

STEWARDSHIP, RELATION, AND THE WIDENING OF BIOETHICS

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ABSTRACT

Chapter ten of Roman Globokar's *Bioethics* (Ljubljana, 2025) makes a claim that reshapes the whole book: bioethics that stops at the clinic is an incomplete account of its own subject. This review essay follows how the chapter earns that claim. Its centre of gravity is the philological reading of *kābaš* and *rādāh*, which refuses both the apologetic denial that Genesis 1:28 carries a violent potential and the penitential acceptance of Lynn White's charge; around it stand a historically exact account of how environmental responsibility became thinkable, a fair presentation of anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism, and an unusually candid assessment of the Catholic Church's own delay in coming to the ecological question. The chapter closes with a constructive proposal of its own, an anthropo-relational model that locates the standing of the human person in responsibility rather than in rank. I argue that this model is the chapter's most valuable contribution and that it deserves the fuller treatment Globokar is well placed to give it.

Keywords: environmental bioethics; Roman Globokar; anthropo-relationalism; *Laudato si'*; Lynn White Jr.; Van Rensselaer Potter; stewardship of creation; bioethics education

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I. A chapter that changes the shape of the book

Globokar's *Bioethics* is a manual for students of the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana. Its first nine chapters cover the terrain a reader would expect: the definition of bioethics, the pluralism of values and the common principles, the two streams of the discipline, the status of the embryo, abortion, assisted reproduction, surrogacy, genetic engineering and euthanasia.^[1] Chapter ten does something a textbook rarely risks. It argues that everything preceding it was, taken alone, an incomplete account of what bioethics is.

That is a claim about the discipline rather than about an issue, and a manual is under no obligation to make it. Most introductions treat environmental ethics as an adjacent field to be mentioned at the end. Globokar instead returns to the discipline's founding gesture and notes that the narrowing came later: Potter's *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* had already insisted that bioethics concerns the human relationship to living nature as much as relations among people.^[2] Recovering that starting point is a considered decision about what the book is for, and the twenty-nine pages that follow are written to sustain it.

II. Why ecology became a moral question

The chapter opens by explaining why nature was long not an object of moral responsibility, and the explanation turns on scale rather than moral failure: „For a long time, nature was not an object of human responsibility, because the dimensions of human action vis-à-vis natural processes were so complex.”^[3] Ethics concerned itself with what human beings could actually affect, which meant other human beings. Modern science and its applications changed the arithmetic, and the ecological awareness that emerged in the 1960s registered the change.

The passage is two paragraphs long and free of the moralising that usually accompanies this story. It also does more than establish a chronology. It shows students that the scope of ethics is not fixed in advance, that it widens as human capacities widen, and that a question can be genuinely new without being a fashion. For a first-year reader, that is a more important lesson than any particular position in environmental ethics, and Globokar delivers it without labouring it.

III. Three models, presented fairly

Section 10.1 sets out anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism. The presentation is economical, quotable, and better than most comparable treatments precisely because it declines to caricature any of the three.

The handling of Hans Jonas shows the quality of the reading. Jonas is commonly filed under biocentrism or ecocentrism; Globokar classifies him as a moderate anthropocentrist and explains why. The imperative „Act in such a way that the effects of your actions are compatible with the sustainability of authentic human life on earth”^[4] makes the continued existence of humanity the criterion; however much intrinsic purpose Jonas grants other living beings, the criterion remains unchanged. That is a judgment rather than a summary. It is also the kind of judgment a student can learn from, since it shows an author who has read Jonas rather than looked him up.

Schweitzer receives the most generous space, including the long boxed passage about the earthworm carried from the road and the window kept shut so that insects do not burn on the lamp.^[5] Globokar does not present reverence for life as a comfortable doctrine. He draws out its central difficulty — that saving one life often destroys another, that raising a fallen fledgling means killing the insects it will eat — and quotes Schweitzer’s answer, which offers no decision procedure at all, only a demand for scrupulous individual accounting: „Where I harm any life, it must be very clear to me whether it is really necessary.”^[6] The comment that follows is exact: the ethic of reverence for life „does not provide concrete criteria for judging which life to give priority to.”^[7]

A textbook that lets a position it presents sympathetically remain unresolved teaches students the difference between an ethic and an algorithm.

