

Gary Slater

Hearing Earth's Cry

Rhetoric and Reality in Integral Ecology

Abstract

The metaphor of the cry of the Earth is increasingly prominent within the rhetoric of integral ecology. This essay argues that, in spite of its rhetorical power, this metaphor would benefit from critical attention in at least three respects: how perceiving a cry translates into judgment and praxis, how the cry implicates human-nonhuman relations, and how the cry navigates specificity and vagueness. Such critical attention contributes to our understanding of integral ecology in four ways. First, it enhances the integral ecology's reading of the "signs of the times." Second, it deflects key critiques of integral ecology, including its handling of anthropocentrism and its inability to apply its values. Third, it speaks to conversations on integral ecology's reimagining of the values of dignity and solidarity. Fourth, it points toward further applications, most notably an exploration of how the cry of the Earth relates to the cry of the poor.

Zusammenfassung

Die Metapher „Schrei der Erde“ gewinnt in der Rhetorik der integralen Ökologie zunehmend an Bedeutung. In vorliegendem Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass diese Metapher trotz ihrer rhetorischen Kraft in mindestens drei Hinsichten von einer kritischen Auseinandersetzung profitieren würde: Zu hinterfragen ist, wie sich die Wahrnehmung eines Schreis in der Urteilskraft und in der Praxis niederschlägt, wie die Metapher des Schreis menschlich-nichtmenschliche Beziehungen impliziert und wie der Schrei hilft, einen Weg zwischen Präzision und Unbestimmtheit zu finden. Eine solche kritische Auseinandersetzung trägt auf vier Arten zu unserem Verständnis der integralen Ökologie bei. Erstens bereichert sie, wie die integrale Ökologie die *Zeichen der Zeit* lesen kann. Zweitens bewahrt sie die integrale Ökologie vor mehreren zentralen Kritikpunkten, einschließlich der Kritik an ihrem Umgang mit dem Anthropozentrismus und an der Unfähigkeit, ihre Werte in der Realität umzusetzen. Drittens trägt sie zu Debatten über die Neuinterpretation von Werten wie Würde und Solidarität durch die integrale Ökologie bei. Viertens zeigt sie weitere Potentiale der Metapher auf – insbesondere legt sie eine Untersuchung nahe, wie der Schrei der Erde mit dem Schrei der Armen verwoben ist.

1 Introduction

1.1 A muffled cry

“A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can’t be any more desperate or any more clear.”¹ With these words from President Joe Biden’s inaugural address, a new president signaled the intention of the United States government to take ecological devastation seriously after the previous administration’s years of neglect. With these words, Biden also spoke a variation on one of the signal phrases of Pope Francis’s integral ecology: the cry of the Earth.

Integral ecology is the name for Pope Francis’s project of integrating concern for the natural world with attention to the structures and concrete conditions of human injustice. This project manifests itself in various forms, from ecclesial documents to speeches that Francis has given, to activism carried out in its name, and to academic treatments of the Franciscan papacy. The most significant source of understanding of integral ecology is the 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato si’* (henceforth LS), and so this essay often refers to the encyclical as representative of integral ecology more broadly. As for the rhetoric of “cry of the Earth,” this phrase (or some variation on it) has featured prominently within such papal texts as, in addition to LS, *Querida Amazonia*, and, to a lesser extent, *Fratelli tutti*. It has stood out within the documents associated with the Amazonian Synod (QA 8). It has appeared in papal statements to world political leaders (Edmund 2017). And it has emerged among the academic reception of Pope Francis’s public role as a religious advocate for ecological action (Moellendorf 2020). Indeed, the term “cry” has even been used to describe integral ecology itself (Latour 2016).

Yet contrary to what Biden said in his speech, it is not at all obvious that this “cry” from the Earth cannot be any more clear, certainly not when it comes to integral ecology. This essay contends that, as a phrase, “cry of the Earth” could, in fact, be made much clearer, and that doing so would benefit our understanding of integral ecology and its applications in concrete contexts of ecological and social injustice. The purpose

1 Online unter <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>>.

of the essay is to demonstrate one particularly promising way of carrying out this task.

Granted, the metaphor of a crying Earth does convey a commonsense understanding that is not difficult to grasp. This understanding is something like: the consequences of the degradation of the planet's climatic and biological systems on the part of human industrial civilization are increasingly difficult to ignore, and such degradation demands both our attention and a morally significant response. Since this commonsense understanding captures something true and urgent, and since the phrase is rhetorically powerful, it may seem, then, that there is not much need to dig any deeper into how the rhetoric of the phrase relates to the reality it expresses.

