen M. Gardiner has emerged as one of the most influential voices in contemporary environmental philosophy. His work, especially *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, offers a rigorous ethical analysis of the environmental crisis, framing it as a complex moral challenge that exposes the limitations of our current moral and political frameworks. Gardiner argues that climate change constitutes a perfect moral storm, a convergence of global, intergenerational, and theoretical dimensions that together create a situation where traditional moral reasoning falters. The global dimension reveals the inequalities between developed and developing nations in both the causes and consequences of environmental damage, while the intergenerational dimension raises the issue of justice toward future generations who will bear the heaviest burdens of present actions (Gardiner, 2003). The theoretical dimension, in turn, highlights the inadequacy of existing moral and political theories to account for ecological complexities and temporal asymmetries (Gardiner, 2006). Through this tripartite framework, Gardiner exposes the moral failures and institutional deficiencies that allow ecological degradation to persist despite global awareness.

Environmental philosophy, therefore, must not only address theoretical questions of value but also confront the moral structures that perpetuate ecological irresponsibility. As Attfield observes, environmental ethics involves expanding the scope of moral concern to include the biosphere and future generations, demanding a re-evaluation of human purposes and priorities. Gardiner deepens this view by integrating moral theory with institutional critique, arguing that the ecological crisis cannot be solved without cultivating moral integrity, virtue ethics, and institutional reform (Attfield 2014). His perspective underscores that environmental problems are not merely technical or economic but fundamentally ethical rooted in how humanity conceives of itself in relation to the Earth. Consequently, this paper examines Gardiner's idea of environmental philosophy as a call to moral renewal and global justice. It explores how his conception of the "perfect moral storm" redefines ethical responsibility in the Anthropocene era, challenging both individuals and institutions to confront the moral dimensions of climate change. By situating environmental degradation within a framework of virtue, justice, and moral accountability, Gardiner offers a philosophical foundation for rethinking humanity's role as steward and participant within the broader ecological community.

Theoretical Background: Environmental Philosophy and Moral Foundations

Environmental philosophy has evolved as a distinct field of inquiry concerned with the ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological dimensions of the human–nature relationship. It emerged in response to the increasing realization that the ecological crisis cannot be adequately addressed by empirical science or policy alone but requires a deeper moral and philosophical reflection on humanity's place within the natural world (Attfield, 2014). The theoretical background of Stephen Gardiner's environmental philosophy is rooted in this

broad intellectual tradition, drawing insights from moral philosophy, political theory, and environmental ethics to construct a framework that interprets climate change as a fundamentally ethical issue. At its core, environmental philosophy seeks to answer questions concerning value, responsibility, and justice in relation to the environment. Philosophers such as Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and Holmes Rolston III initiated this discourse by challenging anthropocentrism the idea that only human interests matter morally. They advanced ecocentric perspectives that recognize intrinsic value in nature, advocating for a holistic understanding of ecological interdependence. Gardiner extends this tradition by integrating environmental ethics with the principles of global justice and intergenerational responsibility, thereby situating ecological problems within the broader landscape of moral and political philosophy. For him, environmental degradation is not simply an external problem but a symptom of humanity's moral failure to act justly toward both the planet and future generations (Gardiner, 2011).

The Moral Dimension of Environmental Philosophy

The moral foundations of environmental philosophy derive from classical ethical theories, including deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics, each offering a distinctive lens for interpreting human obligations toward nature. Deontological ethics, influenced by Immanuel Kant, emphasizes duty and moral law grounded in reason. Within this framework, moral agents are bound to respect all beings capable of rationality and, by extension, the moral order governing the natural world (O'Neill, 1993). Gardiner's position resonates partly with deontological reasoning, particularly in his insistence that moral agents have duties to future generations independent of utilitarian cost benefit calculations. These duties, he argues, arise from respect for the inherent dignity of persons whether present or future and from the moral imperative to preserve conditions for human and ecological flourishing (Gardiner, 2003). Utilitarian approaches, by contrast, assess moral action based on its consequences for overall well-being. Classical utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill extended moral concern to sentient creatures, promoting the greatest happiness principle as a guide for environmental policy (Mill, 1861/1998). However, Gardiner critiques this framework for its temporal bias it discounts the interests of future persons whose suffering results from present inaction. Moreover, utilitarianism often fails to address the structural injustices that underlie global ecological inequality (Gardiner, 2011). Thus, while consequentialist reasoning contributes to environmental policymaking, it remains insufficient for capturing the moral complexity of climate change, which involves long-term uncertainty, intergenerational asymmetry, and collective responsibility. Virtue ethics provides a complementary foundation for Gardiner's environmental philosophy. Rooted in the Aristotelian tradition, virtue ethics emphasizes the cultivation of character traits such as prudence, temperance, humility, and justice that enable moral agents to live harmoniously within the community of life (Hursthouse, 2007). Gardiner's moral framework draws heavily on this virtue-based approach, asserting that the environmental crisis reflects not merely policy failure but a crisis of moral character. The virtues required for ecological stewardship restraint, foresight, and moral courage are precisely those eroded by modern consumerism and short-termism. Hence, environmental ethics, in Gardiner's view, must aim at cultivating moral integrity and collective virtue to counter the temptations of self-deception and procrastination in the face of climate threats.

