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**Thinking altruistic and ecocentric performance in organizations in the age of the  
Anthropocene**

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**Abstract:** Our environment (planetary system) and the individuals who live in it are exhausted. This observation invites us to rethink the performance paradigm and its measurement tools in organizations. Also, this paper reflects on the role of performance in companies in the Anthropocene era and the concept of altruistic and ecocentric performance. The purpose is to advocate the type of performance that contributes to the preservation-conservation and restoration-rehabilitation of our environment and the improvement of individual well-being. This requires simultaneous consideration of environmental performance and “humanized” performance, i.e., the role of the individuals responsible for the performance, as well as the impacts these individuals will experience.

**Key words:** performance, Anthropocene, altruism, ecocentrism, individual

## **Introduction**

At a time of intense debate about the social and environmental impacts of companies (Bebbington and Rubin, 2022), questions must be asked regarding the role of performance and how it is measured within organizations. The modern world is witnessing deteriorating working conditions (both of employees and executives, who grapple with issues such as workplace stress - Légeron, 2015; burnout - Harvey, 2019; and meaning at work - Cherré et al., 2014). Humankind is damaging the environment and the climate (IPCC, 2022), in a new era that has been labelled “the Anthropocene” (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). At the core of these phenomena are primarily companies seeking infinite growth and maximum profits (Bigoni and Mohammed, 2023). They nurture within their walls a culture of individual and organizational performance, supported mainly by accounting quantification and measurement tools. As underlined by Jabot (2023), collective actions must be guided by a paradigm shift regarding performance and measurement tools so that the major social and environmental challenges of our times can be addressed.

Accordingly, “altruistic and ecocentric” performance in organizations should be a topic of reflection. This involves thinking about performance as contributing to the preservation-conservation and restoration-rehabilitation of our environment. It also means avoiding dehumanizing people in conducting this activity—in other words, environmental performance and “humanized” performance must be considered together.

This essay is organized as follows. Following our observations about environmental and workplace burnout and the primary responsibility of companies and accounting quantification and measurement in this regard (I.), we formulate and expound on our proposal for “altruistic and ecocentric” performance within companies (II.), and then conclude with a discussion and future perspectives regarding our proposal.

### **I. Companies and accounting quantification are at the core of the burnout of natural and human capital**

This idea stems from two observations that are as indisputable as they are frightening: first, our environment is burned out (by human activity, particularly the activities of capitalist corporations); and second, the individuals who work in these companies are burned out.

According to Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene. This era is characterized by the transgression of specific planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2009). For example, the IPCC (2022) indicates that the climate is in an ongoing state of deterioration, supported by a steady increase (apart from some occasional decreases) in tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>-eq emissions (Friedlingstein et al., 2022). The IPBES (2022) also reports that biodiversity indicators are steadily declining.

Our times are also characterized by a decrease in the well-being of individuals<sup>1</sup> in the workplace, measured in part by workplace stress (Légeron, 2015); burnout (Harvey, 2019); morale problems (Ruiller et al., 2023); dehumanization (Allain et al., 2021); and psychosocial risks (Chiapello and Gilbert, 2012). The deterioration of workplace conditions is mainly attributable to work overload resulting from the quantitative search for performance (Gernet, 2022) and loss of meaning and ethical dissonance at work (Cherré et al., 2014). More generally, these observations could be explained by a *“shift attributable to the management techniques and styles in organizations (search for excellence and for total quality, performance, competitiveness, and flexibility) [translation]”* (Durat and Bartoli, 2014, p.20).

Both types of burnout, environmental and human, appear to be related (Ahmed, 2020), for at least two reasons. First, a portion of the loss of meaning and ethical dissonance at work today arises from environmental issues that cause people to reflect on their own environmental ethics (Gaillard, 2009) and ecological and social values (Borges and Balamissa, 2022). People simply do not recognize themselves in the performance of their work tasks or their organization’s mission. Second, and the following is a main point of our proposal, both the above phenomena have arisen from the anthropocentric performance edict conveyed by measurement instruments that advocate implicitly infinite growth and that view individuals and nature merely as stakeholders that will have to experience its externalities (Banerjee, 2003). The search for economic growth (and, by extension, organizational performance) has been clearly identified as a determining factor in the deterioration of the climate (IPCC, 2022), biodiversity (Otero et al., 2020), and ecologies (Parrique, 2022). The race for performance by companies, driven by the individual tools

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<sup>1</sup> Employees as well as management.

that measure this performance, constitute a lever in the intensification of work (Green, 2001), and consequently, in the deterioration of individuals' work conditions.

