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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Planetary Ethics: Rereading Seyla Benhabib in the Age of Climate Refugees

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Abstract
In the Anthropocene, humans are drastically impacting the Earth system. Though the numbers are disputed, millions of climate refugees might soon appear worldwide due to, for example, rising sea levels. To better tackle these intertwined ecological and migrational crises, I expand on Seyla Benhabib's theoretical legacy by discerning within it a multidimensional framework containing mutually intersecting moral, legal, and political dimensions. Within this framework, I argue, Benhabib approaches the issue of climate refugees from three different yet supplementary discourses. From her engagement with discourses on cosmopolitanism and global justice, she endorses reforming the Refugee Convention to include climate refugees. From her contribution to discourses on human rights and human dignity, Benhabib opens the door for a human right to the environment to better protect climate refugees. Against the backdrop of her longstanding work to reformulate a feminist and critical-theoretical discourse ethics, I argue, Benhabib puts forward an ecocentric planetary ethics that embraces climate refugees and the rest of nature. In all, I conclude that Benhabib's legacy demonstrates the need for a multidimensional approach to climate refugees in times of ecocrisis.

Keywords Seyla Benhabib · Climate refugees · The Anthropocene · Ecocrisis · Planetary ethics · Ecocentrism

1 Introduction

"Climate change and sea-level rise are *deadly* and an *existential* threat to Tuvalu," insisted Tuvalu's foreign minister, Simon Kofe (2021, emphasis added), in a speech to the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26). Mr. Kofe spoke while standing knee deep in seawater to illustrate the reality of rising sea levels for states on the frontline in the Pacific Ocean. This spectacle brought home the need for more

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advanced frameworks to address intertwined and mutually reinforcing ecological and migrational crises, the former encompassing climate change, greenhouse gases, global warming, species extinction, and biodiversity loss (see, e.g., Rockström et al. 2009).

For decades, both academically and publicly, Seyla Benhabib has contributed significantly to the migration discourse as well as the conversation regarding, among other things, cosmopolitanism, global justice, human rights, human dignity, feminism, and critical theory. In addition to being central parts of Benhabib's theoretical legacy, these themes have been and still are at the center of contemporary philosophical debates. Regarding migration, she has been particularly engaged with the issues of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced or stateless people. Recently, Benhabib has provocatively added climate refugees to this list as a way of emphasizing the lack of adequate moral, legal, and political frameworks for dealing with this issue at every geographical scale. Still, neither she nor other scholars have *systematically* studied the nature of the relation between today's ecological crises and their possible outcomes for migration. In this article, therefore, I will consider the following question: What would a systematic Benhabibian approach to climate refugees look like in the context of her approach to, for example, Tuvalu's existential threat?

In the Anthropocene, humans are drastically impacting the Earth System. Though the numbers are disputed, millions of climate refugees from Tuvalu and elsewhere might soon appear worldwide. To better tackle these intertwined ecological and migrational crises, I will expand on Benhabib's theoretical legacy across its moral, legal, and political dimensions. Within this framework, I will argue, Benhabib approaches the issue of climate refugees from three different yet supplementary discourses. From her engagement in discourses on cosmopolitanism and global justice, she endorses reforming the Refugee Convention to include climate refugees. From her contribution to discourses on human rights and human dignity, Benhabib opens the door for a human right to the environment to better protect climate refugees. Against the backdrop of her longstanding work to reformulate a feminist and critical-theoretical discourse ethics, Benhabib puts forward an ecocentric—that is, non-anthropocentric and ontologically holistic—planetary ethics. This moral position embraces climate refugees and the rest of nature. In all, I will conclude that Benhabib's legacy demonstrates the need for a multidimensional approach to climate refugees in times of ecocrisis.