Such thinking is mistaken. Unless we are meant to believe that the phrase "cry of the Earth" signifies at an exclusively rhetorical level, Earth's cry would seem to be capable of being perceived in some way, by someone, and in some set of conditions. And as soon as one starts to examine the relationship between the rhetoric and the reality, difficult questions present themselves immediately. How might one hear this cry? What might it sound like? Above all, how might one pass from perceiving this cry through an understanding of its meaning into some deliberate course of action in response? That is, how might one proceed from perception to praxis?

These questions are not meant to be snide. I raise the need for critical questions simply as a way to compel reflection on the meaning of a phrase whose rhetorical prominence is obvious but whose specific implications and applications are not. In his article, "The Mysterious Silence of Mother Earth in *Laudato si'*," Willis Jenkins corroborates this concern, holding that "Earth's voice seems silent in crucial loci of the encyclical's argument" (Jenkins 2018, 442). Or as I see it: if this voice is not silent, it is at least muffled in a way that makes it difficult for us to understand what it is saying. Given the current planetary situation, the stakes for what we as a species do with this moment are enormous, and given the promise of integral ecology and the impact of Pope Francis as a public figure, it matters whether his project can be made clearer and more applicable.

In any case, metaphors matter. In an essay entitled "Pope Francis, The Earth Is Not My Sister," for instance, Hans Fiene grounded his critique of the scientific and moral content of integral ecology almost exclusively on his objection to Pope Francis's reference to "Sister Earth" (Fiene 2015)! As Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Nils Stockmann put

it in their commentary on LS, metaphors can touch, but they can also disturb² (2019, 22). For present purposes, it certainly does not diminish a metaphor like the cry of the Earth to give it critical attention. On the contrary, metaphors become problematic when they are *not* given critical attention, which creates unexamined assumptions and limits one's capacity to imagine alternative courses of action in response to problems.

1.2 Overview

To carry out its aims, this essay undertakes three steps. The first step offers a hypothesis as to what the cry of the Earth may actually be and how it might be encountered within one's lived experience. Less interesting in itself than in how it anchors critical questions regarding the rhetoric of Earth's cry relative to concrete application of integral ecology's moral values, this hypothesis depends in its plausibility and promise on, respectively, the extent to which it offers insight on critical questions about the cry of the Earth and merges without strain into the values and commitments of integral ecology. Given integral ecology's emphasis on interconnectedness, this relational approach is appropriate.

The second step establishes links between the Earth-cry hypothesis regarding Earth's cry and integral ecology. It examines the place of integral ecology within the Catholic encyclical tradition and the role of the phrase "cry of the Earth" as it has come to function within Catholic social ethics. The hypothesis is seen to serve integral ecology's notion of ecological conversion, which, in turn, is understood within a broader aim, not exclusive to LS, of an encyclical's role in reading "the signs of the times."

In its third step, the essay examines the Earth-cry hypothesis with respect to three categories of critical questions. Presented as clusters of questions, these categories are: (1) *perception and praxis*; (2) *more-than-human and human*; (3) *vagueness and specificity*. The approach here is itself integral in nature. As the hypothesis on Earth's cry is shown to offer an answer to these critical questions, the plausibility of the hypothesis grows. Conversely, the hypothesis's growing plausibility attests to the value of asking the critical questions, and a clearer understanding begins

2 In its original German: Die metaphorische Sprache kann berühren, aber auch verstören.

to emerge as to how the account of hearing Earth's cry goes beyond rhetoric into concrete contexts of values, communities, and the lives of specific individuals.

The link between the hypothesis on Earth's cry and integral ecology is crucial: to the extent that the hypothesis can be seen genuinely to convey the values associated with integral ecology, its articulation becomes that much more morally significant; at the same time, in providing a clearer and more applicable sense about this phrase "Earth's cry," the hypothesis provides a clearer and more applicable sense about integral ecology. In this regard, this project builds on the work of Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Nils Stockmann in looking at LS in view of the extent to which the Church can be seen as a change agent (Heimbach-Steins/Stockmann, 2019). In many respects, these mutually reinforcing relationships constitute the heart of the essay. A short concluding section considers possibilities for further study.

2 Hearing Earth's cry: a hypothesis

As to what might constitute the reality of Earth's cry beyond the rhetoric, the following hypothesis is suggested: Emerging as a sign from some more-than-human source, the sign is encountered at some precise point by a human perceiver, becomes a cry through those who respond to it and whose lives it affects, and is made meaningful through its dissemination within a given community as evaluated by that community's values; this is a teleological process. Earth's cry, in other words, becomes so in the human response to it, both individually and communally – not through projecting onto it as human onto nonhuman, but by carrying forward something true from it in a manner that then ramifies throughout a given community.