Companies and accounting quantification are at the core of this dual observation. Bebbington and Rubin (2022) point out that companies play a central role in the Anthropocene. They are at the heart of our economic activity (Gray and Bebbington, 2007) and are usually the primary drivers of a capitalist economy, a system that has been characterized as unsustainable (Parrique, 2022; Bigoni and Mohammed, 2023) due to its obsession with infinite growth and short-term profit-seeking (Gray, 2010).

Based on this observation, Bigoni and Mohammed (2023) suggest that the quantification and accounting measurement activities of companies in the Anthropocene must be thoroughly revisited. The Anthropocene must trigger a new type of accounting quantification (Jabot, 2023) that takes into account environmental and social capital (Rambaud and Richard, 2021). This new type of accounting measurement must emphasize the link between organizations and their ecological environments (Bebbington and Rubin, 2022). This process begins with the principle that the future of our planet and its inhabitants (including human beings) rests on performance that assures minimum social standards and maximum ecological standards, as underscored by Raworth (2017). Based on the foregoing, we suggest that individuals and companies should develop an altruistic and ecocentric performance to respond to the great challenges of our time.

## **II. Conceiving of individual and corporate altruistic and ecocentric performance**

From the non-use value perspective, altruism, with its intra- and intergenerational dimensions (Rambaud and Richard, 2021), could refer to the fact of ensuring that a voluntarily unused resource is made available to others (especially to future generations, from the intergenerational dimension perspective).

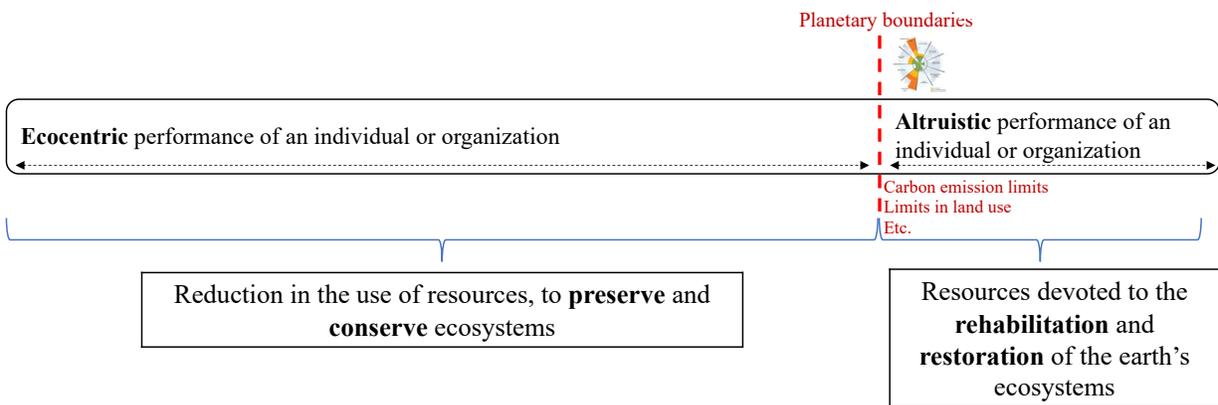
Ecocentrism refers to a worldview that recognizes the intrinsic value of ecosystems and the biological and physical elements that compose them (Zayed, 2022). Humans are thus one component among others in nature (Heikkurinen et. al, 2016). Therefore, when the desires of humans come into conflict with the Earth's ecosystems, humans must defer to the latter, from a standpoint of practicality and ethics.

The two concepts, altruism and ecocentrism, are thus linked together by consideration of the interests of others rather than of oneself. Therefore, the concepts of altruistic and ecocentric performance consist in valuing and quantifying performance that focuses on and is attuned to others and more generally, to our ecosystem with a view to its preservation. Altruistic and ecocentric performance therefore relies on controlling economic performance with the goal of preserving our earthly ecosystem (IPCC, 2022) and its biodiversity (IPBES, 2022). Measurement of altruistic and ecocentric performance emphasizes the ethical, moral, and value choices of individuals and organizations and could lead to “sacrificing” anthropocentric performance that is strictly focused on growth and volume (for instance, sales, market share, or sales volumes).

