

Ecological Consciousness: The Other Face of Environmental Alterity

BENNACEUR Hadja^{1♦}; BELAKHDAR Wahid²

University of Ibn Khaldoun Tiaret, ALGERIA,

hadja.bennaceur@univ-tiaret.dz¹

University of Oran2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed (Algeria),

Belakhdar.wahid@univ-oran2.dz²

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Abstract: Environmental studies have held prominent significance from the earliest stages of human thought to the present day, given that the environment constitutes the dwelling to which humanity belongs and the resource that fulfils all material needs alongside emotional and future aspirations. With the accelerating pace of scientific and technological progress, however, profound risks have emerged that affect the human ecological sphere, resulting in numerous environmental crises. These crises have emphasised the necessity of adopting appropriate measures and advancing a more comprehensive understanding of environmental issues within the framework of sustainable developmental trajectories. Human behaviour plays a decisive role in preserving the environment, particularly through raising awareness of ecological concerns and crises. This rests upon recognising the environment as the "Other" that shares a common bond with humanity. Just as one embraces the Other as a self worthy of engagement and respect, one must also extend this openness to the ecological realm, thereby transforming humanity's relationship with nature from one of mere interdependence to one of intimacy and ethical responsibility. This leads to pivotal questions: To what extent can the narrow meaning of alterity be transcended, extending beyond the nonhuman Other to encompass the environmental Other? Furthermore, what role do educational and social institutions

♦ **Corresponding Author :** BENNACEUR Hadja

play in consolidating the relationship between the self and the ecological Other?.

The objectives are to:

- Clarify both the historical and contemporary significance of environmental studies.

- Highlight the urgent need to adopt the principles of sustainable development.

- Investigate the influence of human behavior and the importance of environmental awareness.

- Identify the vital role of educational and social institutions in shaping environmental consciousness.

Keywords: self; environmental other; ecological consciousness; educational and social institutions; sustainable development; environmental ethics.

Introduction:

Environmental philosophy raises numerous questions regarding its relation to human existence and legal concerns. The environmental problems confronting twenty-first-century humanity now accompany several other dilemmas that have long preoccupied human thought, sparking debates about the relationship between humankind and nature. Humanity is no longer regarded as the sole entity worthy of attention within philosophical inquiry and applied ethics; instead, animal species, plant cover, and climatic and geographical regions are now also recognised as bearing legal and ethical claims upon humankind. Hence, to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of ecological issues and the challenges they give rise to, focus must be directed towards human behaviour in relation to the environment. Such behaviour must be oriented towards recognising the environment as a shared sphere, one inhabited by all living beings, functioning simultaneously as humanity's dwelling, a provider of material needs, and a source of emotional and future vitality.

The claim that humankind represents the centre of the universe and is the master of nature ,established by Western thought and reinforced by the technological revolution ,produced a relationship

of domination and superiority of humans over the cosmos. This relationship is critically deficient in ethical and value-based considerations. With increasing risk threatening the ecological balance and unprecedented advancements in scientific progress and technological acceleration, the search for new philosophical frameworks and applied scientific ethics has become imperative. These frameworks must extend beyond human communities to encompass both human and nonhuman entities. Just as humans bear moral responsibilities toward one another, they are also ethically bound to the ecological Other, linked by a shared bond. Just as one embraces the Other as a self-deserving of coexistence and respect, one must also extend openness to the environment, thereby transforming the human–nature relationship from one of domination into one of intimacy and ethical responsibility. This raises two pivotal questions: To what extent can the narrow meaning of alterity be surpassed, extending from the nonhuman Other to the ecological Other? Furthermore, what role do educational and social institutions play in consolidating the relationship between the self and the ecological Other?

1. Environment – Ecology – Environmental Philosophy: A Conceptual Definition

In Arabic, the term البيئة (environment) derives from the verb بَوَّأَ, from which also stems تَبَوَّأَ, meaning settling, dwelling, or residing. The concept of البيئة thus denotes a dwelling or habitat. This meaning is confirmed in the Qur’ān:

“We revealed to Moses and his brother, ‘Take houses for your people in Egypt and make your houses places of worship, and establish prayer, and give glad tidings to the believers’” (Qur’ān 10:87).

