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Thinking-Being With a Garden: Developing Ecocentric Ethics for Sustainable Organising

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Abstract

In this paper, we turn to gardens to offer a new ethics of being with the world that can inform sustainable organising. For this, we develop an ecocentric ethics perspective informed by the writing of Karen Barad, in particular her notion of ‘agential cuts’. By reviewing gardening literatures, and exploring our embodied gardening practices, we attempt to ‘step out’ of institutionalised ways of thinking and working to reach for different embodied and relational ways of being with earth-others. We contribute to debates by: (a) tracing multispecies mutualities of ‘cutting-together apart’ within the gardens we tend, to show how such cutting can develop understandings of an entangled ethics in which human involvement can at times be peripheral; and, (b) showing how garden(ing)s can help enrich understandings of ‘ethico-onto-epistemologies’ by situating embodied practices of organising within planetary processes and rhythms which are variously consequential for sustaining forms of life. These contributions stemming from garden(ing)s can help to inform ecocentric thinking-being in business organisations by developing possibilities for (re)conceptualising: how businesses practices, and connected imaginaries, are entangled in creating conditions that can diminish and enhance earth-others existences; and, how the fluidities and temporalities of specifically located webs of life in which businesses activities are part necessitate sensitivities to working with unknowing.

Keywords Garden · Sustainability · Organising · Ethico-onto-epistemology · Posthuman

S – It is interesting. Sometimes we notice when people first take on an allotment garden near to ours it looks like they wage war on it! They get hold of some power tools and cut and chop everything.

A – But it all grows back, maybe even stronger, doesn’t it?

S – They must expect it, but then somehow perhaps they don’t. So they maybe do the slashing twice and then we don’t see them again. I guess they give up.

A – Their attempted relationship with the garden didn’t work out – they want a divorce!

S – Exactly. But there can be other ways of understanding and being with a garden.

A – Yeah, you can sense that when being around long-term gardeners, especially when the time comes they have to give up their garden due to age. This always involves a process of mourning, I found, as if they have to give up a part not only of who they are, but also whom they are with.

S = Stephen Allen; and. A = Anke Strauß

Introduction

Within Business Ethics and Management and Organisation Studies (MOS) literatures, the widening gap between increased attention for sustainability issues and the rapid pace of planetary degradation (e.g. Ergene & Calás, 2023; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Kortetmäki et al., 2023; Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024) has led to a growing critique of the basic assumptions with which sustainability research and practice has been carried out (e.g. Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Borland & Lindgren, 2013; Dahlmann, 2025; Ergene et al., 2018). Critical positions call for a paradigm shift to challenge the reproduction of an interrelated set of dualisms, which include separating ‘human’ and ‘nature’. To develop

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sustainable ways of organising beyond privileging rationality, reproducing anthropocentrism and promoting instrumentality, it is suggested that researchers need to engage with relational ontologies and epistemological approaches rooted in “subjective experience, empathy and reflective and collective inquiry into values and emotions” (Dahlmann, 2025, p. 505). A crucial part of this paradigm shift is considered to be a posthuman ethics that decentres the human while emphasising the relationality of existence (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023; Ergene & Calás, 2023; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022).

Relational posthuman ethics acknowledge that there are always others with their needs that our existence might depend upon, and from which obligations of care arise (Phillips, 2019). By foregrounding our material entanglements with earth-others,¹ ethics of care perspectives aim to challenge instrumentalist relationships to nature that dominate current ways of organising (e.g. Allen, 2022; Banerjee & Arjaliès, 2021; Beacham, 2018; Ergene et al., 2021; Phillips, 2015; Sayers et al., 2022; Tallberg et al., 2022). Ethics, here, is embodied in being and interacting, “meeting, existing, and becoming in the company of one another,” rather than about normative values (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023, p. 56).

Cultivating ways of living and working in relational ways with nature, however, is a significant challenge given that many institutional settings nurture and maintain our “anthropocentric habits of thoughts” shaping the ways we perceive, relate and value nature (Ergene & Calás, 2023, p. 1962). Current academic institutional arrangements are suggested to facilitate disembodied and rational forms of knowing (Ergene et al., 2018, 2021; Ferns, 2025; Strauß, 2024). As a consequence, most of the contributions to developing a relational ethics of care perspective that includes other than humans are theoretical (exceptions are Allen, 2022; Beacham, 2018; Davies & Riach, 2019). Developing a new ethics of being with the world, however, as Ferns (2025) critiques, needs to be much more than cognitive and rational exercises: “we must also *feel and experience* alternative ways of being, manifested by deepening our connection with nature.” (p. 852).

In this paper, we acknowledge the deep material entanglements, not only of our being with the world, but also how this being is intertwined with our thinking and how both shape the ethical horizon in relation to pressing sustainability issues. To develop these arguments, we follow Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2016), who insists that knowing is constitutively entangled with being and that

ethics is rooted in the way meaning and matter is produced. We argue that not only is ethics about onto-epistemology but that context, as we go onto explore as habitats, is significant for the ways meaning and matter are interconnected (Strauß, 2024). In contrast to other positions that make subjectivity at the centre of developing a posthuman ethics (e.g. Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020), we attend to the onto-epistemological practices through which we participate with earth-others in ecosystems.

To think with ecosystems we are regularly part of, we turn to gardens, as we signalled in the opening vignette. Gardens, we believe, are not ‘pure natural phenomena’ but naturecultures, a neologism introduced by Haraway (2003) to stress how the separation between natural and cultural phenomena is a product of onto-epistemological practices that are material as well as discursive, and that one is always part of the other. In tune with our relational stance, we consider thinking as an embodied practice that is constitutively intertwined with sociomaterial practices and ways of being (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023).

Gardens have not only been a site of (productive) nature-cultural practices, but were also significant for reflecting upon and considering ideals for organising societies to “carve out an ideal place in nature”, for example in texts of Ancient Greece (e.g. Plato), Chinese legends (e.g. Yuanming), Judeo-Christian mythology (e.g. Damascene) and Roman writings (e.g. Horace) (Giesecke & Jacobs, 2012, p. 9). How we think-act with gardens and associated imaginings are consequential for how garden existences come into being. As person-researchers, we argue, going to the gardens we belong offers new possibilities for thinking and being with the world because they are not our everyday institutional working arrangements. This allows us to ‘step out’ of our instrumental institutionalised ways of thinking and doing to explore how embodied practices of gardening are interlaced with naturecultural. Here, we assume lies potential for furthering an ethics that is rooted in living socio-material entanglements that include humans and earth-others.

In order to contribute to the nascent literature that takes a relational approach to conceptualise posthuman approaches to ethics (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Jääskeläinen, 2022; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Huopainen et al., 2025; Paring, 2025; Phillips, 2019) we make ecology – the “science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding [...], partly of organic, partly of inorganic nature” (Haeckel, 1866, in Friederichs, 1958, p. 154) – the centre of our thinking to bring the biophysical to the fore (Howard-Grenville & Lahnenman, 2021). Such ecocentrism, according to Heikkurinen et al. (2016) is necessary for theorising organisations that aim at participating with the planet in a sustainable manner. Key to ecocentrism is the “principle of wholeness, which means that humans are seen as one strand of an interlocking web with natural systems” (Allen, et al., 2019, p. 784).