Justice, Responsibility, and the Extension of Moral Consideration

A central tenet of Gardiner's environmental philosophy is the extension of moral consideration beyond immediate communities to include distant others, future generations,

and non-human beings. This moral expansion echoes the Rawlsian idea of justice as fairness but extends it temporally and globally (Rawls, 1971). In *The Pure Intergenerational Problem*, Gardiner argues that our obligations to future generations stem from the recognition that they will inherit the environmental consequences of our current choices. Thus, justice requires not only equitable distribution of present resources but also the preservation of ecological integrity for posterity. This intergenerational ethic challenges the anthropocentric bias embedded in modern political and economic systems, which prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability. Gardiner's position aligns with the emerging discourse of climate justice, which seeks to integrate ethical responsibility into global environmental governance (Caney, 2010). By framing climate change as a moral problem of justice and responsibility, Gardiner exposes the inadequacy of existing institutional mechanisms and calls for a reconfiguration of moral and political priorities.

Moral Corruption and the Failure of Ethical Systems

Gardiner introduces the notion of moral corruption to explain humanity's persistent failure to act ethically in the face of overwhelming evidence of ecological degradation. He describes moral corruption as the collective tendency toward self-deception, rationalization, and moral evasion, whereby societies justify inaction through misleading rhetoric or misplaced optimism (Gardiner, 2011). This concept reveals the psychological and institutional dimensions of moral failure how social structures and political systems enable individuals to obscure responsibility. It also highlights the theoretical weakness of prevailing moral systems, which lack the depth and scope to engage complex global and temporal ethics. Moral corruption, in Gardiner's view, is not an accidental flaw but a structural feature of modernity a condition in which convenience and self-interest undermine moral judgment. Similar concerns were articulated by Hannah Arendt, who warned of the "banality of evil" in bureaucratic systems that normalize moral passivity. For Gardiner, overcoming this corruption requires cultivating moral integrity, strengthening ethical institutions, and fostering a cosmopolitan moral consciousness that transcends national and generational boundaries.

The Perfect Moral Storm: Gardiner's Central Thesis

Stephen Gardiner's most influential and comprehensive contribution to environmental philosophy is encapsulated in his concept of the "Perfect Moral Storm." This idea, articulated in his principal work *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, serves as both a metaphor and an analytical framework for understanding the ethical complexity and moral failures surrounding global environmental degradation. Gardiner's central thesis posits that climate change presents not merely a scientific, technological, or economic problem, but an intricate ethical tragedy a convergence of multiple moral challenges that together paralyze effective action and expose deep flaws in human moral reasoning and global institutions. He likens this situation to a meteorological perfect storm, where several distinct but reinforcing forces collide to produce a crisis of unprecedented magnitude (Gardiner, 2011). In this section, the "Perfect Moral Storm" is examined through its three principal dimensions the global, intergenerational, and theoretical storms which together explain why humanity has failed to respond adequately to the moral imperatives of the climate crisis. Gardiner's analysis reveals how the interaction of these dimensions produces not only environmental harm but also moral corruption, a collective failure to take responsibility despite full awareness of the consequences of inaction.

