

Green Paper 01 — Moral Biology

Green Papers: Notes Toward Planetary Guardianship
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Abstract

This paper explores a simple proposition: ethics is not only a question of values or principles, but also a question of capacity. Moral life depends on regulation—within bodies, within relationships, and within institutions. Under sustained stress, systems lose coherence: attention narrows, trust declines, time horizons shrink, and responsibility becomes difficult to carry.

Moral Biology is not an attempt to reduce ethics to physiology, nor to replace normative thinking with science. It is an effort to clarify the conditions under which ethical judgment and collective responsibility remain possible— especially in an era marked by ecological constraint, institutional overload, and chronic uncertainty.

A calm starting point

People can know what ought to be done—and still be unable to do it.

Societies can state ethical ideals—and still produce harm through fragmentation, overload, and procedural drift.

This is not a denial of responsibility. It is a call for realism about the conditions that make responsibility possible.

Ethics as capacity

Ethical capacity includes attention that stays open rather than collapsing into threat; nervous systems that can recover; relationships that can tolerate difference without breaking; institutions that can coordinate without coercion; and cultures that can metabolize grief and conflict rather than carrying them as chronic stress.

Ethics is not only what we believe. It is what we can carry.

Body · relation · institution

A biological perspective does not excuse harm, and it does not reduce ethics to chemistry. It simply acknowledges constraint: stress shapes perception, and perception shapes responsibility.

Relational environments shape what is possible: trust, rupture, repair, and the costs of cooperation.

Institutions shape moral outcomes through incentives, rhythms, information flows, accountability, and default priorities— often without malice, simply through overload and fragmentation.

Planetary constraint

Ethics today is also biophysical. Planetary thresholds are not opinions. They deepen the meaning of responsibility and force longer time horizons—often carried under uncertainty, grief, and uneven burdens.

The moral challenge is not only “what is right.” It is also “what is viable.”

Notes on method

This series uses a reference constellation across stress biology, systems theory, governance research, embodied cognition, and ecological constraint frameworks. Some references are studied deeply; others are used more selectively.

References are included as conceptual instruments and orientation points, not as claims of exhaustive coverage.

Closing questions

What is the minimum level of regulation required for ethical agency—individually and collectively? Which institutional patterns reliably produce moral overload, even when intentions are good? What practices restore coherence without becoming ideology? How do we design civic forms that support responsibility at planetary scale?

References (working constellation)

McEwen · Sapolsky · Tang/Hölzel/Posner · Ostrom · Putnam · Beck/Bauman/Giddens/Habermas · Rockström/Steffen

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