Within the research field of environmental migration, there exists disagreement regarding the viability of the very concept of climate refugees as well as confusion over its application. Some migration researchers even push back against this term altogether, given the complexity of the link between climate change and displacement and the ways in which climate impacts are mediated by social aspects such as vulnerability and resilience (e.g., Castles 2011; Hunter and David 2011; Piguet et al. 2018). Others note that "[t]he difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration still exists but *no-one now seems to deny* their importance as a driving force of displacement," and while the concept of climate refugees remains contested, "there are good reasons to use the term" (Gemenne 2015, p. 70, emphasis added; see Lister 2014). I subscribe to the definition of climate refugees as people who "leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or

gradual alterations in their natural environment" (Biermann and Boas 2010, p. 67). That is, they either choose or are forced to leave their surroundings, temporarily or permanently, due to ecological crises (Luetz and Merson 2019, p. 4).

More provocatively, some researchers point to climate refugees as a notion fast becoming "transformed into the politics of the Earth." In the context of the Anthropocene, this means that "most humans are actually the victims of these [environmental] changes, and not their agents" (Gemenne 2015, p. 70). From another angle, the postcolonial desire to devictimize migrants is complicating the picture: "In our attempt to stress the agency of the migrants, we had forgotten the responsibility that we had towards them, because we humans have become the main agents of transformation of the Earth" (ibid.). Another reason for considering climate refugees in this light derives from the prospects for realization of the 2015 UN Paris Agreement. The latest projections of climate change of researchers, politicians, and NGOs are based on a global temperature increase of 2 °C. Should this increase actually be double, the impact would reach well beyond low-lying islands and coastal or deltaic regions to sub-Saharan Africa (Gemenne 2015) and parts of Global North (Blicharska et al. 2017), potentially producing a *best-case* scenario of 150 million climate refugees by 2050 (Faber and Schlegel 2017, p. 3) and a worst-case scenario of up to 1 billion climate refugees. In comparison, 100 million individuals were displaced worldwide in 2022 (UN 2022).

The exact eventual numbers and the actual impact of climate change upon them, however, depend on complex mechanisms. While climate effects are global, states' overall capacity for resilience involves socioeconomic, demographic, legal-political, and community responses that may develop quite differently (Piquet, Kaenzig, and Guelat 2018). Additionally, looking through the lens of postcolonial and securitization studies, some researchers contest "results show[ing] that research on environmental migration is mainly done in countries of the Global South, whereas climate research generally focuses on countries of the Global North" (ibid., p. 357). To these scholars, "the peculiar geography of environmental migration cannot be explained solely by the uneven vulnerability of southern populations to the environment" (ibid.). Compounding the problem are the so-called national security or humanitarian agendas informing "apocalyptic narratives that forecast massive, abrupt and unavoidable flows of climate refugees"; such thinking, of course, "leave[s] underlying power relations untouched and (re)produces present forms of representational and material marginalization" (Bettini 2012, p. 63).

My approach in what follows will engage with Benhabib's three main contributions to the climate refugees discourse. First, I will apply what Benhabib calls the emigration-immigration asymmetry to climate-related migration while unpacking her proposed revision of the 1951 UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter the Refugee Convention)—one of the most important international instruments for refugee law and protection—to include climate refugees in its scope. Second, by way of Benhabib's engagement in the discourses on human rights and human dignity, I will consider the connections between human rights and the environment and look closely at whether Benhabib advocates for a (new) human right of the environment, particularly in relation to those climate refugees who are presently excluded from the Refugee Convention. Such a right may represent a surer safeguard for climate

refugees than any potential future revision of the Convention itself. Finally, I will draw attention to the ecocentric possibility in Benhabib's longstanding effort to develop a feminist and critical-theoretical version of discourse ethics. According to my reading of this work, Benhabib's moral outlook applies to a planetary ethics grounded in an ecocentric approach to the concept of nature. I will therefore argue that Benhabib's moral perspective attempts to encompass and protect both human nature (e.g., climate refugees) and non-human nature (e.g., the climate and the rest of the Earth system). Her planetary ethics, that is, assumes that both parties possess inherent moral value, and I will show that this normative justification of *nature's* inherent moral value enables the Benhabibian imaginary around protecting present and future climate refugees and guarding against further exploitation and degradation of the Earth's limited natural resources. By being vulnerable, able to be injured, and interdependent, both human and non-human nature should be recognized as affected parties in the Anthropocene.