Leopold completes the section, quoting the criterion that has organised ecocentric ethics ever since: a thing is right if it preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community, and wrong if it tends otherwise.

^[8] Globokar then closes with questions put to the reader rather than answered for him: „Are we harming nature if we crush a stone in the sand? Is it permissible to destroy viruses that cause disease?”^[9] These are the questions a seminar will actually argue about—their presence in a manual signals confidence in the students.

IV. White, Genesis, and an honest reading of the tradition

Section 10.2 takes up the charge that Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism produced the ecological crisis, and this is where the chapter is at its best. I came to it half expecting the standard apologetic manoeuvre. Globokar does not perform it.

He notes that White’s five-page article in *Science* summarised the opening chapters of Genesis „in one paragraph in a very simplistic and uncritical way”^[10] — and then reproduces that paragraph in full so the reader can judge for himself, which is more than most rebut-

tals of White are willing to do. He also reports what rebuttals of White almost never report: that the essay ends by locating the resource for a different relation to nature inside the Christian tradition, in Francis of Assisi, who „sought to dethrone man from his powerful throne over creation and to establish a democracy of all God-created beings.”^[11] He also gives the critique its due, noting that it stimulated deeper reflection on the human relationship to the natural environment and helped a Christian ecological ethic develop.^[12] Treating an adversary’s argument as an occasion rather than an attack is a rare disposition in confessional textbooks.

The exegesis in section 10.3 is the most substantial scholarly work in the chapter and, I suspect, what students will remember. Globokar does not pretend the verbs of Genesis 1:28 are gentle. *Kābaš* originally means to step on and can mean to subjugate, “which often involves violence”,^[13] *rādāh* carries a comparable ambivalence, since governance “always presupposes a relationship of power and force and allows for the abuse of power.”^[14] Having conceded that much, he shows why the concession does not yield White’s conclusion: verse 28 must be read against verse 26, where the same verb defines what the human being was made for, and against the ancient Near Eastern ideal of kingship as shepherding rather than despotism.^[15] The argument is philological before it is theological, which is why it persuades.

Two further moves in this section deserve particular notice. The first is the Sabbath. Globokar points out that the priestly creation account ends with the seventh day and not with the human being, so that dominion is framed by rest, and that rest is owed to the neighbour and to the animals alike.^[16] A creation narrative whose climax is a cessation of work is difficult to enlist in the service of unlimited extraction, and I have not seen the point made this compactly anywhere in the textbook literature. The second is *creatio continua*. Creation is presented as an open process, so that the verdict “very good” describes a direction and not a finished state^[17] — from which Globokar draws the uncomfortable consequence instead of avoiding it: creation is “not perfect,” with “chaos still present in the process,” and therefore “fragile and vulnerable.”^[18] A manual willing to say this much about the world it describes has earned the reader’s trust.

V. *Laudato si’* and the Catholic turn

Section 10.4 is the longest in the chapter, and it opens with a page of institutional self-examination that I would put in front of students on its own.

Globokar asks why Catholic moral theology came so late to the ecological question, and his answer is not flattering to his own tradition. In human bioethics, the Church “has always been at the forefront.” In contrast, in

environmental bioethics it “has been content with the principled position that man must not destroy the natural environment, but has not been particularly prominent in advocating the protection of the environment.”^[19] He then names the mechanism: many environmental activists denied the special standing of the human being and opposed Catholic positions on the protection of life from conception, and the two commitments hardened into mutual suspicion. His verdict on that opposition runs to a single sentence, and it is the sentence I would write on the board: “This opposition is in many ways illogical, because both are about promoting and preserving life.”^[20] He is equally unsentimental about the pontificates, observing that environmental protection “remained on the periphery” of John Paul II’s bioethical concerns and that Benedict’s position in *Caritas in Veritate* remains “in many respects anthropocentric.”^[21] Candour of this kind, in a manual published by a faculty of theology, is worth more to a student than any amount of advocacy.

