

Mutual Care Based on Earth-Centric Empathy in the Living Ecological Web

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When efforts to address the environmental crisis are solely motivated by human-centric fears of threats to human life, there is a risk of overlooking damage to the Earth that does not threaten humans yet contributes to environmental degradation. This paper aims to shift the perspective from human-centric to Earth-centric, attempting to listen to the voice of the Earth based on a mutual relationship, and to seek practical theological wisdom arising from empathy toward the Earth. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of two case studies, the possibility of listening to and empathizing with the Earth is explored. Practicing such interspecies and Earth-centric empathy enables the reformulation of humanity's roles in addressing the climate crisis, creating a path for mutual care within the living ecological web. This process leads to a theological imagination of the eschatological Kingdom of God and ultimately constructs an Earth-centric practical theology.

Introduction

Listening is the primary task of both practical and pastoral theologies. Can we also listen to the voice of the Earth? This is an important question to consider as we face the ever-increasing urgency of the climate crisis, which threatens the livelihood of all living beings on Earth. Perhaps this is a radically different consideration from what practical and pastoral theologians have focused on. In Korea, for example, pastoral theology has mostly attended to individual care and support (Chung 2018, 254–257; Jeong 2018, 251–252). However, listening to the voice of the Earth responds to the invitation found in Bonnie Miller-McLemore's metaphor of the "living human web" (Miller-McLemore 1993). By expanding the scope of the web to all beings, the Earth becomes the central player in a new theological metaphor, the "living ecological web," which powerfully highlights the interdependence and interconnectedness of all creatures and the world.

In the metaphor of the living ecological web, the lived experience of the Earth is an important starting point for practical theological reflection. Lived experience assumes specific situations and contexts,

enabling empathy that can embrace complexity. Therefore, listening to the voice of the Earth in her lived experience is an appropriate starting point for constructing an Earth-centric practical theology.

Such Earth-centric practical theology critiques environmental discourses that call for action based on a sense of crisis for humanity. Efforts motivated solely by the idea that the environmental crisis is a threat to humans are human-centric and should be reconsidered, as this underlying motive implies that it would still be acceptable to damage the Earth if the crisis were not a threat to humans.

This paper deploys an interdisciplinary framework to present a practical theology of intersubjective and interspecies Earth-care. It first builds a conceptualization of what I consider an act of listening to the voice of the Earth. Then, through an analysis of two case studies, it explores and describes Earth-centric empathy as an essential human quality. Finally, it proposes the roles of humans in mutual care based on Earth-centric empathy within the living ecological web. This process invites us to imagine the ultimate eschatological Kingdom of God.

Listening to the Voice of the Earth

The spiritual care and counseling paradigm has moved away from its former psychoanalytic paradigm, where the therapeutic process heavily relied on the interpretations of experts. Today's relational counseling paradigm values the subjectivity of both the counselor and the client, believing that clients are the experts on their problems (Greenspan 1995, 57–69, 263–269; Cooper-White 2004; KimMin 2013, 18–22). Pastoral methods based on this kind of intersubjective relationship, according to Pamela Cooper-White, “can generate more openness to the shared wisdom that is generated at both conscious and unconscious levels” and “ultimately open greater possibilities for empathic listening and liberatory pastoral praxis” (Cooper-White 2004, 81).

This paradigm shift from the expert-patient relationship to intersubjectivity is lacking in human-Earth relationships. The Earth has been treated as an object to control under the technological, industrial, and development-focused paradigm. However, the relationship between humans and the Earth should not be viewed through the expert-patient paradigm either. The Earth is the expert on her problems and possesses excellent resilience and capacity to repair herself (Cho 2019, 55–57). Therefore, if we think we can take care of the planet unilaterally, it would be as arrogant as the modern idea that the planet is manageable. The Earth is neither an object of exploitation nor of one-sided care. We must begin to see the Earth as a subject in a relationship of mutual equality.