This article makes two main contributions to the field. First, it complements Benhabib's contributions to the discourses on migration and the environment as well as cosmopolitanism, global justice, human rights, human dignity, feminism, and critical theory by conducting a systematic and in-depth examination and critical interpretation of some of Benhabib's main works from the perspective of climate refugees and today's ecocrisis. Inspired by Axel Honneth's (Honneth in Busen and Herzog 2012) normative-reconstructive method involving "foundational documents" (intellektuellen Gründungsdokumente), that is, central books containing the core ideas put forward by a thinker, I demonstrate that many of her formulations and rearticulations of her ideas offer important insights into these issues. Second, it supports further research in areas such as cosmopolitanism, global justice, human rights, human dignity, feminism, and critical theory by operationalizing Benhabib's multidimensional approach to climate refugees against the backdrop of her engagement with those other discourses.

2 Climate Refugees' Lack of a Right to Entry

I will begin with Benhabib's engagement in two of those discourses in particular—cosmopolitanism and global justice—and propose that Benhabib endorses the reform of the Refugee Convention to include climate refugees. I read what she designates in those two discourses as the *emigration-immigration asymmetry* as a critical contribution to the discourse on migration and climate refugees as well. This asymmetry, after all, points to the way in which international moral, legal, and political frameworks—and especially the Refugee Convention—perpetuate the mismatch between the existing human right to emigrate and the lack of a corresponding human right to immigrate.

2.1 Climate-Change-Driven Refugees

Upon closer examination, Benhabib appears to be more engaged with the issues of climate change and climate refugees than one might expect. According to her, various drivers (including those that are climate related) have undermined the

nation-state. In *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times* (2011), she describes this process:

> The nation-state, until recently, has been a very successful host to the project of popular sovereignty. But economic, military, immunological, and *climate-related forces*, as well as the explosion of new means of electronic communication and *worldwide migrations*, have *weakened* the institutions of the nation-state. (Benhabib 2011, p. 115, emphasis added)

Certain historical transformations, for example, of migration or climate change, have rendered the state less prepared to tackle transnational issues such as climate change–driven migration. In her 2020 article titled *The End of the 1951 Refugee Convention? Dilemmas of Sovereignty, Territoriality, and Human Rights*, Benhabib links climate change and refugees as follows:

> [I]n an age of *rapid transformations* in which the coordinates of our everyday lives are melting into thin air, *the refugee* and the migrant have become the *quintessential others* and strangers. All the while, migratory movements are *accelerating* as a result of civil wars, cycles of poverty and corruption, domestic gang violence, *climate change*, and desertification. (Benhabib 2020c, p. 91, emphasis added)

In 2011, then, Benhabib appears to describe climate change and migration as two unrelated phenomena that occur simultaneously, whereas in 2020, she holds that migration can be *caused by* climate change and desertification. She further claims that accelerating ecological disasters such as climate change are largely ignored in this context, and that "blaming the stranger" and perceiving "strangers as dangers" are ways of "avoiding responsibility" for climate change as well as "unwanted and vulnerable" climate refugees (2020b, p. 91). Benhabib clearly views refugees as victims of a marginalizing othering, itself the product of a Cartesian dualism or ontological divide between human nature and non-human nature. Because climate-driven refugees spring from a non-human force—i.e., nature—it is acceptable to other them more so than their peers (see Lysaker 2022).

With reference to Derek Wong's 2014 article *Sovereignty Sunk? The Position of 'Sinking States' at International Law*, Benhabib discusses "refugee movements caused by climate change, such as the sinking of the territory of island nations" (2020c, p. 84, note 45). To me, such migrants must be characterized as particularly vulnerable given the immediacy and existential threat of natural degradation for them (think, again, of Tuvalu). This vulnerability could therefore be defined as an *existential precondition* and possibly ontologically extended beyond the inhabitants of small island states to all humans facing ecocrisis (Lysaker 2020a).

