Intelligence as Ethical Ecology: A Relational Ontology of the Pluriverse

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Abstract
This paper reframes intelligence as an immanent, relational, and ethical characteristic of ecological systems, challenging anthropocentric views that confine it to individual minds. Drawing on Leibniz's monadology, Bateson's ecology of mind, Ruyer's primary consciousness, Grosz's incorporeality, Deleuze's immanence, Whitehead's process philosophy, Levin's bioelectric morphogenesis, and relational ontology (Prabakaran, 2025), we argue that intelligence is the pluriverse's capacity for responsiveness, adaptation, and creativity, expressed through entities as localized affects. Rooted in Mahāyāna Buddhism's pratītyasamutpāda (Garfield, 1995), this intelligence is inherently ethical, fostering mutual flourishing within interdependent webs. Unethical behavior arises from the delusion of separateness, occluding intelligence and disrupting ecological harmony. Through embryogenesis and the practice of subtractive teleology, we illustrate how intelligence operates as an ethical ecology, calling for a reorientation toward relational responsiveness and care.

Keywords: Intelligence, Ethics, Pluriverse, Relational Ontology, Embryogenesis, Subtractive Teleology

Key Concepts

Intelligence: A systemic and relational capacity of the pluriverse. It is not an attribute of individuals but a distributed activity that sustains ecological and ethical coherence.

Ethics: Emerging from relational interdependence, ethics is not a normative add-on but intrinsic to intelligent functioning. Unethical behavior is seen as a result of occlusion of this relational awareness.

Pluriverse: A concept indicating the multiplicity of ontological realities and ecologies. It emphasizes diversity, interdependence, and mutual constitution.

Relational Ontology: A philosophical stance that defines entities not as substances but as dynamic affects of interrelation.

Embryogenesis: Used as a case study, it demonstrates distributed intelligence in biological systems, where cells interact ethically to prioritize collective coherence.

Subtractive Teleology: A practice of removing delusions of autonomy to realign behavior with relational and ecological intelligence.

Introduction

Conventional views of intelligence as a cognitive possession of autonomous agents obscure its ecological and ethical dimensions. This paper proposes a relational ontology that reframes intelligence as a systemic, incorporeal current flowing through ecologies—spaces such as forests, families, organisms, or nations—animating their capacity for coherence and novelty. From this

perspective, the human person is no more or less than a creative site of the pluriverse, just like any other ecological space. Intelligence is not what entities possess but what relations enact, emerging as the pluriverse's responsiveness to its own multiplicity (Prabakaran, 2025).

This approach resonates with Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism, where phenomena emerge through intra-action rather than pre-existing entities. Similarly, Eduardo Kohn's (2013) anthropology of forest communication proposes that non-human entities engage in semiotic processes that manifest forms of intelligence. Ethicality is thus inseparable from this ecological intelligence, as responsiveness entails attunement to interdependence, aligning with Mahāyāna Buddhism's pratītyasamutpāda (Garfield, 1995).

Synthesizing insights from Leibniz, Bateson, Ruyer, Grosz, Deleuze, Whitehead, Levin, and others, we argue that intelligence is the dynamic patterning of the pluriverse, expressed through entities as affects. Unethical behavior is not a deviation in the application of intelligence but a lapse in its recognition, driven by the illusion of separateness. Through embryogenesis and subtractive teleology, we explore how intelligence and ethics co-emerge, offering a framework for aligning human action with the pluriverse's harmonious potential.

Intelligence and Ethics as Ontologically Intertwined

Intelligence, in its truest sense, is inseparable from ethics. Leibniz's monads, each reflecting the universe from a unique perspective, suggest a pre-established harmony that aligns with ethical flourishing (Leibniz, 1989). Unlike Leibniz's windowless monads, entities in a relational ontology are porous, emerging as affects of the pluriverse's dynamic interactions (Prabakaran, 2025). Bateson's (1972) ecology of mind reinforces this, positing that intelligence arises from recursive loops within ecologies. A forest's nutrient cycles or a family's emotional exchanges exemplify this intelligence, which is ethical because it sustains mutual flourishing.

Mahāyāna Buddhism's pratītyasamutpāda underscores this interdependence: no entity exists apart from its relations (Garfield, 1995). To act intelligently is to respond to the needs of this relational web, fostering harmony. Unethical behavior—exploitation, disregard, or oppression—stems from the delusion of separateness. This delusion occludes intelligence, as Bateson's (1979) "pathology of epistemology" warns, mistaking the self as an isolated origin of action. Intelligence, being non-agential, cannot be unethical; what appears unethical is a deviation into relational ignorance, disrupting ecological coherence.