In using the term "hypothesis," I hope to signal two things. One is that this is only one of many possible ways one might go about exploring the reality behind the rhetoric of "Earth's cry." There are other definitions one might give, and there are other critical questions one might ask. This essay is simply an attempt – to my knowledge, the only one of its kind – to engage with the notion of Earth's cry in view of the promise of integral ecology and the sense of ecological crisis that hangs in the background. Calling this attempt a hypothesis is a way to keep the conversation open. Second, in using the word "hypothesis," I am indicating that

the plausibility or truth of this particular account is not to be presumed from the start; it must be demonstrated, or at the very least, reinforced. As noted above, the approach is integral and accumulative: coalescing components – hypothesis, critical questions, integral ecology, Catholic social thought, etc. – represent threads that are strengthened, as with a rope, by being woven around each other to result in something strong and durable.

I am also aware that any attempt to explore the relationship between rhetoric and reality for a given phrase will imply certain views about language and metaphysics. Although contemporary philosophy offers no shortage of options when it comes to perspectives on these issues, from ordinary language philosophy to critical theory, the views on such matters for the present essay derive from the work of the pragmatist philosopher and cofounder of modern semiotics C. S. Peirce (1839–1914). Peirce's work is well suited to the present task for several reasons. Peirce was a pioneering figure in both semiotics and the logic of hypothesis (Short 2007). He also understood semiotics to factor within logic as a normative science that rests upon ethics (Potter 1997); this framing supports a key premise of the present effort, which is that interrogating the Earth's cry in semiotic terms is inseparable from its application within ethical praxis. Still further, Peirce provides inquirers with a perspective that, in spite of its vitality for engaging religious communities (Daniel-Hughes 2018), nonetheless stands outside Francis's integral ecology. Such a perspective is helpful for both critically assessing integral ecology's flaws and exploring its applications. Of course, were one to attempt a convincing case for the compatibility of Peirce's thought with integral ecology, such an effort would require establishing common antecedents, as well as compatibility with regard to metaphysics and epistemology.³ This is not the focus at present, however, and so for now, the Peircean connection can simply be left with reference to Matthew 7:16, which is a Bible verse admired by many commentators on Peirce and religion: by their fruits ye shall know them.

3 There are ample resources for such a project, including on Peirce and scholastic thought (Boler 1963), Peircean pragmatism and Catholic thought more broadly (Raposa 2009), and Peirce as a decisive influence on a contemporary project in philosophical theology that shares much in common with integral ecology (Raposa 2020).

3 Reading the “signs of the times”

Out of a combination of its responding to the genuine urgency of ecological devastation, its association with such international events as the Paris Climate Conference of 2015, and the impact of Francis himself as a charismatic and popular public figure, integral ecology has received an unusual amount of public attention; Celia Deane-Drummond has even called Francis an “icon for the Anthropocene” (Deane-Drummond 2017, 70). Correspondingly, the public impact of LS has been significant, even if a bit unevenly distributed geographically – more attention in Europe and the Western hemisphere, almost nothing in China (Heimbach-Steins/Stockmann 2015, 2–10). Contemporary prominence aside, integral ecology manifests several threads whose genealogies can be traced to earlier context in Catholic social thought.

For example, the framing of integral ecology *as* integral stems from the integral liberation of Gustavo Gutierrez and, prior to that, the integral development of Paul VI in *Populorum progressio*, which in turn was influenced by the integral humanism of Jacques Maritain (Castillo 2016). As for integral ecology’s outreach to all persons of goodwill regardless of religious identity, this reflects the influence of *Pacem in terris*’s defense of universal human rights (Bals 2016, 32). Even the overt environmental consciousness of Francis has precursors in the papacies of Benedict XVI and John Paul II, who are cited in LS over twenty and nearly forty times, respectively (Traina 2020, 154). Perhaps above all, integral ecology owes a debt to the notion that Catholic social ethics should read the “signs of the times,” of which connections can be traced back to *Mater et magistra* (Heimbach-Steins/Stockmann 2015, 23) and *Gaudium et spes* (Annett 2019, 26).