Benhabib also appears to associate climate change with the Anthropocene, which she characterizes as a "planetary condition" (Benhabib 2015). In her 2020 Dewey Lecture, for example, she states:

> [T]he long history of our attempt to master our external environment has created a new era for humans on Earth, the so-called Anthropocene. At least since the industrial revolution, human activities have irreversibly impacted natural

> processes, including the habitat of plants and on the Earth's surface. In the years to come, we may be able to reduce the human footprint on nature somewhat, but it is too late to reverse global climate change. (Benhabib 2020a)[1]

Paul J. Crutzen defines the Anthropocene as a human-dominated geological epoch distinguished by the way in which people's ecological footprints are now the main drivers of change in the Earth's climate, ecosystems, and geology (Crutzen 2002). Our actions influence the entire Earth system and its planetary boundaries, concepts that I will explain here. While scientists have increasingly come to accept the idea of the Anthropocene, proposals for its start date range from the Atomic Age backward through the Great Acceleration starting in the 1940s to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution around 1750 and even the Agricultural Revolution of 12,000 to 15,000 years ago (Hamilton 2017, pp. 1–5).

Benhabib's approach to climate refugees might be better understood by way of current research on the *Earth System*, which is defined as follows by Johan Rockström and colleagues:

> the integrated biophysical and socioeconomic processes and interactions (cycles) among the atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, biosphere, geosphere, and anthroposphere (human enterprise) in both spatial – from local to global – and temporal scales, which determine the environmental state of the planet within its current position in the universe. (Rockström et al. 2009, p. 23)

Understood thus, all Earth-system processes are portrayed as non-linear feedback mechanisms—complex, unpredictable interactions encompassing both living or biotic components such as humans and their cultures, plants, animals, and other parts of the biosphere and non-living or abiotic components such as water, land, and air and their physical and chemical characters. Rockström and colleagues connect their understanding of the Earth as an encompassing system with what they label its *planetary boundaries*:

> Anthropogenic pressures on the Earth System have reached a scale where abrupt global environmental change can no longer be excluded. We propose a new approach to global sustainability in which we define planetary boundaries *within which we expect that humanity can operate safely*. (Rockström et al. 2009, p. 23, emphasis added)

These Earth-system scientists warn us that if one or more of the nine planetary boundaries—namely, (1) climate change, (2) ocean acidification, (3) stratospheric ozone, (4) biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycle, (5) global freshwater use, (6) land system change, (7) biological diversity loss, (8) chemical pollution, and (9) atmospheric aerosol loading—is transgressed, it would be damaging or even catastrophic to the entire Earth. This is due to the consequential triggering of non-linear, abrupt environmental change among the continental- or planetary-scale systemic aspects mentioned above.

[1] All the transcriptions in this article are my own.

Considering these ecocritical ideas about an Earth system and its planetary boundaries, Benhabib's thinking expands into new yet increasingly critical areas. This is my interpretation of her work, but she is headed in the direction in any case. Transcending her once narrow framing of climate change as merely adjacent to human migration, she comes to involve the entire planet in the dilemma; in 2021, for example, she again connects climate change and climate refugees to the Anthropocene, this time in relation to global capitalism:

> We need a more *radical rethinking* of . . . the problem of *economic growth*. And here comes, of course, the dilemma: How are you going to tell the developing nations? They are the ones who are hurt most, but how are you going to pose to them in terms of cutting emissions, in terms of replacing the coal industry? The climate change is like one of the, I think, best examples for *global interdependence without solidarity*. And this is where, I think, we really have to think *beyond borders*. And one way in which *migration and climate change are related—there are many ways.* (Benhabib 2021a, emphasis added)

Here, Benhabib evokes an imaginary of global interdependence with *and* without solidarity in the context of a very much intertwined ecological and migrational crisis. To attain solidarity, however, Benhabib calls for a "radical rethinking" that fully accounts for this crisis in the Anthropocene as people continue to destabilize the Earth system and generate an expanding number of climate refugees.