And in another verse:

“And remember when He made you successors after the people of ‘Ād and settled you in the land: you built palaces on its plains and carved dwellings in its mountains. So remember the favours of God, and do not commit abuse upon the earth, spreading corruption” (Qur’ān 7:74).

Likewise:

“And we certainly settled the Children of Israel in a good settlement, and we provided them with good things. In addition, they did not differ until knowledge came to them. Indeed, your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that over which they used to differ” (Qur’ān 10:93).

From these noble verses, it becomes evident that البيئة signifies dwelling, residence, or inhabiting a particular place. This understanding is consistent with the Prophetic tradition: “Whoever deliberately lies about me, let him take his seat in the Fire” (al-Sa’ūd, 2007, p. 117), in which the verb تَبَوَّأَ similarly conveys the notion of habitation and settlement.

In French, the equivalent term *environment* designates “the surroundings that encompass a being and the space in which it exists.” As al-Freijat (2008, p. 15) clarifies, “the term *environment* encompasses the totality of factors, components, and conditions that interact with living organisms within a given space and that affect the biological processes they conduct.”

Terminologically, the meanings of البيئة (environment) have varied. In earlier definitions, it was confined to the natural physical surroundings and all that pertains to humanity's relationship with the cosmos and nature, while excluding the cultural and social domains. As Quraïd (2013, p. 39) states, “the environment is everything that surrounds the human being; it comprises the various natural elements that directly affect living beings, including humankind.” In this sense, the environment denotes the place that receives and shelters the human being, the source from which needs are met, and the domain whose resources and goods are invested. It is also the system that organises the life of a group of beings through reciprocal relationships of influence.

The discipline of ecology emerged to maintain the habitats in which living beings exist, safeguard the ecological balance, and protect against natural risks and disasters. However, with the progress of science and technology, the impact of human activities on nature has increased. Humanity's dominance over nature, coupled with its exploitative and disordered use of resources and disregard for the natural equilibrium of the environment, has intensified. Hence, responsibility rests primarily upon humankind itself: "Just as

humans are responsible for destroying it, they must also bear responsibility for repairing it" (Ṭarāf, 2002, p. 23).

This reality signals grave ecological dangers for humanity ,yet it is fundamentally produced by humanity ,such as ozone depletion and acid rain. These are threats not only to human life but also to the very fabric of the cosmos. In contrast, earlier environmental risks were restricted to natural phenomena, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

The term “ecology” is derived from the Greek words *oikos* (household or dwelling) and *logos* (science). It was first coined by the German zoologist and naturalist Ernst Haeckel in 1869 (Ma‘tūq, 2023, p. 14).

Accordingly, the environment is no longer confined to the natural and physical realm but has expanded to encompass cultural, social, and even civilisational dimensions. It includes humanity’s relationships with individuals, communities, and institutions, which shape social and cultural affairs and determine rational human behaviour. Thus, the environment constitutes the entirety of elements within the milieu in which the individual interacts, both affecting and being affected ,whether this milieu is natural, social, or cultural (Quraid, 2013, p. 42).

Environmental philosophy emerged to investigate the relationship between humankind and the environment on the basis of the premise that humans, by virtue of reason, are the only beings capable of reflecting upon nature and influencing it. Through this capacity, humanity has managed to liberate itself from the harshness and dominance of nature, assisting its power and existence often at the expense of the very habitat that sheltered it and provided the essential conditions of life.

This philosophy represents an attempt to theorise such a relationship on ethical, humanistic, and legal foundations to cultivate ecological awareness and preserve both the sanctity of humanity and that of all living beings, as well as the environment that accommodates them collectively. It also aims to raise awareness of the dangers resulting from the unjust, unethical, and unlawful exploitation of environmental resources and of animate

and inanimate entities, whether material or immaterial. As a field, environmental philosophy is applied in nature, attending to local issues and daily practices arising from the human–environment dialectic. It seeks to articulate moral theory with its application, in line with ethical questions about humanity's connection with its environmental surroundings. This accords with what has been established in the literature of environmental ethics, which affirms the moral rights of nature, rejects anthropocentrism, and refuses to treat nature merely as a means (Kīḥil, 2018, p. 18).

