



Ecological Grief and the Moral Considerability of the Non-Human: Towards a Post-Human Concept of Personhood

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ABSTRACT

The accelerating phenomena of species extinction, ecosystem collapse, and landscape alteration characteristic of the Anthropocene are generating a pervasive but often philosophically unaccounted-for experience: ecological grief. This paper argues that the profound sorrow attendant upon these losses reveals a critical lacuna in mainstream environmental ethics—the lack of a robust ethical framework for mourning the non-human. Prevailing anthropocentric conceptions of personhood, which link moral considerability to capacities such as rationality or self-consciousness, render the death of a forest, a river, or a species a matter of instrumental resource loss, rather than the passing of a legitimate subject-of-a-life. This paper challenges this narrow ontology by synthesizing insights from the environmental humanities, post-humanist philosophy, and Indigenous thought. It posits that ecological grief is not a pathological sentimentality but a testifying response to the loss of relational, more-than-human persons. The analysis proceeds by first delineating the phenomenon of ecological grief and its current marginalization. It then critically deconstructs the anthropocentric boundaries of personhood in Western philosophy, arguing that this framework is ecologically and ethically untenable. Through case studies of “glacier death” in Iceland and the extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys, the paper articulates a post-human concept of personhood grounded in relationality, historical presence, and complex agency. Finally, it contends that recognizing the personhood of non-human entities is an ethical imperative, transforming ecological grief from a private affliction into a public, moral duty of remembrance and a powerful motivation for a more responsive and resilient environmental ethic in the face of escalating loss.

Keywords: Ecological Grief; Post-Human Personhood; Anthropocene; Moral Considerability; More-than-human Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in an age of loss. The steady, often silent, unraveling of the planet's biological and ecological fabric is no longer a future projection but a present-tense reality. Scientists document the sixth mass extinction, while communities worldwide witness the bleaching of coral reefs, the burning of ancient forests, and the retreat of glaciers that have shaped landscapes and cultures for millennia. Alongside these material changes, a parallel, subjective experience is emerging: a deep, pervasive sorrow for the passing of the more-than-human world. This experience, termed "ecological grief," is the emotional and psychological distress associated with environmental loss and degradation (Pihkala, 2022). It is a grief that currently exists in a philosophical vacuum, lacking the cultural scripts and ethical recognition afforded to human-to-human mourning. This paper posits that this lack is not an accident but a symptom of a deeper philosophical failure: the refusal to grant moral considerability, and indeed personhood, to non-human entities.

The central argument of this paper is that the phenomenon of ecological grief exposes the profound inadequacy of anthropocentric conceptions of personhood and demands a radical expansion of our ethical frameworks. The intense mourning felt by scientists, Indigenous communities, and land-based peoples for a lost species or a degraded ecosystem is not merely a personal emotional response; it is a form of testimony. It testifies to the existence of a meaningful, valuable relationship that has been severed. When we grieve for another human, we grieve for a person—a unique subject with whom we shared a world. To grieve for a non-human entity with similar depth is to implicitly recognize it as a subject, not merely an object. Yet, our dominant ethical traditions, from Kantian deontology to classical utilitarianism, have systematically denied this status to the non-human world, reserving the highest moral consideration for beings that possess capacities like rationality, autonomy, or language (Hemmingsen, 2024).

This paper will trace the contours of this philosophical failure and chart a path toward a more inclusive, ecologically grounded concept of personhood. It will begin by thoroughly defining ecological grief, distinguishing it from related concepts like *solastalgia*, and demonstrating its growing prevalence as a legitimate psychological and cultural response to the Anthropocene's ravages. The second section will undertake a critical genealogy of personhood in Western philosophy, revealing how the definition has been constructed precisely through the exclusion of the animal, the vegetative, and the ecological. It will engage with the work of philosophers like Val Plumwood and ecofeminists who have long critiqued this rationalist, disembodied model.

The third section forms the constructive core of the paper. Here, we will develop a positive account of post-human personhood, drawing from three key strands of thought: the relational ontologies prevalent in many Indigenous philosophies, which see personhood as emergent from relationship rather than inherent capacity; the "actor-network theory" and new materialist philosophies of scholars like Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, which attribute agency and vibrancy to non-human actants; and the biosemiotic work of Eduardo Kohn, who argues that forests "think" and that life is inherently a sign-making process. This reconfigured personhood is not a binary category but a spectrum of being, grounded in an entity's historical presence, its relational significance, its capacity for agency and response, and its role as a co-constitutor of a shared world.

