



MIND & LIFE
EUROPE

Mind Matters Series 2023
Gaia: Gateway to the Climate Conversation

If everybody would agree that their current reality is a reality, and that what we essentially share is our capacity for constructing a reality, then perhaps we could all agree on a meta-agreement for computing a reality that would mean survival and dignity for everyone on the planet, rather than each group being sold on a particular way of doing things.

—Francisco Varela, as cited in (1976) “On observing natural systems: Francisco Varela in conversation with Donna Johnson,” *CoEvolution Quarterly* 10: 26–31.

Rather seek for yourself and your fellows the healing vessel, the *servitor mundi*, which you urgently need. For your state is perilous; you are all in imminent danger of destroying all that centuries have built up.

—C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

Keep in mind that it is hubris to think that we know how to save the Earth: our planet looks after itself. All we can do is try to save ourselves.

— James Lovelock

The Mind Matters Series, initiated in 2020, provides an interdisciplinary online platform for some of the world’s preeminent voices in the field of contemplative science. This year at MLE, at the most general level of our programming, we have chosen to focus on “Caring for Life,” and it is from within this perspective that we are taking up the Gaia hypothesis as a nodal point for the Mind Matters Series. Perched on the ever more perilous horizon of the Anthropocene, we need more than ever to reflect critically on the precipitous disintegration of the planet’s habitability, and, crucially, on our participation in this disintegration. What can our work at MLE – informed as it is by science, philosophy, and the wisdom traditions – contribute that is unique to the ongoing global conversation?

A key part of our DNA at Mind & Life Europe is the enactive tradition which holds at its center a view of the continuity of life and mind. In the same way that the enactive approach posits a structural coupling between the biological processes “in here” and the manifestation of the world “out there,” the Gaia hypothesis draws our attention to the inextricable co-evolution of the biological (human life) and the geological (planetary life). If Gaia has become shorthand for a return to a pre-modern form of holism – an understanding of the Earth as a self-regulating superorganism, of which we humans are but one part – it has also gained tremendous momentum in the scientific community in recent years. The Gaia hypothesis offers both a coherent



narrative framework and a robust scientific model—and, perhaps most importantly, it offers a way of understanding our predicament from outside of the constraints of the strictly human perspective. “Gaian being denotes planetary solidarity,” Professor Bruce Clarke reminded his audience in a talk delivered in 2022 at the Koldo Mitxelena Cultural Center in Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain. It is this way of being, precisely, that challenges us to go beyond the classical narrative of being separate agents acting on a broken world.

What, then, are the implications of taking a “Gaian” perspective and considering things according to Gaian timescales? What would it mean to *be Gaian*, not simply as another identity banner in a world of rampant individualism, but as an existential commitment to a mode of being-in-the-world? How has the Gaia hypothesis, and the “more-than-human world” more generally (David Abram), extended itself into the imaginations of philosophers and scientists?

How do we heed the warnings of many well-known environmental philosophers – James Lovelock, Lynn Margulis, David Abram, Freya Mathews, David Orr, Arne Næss, Paul Ehrlich, Rachel Carson, or Donella Meadows, to name just a few – without succumbing to a doomsday scenario of the Earth fighting back against humanity? Where do we find hope in such matters? Can we elicit the “active hope” of which Joanna Macy so eloquently spoke, whereby the world can be healed through ordinary, human efforts?

Or, on the contrary, is it reasonable to expect, as many do in the contemporary Western world, that technology will come to the rescue? What do we do with the myth of limitless growth that capitalism has bequeathed to us moderns? Are we ready to imagine a post-apocalyptic, posthuman condition?

In this series of talks, we will take Gaia as our conceptual figurehead and examine – with an appropriate degree of humility – this vast topic as one would a prism, viewing it from a myriad of different angles, seeing what is reflected back, and hopefully emerging with a more nuanced appreciation of the place of the human in the wider cosmos.