2. Environmental Otherness: Toward a Philosophy of Ecological Alterity

Contemporary Western philosophy has managed to transcend philosophies of the self, consciousness, and subjectivity ,which established the centrality of Western logos and Western modernity , advancing instead towards the philosophy of the Other and of alterity discourse. Jean-Paul Sartre, a pioneer of existentialism, affirmed that the Other is not only essential for the existence of the human being but also a precondition for the knowledge individuals form of themselves. Alterity refers to the differentiation, distinction, and recognition of the Other. For the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the Other represented a decisive moment in the historical transformation of consciousness: “Since the Hegelian moment, philosophy has indeed begun to recognise alterity and its vital role in defining the truth of human subjectivity” (al-Riyāḥī, 2017, p. 100).

If alterity for Hegel is a matter of consciousness of the Other, then, in the view of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, it is an ethical matter, one of participatory relations between the self and the Other. This relation reaches a degree of identification between subject and alterity under what Levinas terms the *proximity of the Other*: “The awareness of responsibility on the part of the self places it in a binding moral position vis-à-vis the Other” (Bin ‘Awda, 2015, p. 45).

Extending from the alterity of the Other and human subjectivity to environmental alterity, the latter may be understood as *oikos* shared among all human and nonhuman beings. Alterity thus does not halt at the boundaries of the human Other; rather, it extends to the

ecological Other, encompassing both animate and inanimate entities. This represents a comprehensive alterity expressed within the *ethics of responsibility* articulated by the philosopher Hans Jonas. Similarly, the French philosopher Michel Serres emphasised the necessity of complementing the social contract ,conceived as a civil agreement between rulers and the governed ,with a “natural contract” between the environment and humankind.

This raises critical questions: To what extent can an ethical relationship between the self and the environment be realised? What are the necessary means to activate and consolidate human ecological awareness so that the environment assumes the same existential, ethical, and moral weight as the human Other? Can schools and educational programmes cultivate and internalise environmental consciousness? Moreover, are they capable of instilling in the child a genuine sense of environmental responsibility?

3. The Relationship between the Self and the Ecological Other

The relationship between the self and the ecological Other falls within the scope of philosophical, ethical, and even aesthetic inquiry, insofar as it seeks to protect the environment from the dangers that threaten it and the problems it faces. Chief among these issues is the depletion of natural resources resulting from humanity’s misuse and exploitative practices, together with the escalation of pollution caused by industrial activities, such as global warming, acid rain, and other forms of environmental harm. Such practices have stripped nature of its vitality and erased its beauty, depriving human beings of the joy of taking pleasure in and delighting in its splendour.

This concern is poignantly expressed in Rachel Carson’s influential book *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson (1907–1964), an American scientist, issued a grave warning about the dangers threatening the environment and disrupting its natural balance. The book constituted a cry that revived and awakened human awareness of the necessity of protecting the environment. It played a pivotal role in the rise of various environmental associations and movements

and served as a catalyst for decision-makers, both political leaders and environmental activists. As al-Khūlī (2018, p. 68) observes, “The age of ecology began with an extremely grave book *Silent Spring* (1962) which drew attention to the disasters caused by the excessive use of pesticides, to the wider orientation of industrial society vis-à-vis the natural world, and to the extinction of living species, among other consequences.”

The exacerbation of ecological threats led to the emergence of ecofeminism. This perspective underscores that the state to which the environment and nature have been reduced is the inevitable outcome of Western scientific centrality and the masculine character of science, epitomised by Francis Bacon and reinforced by the rise of capitalism in Europe and America, along with biotechnological affluence. As al-Khūlī (2018, p. 63) notes, “Since science and capitalism converged in mechanisms of domination over nature, resulting in a form of colonial oppression, certain feminists have advocated continuing resistance to both capitalism and colonialism. Each constitutes a mode of resource depletion and environmental degradation, marked by a mercilessness that has intensified only with technological advancement.”

The authority of science expanded after declaring its separation from and abandonment of ethics and human values, instead adopting a policy grounded in unbounded notions of progress and development while rejecting any religious or ethical authority. The issue of technoscientific domination over nature and humanity’s sovereignty over the cosmos began in the Cartesian moment and from the foundations of Western philosophy itself, which rested on binary divisions such as *soul/body* and *reason/matter*. This dualism segregated the spirit from the material and directed human attention predominantly toward the soul and intellect at the expense of matter, including nature, which was regarded as inert. Thus, it entrenched a philosophy of “master and slave,” wherein humanity was conceived as master over nature and nature as existing solely to serve humanity. This, in turn, implied the independence of natural existence from human existence.