The Global Storm: Justice and the Inequities of Climate Responsibility

The first dimension of Gardiner's moral storm is the global storm, which exposes the moral asymmetry and distributive injustice in the relationship between nations. The causes and effects of climate change are unevenly distributed: wealthy industrialized nations are the principal contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, while poorer developing countries bear the brunt of environmental degradation and extreme weather events (Gardiner, 2004). This imbalance reflects structural injustice within the global order and raises questions about fairness, responsibility, and moral accountability. Gardiner argues that the global dimension is exacerbated by the fragmented nature of international politics and the absence of enforceable global governance mechanisms. Each nation, acting from self-interest, seeks to maximize economic advantage while minimizing environmental responsibility. This collective action problem resembles the "tragedy of the commons" described by Garrett Hardin, where rational actors exploit shared resources to the point of collapse. However, Gardiner extends this analysis from an economic and ecological context to a moral one, emphasizing that global inaction on climate change constitutes a profound ethical failure rooted in moral complacency and political short-sightedness. The global storm, therefore, represents a crisis of international moral coordination. It exposes the inadequacy of existing institutions, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to enforce moral duties of cooperation and equity. As Caney (2010) notes, global justice requires the advantaged nations to shoulder a greater burden of mitigation, both because of their historical emissions and their superior capacity to act. Gardiner's framework, however, demonstrates that such moral clarity is often obscured by self-interest, political inertia, and moral corruption.

The Intergenerational Storm: Ethical Responsibility Across Time

The intergenerational storm is perhaps the most morally challenging aspect of Gardiner's analysis. It concerns the ethical relationship between present and future generations those who create the problem and those who will suffer its worst effects. Climate change involves temporal dispersion of causes and effects: the consequences of carbon emissions are delayed, and their impacts will persist for centuries. This creates what Gardiner calls a pure intergenerational problem, in which moral agents are tempted to exploit the temporal distance between action and consequence to evade responsibility. According to Gardiner, this temporal dimension exposes a deep flaw in human moral psychology our inability to feel moral urgency toward distant future others. This bias leads to intergenerational injustice, where present generations benefit from activities that impose severe burdens on posterity. Traditional moral and political theories often fail to address this temporal asymmetry adequately. For example, social contract theories are limited to contemporaneous agents, while utilitarianism, though concerned with aggregate welfare, struggles to weigh future well-being equitably against present satisfaction (Parfit, 1984). Gardiner thus argues for an expanded moral community that includes future generations as legitimate moral subjects. This position resonates with the principle of intergenerational equity advanced by Edith Brown Weiss, who maintains that each generation holds the Earth in trust for those to come. For Gardiner, acting justly toward future persons requires more than prudence or self-interest; it requires recognizing moral obligations grounded in fairness, virtue, and respect for human dignity beyond temporal limits. The intergenerational storm, therefore, magnifies the tragedy of the moral storm: it is easy for current generations to rationalize inaction since those most affected cannot yet speak for themselves. This, in Gardiner's analysis,

exemplifies the depth of moral corruption the tendency to disguise moral failure behind plausible but ethically empty rhetoric of progress and pragmatism.

The Theoretical Storm: The Failure of Moral and Political Theory

The third dimension, the theoretical storm, reflects the limitations of contemporary moral and political theory in addressing the complexity of the climate crisis. Gardiner argues that prevailing ethical systems whether consequentialist, deontological, or contractarian struggle to accommodate the global, intergenerational, and ecological scope of environmental harm. Traditional frameworks are typically designed for interactions among contemporaneous individuals or within bounded political communities. Climate change, by contrast, is diffuse, cumulative, and trans boundary, involving billions of agents acting collectively over centuries. This theoretical inadequacy produces moral paralysis. Policies become hostage to competing moral claims and economic calculations, while fundamental ethical principles such as justice, responsibility, and the common good are neglected. Gardiner contends that the failure of moral theory is not merely a theoretical shortcoming but a symptom of moral corruption the systematic distortion of ethical reasoning to justify inaction (Gardiner, 2006). He warns that humanity's reliance on cost-benefit analysis, technological optimism, and vague appeals to "adaptation" reflect attempts to escape rather than confront moral responsibility. The theoretical storm thus challenges philosophers to rethink ethical paradigms for the Anthropocene. It calls for an expanded moral vocabulary that integrates ecological awareness, temporal sensitivity, and global justice. This aligns with the vision of environmental philosophers such as Bryan Norton and Dale Jamieson, who argue for a pragmatic and virtue-based ethics that emphasizes character formation, moral education, and collective responsibility.

Environmental Justice and Global Ethics in Gardiner's Philosophy

Stephen Gardiner's environmental philosophy cannot be fully understood without examining his profound concern for environmental justice and the broader question of global ethics. At the heart of his argument is the conviction that climate change represents not merely an ecological or economic problem but a moral injustice of planetary proportions. This injustice manifests in the unequal distribution of ecological burdens and benefits between rich and poor nations, present and future generations, and even between human and non-human entities (Gardiner, 2011). By framing environmental degradation within the discourse of global ethics, Gardiner situates environmental philosophy at the intersection of moral responsibility, political legitimacy, and the quest for the common good. Gardiner articulates that climate change constitutes a "global systemic injustice" wherein the world's wealthiest populations - those most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions impose disproportionate harms on vulnerable communities least equipped to adapt. This asymmetry exposes the moral bankruptcy of international policies that prioritize national interests over global well-being. From this perspective, environmental justice demands a cosmopolitan ethical framework one that transcends state boundaries and recognizes the moral worth of all persons and living beings. Echoing the cosmopolitan ideals of Kant and contemporary theorists such as Pogge (Held 2010), Gardiner advocates for a moral order that binds humanity together through shared responsibility for the Earth's future.