To those unfamiliar with this phrase, “signs of the times” might suggest an approach to Catholic social ethics that is purely descriptive. This is not the case. What this phrase means, rather, is that the ethical task involves inductive observation of a contemporary situation in order to better adapt perennial values like dignity or the common good and embed them within changing circumstances. The values remain constant even as the framing changes.⁴ In the case of John XXIII, for example,

4 Although the link between the rhetoric of Earth’s cry and the topos of the “signs of the times” is a distinctive feature of integral ecology, there are warrants for exploring this link that precede the papacy of Francis (e.g. Vogt 2006).

the signs of the times signaled the risk of global nuclear war; in Francis's case, the signs of the times portend ecological emergency. In the case of integral ecology, such commentators as Marianne Heimbach-Steins have examined such values as the common good in light of Francis's project (Heimbach-Steins 2020). Changed interpretation of Scripture is another example of this approach, with Francis having reinterpreted the dominion verses of Genesis to shift the human relationship with nonhuman life (LS 66–67). Similar points could be made for integral ecology's treatments of the values of dignity (Donaghy 2020, Jenkins 2018) or solidarity (Flores 2018). In any case, these sources of authority are reimagined in ways that serve integral ecology prerogative of bringing together human and ecological justice.

Continuities with its predecessors notwithstanding, there is at least one distinctive normative feature of integral ecology that bears mentioning in conjunction with the cry of the Earth. This is the notion of ecological conversion. Commentators on integral ecology have praised this notion (Abidin Bagir 2020). Yet this also represents an area in which integral ecology has been criticized. It is not so much that ecological conversion itself has come under criticism, so much as the emphasis on personal, intimate, or concrete experiences that ecological conversion entails has been criticized for lacking a clear sense of connection to Francis's equally pronounced global scope; another way to put this is that integral ecology's values are charged with lacking clarity as to how they can be put into practice – see, for example, an overlapping critique along these lines from otherwise contrasting commentaries from R. R. Reno (2015) and Paddy Woodworth (2020); such otherwise laudatory commenters as Paul Reuber and Doris Fuchs have likewise called this aspect of integral ecology into question (2019, 69–76). I believe that the hypothesis on Earth's cry in this essay can serve a defense of ecological conversion against such criticism.

How might this work? To answer this, it helps to establish the context of the cry of the Earth within integral ecology. Francis mentions a “cry” on the part of Earth, nature, or a given territory at four points within the text of LS, and at six points within the text of *Querida Amazonia*.⁵ Francis is not the first pope to refer to nonhuman nature as possessing a kind of voice. John Paul II, for example, is quoted in LS as referring

5 LS paragraphs 49, 53, 117, and 246; QuA paragraphs 8, 10, 48, 52, 57, 62.

to a “paradoxical and silent voice” (LS 85). With respect to integral ecology’s particular preference for the phrase “cry of the earth,” there is no question, however, as to the most significant source of influence: Leonardo Boff’s 1997 book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Granted, the Spanish translation of the original Portuguese text from Boff differs from the Spanish text of LS (Martins 2018, 420). Moreover, earlier in his career in Argentina, Jorge Bergoglio shied away from more overt expressions of the liberation theology of his home continent. Still, the message behind Boff’s use of the phrase “cry of the Earth” has such obvious affinities with integral ecology that the debt is impossible to ignore, and indeed, Francis’s office reportedly reached out to Boff for information prior to LS’s publication (Martins 2018, 420). Yet as Pablo A. Blanco has pointed out, “Boff addressed a methodological turn, Francis turned it into an epistemological one” (2018, 435). This is to say that integral ecology offers a holistic framework by which to unite cosmological insight and practical application that is lacking in Boff’s account. Yet if it is precisely this link that Reno and Woodworth and others have criticized, then how can an account of Earth’s cry overcome this tangle of objections?

It is possible to argue that hearing the cry of the Earth according to the terms of the hypothesis – that is, as an individual encounter from without that represents a change that is then carried forward through praxis within a community – *is* itself something like an ecological conversion. Certainly the sense of self-transformation that the hypothesis suggests, one in which a person becomes the cry of the Earth by living out its meaning, is aptly described in the following words from LS on ecological conversion. In LS 200, Francis, referring to the ability to recognize connections between human and nonhuman nature, holds that by “developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God ‘as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable’” (Rom 12:1).