Therefore, it became necessary to transcend narrow views of nature and the environment, rejecting all forms of human arrogance and

superiority over the natural world. As Abū al-Sa‘ūd (2002, p. 253) asserts, “The conception of nature as the ‘Other’ requires overcoming the anthropocentric perspective that places humanity at the pinnacle of existence (or at the summit of the hierarchy of beings).”

The technoscientific progress that has been imposed necessitates the reformulation of new concepts and the establishment of relations that embrace both human and nonhuman entities alike while taking into account both present and future dimensions. Such relations must be founded upon a universal ontological horizon and guided by values of respect, appreciation, and responsibility toward all beings. As Abū al-Sa‘ūd (2002, p. 264) explains, “Environmental consciousness determines the shared moral responsibility toward both the natural environment and human society. Without doubt, ethics constitute one of the fundamental dimensions that cannot be disregarded in relation to humanity’s conflict with its natural environment.”

Environmental philosophy has situated humanity within the sphere of a new ethical orientation, applied ethics, known as environmental ethics. This entails engaging with the environment as an existence that stands in relation to the self, as a shared Other coinhabited by all beings. This ethical stance necessarily considers not only those who exist today but also those who do not yet exist. Hence, moral responsibility takes on a comprehensive and future-oriented dimension, extending beyond the ordinances of the present towards an anticipation of an unknown future.

The German philosopher Hans Jonas sought to establish an environmental ethic and an *ethics of responsibility* towards the nonhuman and to formulate a new relationship with the cosmos and with future generations yet unborn. This ethic instills within the self a sense of accountability toward the Other, not only in moments of presence but also in moments of absence. It represents a responsibility that transcends the bounds of the present, projecting into an open and indeterminate temporality. Human actions performed in the present exert effects on the future and surpass the temporal boundaries of the quotidian and the lived.

Such an orientation is intended to avert dangers that may threaten the destruction of humanity, as long as the environment remains the shelter and abodes that embrace all selves and beings. For the sake of living together in safety and enduring cosmic peace, humankind must treat the environment with the same dignity accorded to other people, surrounding it with respect and appreciation in pursuit of human happiness, in the spirit of Kant's philosophy of perpetual peace. This requires replacing the Kantian maxim of "duty for the sake of duty," which is grounded in goodwill and moral intention, with a broader and more encompassing principle of action: one in which all are responsible before all humans and nonhumans alike for the sake of universal existence.

Hans Jonas articulated this imperative in his seminal work *The Imperative of Responsibility (Le Principe Responsabilité)*: "Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on earth" (Jonas, 1995, p. 40).

The importance of Jonas lies in his formulation of the *principle of responsibility* as a human principle encompassing both the *I-Thou* and the *I-It* relations, embracing all human beings and the ecological cosmos as a shared unity for these selves. What distinguishes Jonas's future-oriented ethics from Kantian ethics of duty is that Kant grounded the moral principle in a rational and subjective framework that did not transcend the limits of human *I-Thou* relations. Within this framework, humanity was consistently affirmed as sovereign over nature and distinct from other beings.

Jonas, however, introduced a decisive shift by binding moral action and ethical values to the environment, rendering them applicable both to humanity and to the earth upon which it exists. The notions of universality, perpetual peace, and peaceful coexistence are not exclusively human ideas or confined to humanity's domain; the environment itself represents a world and is worthy of attention and respect. Moreover, Jonas's principle of responsibility is oriented simultaneously toward human beings and the environment, in both the present and the future, embracing what exists as well as what is yet to exist. In this context, Jonas's horizon resembles that of the contemporary French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas, who anchored the act of responsibility in the condition of presence.