When the Earth is regarded as a subject in a relationship, we must start to listen to the Earth. However, can humans truly listen to the voices of beings who speak different languages and belong to different species? South Korean biologist Jae Chun Choe, who identifies as an advocate for animals who “cannot afford to hire a lawyer,” states in his opinion columns “Defense for Migratory Birds” (Choe 2007) and “Defense for Wild Boars” (Choe 2019a) that people often perceive migratory birds and wild boars as sources of infectious diseases like Avian Influenza (AI) and African Swine Fever (ASF). However, Choe notes that, contrary to human perception, humans play a crucial role in transmitting these viruses through the distribution of animals and feed. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the lack of genetic diversity in domesticated animals and factory farming practices contribute to the rapid spread of these viruses, for which humans are re-

sponsible. He argues that the practice of culling animals to eradicate viruses, a form of genocide, is never justified. Instead, he asserts that coexistence, rather than eradication, is the way forward (Choe 2007, 2019a). Choe further explains that animals communicate a clear message to humans. He cites cases such as a dolphin caught in fishing lines and a fox trapped in a glass bottle, who approached humans for help to release themselves from the traps, and an orangutan clinging to forklifts to protest against the cutting down of trees in their habitat. Possibly the mass animal casualties at festivals like the Hwacheon Sancheoneo Ice Festival¹ and the Hampyeong Butterfly Festival² leave a visceral message that humans need to heed (Choe 2019b). Through these examples, Choe endeavors to listen to their messages by interpreting their lived experience in their specific situations, their suffering caused by human treatment, and their gestures and requests. This leads to the question: Is it possible for us to listen to the voice of the Earth?

What is the voice of the Earth, and what would the Earth's voice sound like? Increasingly unpredictable climate change, natural disasters, viruses from animals, and all the changes on the planet can be seen as clear signs, expressions, and voices of the Earth's suffering. Just as the symptoms of one person's reaction to another's violence can be devastating but contain a clear message, the changes on the planet that threaten humanity contain the reproaching voice of planet Earth, maybe screaming in pain. Understandably, since the Industrial Revolution, the Earth has been exploited at an increasingly accelerated pace and colonized by the endless pursuit of economic profit and growth, driven by capitalism and neo-liberal rationality. The human actions that

1 Sancheoneo is a species of trout farmed in various areas and released into the frozen rivers around Hwacheon in January. During the festival, hundreds of thousands of people flock to Hwacheon to try ice fishing and bare-hand fishing for sancheoneo (Park, Chung 2021, 182–185). According to San-Ha Kim, director of the Biodiversity Foundation, around five hundred thousand sancheoneos are released and killed during this period (Kim 2018).

2 Scheduled for late April to early May, near family-related holidays, the Hampyeong Butterfly Festival attracts large numbers of visitors. Visitors can interact with butterflies released in the region. However, as the butterflies are artificially hatched in advance and are not native to the area, they barely survive the festival period and are discarded after the event (Kim 2018).



ignore the living ecological web have destroyed the Earth, harmed humans, and pained God.

Can hope be found? If humanity's actions are so harmful, wouldn't it be better for the planet if humans were to become extinct? From the perspective of the Earth, would there be a rationale for preserving humankind to coexist with and on the Earth? In the following, I will attempt to answer these questions and explore what human qualities are required, using Earth-centric empathy to find the answers.

Earth-Centric Empathy as an Essential Human Quality Navigating the Living Ecological Web

While biologist Edward Wilson is concerned about the rapid extinction and endangerment of many animal species since the advent of humans, he also notes that international policies and laws are changing environmental attitudes and practices for the better (Wilson, as cited in Choi et al. 2020, 278–282). This implies that there are increasing instances demonstrating humanity's success in caring for the planet. Therefore, in the following section, I will explore the concept of Earth-centric empathy as an essential human quality through two examples.

1. The Lesson of the Mass Reindeer Carcasses: The Work of the Ecosystem

One aspect of Earth-centric empathy is humble respect for the Earth without making intrusive judgments or actions. Such respectful regard has been exercised in Hardangervidda National Park in Norway. In 2016, 323 wild reindeer were struck dead by lightning in the high mountains of the park. Many insisted on removing all the carcasses, claiming that they would degrade the ecosystem by increasing rodent populations and that they were aesthetically unpleasant. However, the national park management chose to leave the carcasses in place, arguing that lightning is a natural phenomenon and that humans should not interfere with the ecosystem (Im 2020).

Their respectful trust in the ecosystem was rewarded with the opportunity to witness the beautiful unfolding of natural processes. Over two years, Shane Frank and his colleagues found that the carcasses attracted scavengers such as ravens and foxes, providing a pulse of nutrients and that rodents strongly avoided the area during the first year, likely

due to the high predation risk associated with the abundance of ravens (Frank et al. 2020). In another study, researchers mentioned that scavengers concentrated their activities around reindeer carcasses, dispersing plant seeds toward these nutrient-rich cadaver decomposition islands. This process potentially contributes to plant growth and generates diverse plant life. They concluded that anthropogenic manipulation can disrupt the ecosystem's cycling mechanisms by removing ecological functions from some plants and animals (Steyaert et al. 2018). In other words, excessive human intervention in the natural functioning of an ecosystem can destroy its abundance and virtuous cycle.