Just as an example, it bears mentioning that this Earth’s-cry-as-ecological-conversion association describes quite nicely the composition and impact of the landmark environmental text, *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson (1962). Carson’s book begins with a fable of a town rendered silent through irresponsible pesticide use, in which the basic inescapable fact of silence grounds the message of ecological urgency to follow. This speaks to the present discussion in three ways. First, it shows that silence

can be just as powerful as a “cry” as actual sound; in some ways it is even more potent, signifying as it does a present absence where life and beauty once existed. Second, on the level of impact, Carson’s invocation of silence serves as a powerful awakening to ecological consciousness for the book’s readers. Third, and most significant, the legacy of this book attests to the capacity of a perception of nonhuman nature to become channelled into normative structures within human communities in a lasting, meaningful way. From the silence of Carson’s spring, an environmental movement has emerged, and, one might say, an ecological conversion in the manner that Francis describes has occurred.

This reference to Carson raises a basic and important question for this project, the response to which leads to the critical questions explored below. This question is must the cry of the Earth represent something physical? Carson’s impact came in the form of her book, after all, which is to say, as a text. The answer suggested here is that, while the experience of ecological conversion exemplified in Carson or entailed in the rhetoric of a crying Earth does require a particular moment of experience, as well as a particular perceiver, it does not require that these things be bound within such categorical distinctions as physical/nonphysical or text/sense. To put it another way, just as the metaphor of the “book of nature” has long suggested that one might encounter more-than-human nature in a manner similar to a text, so can one imagine experience in such a way that the encounter with a text is understood as similar to that of nature.⁶ On this view, a cry need not be restricted to any particular type of physicality, or even physicality per se. A cry might be heard in a book, in a little voice calling out *rolle lege*, in the song of a bird, or in the silence where that song should be. What matters is less the object of the cry than the relationship between the cry, its perceiver, and the subsequent impact of its having been perceived. Moreover, as Michael Raposa puts it, “to see something as a sign is to see the *more* in experience. It is to identify what is presented to me not just as a being but

6 For a helpful history of the “book of nature” metaphor, see Pedersen 1992; the account of experience characterized here describes the empiricism of many figures associated with the pragmatic tradition, including not just Peirce, but also Peirce’s close contemporary William James. James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a famous example of pragmatic non-reductive “radical” empiricism as applied to religion, an effort which includes the experience of conversion (James 1982 [1902]).

as a being-in-relation, so that what is absent also becomes a presence” (Raposa 2020). That is, thinking about the cry semiotically as a *cry* also suggests a special kind of relationship, one characterized by a compulsion to respond, to seek.

4 Hearing earth's cry in light of some critical questions

The structure of this section is as follows: the critical questions are organized into three clusters, each of which receives its own discussion. At the beginning of each cluster's discussion, some related questions are raised; this is followed by an initial response as to what common sense answers might be possible based on the phrase “cry of the Earth”. Following this, attention turns toward integral ecology and its commentators.

4.1 Perception and praxis

What might Earth's cry sound like? What cognitive content could it contain? How can the cry be distinguished from the countless other perceptions one has within each moment? Is there necessarily a sensory component to the cry? How could the cry compel any particular course of action?

Integral ecology has been rightly praised for the rigor of the scientific research it cites, its candor in describing the seriousness of the problems we face, and the eloquence in speaking into and out of the wisdom and insight of Catholic tradition, and indeed beyond it. But it certainly does not offer anything like an explicit guidebook for how one is supposed to hear Earth's cry and do something about it. One might reasonably respond that it is simply a matter of context being determinative when it comes to considering the aforementioned questions. This is of course true, in that, rather than “cry” per se, it is the specific information about *what* is crying *where* and *under what circumstances* that dictate one's understanding and response, and even one's basic faculties of recognition. Out of context, the hiss of a boiling water kettle, the pop of a champagne bottle, or the boom of fireworks in the night might sound horrific, but cultural conditioning tells us that these sounds connote celebration or comfort. Still, it is possible to go beyond the mere acknowledgment of the importance of context when it comes to an account of the praxis

that follows the hearing of Earth's cry, one that is anchored firmly and organically in the tradition out of which integral ecology has emerged.

One might point to the rich twentieth-century tradition in Catholic phenomenology as a relevant resource here, especially given that Paul Ricouer is one of the few modern philosophers cited in LS (85). Yet for present purposes, two other antecedents to LS stand out when it comes to the praxis of hearing Earth's cry. The first is the notion of *discernment* as articulated by Ignatius de Loyola. Viewing discernment as a cultivated faculty, Loyola understood discernment as essential to one's spiritual training, something that not only facilitates the sorting of worldly experiences into distinct categories of moral worth, but one that is itself a moral practice.