¹ There are various ways to address existences other than human – nonhuman, other-than-human, more-than-human. In order to leave the human-centeredness we use the term “earth-others” that Val Plumwood (2002) has introduced to gesture towards “nature as a realm of others who are independent centres of value” (p. 188).

Consequently, like posthumanist approaches, ecocentrism decentres sovereign individual humans from being at the centre of any ethical concerns and significance, but ecocentrism places all beings within interconnected ecologies i.e. ‘nature’ is give core prominence.

In this paper, in the context of considering sustainable ways of organising businesses, we pursue the question: How do we develop the contours of an ecocentric ethics that is rooted in living socio-material entanglements? To do so, we first review the Business Ethics and interconnected MOS literature on relational approaches to ethics to situate our writing and to understand the challenges that such theorising involves. We then introduce Barad’s ethico-onto-epistemology – and especially the concept of the agential cut – before we turn to gardens as naturecultural sites for developing an ecocentric ethics. By understanding that gardens are phenomena that come into being as discrete entities through intra-active practices – including thinking, understanding and theorising – we map the cross-disciplinary literatures about gardens to highlight the possibilities of these naturecultural sites for informing sensitivities in these practices. To develop the contours of an ecocentric ethics we then interweave two vignettes of our gardening experiences through a Baradian lens, assuming that the world is a doing in which not only humans but also a plethora of earth-others engage.

Relational Posthuman Ethics for Sustainable Ways Organising

Ethics in a relational posthuman key has recently been on the rise in Business Ethics and MOS literatures (Allen, 2022; Beacham, 2018; Borland & Lindgren, 2013; Ehrnström Fuentes et al., 2025; Ergene & Calás, 2023; Huopalaainen et al., 2025; Paring, 2025; Sayers et al., 2022). The basis for developing sustainable organising practices that are situated within the livelihoods of ‘more-than-humans’ (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Jääskeläinen, 2022; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022), is assuming mutuality and interdependencies between humans and earth-others, so that humans are neither understood to be sovereign, nor the sole locus of all valuing (Ehrnström-Fuentes & Jääskeläinen, 2022; Paring, 2025; Phillips, 2015).

Yet, while many share the basic assumptions of an ethics of care (Phillips, 2015, 2019) that acknowledges the basis for ethics in our various entanglements with the world, there are also considerable differences in how relational posthuman ethics perspectives are developed. Some consider an ethics of care “to emerge from interconnections between the embodied human subject and the material world” (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020, p. 757). By taking this approach the subject centre of an ethics of care remains close to its feminist roots, mainly directed towards other humans. Ethics, here, becomes a matter of subjectivity, so that a posthuman

ethics of care is based on a concept of human selves that are becoming with others and are thus in need of, and vulnerable towards, multiple others. These posthuman approaches which concentrate on the “imbricated relations between humans and diverse others as a basis for (re)immersion in the flow of life” (Sayers et al., 2022, p.605), mostly focus on particular species, especially on animals (e.g. Davies & Riach, 2019; Huopalaainen et al., 2025; Paring, 2025), while non-animal living existences are usually generically addressed as the ‘environment’ or ‘nature’. Here an ethics of care is often considered to be rooted in close relations with human subjectivities and expressed through attentive care towards variously conceived earth-others (Sage, 2025).

Other posthuman perspectives have a greater focus towards exploring embodied participation in multifarious biophysical ecologies by stressing that “ethics and implications of sustainability requires greater explicit recognition of and reflection on the broader connections between our different ways of being, knowing, and acting” (Dahlmann, 2025, p.500). These writings consider posthuman ethical practices as centrally involved in developing diverse epistemologies that make visible the webs of life that we are all implicated in and variously sustained by (Borland & Lindgren, 2013; Dahlmann, 2025; Ehrnström-Fuentes et al., 2025; Heikkurinen et al., 2016). Instead of focussing on individual or multiple species (only), these writings use terms like ecologies, web-of-life or ecosystems to stress the enmeshed, even muddled reality of existence. For example, Dahlmann (2025) suggests making biodiversity a central concept for rethinking ethics that are sensitive to humans being part of nature. Several other authors have called for ethics associated with organisations to be ecocentric (e.g. Allen et al., 2019; Gosling & Case, 2013; Heikkurinen et al., 2016). Most, however, remain on a rather abstract or general level (exceptions are Allen, 2022; Beacham, 2018; Davies & Riach, 2019) which Ehrnström-Fuentes et al. (2025) critique, as according to them, a theorising that takes the notion of ecology seriously, needs to be grounded in a (specific) ‘ecology-in-place’.

In the following we use the notion of an ecocentric ethics to move away from the human as reference point that persists in notions like posthuman, non-human, more-than-human and focus on relations that constitute habitats, livelihoods as well as existence – living (biotic) and non-living (abiotic). We acknowledge that such an approach to ethics is highly challenging as it needs to leave the subject-focus which is currently at the centre of an ethics of care (Sage, 2025) without jumping to the abstraction of classical ethics (such as Kantian, utilitarian or, to a certain extent, virtue ethics). This demands developing habits of thinking-being that considerably differ from the way most of us are in the world today. To develop some possible contours of an ecocentric ethics that takes ecology seriously, we use Barad’s

ethico-onto-epistemological understandings (2003, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2016) for reflecting on, and developing ideas about, our embodied thinking-being with the gardens that we belong².

Ethics as an Onto-epistemological Matterings

In pursuit of developing an ecocentric ethics that attempts to pay attention to the limitations of existing posthuman perspectives we primarily draw upon the writing of Karen Barad. This is because her work (2003, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2016) offers potential to conceptualise how a posthuman entangled ethics can be understood to emerge in the embodied practices of participating in ecosystems, making ethics part of an onto-epistemological framework that is based in quantum theory, i.e. the smallest constituent elements of all earthly biophysical existences. By joining other feminist posthumanist thinkers, such as Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett and Anna Tsing, Barad (2003, 2007) critiques anthropocentric approaches that overemphasize language, discourse and human meaning-making, and stresses that materiality, too, has the capacity to act, affect and shape the world. At the centre of Barad's onto-epistemology is the notion of entanglement, where meaning and matter emerge together. To her the "primary ontological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena" (Barad, 2007, p. 139).

Here phenomena are not merely some-thing we observe or experience but the relational outcomes of intra-actions between agencies (which could include human and non-human entities, objects, technologies, forces, and concepts), where matter and meaning, the material and the discursive, are inseparable and co-constituting (Barad, 2003, 2007). This means that phenomena are understood as produced by the "agential" (active, dynamic processes) and the "phenomenal" (what appears to be). She emphasises that knowledge and reality are not separate from the processes of observation and interaction, they are entangled. "Entanglements are not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world" (Barad, 2010, p. 265). In this approach, the world becomes a doing – instead of being made of stable

relations – always entangled and in flux, shaped by ongoing intra-actions.