To ground this theoretical discussion, the fourth section will present two detailed case studies. The first is the formal "death" of the Okjökull glacier in Iceland, a public memorial for a non-human entity that raises profound questions about what, or who, we deem worthy of a eulogy. The second is the extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys, a small rodent officially recognized as the first mammalian species extinguished by anthropogenic climate change. This case exemplifies the silent, unmet mourning for beings that never attained personhood in our cultural imagination. Finally, the paper will address

potential objections, such as the fear of conceptual inflation or political impracticality, and conclude by reframing ecological grief not as a problem to be solved, but as a vital ethical capacity—a duty to mourn that is commensurate with our responsibility for the loss.

THE PHENOMENON OF ECOLOGICAL GRIEF: NAMING THE UN-MOURNED

The term “ecological grief” has emerged from the intersection of psychology, social science, and the environmental humanities to give name to a form of suffering that has long been culturally suppressed or pathologized. Cunsolo and Ellis (2018, p. 275) define it specifically as “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.” This grief is distinct from, though related to, concepts like *solastalgia*, which Albrecht (2005) describes as the distress produced by environmental change impacting one’s home environment while they are still directly experiencing it. While *solastalgia* is a form of homesickness while one is still at home, ecological grief is the mourning for that which is already lost or whose loss is imminent and inevitable (Brown, 2023).

The manifestations of this grief are as diverse as the losses that provoke it. For an Inuit hunter in Nunatsiavut, Canada, it is the grief and anxiety associated with the thinning sea ice, which is not merely a physical platform but a cultural touchstone, a source of identity, and a teacher of skills and patience (Cunsolo, 2012). The hunter’s relationship with the ice is a profound, intergenerational dialogue; its loss is the loss of a partner in that dialogue. For a conservation biologist, it is the “researcher’s grief” experienced when a population they have studied for decades vanishes, or when they handle the last known specimen of a species in a museum collection. This is a grief for a specific, known individual with whom they shared a history, and for the unique thread of life that individual represented.

This grief is compounded by its disenfranchisement. Doka (1989) coined the term “disenfranchised grief” to describe grief that is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported. Ecological grief is profoundly disenfranchised. In a culture oriented toward progress, productivity, and human-centric concerns, mourning for a non-human entity is often dismissed as irrational, sentimental, or a luxury. There are no public funerals for extinct species, no official periods of mourning for clear-cut forests, and no condolence cards for a scientist who has lost their research subject to climate change. This lack of ritual and recognition exacerbates the suffering, forcing it inward and rendering it a private pathology rather than a shared, public response to a collective injury.

The scale of the losses now occurring makes this grief not an exceptional experience, but a defining affective state of the Anthropocene. It is no longer just the loss of a single familiar tree or a local pond; it is the prospect of a world without coral reefs, without the sounds of certain birds at dawn, without the genetic and cultural memory contained within old-growth forests. This is what Lertzman (2015) refers to as “environmental melancholia”—a chronic, low-grade despair for a loss that is both ongoing and so vast as to be almost unrepresentable. It is a grief for the world itself, for the progressive impoverishment of the more-than-human community of which we are a part.

Understanding ecological grief as a legitimate response is the first step in challenging the philosophical structures that render it disenfranchised. The pain of this grief is a powerful indicator of the value of what has been lost. We do not grieve for objects we consider interchangeable or merely instrumental. We grieve for persons—for beings that hold a unique and irreplaceable place in our web of relationships. Therefore, the very existence

of profound ecological grief serves as a pre-theoretical, phenomenological argument for the personhood of its objects. It suggests that our lived experience of the world already recognizes a level of significance in the non-human that our official philosophies have yet to catch up with.

THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC FORTRESS: A GENEALOGY OF PERSONHOOD IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

To understand why ecological grief is so culturally marginalized, one must examine the historical construction of the concept of personhood in the Western philosophical tradition. This tradition has largely erected a fortress around the human, defining personhood through a set of cognitive capacities that are then used to justify the moral exclusion of the non-human world. The roots of this exclusion run deep. In the Cartesian paradigm, famously articulated by René Descartes, non-human animals were considered mere automata—complex machines without consciousness, soul, or the capacity for feeling (Descartes, 1637/1998). This radical dualism between the thinking human subject (*res cogitans*) and the extended, mechanical world of objects (*res extensa*) provided a philosophical license for instrumentalism, reducing the living world to a resource for human use.