It is significant that, despite Benhabib's interest in global capitalism's impact upon geological epochs and transformations, she continues to refer to the Anthropocene, whereas, over the last decade or so, alternative labels for this era have sought to capture the drivers and ramifications more graphically of what is happening to the Earth system, including Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene, and Novacene (Haraway 2015; Lovelock 2019). Capitalocene seems especially relevant to Benhabib's exploration of climate refugees as perpetual products of capitalism ever since its rise after 1450 and consequent determination of people's anthropocentric and instrumental relation with the rest of nature. Additionally, what she characterizes above as the problem of economic growth would be better situated within the larger critique of capitalism that is central in the kind of critical theory she supports. Certainly, capitalism's dual growth and profit imperative presents as very problematic in this discussion due to its inherent overconsumption of natural resources and attendant aggravation of the climate situation and its refugees (Vetlesen 2015).

Lastly, I want to address Benhabib's understanding of nature and its consequences for her account of climate refugees. There are at least three alternative frameworks for this understanding—namely, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. The first framework implies an ontological split between humans and the rest of the world that introduces a moral hierarchy with humans on top. Biocentrism then transcends the anthropocentric outlook by acknowledging, for example, animals as rightfully part of the moral universe. Ecocentrism goes farther still by recognizing even non-living aspects of the world as part of the moral universe. Reading Benhabib's point of departure here as the Earth system model, I would attribute an ecocentric orientation to her thinking, and below I will explore how ecocentrism can be linked to Benhabib's planetary ethics.

2.2 The Emigration-Immigration Asymmetry of Environmental Migration

By applying what Benhabib calls the emigration-immigration asymmetry, we will gain further insight into whether the Refugee Convention should be revised to recognize climate refugees according to the established criteria of being driven by a well-founded fear of persecution. Here, again, I will use the normative-reconstructive method to read Benhabib's foundational statements to highlight relevant nuances and profundities in her reformulations of her earlier notions and apply them to the issue at hand.

Already in her 2002 book *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Benhabib presents a subsection titled "Immigration and emigration: Are they symmetrical?":

> Let me return to *the central philosophical problem* concerning the principles of liberal-democratic membership. Are there any *justifiable conditions* under which a liberal-democratic polity can close its borders to outsiders seeking admission? My short answer is, *No, there are none*. There are some justifiable restrictions on the quality and quantity of new immigration which nation-states can allow, but *never a justification [for] closing borders completely*. (Benhabib 2002, p. 171, emphasis added)

Here, she allows for "some justifiable restrictions on the quality and quantity of the new immigration which nation-states can allow" (e.g., entry limitations due to military or security requirements) but insists that there is "*never* a justification [for] closing borders completely." Rather than treat refugees as "unwanted aliens," one should "*hear* the claims of those who, for *whatever* reason [including climate change], knock at our doors" (ibid., emphasis added). Benhabib further explains that the solution to the emigration-immigration asymmetry requires the acknowledgment of refugees in dialogical terms. Benhabib's version of discourse ethics—with its focus on *actual* dialogues between "us" and "them"—transcends the monological approach to the asymmetry that she associates with the liberal model of democracy:

> *Hearing* these claims does not mean automatically granting them or recognizing them, but it does mean that the *moral claim* of the one who is seeking admission imposes a *reciprocal duty* upon us to examine, individually and singly, each case of those seeking membership in our midst. (ibid., emphasis added)

It follows, then, that there should be established a *human right to immigrate* to supplement the existing right to emigrate of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter the UDHR) (Articles 13–15):