It follows that the measurement of altruistic and ecocentric performance must emphasize the measurement of the value of returns on investments in terms of social and ecological value (Parrique, 2022). This is to be done while avoiding engaging in dehumanization to reach this objective and while keeping in mind the deep links between the issues and the well-being of the individuals who contribute to the performance in question. This is a crucial point in our proposal, because studies on companies in the Anthropocene continuously bring to the forefront issues of ecological or biodiversity measurements and objectives, but do not address the condition of the employees who are involved or will be involved in implementing them. A perspective of this sort implies that employees should bear the brunt of the externalities of ecological and biodiversity performance, which is not desirable. As we noted previously, there is a strong link between the issues surrounding ecological preservation and the preservation of the well-being and health of individuals (Raworth, 2017). In addition, the implementation of ecocentric practices will be conditioned upon their social acceptability (Barrière, 2022). This demonstrates once again, if there is indeed a need to do so, that humans and the preservation of the environment are tightly interwoven.

The basis for our thinking is the observation that corporate growth (economic performance) must be called into question in view of planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2009). Specifically, this involves restricting the economic and activity spheres of humans to the capacities of our earthly ecosystem. The alignment of corporate activities with planetary boundaries requires limiting the growth of these activities, and even engaging in degrowth (Lux et al., 2023). This would generally

mean conducting activities with a measure of temperance, and even frugality, exhibited by a reduction in quantitative performance (Gernet, 2022) or volume: “We would produce about the same things as we do now, but with less frequency and in smaller amounts [translation]” (Parrique, 2022, p. 191). Such a reduction in so-called quantitative performance would result in two distinct types of performance: one that is *ecocentric*, i.e., economic performance in which the consumption of resources is compatible with planetary boundaries and that aims to preserve and conserve the earth’s ecosystems; and one that is *altruistic*, that frees up people’s time and other resources and allows them to be applied to the altruistic rehabilitation and/or restoration of the Earth’s ecosystems (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Objectives of ecocentric and altruistic performance

The above therefore involves engaging in altruistic and ecocentric performance to work toward the preservation and conservation of our ecosystem as well as its rehabilitation and restoration. *Ecocentric* performance is economic activity that is compatible with planetary boundaries, i.e., that has little or no effect on the environment. It includes preservation and conservation projects aimed at avoiding any future deterioration of ecosystems (Pivin et al., 2022<sup>2</sup>). *Altruistic* performance is human and organizational activity aimed at reconstructing lost ecosystems. This includes rehabilitation and restoration projects primarily intended to return

<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.carbone4.com/files/Towards\\_biodiversity\\_certificates\\_proposal\\_for\\_a\\_methodological\\_framework.pdf](https://www.carbone4.com/files/Towards_biodiversity_certificates_proposal_for_a_methodological_framework.pdf)

ecosystems back to their original natural state (Brookes and Shields, 1996), or at least as close as possible to the main conditions and functions they had before they were disturbed (FISRWG, 1998).

More tangibly, if we take the example of a research professor's professional activity, a preservation-conservation practice might involve flying less (or not at all) to take part in international conferences. This would directly result in lower fossil fuel consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and lead to conservation of the environment. This practice could concurrently free up time (which would have been spent travelling, for example) and financial resources (cost of fare and hotel), which could then be used for the restoration or rehabilitation of an environment (forest, bog, lake, ocean, etc.).

### ***Conclusion and future perspectives***

This reflection on the ecocentric and altruistic performance of individuals and companies brings up ideas that merit further investigation in regard to the two observations about the Anthropocene presented at the beginning of this article, i.e., 1) our environment is burned out, and 2) employees are burned out.

The ideas in question pertain to the following four aspects of the performance model presented hereafter (Figure 2).