The reading of *Laudato si’* that follows is careful and corrects a widespread misunderstanding. Globokar shows that Francis’s target is a specific modern formation rather than the biblical tradition, one that “has taken shape within modern scientific-technical civilisation, in which man seeks to assert his independence from nature and to assume God’s place in it.”^[22] He tracks the encyclical’s vocabulary of disordered, modern, distorted

and excessive anthropocentrism, reproduces paragraphs 117 and 118 in full, and notes that Francis explicitly declines biocentrism as the remedy, concluding that the encyclical itself advocates a moderate anthropocentrism.^[23] He extends the account to *Laudate Deum*, quoting Francis on the need to rethink the meaning and the limits of human power.^[24]

He also does something his fellow commentators generally do not, which is to record where the encyclical leaves work undone. Having noted that Francis attributes intrinsic value both to individual creatures and to ecosystems, Globokar remarks that “it is not entirely clear what this intrinsic value of other created beings consists in and what concrete consequences this has for human action.”^[25] A philosophical reservation about a papal document, stated without hedging, in a manual for theology students, is a small act of scholarly independence and should be recognised as one.

If I may register a wish rather than an objection: the passage from *Laudate Deum* on the limits of human power, and the encyclical’s own analysis of the technocratic paradigm, seem to me to open onto the rest of the book in a way the chapter has no room to pursue. Reproductive technology, genetic intervention and end-of-life medicine are all domains in which technical capacity generates its own normative pressure, which is why they are bioethical problems at all. That the same pressure operates on a watershed as on a

laboratory is a thought this chapter makes available, and I would be glad to see Globokar develop it in an essay where he has the space for it. It is a compliment to a textbook to say that it points beyond its own format.

VI. Anthro-po-relationality: the chapter's own contribution

The chapter does not end with a survey. It advances a position, and readers of the earlier sections may be surprised by how much is packed into a short passage. In the concluding pages of section 10.4, Globokar writes that “the most appropriate approach is the anthro-po-relational one, which recognises man’s special place because of his moral responsibility to care for creation, while at the same time seeing man in direct relationship with other living beings and with creation as a whole. Man is a creature of relations and cannot live without relations with other creatures and the natural environment.”^[26]

This is the most valuable idea in the chapter, and it does work that none of the three surveyed models can do. Relationality locates the human person’s standing in responsibility rather than in rank. That single move preserves the theological anthropology the previous nine chapters were built on while removing what makes anthropocentrism dangerous, because a being whose standing consists in an obligation cannot license the arbitrary use of what it is obliged to; it can only fail. It also

answers the levelling objection Francis raises against biocentrism, since the human being remains singular precisely as the one who can be held to account. Anyone teaching this material will find the concept immediately useful, and I expect it to be quoted well beyond the readership of a Ljubljana manual.

Because the idea is this good, I would like more of it. A model that resolves the tension between positions the chapter has just spent twenty pages developing deserves its own section, with the objections it will meet. The replies to them, and with at least one of the chapter’s own cases worked through in its terms. Globokar has clearly thought; the format has allowed him to state the conclusion. A separate study of anthro-po-relationality would be a genuine contribution to environmental bioethics, and this chapter is the natural place from which to begin it.

VII. The pedagogy

The teaching apparatus is unusually well made and deserves description, since this is where a textbook either works or does not.

The learning outcomes are honest about their own ambition. Alongside recognition and knowledge, they state that the student “will be personally encouraged to do your part to take responsibility for the natural environment and the future of our planet.”^[27] A manual that declares its formative intention is preferable to

one that smuggles the same intention in under a neutral register, and in a faculty of theology the declaration is appropriate.

The two case studies are the best part of the apparatus.^[28] The first sets a municipal waste recycling plant against an undeveloped green space with walking paths and a playground the parents built themselves; the second sets twenty wind turbines against migratory birds, noise and the visual amenity that sustains local tourism. Neither is rigged. Each puts a genuine environmental good on both sides, so a student cannot resolve them by identifying the environmentally correct answer, and the second forces the recognition – normally suppressed in undergraduate discussion – that climate mitigation and biodiversity protection can pull in opposite directions. The accompanying questions about who should decide, and how all stakeholders can be heard, introduce a procedural dimension that gives a seminar somewhere to go.