> [A] *fundamental human right* to exit as well as to *seek admission* into a political community, a right grounded in the *recognition of the individual as an autonomous* person entitled to the exercise of rights. The fundamental right to human liberty entails the fundamental right to *entry and exit*. This fundamental right creates a set of *reciprocal* obligations and duties upon states – for example, to refrain from preventing the exit of those who want to leave or from

> completely blocking off those who want to enter. Any restrictions to be placed upon the rights of exit and entry must be made compatible with, as well as limited by, this fundamental human right. (Ibid., pp. 171–172, emphasis added)

Importantly, this reciprocal intertwinement of the right both to exit and to enter, to emigrate and to immigrate, is not legal but moral in character, according to Benhabib:

> This fundamental right of exit and entry is a *moral claim* and not a legal right, which would or could be defended by established authority with legal, coercive powers. This right articulates a moral claim because the *recognition of the human liberty to express allegiance* to the political order knowingly and willingly entails the right to exit when such allegiance is not forthcoming. Citizens are not prisoners of their respective states. Only a polity that violated other fundamental human liberties would also be one that limited the freedom of its citizens to exit. (Ibid., p. 172, emphasis added)

Benhabib solves the emigration-immigration asymmetry via their inherent moral equivalence yet cautions that the "*right to entry* must be distinguished from the *claim to membership*" (ibid., original emphasis). In other words, "others [native to the country in question] have to recognize us as potential strangers who may want to enter their country" (ibid., p. 173). She concludes, "if we want this claim recognized for ourselves, then we also must recognize it for others" (ibid.):

> It is only the mutual recognition of the reciprocal obligations generated by this right that give it meaning as a moral claim. There is a fundamental human right to exit only if there is also a fundamental human right to admittance, *though not necessarily to membership.* (Ibid., emphasis added)

Within her account of the deliberative framework of democracy, Benhabib insists that all communities should be able to control their own criteria for inclusion and exclusion—admittance, that is, "does not create an automatic entitlement to membership" (ibid.). Yet, "it does entail one's moral right to know how and why one can or cannot be a member, whether one will or will not be granted refugee status, permanent residency, and so forth" (ibid.). Two years later, in the book *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (2004), Benhabib revisits the emigration-immigration asymmetry in this way:

> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights . . . recognizes the right to freedom of movement across boundaries: a right to emigrate – that is, to leave a country – but *not a right to immigrate* – a right to enter a country (Article 13). (Benhabib 2004, p. 11, emphasis added; see p. 93)

Here, then, Benhabib not only problematizes the legal ramifications of the UDHR's lack of the right to immigrate but also criticizes the declaration's very moral grounding:

> a cosmopolitan theory of justice . . . must . . . incorporate a vision of *just membership*. Such just membership entails: recognizing the moral claim of

> refugees and asylees to *first admittance*; a regime of *porous* borders for immigrants. (Benhabib 2004, p. 3, original emphasis)

To safeguard this Benhabibian just membership, then, climate refugees and other migrants should be assigned a moral claim based on an understanding of state borders as porous, both conceptually and empirically. When state borders are porous, "[a]liens can become residents, and residents can become citizens" (Benhabib 2004, p. 211), making them "not a threat to, but rather an enrichment of, existing democratic diversity" (ibid., p. 120). In my reading, Benhabib's account of cosmopolitan justice and its moral core represents a useful compromise between closed borders (John Rawls) and open borders (Joseph H. Carens). This core, I would further argue, should inform the moral basis of the UDHR—namely, the idea of human dignity:

> [T]his metanorm presupposes the principles of *universal moral respect* and *egalitarian reciprocity*. *Universal respect* means that we recognize the rights of all beings capable of speech and action to be participants in the moral conversation; the principle of *egalitarian reciprocity*, interpreted within the confines of discourse ethics, stipulates that in discourses each should have the same rights to various speech acts, to initiate new topics, and to ask for justification of the presuppositions of the conversations. (Benhabib 2004, p. 3, original emphasis)

While this normative framework is admittedly cosmopolitan in terms of protecting each person's inherent moral value regardless of citizenship, it may not be fully capable of safeguarding the human dignity and rights of climate refugees per se. I will return to this shortly.