Barad's notion of entanglement "disrupts a metaphysical division between ontology, epistemology, and ethics, re-implicating knowing, being, and living as mutually constitutive", which means that ethics becomes a matter of onto-epistemology (Zhao, 2020, p. 86). Consequently, Barad uses the term "ethico-onto-epistemology" (2007, p. 426). Within this framework, "[e]thics is about being response-able to the way we make the world, and to consider the effects our knowledge-making processes have on the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 381). This implies that responsibility is associated with "the entanglements 'we' help enact and what kinds of commitments 'we' are willing to take on (including commitments to 'ourselves' and who 'we' may become)" (Barad, 2016, p. 362).

Within her ethico-onto-epistemological approach, it is the notion of 'a cut', or 'agential cut', that is particularly significant in understanding the ethicality of meaning and matter because this is how distinctions, relations and assemblages³ are produced (Barad, 2007). Agential cuts are "material-discursive boundary-making practices" (Barad, 2007, p. 93), that produce 'objects' and 'subjects' and other forms of "differentiating/entangling" (Barad, 2014, p. 176). Agential cuts are understood to be "not about othering/separating, but on the contrary about making connections and commitments" (Barad, 2016, p. 362). A degree of control, and so responsibility, is associated with the boundary-making which is based on making distinctions by cutting matter together and apart e.g. between interdependent living entities such as 'plant' and 'soil'. Consequently, "it is in these cuts and through these boundary-making practices that Barad's ethical contribution is to be found" (Hollin et al., 2017, p. 932). This is because through these cuts ethical rationalities and responsibilities are made in the ways that meanings and matter are given stability in how inclusions and exclusions are produced. So far, agential cuts have mostly be considered in Science and Technology Studies⁴ in relation to how the apparatuses of science (e.g. laboratory equipment) "enact

² In seeking to decentre the human (us) in our attempted ecocentric ethics theorising we have tried to be attentive to the language we use. In particular, the issue of us inadvertently possessing earth-others via making claims to 'our gardens'. Consequently, in associating ourselves with the gardens that we explore in this paper we have chosen to depict our associations with the gardens via 'we belong', 'being-with' and 'we tend'.

³ The term 'assemblage' is most often traced to the writing of Deleuze and Guattari as a translation of the French 'agencement'. As Law writes "like 'assemblage', 'agencement' is an abstract noun. It is the action (or the result of the action) of the verb 'agencer'. In French 'agencer' has a wide range of meanings ... it is 'to arrange, to dispose, to fit up, to combine, to order'." (2004, p. 41). He suggests that "assemblage is a process of bundling, of assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together." (2004, p. 41).

⁴ Science and Technology Studies can be understood as the contemporary title for a multidisciplinary research stream which includes the philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge.

agential cuts that produce determinate boundaries and properties of ‘entities’” (Barad, 2007, p. 148).

In this paper we use the notion of agential cuts to explore our embodied experiences of gardening practices to understand possibilities for an ecocentric ethics, and the consequences for organising practices that can pay attention to relations between human and earth-others. Before we do that, we map the intellectual landscape of how gardens and their adjunct practices have been addressed in connection with theories of ethics and organising, and a wider interdisciplinary gardening literature. We do so to highlight what has been overlooked so far, and argue for a further engagement with the rich socio-materialities and embodied multi-species practices that gardens offer.

Gardens as Sites of Naturecultural Organising

As introduced, we approach gardens as ‘naturecultures’ in which the constellations of practices through which they are produced are closely intertwined with ideas about ethical relations amongst humans and earth-others (Haraway, 2003). By taking this approach we are connecting with conceptions which understand gardens and gardening as variously “emblem[atic] of the ideal human relationship to nature” (Cooper, 2012, p. 15), as well as “forms of organisation that are somehow ‘closer to Nature’” (Burrell & Dale, 2002, p. 107). However, making these associations with gardens is an intricate matter, as they are intimately related to how we make meaning out of and act on/with ‘nature’, and associated imaginaries (Campbell, 2006; Roux-Roussier et al., 2018; Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024), as well as utopian ideas of forms of sustainable organisation (Burrell & Dale, 2002; Munro, 2002).

Gardens’ intellectual landscape, spanning spatial dimensions as well as bodies and practices, is informed by different onto-epistemological narratives, which means that gardens become phenomena of very different human-nature relationships. In Western cultures Garden of Eden constitutes the most prominent garden imaginary (Burrell & Dale, 2002), a place that humans were expelled from and since then have had to subdue and endure the alien land until they can return to their real ‘home’ in heaven (Cooper, 2012). In some indigenous creation stories, instead, paradise is to be found on Earth. It, too, is a garden but for instance in the Potawatomi creation story, it was Skywoman together with various animals who has created a garden by spreading seeds that she has carried from Skyworld (Kimmerer, 2013; also Bernhard, 2023). Situating these imaginary gardens in different realms, as Kimmerer (2013) points out, has consequences for how we perceive, value and work with the natural world.

Gardens as Spatial Organising

In some writings about theories of organising there is an ongoing engagement with gardens and the concept of boundary and adjunct notions of organisation and disorganisation, of order/control and disorder/disturbance (Munro, 2002; Parker, 2022). Mainly referring to the history of gardens, Burrell and Dale (2002), for instance, show how the utopian imaginings of ‘garden’ are secured through spatial boundary-work that maintains organisation (boundary, formality and control) in face of disorganising (playfulness, surprise and unpredictability) tendencies. This links in with broader literatures on gardens that constitute them as confined spaces that either symbolise perfect human-nature relationships or are highly productive horticultures (Giesecke & Jacobs, 2012). These notions include seeing gardens as formally enclosed spaces for humans that are separated from a pernicious and violent nature-other (Cooper, 2012).

Parker (2022) extends these arguments taking ‘weeds’, and the construal of a plant as being one, as “a very useful way of thinking about the categories of organisation and disorganisation” that constitute most epistemologies of organisation (p. 1). Practices of weeding, he states, also always “encourage the weed, because as soon as the ground is opened, is ploughed, it becomes a seed-bed for anything that falls into it” (Parker, 2022, p. 4). The conditions of the Anthropocene, he argues, needs to trouble the assumption of this boundary and bring vegetal accounts of organisations to the fore to “wild organisation theory” (ibid).

Troubling the notion of boundary to wild organisation theory, connects with imaginaries that transgress the notion of garden as confined space and consider it ‘second nature’ that stands for human-nature co-evolutions and co-dependencies (Pollan, 1991). This is related to arguments that in considering nature-culture relations there is “no footprint-free world” that is ‘wild’, “there are simply many varieties of gardens” – ‘wildland gardens’ (Janzen, 1998, p. 1312). What is surprisingly absent from accounts that engage with gardens as spatial organisation are bodies, human and earth-other bodies, that become in relation with the earth through, for instance, practices of gardening.