Ecology as the Site of Intelligence

Intelligence is the character of all ecologies, not a cognitive overlay confined to human minds. Bateson (1972) describes mind as immanent in systems, where information circulates to enable adaptation and creativity. Whitehead's (1929) process philosophy complements this, framing reality as "actual occasions" that cohere through prehensions—relations integrating past data into novel configurations. Intelligence is this creative advance toward complexity and harmony.

Simondon's (2020) theory of individuation supports this, portraying entities as emergent outcomes of transductive processes within relational fields. Intelligence is the process of individuation itself—a responsive unfolding. Grosz's (2005) onto-ethics describes evolutionary differentiation as an ethical act of freedom, expressing intelligence through attunement to difference. Brian Massumi's (2002) work on affect theory similarly positions intensity and relational emergence as primary ontological forces.

Opposing views, such as computationalism (e.g., Dennett, 1991; Clark, 2013), frame intelligence as a representational process internal to the brain. However, this model lacks ecological embeddedness. Joscha Bach (2021) acknowledges internal complexity but still prioritizes symbolic computation over relational emergence. In contrast, the relational ontology presented here positions intelligence as an emergent property of systemic interactions.

Entities as Pluriverses of Interdependent Affects

Every entity is a pluriverse—a convergence of diverse temporalities, spatialities, and relational intensities. Ruyer's (1952) primary consciousness posits that even simple organisms exhibit proto-intelligence, guiding their development. Levin's (2021) research on bioelectric signaling in embryogenesis illustrates this, showing how cells coordinate to form coherent structures without centralized control.

Grosz's (2011) feminist materialism underscores the ethical dimension of this interdependent communality. Ethicality emerges from acknowledging relationality, while unethical actions—driven by egoic or anthropocentric tendencies—undermine this. Deleuze's (1994) concept of the virtual frames intelligence as incorporeal potentiality actualizing through entities. Misrecognizing this intelligence as a trait of isolated humans leads to shortsighted, self-destructive behavior (Prabakaran, 2025).

Embryogenesis: A Case Study in Ethical Intelligence

Embryogenesis exemplifies intelligence as an ethical ecology. Levin (2021) shows how bioelectric signals enable cells to solve problems and adapt collectively. This distributed intelligence is not only problem-solving but ethically oriented, prioritizing systemic flourishing. Whitehead's (1929) concept of concrescence, where entities integrate data into unified wholes, parallels morphogenetic coherence.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of the "body without organs" portrays the embryo as a field of potentialities actualizing relationally. Intelligence is distributed across the ecology, and ethicality emerges from this harmonious interplay. Environmental toxins or genetic disruptions reveal how ethical and intelligent breakdowns are entwined. The embryo, like forests or communities, flourishes by being-with (Nancy, 2000).

The Myth of Autonomy and the Occlusion of Intelligence

Human consciousness often mistakes reflexivity for autonomy, interpreting the self as an isolated agent. This delusion, critiqued in Mahāyāna Buddhism as avidyā (ignorance through misidentification), fractures ethical and ecological coherence (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999). Intelligence becomes occluded as the egoic self obscures relationality.

Deleuze's (1994) plane of immanence describes reality as a field of pure difference, where entities emerge from relational potentials. Intelligence is the pluriverse's generative force, while ethics is its structural necessity. Unethical acts, like environmental destruction, stem from ignoring this web of co-arising.

Subtractive Teleology: Practicing Ethical Intelligence

If intelligence is a relational current, our ethical task is to subtract delusions of separateness. Subtractive teleology, aligning with the Buddhist notion of śūnyatā, reorients behavior from assertion to attention (Batchelor, 2015). This does not negate agency but deepens it through attunement.

Rather than amplifying selfhood, subtractive teleology calls for awareness of our embeddedness, recognizing ourselves as expressions of ecological intelligence. This fosters ethical responsiveness grounded in interdependence, aligning with Grosz's (2005) vision of open-ended becoming.

Conclusion: Intelligence as an Ethical Mode of Being

Intelligence and ethics are inseparable expressions of the pluriverse's relational becoming. Drawing from Leibniz, Bateson, Ruyer, Grosz, Deleuze, Whitehead, Levin, Barad, and Kohn, we propose that intelligence is the pluriverse's capacity for creativity, responsiveness, and attunement. It is embodied through cells, organisms, and communities as ethical ecologies.

Unethical behavior is not a flawed use of intelligence but its occlusion, a product of relational ignorance. Subtractive teleology invites us to realign with systemic intelligence by shedding illusions of autonomy. Through this, we can act as co-becomings of an intelligent pluriverse.

The implications are profound. Organizations, governments, and institutions can be reimagined as ethical ecologies rather than instruments of extraction. Firms might prioritize stakeholder collaboration and regenerative design. Nation-states might adopt interdependent governance over nationalist isolationism. As Barad (2007) and Kohn (2013) remind us, intelligence is not limited to humans—it is a mode of being that permeates the fabric of the world.

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