Still later, in her book *Another Cosmopolitanism: Hospitality, Sovereignty, and Democratic Iterations* (2006), Benhabib revisits the emigration-immigration asymmetry in her account of cosmopolitan justice and its moral core:

> The Universal Declaration is *silent* on states' obligations to *grant entry* to immigrants, to uphold the right of asylum, and to permit citizenship to residents and denizens. These rights have *no specific addressees* and they do not appear to anchor specific obligations on the part of second and third parties to comply with them. Despite the cross-border character of these rights, the Declaration *upholds the sovereignty of individual states*. Thus, a series of *internal contradictions* between universal human rights and territorial sovereignty are *built into the logic* of the most comprehensive international law document in our world. (Benhabib 2006, p. 30, emphasis added)

In terms of the emigration-immigration asymmetry, these internal contradictions derive from inconsistencies between universal human rights and the concrete reality of constraining state border permeability. In the case of climate refugees in particular, the emigration-immigration asymmetry generates the same inconsistencies through the mismatch between the human right to emigrate and the lack of a corresponding right to immigrate, which exposes climate refugees to various forms of exclusion, exception, displacement, and limbo. Although these people are humans, they are not human *enough*, apparently, and remain without an adequate moral,

legal, and political framework of protection. And their vulnerability is especially acute given the rapidly accelerating conditions of the climate change, loss of biodiversity, and other natural disasters that force their migration.

2.3 Reforming the Refugee Convention in the Age of Climate Refugees

The Refugee Convention defines a refugee as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UN 1951, p. 3). Critics of the convention tend to fall into two groups: those who find it presently unfit to address contemporary displacement challenges, and those who find it too inclusive and therefore in some ways responsible for the large numbers of refugees today (McAdam 2017).

For those falling into the first group, there are at least three ways in which the Refugee Convention could be revised regarding, for example, climate refugees (Poon 2017). First, a revision could redefine the very *concept* of a refugee by interpreting the term "well-founded fear of being persecuted" to encompass persecutors such as climate change. As noted earlier, climate refugees are accurately described as people who freely or by force leave their habitats, temporarily or permanently, within their country or abroad, due to sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment. Second, a revision could recognize climate refugees as members of a particular *social group* among the five categories (race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political conviction) that the convention is intended to protect. Third, a revision might result a *new convention*, which explicitly recognizes climate refugees.

Though reforming the Refugee Convention sounds fairly straightforward as a response to the increasing link between climate change and displacement, some scholars find this strategy problematic (e.g., McAdam 2012, 2017). For one thing, they find the universalizing tendency of some human-rights approaches to be problematic and question the desire "to create norms that take the 'particular' to a level of general applicability, which make individual rights 'human rights' at one and the same time" (McAdam 2012, p. 210). The risk here, they claim, is that this move from the particular to the general lacks an empirical basis of evidence and thus becomes too vague to be "translated into practical, rational policies and normative frameworks" (ibid.). Rather than simply extending the existing rights-based framework of the Refugee Convention, they insist, one should instead listen to and learn from actual people in their actual local surroundings, then try to respond to their needs. Targeted outcomes in particular scenarios in specific geographical areas represent to these scholars a more efficient means of addressing the issue of climate change and migration; further, "more bilateral and regional 'economic' migration opportunities would also help to address underlying problems" (ibid.). In addition to the need to develop regional soft-law declarations, they point out, "[a]t the normative level, there are already clear frameworks to guide such actions—the *human rights* law regime is the most relevant and important" (ibid., emphasis added).