Gardens as (Embodied) Practice

The few contributions in the connected Business Ethics and Organisation and Management Studies literatures which engage with gardens in relation to embodied practices tend to do so by refraining from considering gardens as confined territories. Instead garden(ing)s, to rethink the ethics and practices of sustainable organising, revolve around ‘multispecies collectives’ (Roux-Rosier, et al., 2018) and ‘human-land relationships’ (Campbell, 2006). Roux-Rosier et al. (2018) engage with permaculture as an imaginary

of sustainable organising that centres “relations between humans, nonhuman species and the natural environment” (p.550), while Campbell (2006) re-conceptualises the notion of entrepreneurship as the ‘business of living’ to reconnect human (entrepreneurial) activity with ecological humility that aims for existing in harmony with the land. She explores in her writing how “garden[ing] with Mother Earth [can constitute] a revitalised social relationship that is fraught with physical, intellectual and social significance” (Campbell, 2006, p. 169). These positions, however, only address ethics indirectly.

Roquebert and Debucquet (2024) make ethics an explicit matter, by researching the agricultural method of biodynamics to grasp its “radical moral substance” to transgress nature-culture dualism. Based on the premise that humans are integral parts of nature, they highlight the deep changes in moral values that an ecological justice would demand. This includes considering an ecological community comprising of “intimate relationships with nonhuman living beings” which is rooted in lived experience (Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024, p.232).

In the wider literature on gardens such boundless notions resonate strongly with indigenous spirituality and Earthly metaphors – such as of ‘Planet Garden’, “which requires wise maintenance” (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 96), that needs humanity to become aware gardeners who take care of others (e.g. plants). Becoming ‘homo-gardinus’ is proposed as part of a counter-narrative “to overcome the ruling form of capitalism and to counterbalance a world dominated by the homo-economicus”, a self-interested atomised humanity (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 95). Although, understanding “who has legitimate claims as the gardener and whose garden a given landscape is” (McEuen & Styles, 2019, p. 1196), can be seen to be fundamental if gardening is “seek[ing] to heal the harms caused by industrialism, capitalism, and colonialism” (p. 1197).

More generally, garden(ing) as practice addresses human experiences, with “gardening physically impact[ing] nature just as natural processes physically affect the garden” (Cooper, 2012, p. 28). Within this, an important idea is ‘communing’, an “intimate sharing or mutuality” between the gardener and the gardened (Cooper, 2006, p. 73). This intimacy is understood to encompass an ongoing interacting ‘narrative’, rather than distinctive spatial and temporal moments, whereby “the gardener’s treatment of the plant cannot be random, but proceeds in stages, as does the development of the plant itself” (Cooper, 2006, p. 74).

By reflecting on the range of ideas and questions raised across these literatures related to gardens we see significant opportunities for further stimulating debates about sustainable organising which shake-off gardens anthropocentric orientations (Cooper, 2012; Giesecke & Jacobs, 2012), and bring critical attention to associated discursive-physical

human and earth-others boundary making (Burrell & Dale, 2002; Parker, 2022). The opportunity for developing embodied ecocentric understandings, which place humans as *a* strand of nature (Kimmerer, 2013), particularly relates to the writings which explore an ethics about intimate garden(ing) relationships (Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024), mutualities (Cooper, 2006) and co-evolutions (Pollan, 1991).

To take these debates forward to rethink the onto-epistemological basis of sustainable ways of organising we next turn to considering specific situated spaces of embodied naturecultures, which we call the gardens we belong. As we have argued gardens offer us a more expansive space for reimagining sustainable organising than often stultifying institutional settings. By drawing upon Barad’s (2007) ‘agential cuts’ to explore our gardening encounters we attempt to extend critical appreciations of how ecocentric ethical rationalities and responsibilities can be understood to be produced through physical-discursive boundary making in ecologies.

Entangling with Garden(ing)s in Practice

A posthuman lens requires the central attention to how we are part of, producing and produced by, the practices that we research (Cozza & Gherardi, 2023). Consequently, to approach our embodied gardening experiences, we follow Gibson-Graham’s (2011) adoption of Eve Sedgwick’s heuristic practices that she calls ‘weak theory’, which abandons the certainty of describing what is, in favour of a critically speculative opening towards being entangled in a world. To offer a new ethics of being and organising with the world that acknowledges humans as part of nature, we argue, necessitates ethico-onto-epistemological practices of (re-)weaving that are not only radical but also embodied, unfinished and ongoing (Allen, 2022; Campbell, 2006; Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024). By presenting two autoethnographic vignettes that span over several years, and tap into different moments of becoming gardener, we draw on our lived experiences and explore consequences for an ecocentric ethics.

To be congruent with our purposes to situate ourselves as relationally embedded within a world, and specifically the gardens we are part of, we take the sensory experiences of our being-with the gardens as the entry point for our writing, while appreciating the limits of our awareness and understanding. To develop such thinking-being with a garden, we take an ‘autoethnographic’ approach and include selected vignettes on our experiences with becoming-garden(ed) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography described as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” enables us to explore the potential for (re) theorising based on seeing the value of carefully tracing and

reflecting upon our everyday doings (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). While there is often an underlying humanism to autoethnographic writing which “leaves the speaking self relatively untroubled in the text” (Gannon, 2006, p. 477), we aim at bringing in posthuman appreciations, whereby “the potential boundaries and identities which a writer is traversing as in autoethnography, becomes lost in a soup of unknowing and unintentionality” (Allen, 2019, p. 67).⁵ Such hesitant writing is in line with a practice of gardening that does not underestimate the importance of listening to plants, animals and other more-than-human critters (including soils).

The gardens that we tend are plots of allotment land in or close to our home-cities – Sheffield (UK) and Berlin (Germany). Our belonging to these gardens is institutionalised through renting contracts and memberships in garden associations, and although our everyday experiences with this belonging feels quite stable, the increasing land value within cities attached to the potential to accumulate capital via building also makes the specification of the land as garden land increasingly precarious.⁶ Despite the regulations of garden associations, gardens and gardening practices are highly diverse. Our gardening practices can be situated in what is often called natural or organic gardening that considers it an experiential knowledge practice that attempts to be aware of the involvement of earth-others. Although, we seek to be critically aware of our positioning as whilst organic gardening practices are in many ways focussed on developing “harmony with nature rather than dominion over it”, at times they can be understood to include aspects of nativism whereby those who are not ‘natural’ – human and earth-others – are denigrated and removed (McKay, 2011, p. 42).

Vignette 1 – S’s Garden(ing)

We garden and sit within the rectangular hedged boundaries of the allotment which is categorised as

⁵ We acknowledge the challenge of what we would call ecosystem-thinking and writing as every species we focus on (a cherry tree, a fox, a badger, a fungus) is always multiple and alive. For instance, when we write “soil”, we evoke an image of earth-coloured material that is to be found under our feet. Soil, however, is not dirt but a complex composition of a myriad of bodies – bodies of rock, of water, of air and not least, countless microbes. And it goes on, as soil is also a matter of composition in which various plants, fungi, weathers, animals take part in (including humans). Soil is a whole web of life. And most of this web of life is unknown. Thinking ecologically, thus, means that picking up one aspect always entails a whole (and endless) web of entanglements.