This exemplifies how humans have successfully practiced empathy for the planet by stepping back from excessive intervention. We must actively and radically reduce humanity's negative impact on the planet. It means relying on the resilience of the planet and humbly admitting that there are some things we cannot do.

2. The Community Model of Green Asia Network

The second example reveals a more complex exercise of Earth-centric empathy that enlists cooperative work. It involves both intraspecies and interspecies empathy. Starting in 2000, the Korean NGO Green Asia Network went to Mongolia. By that time, due to climate change, many parts of Mongolia had become deserted; livestock had died, and numerous groups of people had become environmental refugees. Ki Chul Oh, Chief Executive Officer of Green Asia Network, stated that Mongolia is the only country in the world, excluding the Arctic, where temperatures have already risen by 2 degrees Celsius (Oh 2017, 58–59). He also explained that people in non-industrialized countries like Mongolia cause the least damage to the planet yet suffer the most devastating effects of climate change; the resulting poverty in such areas can only be addressed by revitalizing the land (Oh 2017, 48, 111). Therefore, they spent three years planting 10,000 trees in a Mongolian village to rebuild the lives of the local people. However, the trees planted by Green Asia Network barely survived. To Oh's surprise, the reason for this failure was that the villagers, whose priority was to save their livestock, secretly allowed their animals to graze on the leaves of the trees. Therefore, their second attempt needed to address issues beyond planting trees (Oh 2017, 212–214).

In 2003, Oh and Green Asia Network began paying unemployed villagers a monthly stipend to plant and care for the trees. Also, guided by a local environmental teacher, six hundred students came on a field trip, chose their own trees, and continued to visit and look after the trees. Oh started envisioning a model in which people and land could be restored and grow together (Oh 2017, 210–211, 214–216). Here, his empathy operated in his analysis of the lived experiences of three main actors—the land, the trees, and the people—which I interpret as deep listening. In his first attempt, he heard the messages of the trees that died after being eaten by livestock; in his second attempt, he heard the messages of the trees that gradually came back to life with proper care. This made him realize that he needed to connect the needs of the land and the trees with the direct actions of the people. He examined the land's features and the people's perceptions and culture and then accordingly planned his next attempt. Knowing that NGOs would one day be gone, he focused on people's self-reliance and the relationship between the land and the people (Oh 2017, 214–216).

In 2007, Green Asia Network rented land in the devastated Bayannur area and asked the villagers to work on it. At first, the villagers were not invested in the task. They said, "Even if we work hard, the government officials, rich people, and foreigners like you will take everything away." Oh explained that "Their products have always been taken away. So, the idea of 'there is no point in working' and 'there is no tomorrow' is ingrained in them" (Oh 2017, 218–220). In understanding this, the villagers' frustration became Oh's through empathic listening to the history of the community. However, instead of simply accepting the feelings of hopelessness, he recognized these feelings as information about the villagers' situation. This frustration was addressed at the time of the potato harvest by transferring the decision-making power to the villagers: "Nobody who has not worked on this land can take a single potato. You have to decide for yourselves to whom you will give the potatoes" (Oh 2017, 220). He also invited and empowered the villagers to have a meeting to decide for themselves whether to plant potatoes again next year, how much of the harvest would be left for use as seeds, how to divide the potatoes for winter food, and how much would be given to the elderly and disabled. Furthermore, by elevating the hopes of the villagers and providing them with ongoing professional training, Oh got the villagers to form a community to plant trees and look after the

land themselves (Oh 2017, 221–226). Thus, the project developed into a community-building initiative that empowered the people to be self-reliant while nurturing them into the people the land needed.

In 2012, he organized a community meeting to set standards for acceptable absences, lateness, and workload, and he let those unwilling to improve leave the community. Some activists said, "You are imposing strict standards on poor people." However, Oh argued, "We are not here to help poor Mongolians out of pity. We are here to take responsible steps to counter climate change. They are not objects of charity, but they are our partners. This relationship requires them to take responsibility as well" (Oh 2017, 226–228). His comments reflect a desire for an equal and mutual relationship rather than one of just one-sided giving. Based on this relationship, he suggests a community model that restores not only the forest there or the lives of local people but also the relationship between the people and the land. In 2014, Green Asia Network's community model was recognized by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as a sustainable land management model and received the 2014 Land for Life Award. It has also been recommended as a model for other countries suffering from desertification (Oh 2017, 208–211).