The ten questions for deeper discussion are similarly well judged.^[29] The first asks students to argue with the claim that environmental concern is “mainly about green ideology, which contradicts the Christian view that man has a special place within creation,” which is exactly the objection they will meet outside the seminar room and is better met inside it. The fifth asks where White’s critique is justified and where it is too simplistic, which correctly prevents the earlier section from being read

as a refutation. The sixth asks why, at least in Slovenia, no stronger Catholic environmental movement has developed; I would like that question asked in Croatia as well. The eighth, on the climate finance agreed at Baku in November 2024, brings the global dimension into the room. And the tenth asks the student to spend time admiring the nature around him and to write down his impressions. I confess that I first read this as filler. On reflection, it is the most theologically consistent item on the list, since the chapter’s account of the first human attitude toward creation is “gratitude for creation and admiration of its beauty.”^[30] If that claim is meant seriously, an exercise in attention belongs in the coursework. I withdraw the objection.

VIII. Conclusion

The tenth chapter of Globokar’s *Bioethics* does what a textbook chapter should and rather more. It gives students an accurate map of environmental ethics, teaches them to read a contested biblical text with the philological tools the reading requires, and refuses both temptations that beset treatments of Christianity and ecology – the apologetic denial that there is a case to answer, and the penitential acceptance of a caricature. The frankness about the Church’s own delay, the willingness to note where *Laudato si’* leaves a concept underdetermined, and the constructive proposal of an anthropo-relational model are more than a manual of this kind usually undertakes.

The chapter's scope decisions are, in my view, the right ones for its purpose. A reader coming from outside the confessional context will notice that the ecological resources of other traditions are not surveyed, and that the animal question is held over to chapter eleven; both follow reasonably from what the book is and where it is taught. One practical note for the publisher rather than for the author: the English edition would benefit from a further proofreading pass before it is put in front of anglophone students, since several terms have not survived translation intact. The scholarship is unaffected, and the book de-

serves the wider circulation that a corrected printing would secure.

What stays with me is the chapter's central pedagogical achievement. Globokar has given his students the tools to see that responsibility for the natural world continues the responsibilities they have been studying for nine chapters – the same commitment to life, extended to its proper range, rather than an adjacent enthusiasm. Whether they draw the connection will depend on the seminar. The chapter has made it possible, which is what a good textbook is for, and it is why I would assign this one.

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- [1] Roman Globokar, *Bioethics*, TEOF Manuals 29 (Ljubljana: Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, 2025). The chapter under review is „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 245–73; all page references below are to this volume.
- [2] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 245, invoking Van Rensselaer Potter, *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).
- [3] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 246.
- [4] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 247, quoting Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 57. English translation: *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- [5] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 249–50.
- [6] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 250, citing Schweitzer 1990, 340.
- [7] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 250.
- [8] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 251, citing Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987 printing), 262.
- [9] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 252.
- [10] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 253.
- [11] Lynn White Jr., „The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1206, quoted in Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 254.
- [12] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 254.
- [13] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 257, citing Lintner 2017, 42–43.
- [14] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 258, citing Lintner 2017, 43.
- [15] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 257, citing Claus Westermann, *Schöpfung* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1971), 75–80.
- [16] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 258–59, citing Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:12–14.
- [17] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 259.
- [18] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 259.
- [19] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 260.
- [20] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 260.
- [21] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 261–62, citing John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, Message for the World Day of Peace (Vatican City, 1990), and Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), §51.
- [22] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 263.
- [23] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 263–65, citing Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §§69, 81, 115–19; §§117–18 are reproduced in full at 264.
- [24] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 265–66, citing Francis, *Laudate Deum*, Apostolic Exhortation (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), §§19, 28.
- [25] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 263.
- [26] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 268.
- [27] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 245.
- [28] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 269–71 (Examples 10.1 and 10.2).
- [29] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 272–73.
- [30] Globokar, „Caring for the Natural Environment,” 268.