Invoking Loyola in the service of hearing Earth's cry is highly appropriate for integral ecology given Francis's role as the first Jesuit pope. Indeed, other commentators have noted the influence of Loyola on Francis's papacy (Castillo 2017, Ashley 2017, Schweiker 2018). This influence is evident particularly in 2013's *Evangelii gaudium* and 2018's *Gaudete et exsultate*. According to Ashley, "Christian spirituality (including Ignatian spirituality in particular) is a constitutive element and source of theology for Pope Francis, rather than an ancillary *frosting* on the doctrinal cake," and in which "not only is Francis an interpreter of the *Spiritual Exercises*...but the *Exercises* interpret him" (Ashley 2017, 167). Considered relative to Earth's cry, discernment is what primes the hearer not simply to receive the sounds of the world, but rather to pay attention in an active, engaged manner. That is, discernment is what turns the hearer into a listener.

The second relevant antecedent is the formula from *Mater et magistra* of see-judge-act as essential to an inductive approach to Catholic social ethics. One simply has to substitute "hearing" for "seeing" here to get an appropriate sense of the intimate link between perception and praxis in how integral ecology's perspective on how hearing Earth's cry might generate a meaningful moral response. As with Ignatius, this too is an appropriate source when it comes to engaging with integral ecology, one whose salience has been observed by commentators. In this respect, the relevance of the see-judge-act formula is part of the more widespread influence on integral ecology from the Vatican II-era Church noted in the previous section; indeed, the specific see-judge-act formula has been linked to integral ecology by multiple commentators (Grey 2020a, 21, Heimbach-Steins/Stockmann 2015, 23).

4.2 More-than-human and human

What human-nonhuman relationships are suggested by the phrase “cry of the Earth”? Is this relationship asymmetrical in any way? What qualities might be shared between humans and nonhumans? What is distinctively human? Is it possible actually to know or speak of something nonhuman on its own terms, must human understanding remain always within itself, or is there perhaps some third option that is possible?

This second cluster of questions that comes from critical attention to the cry of the Earth concerns the relationship between human and nonhuman. As conveyed in the commonsense view of this metaphor, it is clear that nonhuman nature is to be characterized as being capable of crying out through its own capacities, that is, as capable of generating signs that humans interpret as cries. Even if the *what* of the cry – that is, its semantic content – is left unexplored, the *that* of the cry – that is, its iterative incorrigibility – is implied as being undeniable.

Tricky questions follow when one thinks more critically about the dynamic of human-nonhuman communication implied by the phrase “cry of the Earth.” Is it not arrogant to presume to speak on nature’s behalf by imputing onto its sonic landscapes the morally fraught name of cry? Or perhaps the reverse is true, and it submerges or even dissolves the distinctively human into nature to give preference to Earth as the subject that cries out, which might suggest that nature is somehow above humanity? If one were to suggest that the Earth’s cry were actually just a human projection onto nonhuman nature rather than something that really impinges into the human from without, would that be appropriately humble, recognizing as it does human limitations, or arrogant, neglecting to acknowledge moral imperatives beyond our own species?

Such questions are not an accurate reflection of the views on communication beyond the human that are conveyed in Francis’s integral ecology. Still, it speaks to some existing tension, some ambiguity somewhere that the topic of anthropocentrism in LS is among the most disputed on the part of sophisticated commentators. Daniel Dombrowski, for example, praises LS for its turn away from more overt expressions of human dominion over nature, yet holds that integral ecology remains more anthropocentric than it itself admits (2015, 32). Kevin O’Brien takes issue with the hierarchical framing of the human over nature, which he sees as funding parallel hierarchies over such issues as gender (2019, 9).

Still others suggest substituting “relatiocentrism” for anthropocentrism in the text (Kolhaas/McLaughlin 2019, 502). Conversely, as Willis Jenkins has reported, other commentators see it as unduly pessimistic about the world we humans have built for ourselves, or worry that attending too deeply to Earth’s cry risks lessening the centrality of the human relative to the divine or as bearer of dignity (2018, 454).

In exploring the dynamic of human-nonhuman interaction implicated in the phrase “cry of the Earth,” a distinction emerges that has been overlooked by commentators on integral ecology. This is the distinction between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, which is the difference between a view that extolls the human as the center of value or importance and a view that nonhuman referents can only be known or described in terms intelligible to human minds. The phrase “cry of the Earth” illustrates this distinction, in that it is anthropomorphic but not anthropocentric. The phrase draws upon human associations (a crying baby, for example) in a manner that was not itself suggested by anything nonhuman, even as it identifies the more-than-human as a site of moral urgency.