3. Earth-Centric Empathy as the Righteousness that God Calls for

Oh's account of his experience in Mongolia reveals an interesting theological point. He noted that when a tenth of the village area was forested, sandstorms disappeared and desertification stopped in that area. He also explained that one forest could protect ten times its own area (Oh 2017, 223). If so, this could be a case where the restoration of a part of an area leads to the protection of the whole area. The disaster sites of the climate crisis are haunted by a biblical account of the destructive crisis seen in Sodom and Gomorrah, overthrown as sulfur and fire rained down, where the whole city could have been saved if there had been ten righteous people. This is not, of course, to argue that natural disasters are God's punishing act upon the disaster site. Biblical scholar Ohyun Kwon claims that the focus of the Sodom and Gomorrah story is on God's search for righteous people and God's salvation rather than on God's judgment. Kwon interprets the passage as God's command to become the ten righteous people that this society and history need (Kwon 2005, 95,



222). Thus, what is the righteousness that the text calls for? Who are the ten righteous people that God is looking for? Furthermore, what are the implications of this righteousness for environmental issues?

When God informs Abraham of God's plan of judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, God says, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:20–21 NRSV). There was a cry from Sodom and Gomorrah. Kwon observes that, just as God responded to the cries of the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt, God's salvation comes in response to a cry (Kwon 2005, 149). Ee Kon Kim also explains that the cry of agony forms the foundation of Israel's salvation history (Kim 1999, 528, 534, 550). Therefore, it is important that such cries are assigned to identifiable agents. Strangely, however, this text does not clearly identify the agent of the cry. In the absence of the agent, Kwon claims that there was no one to cry out to God except Lot and tries to prove that Lot was the only righteous man there (Kwon 2005, 152, 206–211). Later writings about Lot testify that he was righteous, as in the second letter of Peter: "and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)" (2 Pet. 2:7–8 NRSV). However, there is no such description of Lot in the Old Testament, unlike Abraham or Noah, who are explicitly called righteous. As a result, scholars disagree about Lot's righteousness and why he was saved. Besides, Lot does not appear to have been in an abusive situation in Sodom and Gomorrah that would lead him to cry out. Critically, if Lot had cried out, the Bible would have stated so, just as it does in other contexts. Thus, who is the agent of the cry that is not written in the text?

I argue that it was the land that cried out and thus caused God to perform an act of salvation. Directly linking today's environmental degradation to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah that caused the land to cry out may have its limitations. Scholars describe the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as abject moral and social decay, along with disregard for fundamental order and human rights (Kwon 2005, 151). However, it should be noted that the Hebrew Scriptures testify to the suffering and responsive Earth, reacting not only to the sins that humans commit against God but also to the violence and sin

among humans (e.g., Gen. 4:10–12, Gen. 6:11–12, Lev. 18:27–28, Joel. 1:10). The Earth suffers and cries out in response to the rebellion against God, violence among humans, and the direct exploitation of the Earth. Thus, the task of the righteousness that God called for in Sodom and Gomorrah may have been to listen to the cry of the Earth, to empathize with her, and to ease her pain.

Meanwhile, Kwon lists the commonalities of the righteous in the Pentateuch and mentions that one of the commonalities is that the righteous inherit the land from God (Kwon 2005, 122, 125). In this case, the righteous can inhabit fertile land, but when we shift from the human-centric perspective to the Earth-centric one, we see that the land receives the righteous as gifts who will neither violate her nor make her cry out. In other words, God is not for humans alone but for the whole created world. Thus, God hears and moves in response to the cries of the Earth.

In this sense, the Green Asia Network's community model can be seen as a righteous success and a case of stopping the cry of the land by empathetically listening to and caring for the land and rebuilding the relationship between the people and the land. The Norwegian national park's decision about the reindeer carcasses was also a successful case of empathy toward the Earth's ecosystem. Therefore, based on Earth-centric empathy, we should listen to the Earth and determine whether to back off from human interventions, as in the case of the reindeer, or to actively look for ways in which humanity and the land can restore a relationship of harmonious coexistence, as in the case of Green Asia Network. In discerning the possible action plans, we should also contemplate the roles of humanity in each of the two cases.