A key dimension of Gardiner's conception of environmental justice is its intergenerational scope. He argues that the current generation's exploitation of natural resources violates the principle of fairness toward future generations, who will inherit a degraded planet and diminished life prospects. This temporal injustice challenges traditional

ethical theories, which are often ill-equipped to address harms that extend across centuries (Gardiner, 2003). In line with Rawls' notion of the "just savings principle," Gardiner maintains that moral agents must act as trustees of the Earth, preserving ecological integrity as a matter of justice and stewardship. His approach thus integrates environmental sustainability into the core of moral theory, transforming ecological care from a matter of choice into a categorical duty. Furthermore, Gardiner's work situates environmental justice within the context of institutional ethics. He contends that global governance structures such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol are often paralyzed by self-interest, bureaucratic inertia, and political compromise (Gardiner, 2011). These institutional failures reflect not merely procedural inefficiency but moral corruption on a global scale, as powerful nations exploit loopholes and defer responsibility under the guise of diplomacy. For Gardiner, genuine environmental justice requires institutions that embody ethical integrity, promote equitable participation, and prioritize the protection of the most vulnerable both human and ecological.

Gardiner's emphasis on virtue ethics further enriches his account of global justice. He posits that structural reforms alone are insufficient unless they are guided by virtuous dispositions such as honesty, humility, compassion, and courage (Gardiner, 2010). These virtues enable moral agents to resist the temptations of denial, greed, and apathy that sustain ecological destruction. In this regard, Gardiner aligns with environmental philosophers like Aldo Leopold and Bryan Norton, who envision ethics as a way of cultivating character and fostering a "land ethic" grounded in respect for the biotic community. Ultimately, Gardiner's framework calls for a global ethics of care and responsibility, where environmental justice is not confined to legal or distributive concerns but extends to the moral imagination. His environmental philosophy redefines justice as an ongoing practice of solidarity across nations, species, and generations. In confronting the environmental crisis, Gardiner challenges humanity to move beyond narrow self-interest toward what he calls "the moral community of all beings," a vision rooted in the recognition that our shared destiny depends on the flourishing of the Earth itself.

Toward a Virtue-Oriented Environmental Ethics

In addressing the ethical challenges posed by climate change, Stephen Gardiner advances an approach that moves beyond the limitations of rule-based or consequence-driven moral theories toward a virtue-oriented environmental ethic. For Gardiner, the complexity of the environmental crisis its temporal, spatial, and moral dimensions reveals the insufficiency of conventional ethical systems such as utilitarianism and deontology. These frameworks often fail to cultivate the kind of moral character and dispositions necessary for sustained ecological responsibility. By contrast, a virtue-oriented approach emphasizes the moral agent's character, motivations, and capacity for self-restraint, situating environmental ethics within the broader horizon of moral formation and the good life. Drawing on the Aristotelian conception of virtue as a mean between extremes, Gardiner's environmental virtue ethics seeks to develop habits and dispositions conducive to ecological flourishing. The goal is not merely to obey environmental laws or maximize utility but to live well within the bounds of nature (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b). This requires cultivating virtues such as temperance, humility, prudence, and justice, which counteract the vices of excess, arrogance, and negligence that characterize the anthropocentric attitude of modernity. Gardiner thus reinterprets environmental degradation as a symptom of moral deficiency a failure to embody the virtues necessary for planetary stewardship.

In this virtue-oriented framework, temperance emerges as a foundational ecological virtue. It calls for moderation in consumption and restraint in exploiting natural resources, echoing the ecological humility advocated by Aldo Leopold's land ethic. For Leopold, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community." Gardiner extends this principle by emphasizing moral self-discipline and the cultivation of global virtues capable of resisting the moral corruption endemic to consumerist societies. Humility, in this sense, becomes an antidote to the hubris of technological domination, reminding humanity of its dependence on ecological systems and its moral duty to protect them. Another key virtue in Gardiner's environmental ethic is prudence the practical wisdom to discern right action in complex, uncertain, and long-term contexts. Unlike the narrow rationality of cost-benefit analysis, prudence integrates foresight, moral imagination, and sensitivity to the consequences of one's actions for distant others and future generations (Gardiner, 2006). It aligns with Hans Jonas's "ethics of responsibility," which calls for an anticipatory moral awareness appropriate to the technological age. Through prudence, moral agents cultivate the capacity to deliberate wisely amid uncertainty, recognizing that ecological responsibility requires not omniscience but sincerity, caution, and care.

