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# INTRODUCTION TO INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON PLANETARY WELL-BEING

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Life matters. Life on Earth emerged about 3.7 billion years ago and what we call diversity of life is the result of genetic information passing from one generation to the next and diversifying in the process. The metaphor of the tree of life captures how all life is intertwined: Imagine leaves growing from the twigs of a tree. Each leaf is a species connected to others through the branches and the trunk of the tree. One of the leaves among millions is our species. We are all the same yet different—we are all different forms and shapes of the life that once emerged.

Thousands of scientific papers and reports have documented the human-induced devastation of the diversity of life and destruction of whole ecosystems, testifying to our inadequate care for the planet. The creation of the unprecedented current material wealth of the high-consumption societies has converted natural ecosystems to agricultural fields, cities, and other infrastructures; exploited renewable natural resources more quickly than they can regenerate; changed the atmospheric composition too rapidly for many life forms to adapt; polluted and poisoned; and has moved non-native species to areas where they overrun vulnerable native species. We humans shake the tree of life heavy-handedly: Twigs are breaking and leaves are falling.

All life has intrinsic value, and our moral obligation is to respect and cherish, not destroy, its diversity. Even though the contribution of different peoples and nations to the present crisis is highly uneven on a global scale, we humans together hold the knowledge and capacities, and the equal but differentiated responsibility, to repair the damage done to human and nonhuman well-being.

This volume strives to secure the preservation of the diversity of life and the prospects of well-being for all on Earth. It is a manifestation of an ambitious goal to establish the new, non-anthropocentric, and holistic concept of *planetary well-being*. At its core, planetary well-being insists that the planet's life-sustaining

systems remain sufficiently undamaged by human activities so as to allow all species and populations to survive and thrive. Planetary well-being is a novel cross-disciplinary concept coined to foster global transformation to a more inclusive and equal expression of well-being for all. As such, it pushes for a paradigm shift in how human and nonhuman well-being are perceived and approached. The concept has grown from an understanding that preservation of the diversity of life demands an urgent reversal of the deterioration of Earth and ecosystem processes threatening the existence and well-being of so many of Earth's inhabitants. The concept stems from theoretically and ethically critical stances that call into question the anthropocentric biases of Western scientific and political thought as well as the dualistic idea of human–nonhuman relations. It brings new perspectives to the ethical discussions on sustainability, justice and responsibility, and well-being.

Despite decades of work on sustainability and sustainable development, the planet's life-supporting systems are failing. While explanations for this can be offered at multiple levels, what matters now is whether the harmful trajectories can be changed. As moral agents, we humans are responsible for changing these trajectories. We believe that the actors who deliberate, plan, and enact the change need new conceptualizations to make their decisions and actions effectively transformative. By adopting process-oriented and systems-focused thinking and by unifying human and nonhuman well-being, planetary well-being offers a new conceptual framework for theoretical, methodological, and empirical research in the field of sustainability science, and for stimulating actions to preserve well-being on Earth.

In this edited volume, researchers across human, social, and natural sciences apply and reflect on the concept of planetary well-being, showcasing its value as an interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral changemaker. The objective of this volume is to scrutinize the meaning, position, and significance of planetary well-being as a theoretical and empirical concept in sustainability science. We apply it to discipline-specific domains including anthropology, art and culture, business, financing and corporate environmental management, consumption, development, ecology, education, history, philosophy, planning, psychology, and social work. These discipline-specific and interdisciplinary explorations, while far from being exhaustive, cover a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. In addition to addressing the consequences of the degradation of ecosystem processes, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, the volume tackles other global threats and challenges facing humanity, such as economic inequality, uneven power structures, and social injustice. This way, planetary well-being serves as a tool to sharpen and broaden the analytical outlook beyond the conventional frameworks of sustainability transformation, just transition, and sustainable development.

Many contributions in this volume also address methodological questions related to the use of planetary well-being in research: How can it be operationalized for different purposes, and what aspects of human and nonhuman well-being are highlighted, omitted, or sometimes purposefully obscured in various methodological as well as societal contexts? The ultimate objective is to reflect on how

planetary well-being as a non-anthropocentric and holistic framework can be used to promote transformative action towards a world where all forms of life, humans and beyond, would have the opportunity to achieve well-being.