In a sense, then, the cry of the Earth *as a cry* comes from and exists within a distinctively human space, even as the phrase resolutely rejects any view that would restrict what can be known or valued within some impermeable perimeter at the edge of the human. This view of Earth’s cry as anthropomorphic without being anthropocentric is supported by the text of LS, which, as astute commentators have noted, takes care not to condemn anthropocentrism outright but rather qualify its critique with the modifier “excessive” or other similar adjectives (Clough 2020, 97; Grey 2020b, 874). This dynamic sense of interspecies relations is captured beautifully by Francis in a way that speaks to the Earth-cry hypothesis; for Francis, “The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us toward a common point of arrival, which is God” (LS 83). Carmody Grey gleans a key insight on relations between humans and nonhumans in her interpretation of this passage, holding that “There is no trumping of the nonhuman with the human. There is no negative traction in the framing of the human priority. Rather the human priority is seen to contain, express, carry – to actually *be* – the good of all creatures” (2020b, 875). Note the directionality here: human thought is a product of more-than-human thought, with the movement of thought proceeding from the natural to the human rather than the reverse as a

sort of projection of human categories onto nonhuman nature. Taken together, both of these references – LS's, Grey's – very much speak to the Earth-cry hypothesis's sense of the human *as* the cry, and of a movement that proceeds from the nonhuman through an individual human encounter and, in a teleological process, throughout a community as oriented to values as ends.

4.3 Vagueness and specificity

How does one hear "Earth"? What might be the relationship between Earth as a whole and whatever specific source generates the cry that one encounters? Is the vagueness of "Earth" a problem for deriving a praxis based on Earth's cry, or might there be some advantage to it?

This third cluster of questions that comes from critical attention to the cry of the Earth concerns the tension between the vagueness of the word "Earth" and the specificity of hearing a cry. After all, one never simply hears "Earth." Or rather, one always hears it, since anything terrestrial is by definition exemplifying Earth. To be at all significant, the cry of the Earth must be mediated by some specific source that is indelible in itself yet also capable of suggesting something so far beyond itself as to merit being associated with Earth as a whole. To press these reflections too far is to enter a snarl of semiotic twine, and so it is not surprising that, of the three clusters of questions this essay identifies, this is the one that has been least commented upon by commentators on integral ecology. One possible strategy might be to revisit the question of discernment, since undoubtedly there is an element of discernment in distinguishing which sounds are most appropriately to be labeled "cry of the Earth" and which are not. Yet while discernment pertains to the relationship between an apprehending consciousness and what it perceives, the present question goes beyond this relationship into something further: the relationship between the specific object that is heard and the ecologically significant category of "Earth" in which the object is contained.

Another possible strategy for addressing vagueness/specificity in Earth's cry would be to examine the polarity between global and local in integral ecology, since undoubtedly both of these poles are implicated in the phrase "cry of the Earth." This is an issue that has received some commentary within the scholarly reception of LS, such as in the attempt to examine scalar thinking within the encyclical (O'Brien 2019). The

tradition of Catholic social thought furnishes an appropriate concept in navigating global-local polarity in the form of subsidiarity, which applies to the task of identifying morally autonomous institutions at different levels of generality as vertically ordered. There is certainly a benefit in thinking through integral ecology in such terms; the publication in 2020 of *Fratelli tutti*, which examines bonds of human fraternity in global and local context, reinforces this need. For that matter, there is also a benefit in examining the *horizontal*, polycentric element of integral ecology, which befits Francis's citing of diocesan councils and consistent emphasis on local contexts; even more than the vertical, the horizontal aspects of integral ecology have been noted by commentators (Heimbach-Steins 2020, 116; Traina 2020, 154).

Yet even here in this exploration of vertical and horizontal dynamics within integral ecology there is something missing. One might think that the dynamics of subsidiarity might suffice to clarify the vertical ordering embedded in the relationship between the specific source of a cry and the Earth as a whole. Yet as Russell Hittinger has pointed out, the logic of subsidiarity is one that recognizes intrinsic value of social bodies at various levels of generality, which is not quite the same challenge as clarifying the link between "Earth" and the specific source of the cry that is cry-as-Earth (Hittinger 2008, 109). For this, a different logic is needed, and this comes via formal commentary on the logic of vagueness.