⁶ Interestingly, climate change and biodiversity loss has begun to counter this development, so that gardens in cities start to become valuable for urban resilience management as they serve as cooling patches, fresh air provider, are important for water or biodiversity management.

‘Plot 100’ in the city of Sheffield in the North of England. Topographically the city of Sheffield is a ‘bowl’ surrounded by hills and five rivers, and this allotment site, like many others, is on one of the outer slopes of the bowl in the city outskirts. Originally plots were ten square ‘rods’ – a measurement from Anglo-Saxon times at least 1000 years ago – about 250m² in size which was intended to allow enough vegetables to be grown to feed a four-person family for a year (The National Allotment Society, n.d.-a). The plot which has been in our care since October 2021, is classified as under 200m² in the City Council’s calculation of the annual rent of c.£100.

We are not there so much, mostly at the weekends outside of the colder months when the growing happens. We probably visit as occasionally as the foxes who pass through (we know of them from our wildlife camera – before its circuitry broke due to getting overheated in an extreme wave of heat last summer), but we visit more frequently than the badgers who also pass through – but much less often than the robins, wood pigeons or magpies – indeed we know a frog that now lives there in the pond we dug in the summer before last to help with the dampness at the bottom of the plot. It was so dry for much of spring and summer last year. Despite the watering we did, nothing we planted thrived. Some squash did okay. Maybe we need to somehow garden better this year – add some compost? But with this winter being so wet maybe that should help us?

We had planned to plant some fruit trees, but there is still the uncertainty about the ash tree, and whether it can recover from the potentially fatal ‘Dieback’. The City Council will want to remove it if it shows signs of a possible collapse. Any new fruit trees would need to go in the area near the ash, so would be exposed to whatever happenings might come about from its likely chainsaw imbued removal in support of human safety (Fig. 1).

The vignette and photo give us glimpses of this garden and the various spatio-temporalities it might hold. The intra-actions that have produced this garden phenomenon are a convoluted milieu of aspects including topography, classifications and quantifications of what constitutes sufficient space for growing food for a family. While the family’s presence in the confines that demarcate the garden can be considered infrequent compared to other animal species, their awareness of mammals, such as foxes and badgers, made possible through the now broken wildlife camera technology which S brought into the garden, provides a sense of interrupting the passage of these earth-others. The movement through of foxes and badgers, when humans are absent

Fig. 1 S's allotment taken on July 5.th 2022



from the garden, suggests the space, that has been taken for human cultivation, is also part of other spatial arrangements that do not match the garden's boundaries brought about by institutionalised cuts that produce Plot 100 by determining its boundaries. The transitory activities of wildlife indicate that the garden is part of much wider territories that earth-others enact in various routines of movement (e.g. daily, seasonal) instead of dwelling in.

The human gardeners, S and family, realise, that at many times they are just one strand of life. The cuts that produce the spatial arrangement we call garden is often meaningless to most earth-others who choose the time of human absence to reproduce their territory. The wildlife camera, whilst functioning, made S aware of the plethora of spatial arrangements which the garden sometimes becomes part of in various rhythms of pacing-out and resting-in. At the same time, the video capture of some species gives digitalised form to their relative exclusion from the demarked plot. Perceiving species in their movements has the potential of cutting together earth-other existences with space differently than the institutionalised way of cutting apart a piece of land, parcelling earth, to produce human territory in form of Plot 100. Such a cutting together allows perceiving earth-others not as individual entities disconnected from their context, but rather intertwined with their territories – whatever the contours of these territories might be. This has implications for a spatial practice that diverges from the institutionalised cuttings that produce exclusions and takes into account the entanglements that constitute ecologies of

existence. It demands an ethical practice that perceives spatial arrangements as multiple, and engages with boundaries and their (im-)permeability for various earth-others in the (re-)production of their territories that make possible their existences.

Part of such ethical spatial understandings are practices of zoning that have the potential to produce habitats through which the garden becomes inhabitable to earth-others. Human practices voluntarily or accidentally create conditions of a potential habitat. The vignette describes one of S's and his family's human practice of digging a pond as part of reforming the garden that brings about the potential for a frog to find a dwelling place. The unplanned presence of the frog in the pond, introduced as a way of intervening in a dampness which inhibits the potential for growing food for human nourishment, becomes meaningful for S as habitat through a cutting together the dug pond with an idea of wildlife that manifests as frog. Relating wildlife with garden undermines the institutionalised cutting that separates garden (as human territory) from the wild (as earth-others' territories), and in the process of which, the meaning of the space of contained water becomes reconfigured from attempted anti-dampness technology (dug hole in the ground) to valued habitation for this wildlife (a pond). Here, the spatial practice is not involved with boundary-making and boundary-perforation but rather entails practices of zoning. An ethics of such zoning practices engages with how this produces habitats through creating, maintaining or changing microclimates.

With the next vignette, we extend this entangled thinking-being with a garden by focussing on how garden phenomena (such as species) gradually shift from manifesting as stable relations between humans and individual species, to living assemblages whose shifting relations manifest through the participation of manifold existences.

Vignette 2 – A's garden(ing)

The bark that protects the trunk from dehydrating had opened up just where the sun hits the small sour cherry tree. First it was a little crack but then the bark bloated, domed up, and when it popped it left the trunk unprotected like the vulnerable pink skin that one can find under a blister. Later I learn that during the merciless summer of 2019 a sunburn has caused this bloating. In autumn the next year I found little white mushrooms nesting in the wound that would not close. I tried to cut away as much of their fruiting bodies as possible but I knew this was a case of dying. The only question was whether it was a slow or a quick death. Two years later the mycelium had turned into soft tissue the major part of the trunk carrying the crown of the tree that I had pruned and harvested for nearly 10 years. When my fingers poke the trunk, it reminds me more of a sponge than wood. Insects have found a home in the soft tissue. They are turning wood into tiny pieces that remind me of the crumbs of earth that ants build their nests with. I am sure that the spotted woodpecker will be around soon. Fast death, I think and hope to harvest one more time its cherry gift. Should I think about some kind of scaffold to support it?

A year has passed. I have cut some of heavy branches to help with carrying the crown on what to me looks like not even half of the trunk. It still grows new branches what seems to me like a miracle but one side of the trunk is still intact and the sapwood seems to carry enough water and minerals for it to keep existing. Sunflowers and cucumbers around the trunk hopefully reduce dehydration. I think of last summer when I found a musk beetle sitting on the cherry tree's leaves. These beetles are rare in our ecosystems as they need dead wood for reproduction. So many signs for dying and becoming alive.