Immanuel Kant, while moving beyond the mechanistic view of animals, nonetheless cemented the link between moral considerability and rationality. For Kant (1785/1998), the source of dignity and the basis for being an “end in itself” was autonomy—the capacity for self-governance according to rational moral law. Beings without this autonomy, which he explicitly stated included non-human animals, had only a conditional worth as means to human ends. While Kant argued for kindness to animals, it was only because cruelty might coarsen our moral character towards other humans, not because the animals themselves were direct objects of moral duty. The circle of direct moral concern was drawn tightly around the rational human agent.

This rationalist criterion for moral standing has proven remarkably persistent. Even in utilitarian philosophy, which expanded the moral circle to include sentient beings capable of suffering, the bar for personhood was often set implicitly higher. Peter Singer (1975), for instance, argues for the equal consideration of interests for all sentient beings, a monumental step forward. However, his framework can still lead to a hierarchy where beings with greater cognitive capacities (e.g., self-awareness, future-planning) have stronger or more complex interests, and thus a higher moral status. The concept of personhood remains tethered to a gradient of cognitive ability, leaving ecosystems, plants, rivers, and non-sentient beings in a moral void.

This philosophical legacy has had profound practical consequences, because it provides the ethical underpinning for legal and economic systems that treat nature as property, as *res nullius* (nobody’s property) waiting to be claimed and exploited. As legal scholar Christopher D. Stone (1972) argued in his seminal essay “Should Trees Have Standing?”, our legal system is designed to recognize rights and injuries only for persons, which are exclusively human and corporate entities. To have an injury, one must first be a subject of the law. By denying legal personhood to natural entities, the system renders their destruction a mere externality, an damage to human property interests, rather than a wrong against the entity itself.

The critique of this anthropocentric fortress has been most powerfully advanced by ecofeminist and environmental philosophers. Val Plumwood (2002) meticulously deconstructed the “rationality/mastery model,” showing how the hyper-separation of human from nature is linked to other forms of domination, such as the domination of men over women and colonizers over colonized peoples. She argued that this model is not only ethically flawed but also ecologically suicidal, as it blinds us to our fundamental dependency on the natural world. Similarly, Arne Naess’s (1973) Deep Ecology movement called

for a recognition of the intrinsic value in all living beings, irrespective of their utility to humans, advocating for a “biospherical egalitarianism in principle.”

The cumulative effect of this philosophical tradition is a cultural and psychic numbing. When the non-human world is systematically defined as a collection of objects, its destruction cannot be registered as murder, its loss cannot be recognized as death, and the sorrow it provokes cannot be validated as grief. The phenomenon of ecological grief, therefore, represents a crisis for this tradition. It is the lived, felt evidence that the fortress walls are false, that we are in fact in deep, meaningful, person-to-person relationships with the more-than-human world. The task, then, is to build a new philosophical foundation that can account for this reality.

FOUNDATIONS FOR A POST-HUMAN PERSONHOOD: RELATIONALITY, AGENCY, AND SEMIOSIS

If the anthropocentric model of personhood is ecologically and ethically bankrupt, what can take its place? A post-human concept of personhood does not simply extend the old, capacity-based criteria to a wider set of entities. Instead, it fundamentally rethinks the nature of personhood itself, shifting from an intrinsic-property model to a relational and ecological one. This section outlines three interconnected pillars for this new framework: relationality from Indigenous philosophies, agency from new materialism, and semiosis from biosemiotics.

The first and most crucial pillar is relationality. Many Indigenous philosophical systems offer powerful alternatives to Western individualism. In these ontologies, personhood is not an innate property of an isolated individual but emerges from a network of relationships. As Māori philosopher Mete Smith (2021) explains, identity is constituted through whakapapa—a genealogical and ecological kinship network that connects humans, animals, plants, rivers, and mountains in a single, entangled web of life. In such a worldview, the Whanganui River in Aotearoa New Zealand is not merely a resource; it is an ancestor, a living whole. This is why it was possible, after a 140-year struggle, for the river to be granted legal personhood in 2017, recognized as “an indivisible and living whole from the mountains to the sea.” Its personhood resides in its relational, life-sustaining role for the iwi (tribes) and the entire ecosystem.