Justice, both intergenerational and global, also stands at the center of Gardiner's virtue ethics. He insists that the moral life cannot be separated from considerations of fairness and solidarity across space and time. The just person, in Gardiner's view, is one who recognizes the moral claims of future generations and marginalized communities, ensuring that ecological benefits and burdens are distributed equitably (Gardiner, 2004). This virtue of justice complements the virtues of care and compassion, which extend moral concern beyond the human sphere to encompass non-human life and ecosystems. Moreover, Gardiner's virtue-oriented environmental ethic underscores the importance of moral integrity the alignment of moral belief and action. Integrity resists the fragmentation of responsibility that characterizes modern responses to climate change. It entails consistency between one's ecological values and daily choices, from political advocacy to personal consumption. As Dale Jamieson notes, such integrity requires viewing one's life as a coherent moral project, where environmental stewardship becomes integral to one's identity rather than an optional moral add-on. Gardiner's virtue ethics thus envisions environmental renewal as a moral transformation rather than a merely technical or political reform. It calls for the re-education of desire, the reorientation of institutions, and the cultivation of moral exemplars capable of inspiring ecological virtue in others. In this regard, his approach resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of moral fragmentation in *After Virtue*, suggesting that the recovery of a shared moral narrative is essential for rebuilding the moral ecology of human life.

Conclusion

Stephen Gardiner's environmental philosophy offers one of the most profound and morally rigorous frameworks for understanding the ethical dimensions of climate change in contemporary thought. Through his concept of the "perfect moral storm," Gardiner reveals that the environmental crisis is not merely a scientific or political dilemma but an ethical tragedy rooted in the structure of modern moral life. It exposes humanity's inability to reconcile short-term interests with long-term responsibilities and reveals how moral corruption manifested in denial, self-deception, and institutional inertia undermines our collective capacity for justice and stewardship (Gardiner, 2011).

At the core of Gardiner's contribution is his insistence that environmental degradation represents a moral failure of civilization, not simply a technological miscalculation. The climate crisis tests the very foundations of ethics, justice, and responsibility. It compels moral agents to rethink the scope of their obligations extending them beyond the boundaries of nation, species, and generation. By identifying the global, intergenerational, and theoretical dimensions of climate change, Gardiner reframes environmental philosophy as a discipline of moral realism, one that must face uncomfortable truths about human vulnerability and complicity.

His appeal to a virtue-oriented environmental ethic provides a constructive path forward. Gardiner's integration of Aristotelian virtue ethics with environmental thought underscores that sustainable living depends on cultivating the right dispositions temperance, humility, prudence, justice, and integrity. These virtues equip moral agents to resist the vices of greed, arrogance, and apathy that fuel ecological destruction. In this sense, environmental ethics becomes not only a question of policy but a moral pedagogy: a call to form character and conscience in harmony with the natural world. Furthermore, Gardiner's framework for environmental justice situates ecological responsibility within a global moral order. He argues that true justice must account for the asymmetries of power and vulnerability across nations and generations (Gardiner, 2004). By linking environmental ethics to global governance, he exposes the moral inadequacy of institutions that prioritize economic gain over planetary welfare and challenges policymakers to embody the virtues necessary for just ecological stewardship. Ultimately, Gardiner's environmental philosophy redefines the moral task of our age. It demands a transformation from reactive to reflective moral agency, where individuals and societies act not out of fear or convenience but from an awareness of their moral place within the web of life. His thought reawakens the ancient philosophical question of how to live well now reframed within the fragile ecology of the Anthropocene. In doing so, Gardiner reminds us that environmental renewal is inseparable from moral renewal: to heal the Earth, humanity must first recover its moral compass. Thus, Gardiner's work stands as a clarion call to integrate ethical responsibility, global justice, and virtue into the heart of environmental philosophy. It challenges contemporary civilization to transcend moral corruption, cultivate ecological wisdom, and build a world where human flourishing is aligned with the flourishing of the Earth. His philosophy points toward a future in which ethics is no longer confined to human relations but extends to the entire community of life a moral horizon that envisions not domination, but stewardship, interdependence, and reverence for being itself.

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