*A year later N and T visit me in the garden. Both are in their 80s and have been gardeners all their lives. Last year T has given up her garden and joined N on his plot. When they see the cherry tree they are excited to see an old variety. N immediately identifies that fungus as *pholiota squarrosa* but both are confident that the dying is a matter of years. N suggests cleaning the frayed edges of the opening “not to give more insects the opportunity to dwell in it”. T finds that*

unnecessary as “the sapwood has developed on the other side”. Both suggest cutting some more branches to relieve the pressure and building a little scaffold to support the tree against the wind that might otherwise push it over. “Cut these branches, and then observe what happens,” they suggest (Fig. 2).

Vignette 2 spans over five years and starts with a considerable change of the materiality of an old cherry tree, that provokes a gradual shift of A in engaging with, thereby manifesting, this specific cherry tree phenomenon. Phenomena, according to Barad (2003, 2007), are differential patterns of mattering that come about in specific forms of engagement that make particular phenomena apparent. Gardening engagement— it seems — starts with a practice of getting to know who and what is present and who and what is, or should be, absent. Just as S recounts in Vignette 1 individual species (fox, badger, frog, squash, ash tree, compost), A, too, distinguishes a cherry tree, mushrooms, woodpecker, other insects. Such linguistic cutting is not a matter of individual discretionary power but is also implicated in gardening rules, City Council regulations, garden centres, plant taxonomy books and technologies, such as video cameras (Vignette 1). The differences such cuttings produce can be of very different quality. In the vignettes, we find existences that are rather generically addressed (insects, mushrooms, fruit trees), while others become more specific (such as cherry tree or ash tree). While both are the result of discriminatory practices, a higher specificity often comes to matter because the latter are involved with desirable (cherries—Vignette 2) or undesirable (Dieback—Vignette 1) phenomena. These discriminatory practices of who is present/absent, however, manifests phenomena as a matter of individual species, self-contained entities to which something happens (an opening of the bark, for instance).

The linguistic agential cutting-apart giving character to different livelihoods (e.g. mushroom, insect, woodpecker) and bringing definition these existences so they can become valued in their own right, and thus become the focus for forms of human care that are in some way tuned in to their ways of living and dying. However, this cutting-apart can easily become a simplified anthropocentric picture of recognising earth-other existences. In Vignette 2 only gradually A's perception shifts from individual species towards living entanglements that are assemblages, whose aliveness is to be found in their ongoing – and changing – emergence of relations. The relatively stable tree + fruit + human assemblage that had constituted the cherry tree phenomenon so far changed with the intensity of the sun that hit its trunk, while A started to learn to identify certain species that tell about the state of the cherry tree, such as, the musk beetle, who tells about dead or dying wood. The musk beetle becomes an indicator species, if the cutting apart is accompanied by

Fig. 2 A's garden taken on 23 May, 2022



cutting together one species (beetle) to conditions of an ecosystem that this species needs. In this relation, the cherry tree ceases to be a species (alone), but becomes a habitat for the indicator species to whose conditions the indicator species refers. Such acts of cutting together-apart produce species and habitats as co-emerging in ways that extend beyond the tree + fruit + human + assemblage that A has perceived over an extended period of being-with the garden.

Perceiving co-emergence means that a cherry tree phenomenon emerges in and through an extended assemblage in which humans are not the only ones who have agency. The significance of seasonal rhythms – a ‘dry spring’ a ‘wet winter’ or an ‘overheated summer’ – become figural in stories of how gardening, associated with growing fruits and vegetables for human nourishment, is felt to be (un)successful. They highlight how plants for human nourishment are entangled within global–local planetary happenings, which are highly significant in how existences can emerge. Earth-other participants – such as the climate that gradually becomes the mattering of changes in the Earth’s biophysical system – thus increasingly become meaningful in the matter of, for instance, a cracked cherry tree bark. Next to abiotic factors, such as weather and climate also biotic factors – potentially uncertain in their presence, such as the *hymenoscyphus fraxineus* fungus causing ‘Dieback’ in ash trees (Vignette 1) or *pholiota squarrosa* disintegrating the cherry tree’s trunk – hold the potential of new entanglements with various consequences.

Hence, humans (and their practices of tending) constitute important (habitat) infrastructure for cherry trees and other ‘cultivated’ plants but they are not the only gardeners; not the only ones who participate in world-making activities. Maintaining linguistic or cartographic cuts that allow human gardeners to perceive themselves as governing garden life, underestimates the potential agency of earth-others. This leads to over- and underestimating responsibility of human gardeners. It overestimates responsibility when assuming that the cherry tree’s injury is caused by humans’ failure in taking care due to their ignorance about the possibility of plant sunburns. At the same time, it underestimates that humans are always being part – not standing apart from – (ecological) assemblages and that *being* part also always implies *taking* part in these very assemblages, whether intentionally or not. And taking part can take place in various different manners.

To understand the lived garden realities as entanglements implies a cutting together that becomes sensitive to the relations that emerge through taking part in assemblages, no matter whether it is through humans digging a hole to help with the damp of the patch that created a pond – the ideal habitat for frogs (Vignette 1) – or the intensity of the sun that extends a tree + cherry + human + assemblage into a tree + fungus + insect + cherry + human + one. Such entangled worlding acknowledges that we are part of and take part in constantly changing assemblages that make possible certain (human and earth-others’) existences, while making others less likely.

Thinking-doing the world in such an entangled way has also consequences for ethics. It requires that we acknowledge the ways that any ethics of being-with gardens is most of the time not fully clear to us – which, as we go onto explore, is an important quality of the perspective that we develop. While A understands in Vignette 2 that the tree is ‘wounded’, from ‘sun-burn’, her first response to being concerned with the dying of this individual tree is an undecidability associated with how to be together with this new tree + mycelium + insect + assemblage. She wonders whether planting cucumbers around it that could climb and shield the trunk from more sun might be a way to enter this assemblage that still supports the tree in its fruit-gifting. An ecocentric ethics, thus, can imply the intentional creation of nourishing relationships, or the momentary suspense of action to observe changes and to think about how to support it in this newly assembled existence. As well as an awareness that most of the infrastructures and habitats we create for other species are created unintentionally, and so are unknown to us. To understand the lived garden realities of these entanglements does not only require constantly changing cuttings apart, but also a concurrent becoming sensitive to cuttings together.

Contours of an Ecocentric Ethics of Being with the World

Considering gardens as materially situated sites of nature-culture offers an embodied opportunity for exploring how different forms of life come together (that which is nurtured and nourished) and are drawn apart (that which is tamed and killed) in ongoing processes of cutting together apart. The attentions that the conceptual lens of Barad’s ethico-ontopistemology brings to the complex experiences of interconnecting and overlapping multispecies encounters, and the adjunct unfolding and waning of their habitats, offers richer notions of sustainabilities that can also help us to reconceptualise practices of organising that are more just to being with the world. We have attempted to map out the contours of agential cuts to develop a new ecocentric ethics of being with the world (Allen, 2022; Ehrnström-Fuentes & Jääskeläinen, 2022; Ergene & Calás, 2023; Sayers, et al., 2022). By becoming aware of earth-others, as entangled in and with habitats, an ecocentric ethics implies a sensitivity for the complex space–time matterings that constitute habitats in our livelihood activities. It is these habitats that we participate in and that for the most part are unknown to us. While we consider space and time being constitutively entangled, in the following we address them separately for purposes of clarity.