The second pillar is the recognition of non-human agency. New materialist philosophers like Jane Bennett (2010) argue for the “vital materiality” of all things. In her book *Vibrant Matter*, she challenges the dead, passive conception of nature, proposing instead that non-human forces (from electricity and metals to ecosystems) are active participants in the world. They are “actants” that possess the capacity to shape events, resist human designs, and command attention. This is not an attribution of consciousness but an acknowledgment of efficacy and force. A hurricane, a virus, a landslide—all exert a powerful, world-changing agency. Similarly, Bruno Latour’s (2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) insists that agency is distributed across human and non-human actors in networks. From this perspective, a person is not a bounded ego but a node in a web of actants, and personhood can be attributed to any key node that performs a crucial role in holding a network together, such as a keystone species or a river system.

The third pillar is derived from biosemiotics, the study of signs and communication in living systems. Anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, in his groundbreaking work *How Forests Think* (2013), argues that life is inherently semiotic—it is about representing the world and interpreting these representations. Kohn demonstrates, through his ethnography of the Ávila Runa in Ecuador’s Amazon, that the forest is a multi-species semiotic community. Trees, birds, jaguars, and humans all engage in processes of representation and interpretation, albeit in different ways. A jaguar interprets the scent of prey; a tree interprets the angle of sunlight. For Kohn, this shared capacity for semiosis, for being “in

the world” through signs, provides a non-anthropocentric basis for rethinking the self. If thinking is not confined to the human brain but is a property of living, relational systems, then the boundary between human persons and the rest of the living world begins to dissolve.

A post-human personhood, therefore, would be granted not on the basis of a checklist of cognitive capacities, but on the basis of an entity’s participation in a shared, semiotically rich world, its demonstration of relational agency, and its historical and ecological significance. It is a spectrum, not a binary. A companion animal, a centuries-old oak, the Great Barrier Reef, and the Ganges River may all be considered persons to varying degrees, based on the depth of their relational ties, the power of their agency, and their role as unique, irreplaceable loci of meaning and history within the biotic community. This framework provides the philosophical grounding for why we might legitimately grieve for them.

CASE STUDIES IN POST-HUMAN DEATH AND MOURNING

The theoretical framework of post-human personhood becomes most salient when applied to concrete cases of loss. The following two case studies illustrate the stark reality of non-human death and the nascent, struggling emergence of practices for mourning it.

The Death of Okjökull: A Eulogy for Ice

In August 2019, a unique memorial ceremony was held on the barren rock of what was once Okjökull glacier in Iceland. Scientists, activists, and members of the public gathered to unveil a plaque, titled “A Letter to the Future,” which read in part: “Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years, all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it” (Boykoff & Daly, 2021). The plaque was addressed to future generations, but its immediate function was to mark a death. The ceremony was a funeral for a glacier.

This event is philosophically profound. A glacier is not a singular organism but a complex, dynamic, geological-biological system. Yet, the people of Iceland recognized it as a distinct entity with a history, a name, and a presence in their landscape and culture. Its “death”—defined by glaciologists as the point when it no longer had enough mass to flow under its own weight—was felt as a genuine loss. The memorial served to publicly acknowledge this loss, to give the grief a form and a place. It was an act of enfranchising a previously disenfranchised grief. By holding a funeral, the participants were implicitly according Okjökull a status beyond that of a mere physical object; they were recognizing it as a being that was worthy of a eulogy, a being whose passing left a hole in the world. This case powerfully demonstrates how a post-human personhood can be performatively brought into existence through communal acts of mourning and recognition.

The Bramble Cay Melomys: The Unmourned First Mammal

In stark contrast to the memorial for Okjökull stands the case of the Bramble Cay melomys (*Melomys rubicola*). This small, brown rodent lived only on a single, low-lying island in the Torres Strait, between Australia and Papua New Guinea. In 2019, the Australian government officially declared it extinct, the first mammal in the world known to have been killed by anthropogenic climate change. Its habitat was destroyed by rising sea levels and increasing storm surges, which repeatedly inundated the tiny island, eroding the land and destroying the vegetation the melomys needed to survive (Woinarski et al., 2017).

The extinction of the Bramble Cay melomys was met with scientific regret and brief media coverage, but there was no public funeral, no monument, no outpouring of grief.

Its death was a non-event in the global cultural sphere. Why? Because it never attained personhood in our collective imagination. It was a small, remote, “uncharismatic” mammal. It had no obvious utility to humans and no long-standing cultural significance in Western societies. Its loss is a perfect example of what Thom van Dooren (2014) calls “flight ways”—the unique, intricate ways of life that are snuffed out with every extinction. The melomys had its own way of being in the world, its own evolutionary history, its own niche. Its extinction represents the irreversible loss of a unique form of mammalian life, a thread in the tapestry of evolution cut forever.