### The organization of the volume

This book is divided into five parts that each approach planetary well-being differently. The first part focuses on introducing and defining the concept by presenting its theoretical, contextual, and ethical backgrounds. The opening chapter, “Planetary well-being”, is a verbatim reproduction of a research article originally published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, where planetary well-being was conceptualized for the first time. The chapter critically discusses the problems of the existing conceptual frameworks within sustainability science and well-being and introduces planetary well-being as a needed addition to address the root causes of ecological crises. Chapter 2, demonstrates how planetary well-being is positioned in the broader ontological and ethical-theoretical landscape, owing to its process-oriented perspective and non-anthropocentric normative grounds. Chapter 3, encourages more attention to ontological questions as well as openness to differences and transdisciplinary and multi-ontological co-researching in the pursuit of planetary well-being.

After the introductory part, the book continues examining theoretical, methodological, empirical, contextual, and political questions on planetary well-being, with a division of four parts. Each part approaches the concept and puts it into use and practice in certain spheres of urgency that are key when aiming at collective sustainability transformation: The second part deals with the urgency to assess ecological processes as constituents of planetary well-being and to change the direction of humanity’s impact on them; the third part covers the urgency to challenge and revise economic structures and practices; the fourth part underlines the urgency to rethink and contest anthropocentric ideas of well-being; and the fifth part focuses on the urgency to find solutions to foster cultural and societal transformation towards planetary well-being.

Part 2, lays the groundwork for planetary well-being by exploring many of those processes whose integrity contributes to planetary well-being but are currently threatened or undermined by the harmful impact of human activities, driven especially by high-consumption societies. Chapter 4, argues that human activities such as overexploitation of natural resources, ecosystem degradation, and global trade have had severe consequences for the prevalence and spread of pathogens in human and wildlife communities. The chapter outlines how human activities can provide favourable conditions for pandemics and trigger cascading consequences for ecosystems worldwide. Chapter 5, argues that landscape approaches hold transformative potential for the managing of socio-ecological systems and offer an opportunity to put planetary well-being into practice. Chapter 6, maintains that soils are closely interlinked with planetary well-being as they are related directly

or indirectly to nearly all critical ecosystem processes on Earth, including energy flows, element and water cycles, and interactions between living organisms. The chapter proposes that by taking care of the soil health humans can actively contribute to planetary well-being.

Part 3, consists of chapters that aim at revealing how societies organized around economic motives have harmed and continue to harm both human and nonhuman well-being. The chapters also propose alternative ways how our present economy-driven society might be changed to better take into consideration ecological and social sustainability as well as planetary well-being more generally. Chapter 7, analyses why ecocentric ideas of well-being have not been adopted more widely and argues that economic and political incentives, or path-dependencies, have hindered attempts to understand well-being in more ecologically balanced terms. Chapter 8, demonstrates how the critical development studies perspective is significant in the conceptualization and usage of planetary well-being by virtue of its analysis of the connection between global injustice and local ecological knowledge.

Chapters 9 and 10 introduce examples of the ways in which the current economic imperative could be exposed and challenged. Chapter 9, discusses sustainable marketing and consumption from the perspective of planetary well-being, and Chapter 10, presents a critical analysis of selected sustainable business concepts and practices by using planetary well-being as a conceptual framework. Chapter 9 begins with the bold claim that the current marketing and consumption system is a threat to planetary well-being. The chapter even challenges the concept of sustainable marketing, which it regards as an oxymoron. The authors call for structural and cultural transformations and systemic changes in our everyday consumption practices, with the aim being to reduce consumption levels and to incorporate a non-anthropocentric and systemic view of planetary well-being into business structures and economic systems.

Chapter 10 for its part continues challenging the existing economic system by maintaining that a range of current sustainable business concepts and practices have critical shortcomings when analyzed from the viewpoint of planetary well-being; despite of their aim and reputation as sustainability promoters they are still based on a business logic dominated by profitability and shareholder wealth. Therefore, Chapter 10 arrives at a similar kind of conclusion as the previous chapter: “In order to truly achieve planetary well-being, the whole economic system (not only individual companies) should shift the focus from economic perspective (i.e., continuous economic growth) to environmental and social perspectives.”