Thinking-being with a garden has shown how organising livelihoods are a matter of space–time, with space becoming

multiple in rhythms of mattering in which human and earth-others participate in various intensities. By showing how gardens are produced as bounded-space-phenomena and part of much wider territories that multiple earth-others pace out, we extend discussions on gardens as sites of organisation/disorganisation or control/unpredictability (Burrell & Dale, 2002; Parker, 2022). Thinking-being with a garden brings new attentions to current boundary-making practices and how they socially and materially construct most of the possibilities and potential for relating to any others in human-only terms. Those human-centred agential cuts are for many earth-others at best irrelevant and at worst fatal.

When considering spatial mattering through boundary-making, the human gardener is often at the centre of cuttings together-apart (Burrell & Dale, 2002): through gardening there is ongoing categorising of the ‘good’, that which becomes a celebrated inclusion, and the ‘bad’, what is denigrated and excluded (McKay, 2011; Parker, 2022). It is these cuttings that produce species phenomena. Recognising individually classified species, we have shown, is only the beginning of becoming a gardener and that over the years cutting increasingly is combined with a relating that emphasizes the relationality of existence we call habitat.

An ecocentric ethics of sustainable organising would include the spatial practice of zoning that is sensitive to what habitat possibilities human and earth-other livelihood practices may and may not generate. By attempting to take a more holistic view of possible assemblages involved in variously situated ecologies of existences, or webs-of-life (Dahlmann, 2025; Ehrnström-Fuentes et al., 2025), we have extended work that has based understandings of posthuman ethics around single species of animals (e.g. Davies & Riach, 2019; Huopainen et al., 2025; Paring, 2025; Sayers, et al., 2022). Through the grounding of multispecies relatings in gardens we extend conversations which have sought to theorise interdependencies and vulnerabilities, between humans and earth-others, in support of sustainable organising (Allen, 2022; Ergene & Calás, 2023; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022).

When engaging with habitats, their unfoldings and wanings in entangled livelihoods, we found that humans are not the only ones who change microclimates in practices of zoning (as in case of the pond – Vignette 1). Other intensities (as in case of the heat—Vignettes 1 and 2) can also change the assemblages that produce particular phenomena, as in the case of the cherry tree (Vignette 2). Consequently, humans are not always active parts of the entanglements through which earth-others constitute webs of livelihoods, which tends to be assumed in ecocentric ethical contributions (Allen et al., 2019; Gosling & Case, 2013; Heikkurinen et al., 2016). In our explorations most of the time, humans are decentered ‘others’ as the relational encounters in a garden on many occasions happen without them (e.g. Vignette 1 – the foxes and badgers recorded presence). Hence at times,

connecting with Sage's (2025) considerations of soils and organisation, an ecocentric ethics involves the appreciation of entanglement for humans, while acknowledging how humans are cut-out of active mutualities that make earth-others' livelihoods possible. An ecocentric ethics, thus does not only imply "intimate relationships with nonhuman living beings" as Roquebert and Debucquet (2024, p.232) suggest, it would also imply acknowledging and appreciating the plethora of becomings beyond active human participation. This, as we have shown, reflects in changes in onto-epistemological cuts that shift attention from individual species to habitat conditions. Intimacy, here, is not directed towards an individual but towards the entanglements of living that makes humans one kind of existence amongst (and with) many.

The ecocentric ethics we have developed highlights the mode of human participation in this web of life, no matter whether this is intentional or unintentional, caring or unconcerned. An ecocentric ethics is thus rooted in the awareness that "humanity engenders a multitude of diverse existences, [...] tightly embedded within the planetary ecosystem" (Dahlmann, 2025, p.501). Being part of the world means that non-participation is not possible, that there is no outside of this web. Yet, participation can also mean consciously minimising active involvement (Sage, 2025), so that earth-others have space to unfold their powers in their specific entanglements, such as microbes or earthworms in unploughed soils.

Another aspect relating to 'ethico-onto-epistemology' which we have developed within this paper is associated with time and temporality. Barad describes how in quantum terms "there is no overarching sense of temporality, of continuity, in place. Each scene diffracts various temporalities within and across the field of spacetime-mattering." (Barad, 2010, p. 240). In garden naturecultures, matter matters in many ways because of how their entanglements are embedded within the motions of planetary orbiting, as is often clearly expressed in literatures about how "natural processes physically affect the garden" (Cooper, 2012, p. 28). In the vignettes of our experiences made in the gardens, we have tried to account "for our part of the entangled webs we weave" within planetary process and rhythms, including seasonality and changing climates. As we find them to be variously consequential for sustaining forms of life (Barad, 2016, p. 364), we argue that all forms of possible cutting-together-apart in practices of ecocentric ethics are imbued with/by these planetary happenings.

By bringing attention to Earthly contexts in rhythmic seasonal and climate temporalities we offer new possibilities for furthering theory on a posthuman ethics of sustainable organising. So far, posthuman ethics theories often focus overly on proximate physical entangledness with other species (e.g. Paring, 2025), we have extended attentions to the

rhythms of time that our entangled existences are interwoven with. The ethico-onto-epistemology of gardening which we have sought to develop here can offer potentialities for rethinking sustainable organising by stitching in these attentions of knowing-being with earth-others a sensitivity of rhythmic, but increasingly volatile, planetary entanglements.

As a consequence, a new ecocentric ethics of being with the world is expressed in an open-ended process of thinking-doing and reflecting on cutting together-apart, thereby multiplying the possibilities of living in relations. Our vignettes show that emergence could be unpredictable, with changing climate and associated weather, such as intensive heat or prolonged dry or wet periods, which appear hallmarks of Anthropocene times (IPCC, 2023; Richardson et al., 2023). For an ecocentric ethics, this implies a shift from knowing (intimate relations) (e.g. Roquebert & Debucquet, 2024) to unknowing (appreciating relations that are not intimate to us). Centring unknowing in the sociomaterial practice of gardening enables and necessitates developing a practice of listening that is as much embodied and sensual (Vignette 2), as well as interwoven with technology (Vignette 1). Our vignettes show hesitancy as a (garden) practice that embraces the unknowingness that is emblematic of all gardens. In doing so we provide greater texture to the meanings of unknowingness that others have considered when taking a posthumanist approach to understanding sustainable organising (Allen, 2022). This kind of listening differs from other forms of listening because it is not directed towards one individual species (like the cherry tree) but to an ecology of existence (that involves musk beetle, weather, fungi, woodpecker, etc.) and the potential shifts in their assemblage entanglements.