Jonas successfully transcended classical ethics, which no longer met the spirit of the contemporary epoch. He demonstrated that anthropocentrism and the sovereignty of humankind over nature are, in fact, the root causes of ecological problems. For Jonas, nature is not detached from humanity; thus, he called for an applied ethics capable of understanding the new relations that underpin contemporary life in its human, technological, and ecological dimensions. As Bouhannāsh and colleagues (2023, p. 165) note, “Contemporary humanity is well reminded of the looming state of chaos awaiting it if technology continues to drive the locomotive of existence, for technology represents a pressing danger to humanity. This urgency led Jonas to raise his voice against the course of technological development and its assumption of the role of leadership, for it has surpassed its assumed boundaries and has begun to aspire toward the infinite.”

Through his sharp critique of the major traditions of classical moral philosophy, Hans Jonas succeeded in laying the foundations for a new ethic suitable to the spirit of the age and to the consequences of instrumental rationality. In rejecting anthropocentrism and every philosophy grounded in rigid dualisms, he established an ecological philosophy and an environmental ethic fit for the *we*, including both the human self and the ecological Other. His project sought to redirect humanity's gaze away from the exploitation of the environment and the depletion of its resources for private interest toward the protection of the environment and limitation of the risks posed by science and technology, all in defense of the common good and under the banner of serving humanity.

This orientation was framed by the principle of respect for the whole and ontological grounding for the existence of nonhuman beings as independently valuable. Jonas underscored *teleology in living beings*: every living organism strives to preserve its survival and existence in a manner analogous to human beings and thus enjoys rights such as natural human rights, the right to life, the right to live, and others.

The Australian philosopher Peter Albert David Singer (1946) sought to achieve equality among all living beings and famously championed the idea of animal liberation. For Singer, all creatures

share the capacity to feel; consequently, every sentient being must be treated equally. He rejected racism, sexism, and speciesism, emphasising the sanctity of life for every being capable of pleasure and pain. Since every sentient experiences suffering, Singer argued for liberation from torment, fear, and ecological threats. Ethical consideration, in his framework, is thus intimately tied to the notions of pain, pleasure, suffering, and happiness ,not solely to rational or social grounds. As Zuhdī (2023, p. 162) observes, “If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not grant one human the right to use another for his own ends, how then could it grant humanity the right to exploit nonhumans?”

In the same vein, Luc Ferry (1951), one of the foremost ecological philosophers advocating for environmental rights, defended the rights of both animals and plants within nature. He also advanced the principle of a *third right*: the right to “control control.” Initially, human beings exercised control over nature; subsequently, with the aid of scientific progress and technological development, technology itself came to exercise control over humans. Thus, according to Ferry (as cited in Sibā‘, 2018, p. 96), what is required is to establish a third stage ,a stage devoted to the control of nature.

The American philosopher Edgar Morin called for a policy of *humanising the environment* by regarding it as a friend of humanity. Friendship and familiarity are based on affection, care, and the sharing of existence with the Other ,including the ecological Other. In Morin’s view, this constitutes a civilisational and humanistic policy. He ascribed to ecology the merit of reshaping and structuring our relationship with the environment. As Morin (2019, p. 119) states, “Ecology is the first science that reawakens the relationship between humanity and nature. By revealing our relation to life and death, ecology compels us to reconsider our planet and to bind our destiny to it, ultimately obliging us to rethink ourselves.”

This position resonates with that of the French philosopher Michel Serres (1930–2019), who expressed humanity’s relationship with the environment in perhaps its most direct terms, underscoring the necessity of embodying theoretical environmental ethics. In addition to the “social contract” advanced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which centred on civil society’s agreement between

rulers and the governed, Serres called for the ratification of a *natural contract* between the environment and humanity, one that recognises nature as a being worthy of respect, imbued with ethical and moral value. As Souarīt (2021, p. 81) observes, "The idea of reciprocity whether of contemplation, respect, or knowledge never presupposes ownership or the act of control. The natural contract is a truce and reconciliation within an objective war declared by humanity upon nature. It is a contract of solidarity among individuals and collectives, locally and globally."

Moreover, nature sustains a reciprocal relationship with humanity: insofar as it grants its resources and wealth, humanity must treat it in kind, restoring what has been taken in a positive exchange. This is a commitment contract safeguarding the interests of both. Such a relationship requires human beings to acknowledge the existence of the environment and other entities, both animate and inanimate, as inherently rightful. Justice thus obliges us to love humanity and the world, to cherish parents and nature alike, and to love our fellow human beings and the earth itself upon which we dwell.