- (1) Ecocentric performance must make it possible to reduce the burn-out of our environment by fitting (restricting) the economic activity of individuals and organizations within planetary boundaries. This is a preservation and conservation perspective that rests on attaining carbon neutrality<sup>3</sup> by 2050, as recommended by the IPCC (2022). This means, in particular, that companies (and therefore individuals) would give up their quantitative performance and make qualitative performance a priority.
- (2) Following from this first point, ecocentric performance must lead to a reduction in the burnout of employees most notably by allowing the control (and even the reduction) of the quantitative objectives of performance and by aligning them with the practice of

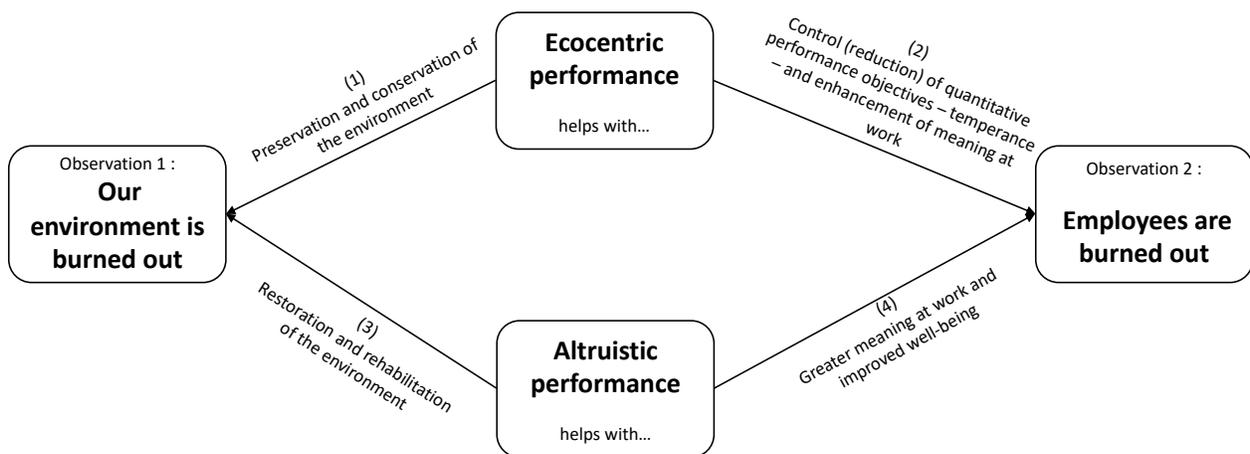
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<sup>3</sup> Volume of CO<sub>2</sub> released into the atmosphere that is equal to the volume extracted from the atmosphere by the biophysical operations of our ecosystem.

temperance, and even frugality (Parrique, 2022). This would lead to relaxing the constraint of the quantitative performance that individuals have been required to fulfill, thereby reducing their workload (overload). This perspective will enhance the meaning of work for individuals if organizations provide a tangible embodiment of their ecological commitment, such as gearing their performance and activities to planetary boundaries.

(3) Altruistic performance must also help reduce the burnout of our environment by leading to the restoration and rehabilitation of damaged environments and ecosystems, which will then make their preservation possible and allow them to be transmitted to future generations to ensure their well-being.

(4) Altruistic performance must help decrease employee burnout by potentially contributing to the reduction of ethical dissonance at work and emphasizing and making the meaning of work and workplace well-being actionable. By implementing altruistic performance in organizations, individuals help restore and rehabilitate the planet’s ecosystem and the Earth’s biodiversity. This is accomplished by dedicating some of their work time to a restoration or rehabilitation activity, thereby helping them align themselves with their ecological and social values.



**Figure 2:** How ecocentric and altruistic performance can help reduce environmental and employee burnout

The foregoing reflections give rise to research issues and perspectives, particularly around issues of this proposal’s social acceptability. Some of the main ones are:

- (1) What are the perceived expectations, visions, and constraints of managers and decision makers regarding the development of an altruistic and ecocentric performance framework in their company (freeing up resources and work time)?
- (2) What are employees' perceptions of the development of objectives tied to these types of performance in their company? What conditions would be acceptable to employees (bonuses, recognition, etc.) for implementing such a system? What would be the constraints?
- (3) What would be the effects of adopting these performance practices on the wellbeing of people, the meaningfulness of work, and people's behavioral intentions in the organization (engagement at work, organizational attachment, etc.)? Could these practices help decrease what is known today as eco-anxiety (Panu, 2020)?
- (4) How can such performance indicators be incorporated into the environmental communications of organizations? What effects would these areas of emphasis have on the behaviors of investors and stakeholders?

These various questions should, in our opinion, be the topics of inter-disciplinary work between the fields of environmental science and social science.

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