The Roles of Humans Practicing Earth-Centric Empathy for Mutual Care

1. Humans as Co-Creators: Providing a "Holding Environment"

First, humans can provide a holding environment where Earth-centric empathic listening can happen. In process theology, God's creation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of mutual influence between God and the world of interdependence. God continues to create by persuading toward the highest possibility and well-being of all, and the

world responds to God's aim by emerging. Humans can choose whether to respond and participate as co-creators in God's work or deviate from God's aim. God co-experiences the results with the world (Suchocki 1995, 56–64). In the Green Asia Network's community model, humanity's role was to work with God as co-creators.

Donald Winnicott's "holding environment" can be a valuable concept to explain the role of co-creators. It refers to the good enough care provided by a primary caregiver who adjusts and adapts to the changing needs of a child. Winnicott recognized that mental disorders could result from critical deprivation of an appropriate environment. Thus, he mentioned that the therapeutic act in counseling should include providing a holding environment that is supportive, consistent, and safe enough to facilitate the client's growth (Winnicott 2000, 60–102, 351–355). This concept of holding environment is now understood as a vital factor that needs to be provided not only in counseling but also in all forms of pastoral care. Therefore, as co-creators, we need to listen to and empathize with the voice of the Earth and strive to provide a holding environment for the Earth.

2. Humans as Co-Creatures: Hoping for a "Holding Environment"

At the same time, we are also co-creatures. Despite our best efforts, we cannot fully understand and empathize with the planet, so we should humbly acknowledge our limitations. Just as in the case of the national park that left the reindeer carcasses unattended, there are times when humanity needs to step back. Now, as co-creatures, we rely on the power of creation and the resilience of God and the Earth, hoping for a holding environment. However, when it comes to the pain and suffering that could be caused by the Earth, already reaching the limits of her resilience, we need to cry out in solidarity, hoping for the Kingdom of God, where neither humans nor the Earth needs to cry out.

3. A Hopeful Vision for Earth-Centric Interspecies Empathy

Earth-centric empathy is a complex and abstract concept. It constantly requires us to listen to the voices of other species. Can we put this into practice in our daily lives and perform the roles for mutual care? A glimmer of hope that species differences

may not be a barrier to empathy can be found in the recent popular Korean drama *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*. Young-woo Woo, a female lawyer with autism spectrum disorder and exceptional intellect, faces various forms of discrimination because of her differences from others. She possesses a special love for and knowledge about all kinds of whales and listens to their sounds through her headset on the subway to calm her nerves. Whales swim and leap in her mind when she gains insightful perspectives on her cases. She even engages in dolphin liberation protests on her days off.

Choe explains that whales are unique in the wild for actively caring for other disabled or injured individuals. Since whales breathe through their lungs, they risk sinking entirely in the water when injured or exhausted. However, other whales would carry them on their backs to help them breathe. Choe speculates that this may be why Attorney Woo has a particular affinity for whales and suggests that "The world she envisions is a world of whales" (Choe 2022). Of course, Choe is addressing intraspecies care in this context, drawing a parallel between the whales' care for other disabled individuals and the issue of disability discrimination in human society. Nevertheless, the consistent acts of care among whales, Attorney Woo's active involvement in dolphin liberation protests, and the love and concern shown by people for the extraordinary Attorney Woo may signify that we are capable of listening to other species and demonstrating empathetic behavior towards different species.

This kind of symbiosis, based on interspecies knowledge and empathy, is often described as the eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God. In the first Kingdom of God, there is a scene in which Adam names all the animals in the Garden of Eden. Cha Yong Ku argues that Adam's act of naming the animals does not imply human dominance over them; instead, it suggests an intimacy between animals and humanity (Ku 2015, 213–215). Additionally, as in Isaiah, where "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6 NRSV), the Kingdom of God we ultimately seek is a kingdom of interspecies empathy. Therefore, Earth-centric empathy is not a mere choice but an essential quality for those who seek the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the expansion of practical actions based on Earth-centric empathy can be an experience of the Kingdom of God in the world.



Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to construct an Earth-centric practical theology through an interdisciplinary analysis. I have argued that humans need to listen to the voice of the Earth in the living ecological web and play roles in mutual care based on Earth-centric empathy. Earth-centric empathy at times involves seeking ways for humanity and the Earth to coexist while working as co-creators to provide a holding environment for the Earth and all living beings. At other times, Earth-centric empathy requires us to step back from excessive human intervention on the planet, hoping for a holding environment as co-creatures. This kind of interspecies empathy invites us to envision the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom, there will be no more cries of the Earth, no more cries of anyone like those heard in Sodom and Gomorrah. As is declared in the book of Isaiah: "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress" (Isa. 65:19 NRSV).

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