In order to be able to explore the contours of an ecocentric ethics of being-with the world, we have focussed on our individual experiences of participating in particular naturecultures called gardens. Thinking-being with a garden, we have argued, can offer the opportunity to experience ways of being, that can loosen the grip of our anthropocentric habits of thought to be able to catch a glimpse of the shimmering contours of a new ecocentric ethics of being with the world. While aiming at becoming response-able to the world to pursue the question of how to develop the contours of an ecocentric ethics that is rooted in living socio-material entanglements, we have not (yet) outlined possible consequences for business ethics. In our closing remarks, we thus sketch some propositions for translating this new ecocentric ethics of being with the world into practices of business ethics.

Closing Remarks: Translating an Ecocentric Ethics into Sustainable Business Practice

In this article, we have assumed with Barad (2007) that ethics is “about being response-able to the way we make the world” (p.381) and have argued that an ecocentric ethics is a matter of becoming intimate to the space–time matterings of habitats. Part of it are (changing) agential cuts that produce diverse forms of differentiating and entangling, such as gardens that, we have shown, are neither insular nor separate from ‘the wild’. Instead, agential cuts formally or intellectually mark out boundaries that constitute a piece of land as allotment or other forms of garden – these cuts make us participate in the lively forces of an ‘ecology-in-place’ (Ehrnström-Fuentes, et al., 2025) in a particular manner – a gardening manner.

Business organisations come into being in similar institutionalised material-discursive boundary-making practices and bring about participating in the world in a business organisation manner that – to date – systematically separates ‘human’ from ‘nature’. This also affects the possibilities of thinking and practising sustainable ways of organising, which have been criticised as not enough to meet the rapid pace of planetary degradation.

Current business ethics practice is dominated by legal requirements, such as the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSRD) that aim at extending businesses’ spheres of influence into spheres of responsibility. While so far, agential cuts have reduced business organisations’ participation in socio-ecological systems to the abstraction of markets, legal, institutional or financial effects, current EU regulations aim at cutting together business practices with the socio-material effects – thereby integrating what has been successfully ‘externalised’ for decades – through non-financial reporting standards. Complying with these regulations, business organisations collect and manage an increasing amount of data on social and ecological systems. Such data has the potential to getting to know the world in a different way than the market-related one but also runs the risk of reproducing anthropocentrism, promoting instrumentality and rationality if governed by a normative business ethics only.

Sustainable ways of organising, as many critical scholars claim, need a relational posthuman ethics that is embodied and interacting. In the demarcated area, called garden, we have shown that an ecocentric ethics unfolds in a mode of participation rooted in an embodied presence and engagement with the material and immaterial forces that come together. Beyond the intimacy of a garden, however, non-living forces, such as pesticides and mineral fertilizer, but also machines, partly or fully replace human (embodied) presence in ecosystems, so that humans can spend their time

doing other things. While such re-placements often negatively affect earth-others in their capacity to participate in living webs of co-thriving that constitute ecosystems (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), such disembodied participation also hampers learning about how to organize human livelihoods in ways that can support flourishing of their existences with earth-others. Indeed, when we look at our institutional settings it is very hard to trace how the ways of organising into which we are enrolled offer possibilities to experience and be able to respond to, and work within, the rhythms of planetary entanglements.

Turning responsibility into response-ability within a business context, however, we do not necessarily propose the reconstruction of intimate – that are direct – relations with ecosystems but stress that a new ethics of being with the world is rooted in engaging with the ways we ‘know-do’ the world. The contours of an ecocentric ethics that animates sustainable ways of organising with the planet, emerge in reflexive learning processes that – as we have shown for gardens, take place when livelihoods are understood as a coming together of human and earth-other forces. Developing practices of an ecocentric business ethics is thus constitutively linked to the capacity to learn about the particular coming together of human and earth-other forces that enable a particular livelihood/business as well as the material-discursive practices that produce this particular business organisation phenomenon.

At the centre of this learning is an ecology-related unknowingness that is valued as a source for livelihood (re-)creation, which takes into account potentially affected earth-others. This would imply that, instead of investing most of an organisation’s capacities in acquiring abstract knowledge to exclude unknowing in favour of ideals of control, unknowing is considered an epistemic dimension that offers the opportunity for (sensory) engagement – even with data – focussed on learning how to skilfully participate in socio-ecologies, so that the livelihoods of many existences (not just humans) thrive.

For this, we propose questions that differ from those connected with detached business sustainability efforts, as well as the intimacy of posthuman feminist ethics of care (Huopainen et al., 2025; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2025; Phillips, 2015, 2019). Next to the plethora of questions that address the planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023), a practice of ecocentric business ethics could explore reflexive questions such as:

- ‘How do we understand that our business activities are participating in ecosystems?’: to prompt epistemic considerations of the ways in which the activities of a business are conceived of being cut together and apart from the webs of life of earth-others, including appreciations for the unknowability involved.

- ‘Who else’s thriving do we make possible through the practices we perform in organizing our business livelihoods?’: to bring attention to the existences of particular earth-others and support reflection about how their livelihoods may flourish or fade through becoming (dis)entangled in the practices of organising a business.
- ‘How do our organizing practices pay attention to the planetary and climate rhythms and multi-dimensional spaces that our existences are implicated in?’: to open up questions about how the business’s practices in-place can be shaped by planetary processes and rhythms, and associated increasing Anthropocene volatilities.
- ‘What business practices do we engage to re-place human presence and with what consequences?’: to explore how different forms of human presence, and non-presence, can be understood to inform perceptions of the possible consequences of the business practices on including and excluding earth-others existences across time and space.
- ‘Overall, through ‘thinking-being like a garden’: how does sustaining our business increase the aliveness of the socio-ecological systems that we are entangled with?’: to draw upon the practices and imaginaries of garden(ing) s to support reimagining possibilities for sustainable organising.

These questions are inevitably much more complicated than the already challenging questions that are involved with measuring and reducing CO2 emissions. Trying to reach for ways of being and organising that are just to the world and its earth-others we can become overwhelmed by the unfolding complexities of making sense of our possible multispecies entanglements, and what to do about them. In recognition of likely feelings of defeatedness and incapability we end this article by going back to its beginning.

Human involvement in the lively assemblages that constitute – for instance – a garden can take place in different ways but participation has to take place in order for a (garden) phenomenon to emerge. Knowing-doing the world in which non-human existences are sheer matter or objects to be tamed, controlled or fixed allows ignoring needs of other livelihoods and how they are entangled with one’s own, but it also turns gardening in an endless fight against an encroaching wilderness.

Becoming permanently attentive to the rhythms of planetary variabilities and the associated potential for many livelihoods to access energy and warmth from the sun, rain and soil might sound an equally Sisyphean undertaking. Understood as participating in ecologies-in-place, however, this attentiveness can not only help to adventurously find ways of organising that are more invigorating and worthwhile in the service of multispecies sustainabilities, it also a way of growing in company with other existences.

Declarations

Conflict of interest We do not have any potential conflicts of interest to disclose. This is a conceptual paper no informed consent was required as there were no human or animal participants.

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