Drawing from the work of C. S. Peirce, my previous work has identified two features of the logic of vagueness that bear promise when it comes to the effort to hear and understand the cry of the Earth. The first is its flexibility, in that the logical form of vagueness "allows a given term to be specified in an indefinite number of ways without exhausting its meaning" (Slater 2015, 76). The second feature is that, unlike generality, which leaves its determination at the behest of an interpreter, a vague term restricts the freedom of the interpreter, and reserves for some further term the right to render specific that which had been vague (Slater 2015, 76). These points may seem unrelated to any discussion of integral ecology, much less Earth's cry, yet there are two promising entailments to vagueness thusly framed. The first is that the inexhaustibility of vagueness would suggest correspondingly inexhaustible possibilities for "Earth" being specified in some specific source of a given cry. The second is that, because the interpreter is not at liberty of determining what or how the vague becomes specific, the agency is possessed from without, that is, from beyond the human as closer to the source of the

cry. Considered in light of the preceding discussion of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, such a sense of agency for a nonhuman source of the cry is another factor that militates against an unwarranted anthropocentrism. It helps in this regard that vagueness has been linked to Pope Francis's writings. In the papal exhortation *EG*, Barrett Turner detects a note of vagueness within Pope Francis's approach to Catholic social ethics, which Turner interprets as a function of the pope's Jesuit training. In reference to *EG*, Turner avers that the papal exhortation's "new principles are meant to train one for dialogue through the formation of the imagination" (Turner 2017, 129). There is no sense in which Barrett's observation was meant as praise, but in view of these considerations on vagueness, any such vagueness within Pope Francis's approach might well be considered a promising feature.

It should be pointed out that "cry of the Earth" is itself an inherently vague phrase, even as a cry itself is something inherently specific. A historically destructive forest fire and a silent spring where birdsong was once heard could equally serve as cries of the Earth. What is significant here about vagueness is not just that it accommodates mutual contradiction or maintains a dynamic link between vagueness and specificity, but also that the vague is forever pregnant with meaning. It always calls out for specification in some concrete context.

5 Considerations for further study

The reception of integral ecology – LS in particular – has been vast, and of course it contains discussions relative to which this essay's explorations on the cry of the Earth will not bear directly. The critiques that LS falls short in taking the damaging impact of overpopulation seriously enough (Daly 2020), or that its view of nature is too domesticated and harmonious (Schweiker 2018) may well count among such examples. Still, even if the foregoing exploration has barely advanced past the level of a sketch, one hopes that it at least can be seen as initiating an approach that offers promise in highlighting and repairing some of the shortcomings of integral ecology, including the ambiguities concerning its applications or its underdeveloped account of the relation between the global and the concrete or intimate mentioned above. In any case, possibilities for further research along the lines this essay has laid out do present themselves. Three possible pathways of inquiry stand out.

First, the role that the value of dignity plays within integral ecology could be examined in light of this essay's hypothesis on Earth's cry. Such an inquiry might begin by probing the ways in which integral ecology has reimagined dignity relative to earlier iterations within the tradition of Catholic social thought. This would touch on the questions of dominion and anthropocentrism that have been noted by other commentators (Jenkins 2018; Hollenbach 2014; Donaghy 2020), yet it would also investigate integral ecology's shift toward emphasizing relationships within intimate spaces rather than categorical claims arrived at via deduction. Particularly promising might be looking at the critique from Darrel Moellendorf that, in spite of the rhetorical power of "cry of the Earth," nothing practical can be suggested in terms of one's conduct by assigning value to nonhuman life. Drawing a sharp line between valuing something and drawing normative lessons from it, Moellendorf argues that "[n]o normative guidance can be found in the direction that the encyclical [LS] points, namely to nature itself" (2020, 66).

Second, something similar could work for engaging with the value of solidarity. In this case, Francis's endorsement of rights for nonhuman life might be investigated in light of the turn toward the intimate and relational just mentioned (Francis/Kirchgaessner 2015). This effort might engage Nicole Flores's discussion of the familial metaphors for the earth within LS (2018), with a possible supplementary framework suggested in terms of Martin Buber's famous distinction between I-It and I-Thou. Particularly compelling would be an engagement of solidarity in terms of discussion of indigenous rights, including the discourses regarding political status for nonhumans in the context of *buenvivir* and the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador (Agostino/Dübgén 2014; Humphreys 2017).

Third, given the common pairing of "cry of the poor" alongside "cry of the Earth," these two phrases could be examined together using an approach similar to that which has been initiated in this essay. Such an effort would speak to the core link between social and ecological injustice that defines integral ecology. Just as compellingly, it could facilitate inquiry into the relationship between an ethics of ecological devastation and an ethics of human displacement and international migration.

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About the Author

Gary Slater, DPhil, MTh., Alexander von Humboldt Foundation research fellow at the Institute for Christian Social Sciences, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. Email: garyslater@uni-muenster.de.