Part 4, offers a continuation of Part 3 by exploring ways to enable systemic and structural changes and transformations by changing mindsets, especially regarding perceptions of human well-being. Chapter 11, proceeds by challenging the assumptions guiding current mainstream marketing and consumer research. It discusses planetary well-being from the perspective of moral philosophy, transformative consumer research and positive psychology, and emphasizes the premises of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, which encompasses pursuing a life of meaning,

virtue, and excellence instead of “ever-increasing production and consumption”, transmitting the message that “the goods life” is the path to “the good life”. While Chapter 11 argues that transformative consumption on the individual level requires also systemic and structural transformation of markets and marketing, Chapter 12, focuses on individual change by demonstrating the significance of people’s mental well-being in changing their behaviour towards promoting planetary well-being. According to the chapter, the needed transformation “requires the reshaping of human–nature relationships and restoring the view of humans and human minds as part of nature, not separate from it”.

Sharing a similar focus on individuals, Chapter 13, emphasizes that social work must step back from the systems-processes level and embrace the individual level when discussing and promoting planetary well-being. This is because social work—both as an academic discipline and a practice-oriented profession—is involved in the daily lives of individuals, families, and groups, and their social problems. Nevertheless, planetary well-being can help social work researchers and professionals to reconsider their role regarding the well-being of other species and entire ecosystems. In this way, social work appears as one more sphere of social practice in which adopting the concept of planetary well-being becomes crucial.

Part 5, explores possibilities for initiating and guiding transformation away from unsustainable societal practices towards ones that are in line with the objectives of planetary well-being. Chapter 14, reviews the disappointing track record of multilateral biodiversity agreements and suggests that assignable targets are necessary to secure progress in global biodiversity conservation. The chapter proposes that country-level extinction risk indices are promising tools for motivating actions and tracking progress towards planetary well-being.

Chapter 15, argues that transition towards planetary well-being in organizations requires a deeper integration of environmental values in financial accounting and reporting. Such integration at the level of financial valuation is critical to ensure that environmental impacts begin to influence the management decisions of the organizations. Chapter 16, discusses the role that financial markets may play in steering economic production towards planetary well-being. The chapter proposes changes in financial incentives that, via influencing the cost of financial capital, would lead to exclusion of non-environmentally friendly production and tilt financial flows towards less harmful production, thereby promoting planetary well-being.

The last two chapters of the book approach perhaps the two most consequential arenas of human communities with respect to enabling paradigmatic change: culture and education. Chapter 17, argues that the role of art and culture is indispensable in challenging, preventing, and changing destructive human practices that cause ecological and well-being crises. The chapter focuses on the capacity of contemporary art to foster cultural transformation towards planetary well-being and presents a new concept of “culture as planetary well-being” to reflect the required cultural transformation, which it sees as a large-scale change in shared knowledges, lifestyles, traditions, beliefs, morals, laws, customs, values, institutions, and

worldviews. Likewise, in the final chapter of the volume, a new theoretical concept is introduced as a pathway for replacing the traditional anthropocentric view with a wiser form of humanity.

### **Nurturing a new beginning**

The protection of well-being on Earth calls for a paradigmatic policy reform. We believe that sustainability science and policy need a conception of well-being that is built on systemic and non-anthropocentric grounds. Human development needs to be re-evaluated based on its impact on planetary well-being. We hope that this book opens the floor and inspires researchers across the globe to continue research on planetary well-being and to explore topics only touched upon in this volume. Our aim has been to seed a new beginning in sustainability science. While the endeavour for planetary well-being is a shared task that we hope will encourage and connect humans across the planet, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical and current stark inequalities and the differentiated role of various communities that have contributed to the present plight. Responsibilities for planetary well-being are shared yet differentiated, and it is only fair that the greatest burden should fall on the shoulders of the well-off communities and people who have much more than what they need; they, including us the editors, owe it to the present peoples, future generations, and nonhuman life in all its diversity.