Recognition of the Other and the adoption of communicative and dialogical ethics beyond individualistic rationalism can only reach their whole meaning when extended to the ecological Other. Establishing such a communicative-ethical relationship, grounded in love and oriented by the motto of "living together in peace," is essential to the pursuit of human happiness. This raises an urgent question: How can educational institutions and schools play an active role in cultivating and contributing to the environmental awareness of the child?

4. Environmental Education in Educational Settings

Environmental dangers have become global threats that endanger all human beings since nature possesses no political boundaries, such as those of nation-states, nor does it enjoy sovereignty and independence. The environment is a shared right, and it imposes duties on everyone without exception. To confront the worsening ecological crisis, it is imperative to follow ecological developments closely, to work toward the protection and preservation of the environment from the perils that threaten it, and to consider the environment as an entity standing vis-à-vis the human self,

endowed with rights comparable to those of humanity. This requires treating the environment according to ethical values, legislating for its protection, and safeguarding collective well-being. Such security can be realised only through linking school education to environmental awareness, given that schools serve as laboratories of socialisation and as the milieu through which children derive their values and principles. In the words of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, the school is both a workshop and a microcosm of society. From this perspective, joint efforts and collaboration must be consolidated between the ministries of the environment and of education through curricula and educational programmes aimed at the protection of the environment.

Within this framework, and under the protocol signed in April 2002 for the integration of supportive programmes in environmental education across curricular tracks, environmental clubs were established in schools and institutions, including *green environmental clubs*. These initiatives also encouraged gardening within educational spaces to increase green areas. Moreover, artistic methods were adopted for environmental education ,such as drawing, painting, songs, poetry, and stories ,through which learners could express their ideas, creativity, and emotions toward the environment, thereby conveying purposeful and awareness-raising messages. Theatrical and cinematic activities were likewise implemented as motivating factors for fostering environmental culture and consciousness.

Additionally, school textbooks incorporate texts such as "The Tree, Friend of Humanity" and "I do Not Waste Water." Moreover, pamphlets, murals, and promotional awareness campaigns were employed to reinforce the message that "Our planet Earth is in danger and must be protected." Among the Algerian initiatives undertaken in this regard were the "Green Train Project," a travel exhibition designed to circulate discussions of environmental issues. This Green Train journeyed across western and eastern Algeria, aiming to increase citizens' awareness of environmental preservation and to disseminate ecological culture more broadly (Kūlū, 2020, pp. 237–238).

This analysis reveals that education plays a fundamental role in preventing harm, averting corruption, and resolving environmental problems. However, educational efforts can be fruitful only if the efforts of teachers, learners, the educational system, curricula, legal legislation, and measures to monitor human behaviour towards the environment converge, alongside the role of family upbringing in providing proper education to children.

Conclusion

In summary, discussing environmental consciousness essentially involves discussing a new awareness based fundamentally on a renewed union among all living and nonliving beings, with attention to the ethical dimension concerning animals, plants, inanimate matter, the environment overall, and human beings. This entails the activation of new relational dynamics that are absent in traditional grand philosophies, an *I-Thou-We* (human-environment) relation of fusion, where humanity takes the place of the environment as the environment once it fills humanity's projects and meets its needs. This reciprocal relationship is founded on equality, love, respect, and appreciation. Responsibility, therefore, is not limited to the consequences of free, conscious human actions toward fellow humans but also extends to the environment and beings yet to come, recognising that the environment holds rights equal to and commensurate with humanity's. Thus, a spectrum of shared rights and values can be established between humans and nature, encompassing all living and nonliving entities.

Environmental philosophy and ecology have introduced ontological, ethical, and humanistic dimensions that form the basis of a new, practical applied ethics aimed at elevating humanity toward higher ideals and transcending all forms of racism, sexism, egocentrism, and domination. We acknowledge and celebrate the humanisation of nature and the environment, their preservation, the prudent use of their resources, their kindness towards animals, and the protection of green space principles already enshrined by the Qur'ān, advocated by Islamic law, and taught through Islamic religious education. This is because the ultimate purpose of human

existence is reform, sound stewardship of the earth, and the prevention of corruption.

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