The disparity between the mourning for Okjökull and the silence for the Bramble Cay melomys reveals the challenges and biases inherent in developing a post-human ethics. We are more easily able to grant personhood to grand, majestic, landscape-defining entities like glaciers than to small, “insignificant” rodents. Yet, a consistent post-human personhood must strive to recognize the value and uniqueness of all beings, not just the aesthetically pleasing or culturally resonant ones. The melomys’s story is a silent indictment of our failure to do so, and its unmourned death is a testament to the work that remains.

OBJECTIONS AND REBUTTALS

The proposal for a post-human concept of personhood is likely to face several serious objections. Engaging with them is crucial for strengthening the argument.

The Problem of Conceptual Inflation

A common objection is that extending personhood beyond humans leads to a “conceptual inflation” that renders the term meaningless. If everything from a glacier to a bacterium is a person, does the concept not lose its analytical and moral force? The rebuttal to this is twofold. First, the proposed framework is not a binary switch but a spectrum. It does not claim that a bacterium has the same moral weight as a human or a whale. Rather, it argues that moral consideration is not an all-or-nothing game and that we need a more nuanced vocabulary to describe the different kinds of value, agency, and relational significance that different entities possess. Second, the fear of inflation often stems from the anthropocentric assumption that granting value to the non-human somehow diminishes the value of the human. This is a false economy. A relational ontology understands value as multiplicative, not subtractive; enriching our understanding of the personhood of the world around us enriches our own humanity.

The Political and Legal Practicality Objection

Skeptics may argue that such a philosophical shift is politically impractical. How can we base policy on such a vague and expansive concept? The rebuttal is that this shift is already happening. The granting of legal personhood to the Whanganui River, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers in India (though later stayed), and the Turag River in Bangladesh demonstrates that this is not a purely academic exercise. These are pragmatic legal innovations designed to protect entities that are vital to human and ecological communities. They create guardianship models where humans have a legal duty to represent the interests of the non-human person. This provides a powerful tool for conservation that moves beyond the limitations of a property-rights framework.

The Anthropocentric Anchor Objection

Finally, one might object that any concept of personhood is inevitably anthropocentric, as it is a human concept projected onto the world. While this is epistemologically a challenge, it is not a veto. As post-humanists like Karen Barad (2007) argue, we are part of the world, not outside observers of it. Our concepts emerge from our intra-actions with

the world. The concept of personhood, then, can evolve through a more attentive and responsive engagement with the more-than-human. The fact that Indigenous cultures have long held concepts of non-human personhood shows that the anthropocentric model is a cultural particular, not a universal necessity. Our task is to cultivate the ethical imagination necessary to allow our concepts to be reshaped by the world we seek to understand and protect.

CONCLUSION: THE DUTY TO MOURN

This paper has journeyed from the raw, personal experience of ecological grief to the abstract heights of philosophical reconstruction, and back down to the hard ground of extinct rodents and memorialized ice. The path has revealed a fundamental truth: our inability to adequately mourn the more-than-human world is a direct consequence of a flawed ethical ontology. The anthropocentric fortress of personhood, built over centuries of Western thought, has blinded us to the vibrant, agential, and deeply personal nature of the world in which we are embedded.

The reconceptualization of personhood proposed here—grounded in relationality, agency, and semiosis—offers a way out of this ethical impasse. It provides a language and a philosophical justification for what our hearts already know: that the loss of the Bramble Cay melomys is a genuine death, that the passing of Okjökull is worthy of a funeral, and that the coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef is a form of corporeal and communal suffering. By granting post-human personhood, we transform the non-human world from a backdrop for human drama into a community of subjects, each with their own claim to existence and flourishing.

In this light, ecological grief is recast. It is no longer a sign of weakness or sentimentality, but a testament to our capacity for ethical relationship. It is the pain of a severed bond, and that pain is proportional to the value of the bond that was severed. To feel ecological grief is to recognize the personhood of the other. Therefore, the duty to mourn becomes an ethical imperative in the Anthropocene. It is a form of bearing witness, of refusing to let these losses pass in silence. Public memorials, rituals of mourning, and the integration of these stories into our cultural narratives are not peripheral activities; they are central to the project of building a future ethic that can navigate an era of escalating loss. By learning to mourn well, we affirm the value of what remains and strengthen our resolve to protect the dazzling, fragile, more-than-human personhood that still graces our wounded planet.

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