Which of the above three approaches to the Refugee Convention—reform, rejection, or "golden mean"—might Benhabib support? She appears to address the last approach in her 2018 book *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration*:

> Neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor other legal instruments recognize conditions of extreme poverty and material deprivation as grounds for legitimate asylum. Economic migrants are considered individuals who raise spurious claims to protection and refuge. But why are extreme poverty and material deprivation not a legitimate ground for seeking opportunities to escape from them? Particularly under conditions of global economic interdependence when the policies of advanced capitalist economies that cause *damage to the environment all over the globe* have far-reaching consequences. (Benhabib 2018, p. 114, emphasis added; see also Benhabib 2017)

Although Benhabib does not specify whether her "other legal instruments" encompass regional conventions and/or human rights frameworks, she aligns herself with the golden mean approach in terms of the need to address extreme poverty and material deprivation as migration drivers. She also laments the "interdependence" of, for example, climate-related and economic factors in forcing people to flee their homes, again suggesting the Capitalocene as the most accurate description of the current era in Benhabib's thinking.

In her 2020 article *The End of the 1951 Refugee Convention?*, on the other hand, Benhabib sounds more interested in the reform approach:

> The category of "membership in a *social group*" . . . has been *expanded* in recent years to cover gender-based and gender-related crimes . . . However, as noted by many scholars with regard to the five protected categories, this "limitation seems to be more a matter of policy than of principle. It seems implausible that persecution for other reasons is different in principle. Furthermore, it seems *implausible* that persecution is the only valid form of necessity. *Natural disasters*, wars, famines could be *equally compelling reasons of necessity since they can induce a well-founded fear of harm*." The *temporary protection status* offered by many states to refugees fleeing for these reasons is *only partially adequate* to deal with the quandaries generated by the Convention's five protected categories. (Benhabib 2020c, p. 84, emphasis added)

Here, Benhabib seems to suggest that, parallel to other historical cases of extension, the Refugee Convention's definition of the category of a social group should now extend again to include migrants and displaced persons fleeing, for instance, natural disasters.

So, while Benhabib supports the economic and material aspects of the golden mean approach as well as the social-group dimension of the reform approach, she does not explicitly promote either one. Also, despite her longstanding interest in human rights, she does not seem to advocate for the golden mean's measure involving local and regional human rights initiatives. Alternatively, Benhabib builds on critical theory and feminism by developing what I interpret as relational

autonomy and concrete universalism, to which I will return below. These experientially and empirically situated notions resonate with the above regional human rights initiatives on local and regional scales.

I will also briefly address the question of states' responsibilities toward climate refugees as opposed to other refugees by looking at research documenting that fact that many climate refugees, especially in Global South or on small island states subjected to rising sea levels like Tuvalu, are more vulnerable to natural disasters than other groups of migrants (Bettini 2012; Gemenne 2015; Klepp 2017). This level of vulnerability, of course, is partly the product of the globally unjust situation whereby the richest 10% of the countries in the Global North are responsible for 50% of the natural resource consumption and emissions, while the poorest 50% of the countries in the Global South are responsible for only 10% of that consumption and emission (Klepp 2017; UN 2020). To attempt to correct this power asymmetry, some scholars call for a greater focus on historical responsibilities and global solidarity of, for example, former colonies and how people there have been exploited (Klepp 2017)—to focus more on climate justice when we are dealing with environmental migrants and seek "opportunities and solutions for environmental migrants that are emancipative, migration friendly" (Klepp 2017, p. 17). Such an effort would be best informed by dialogue with inhabitants in local and regional settings.

3 A Benhabibian Human Right to the Environment

I will now move on to the second approach in Benhabib's multidimensional framework for the issue of climate refugees: her engagement with discourses on human rights and human dignity. Here, in my reading, she clearly opens the door for a human right to the environment as a way in which to better address the matter of climate refugees. I see at least three reasons for the affinity between Benhabib and this interconnection between human rights and the environment in terms of climate refugees. First, as is evident from her foundational writings, the human rights and human dignity problem has occupied Benhabib's theoretical thinking for at least 40 years. Highlights of her work on this include the 2004 book *The Rights of Others*, which is almost entirely dedicated to these questions, and to migrants of many types; her 1986 book *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, in which she deals with Hegel's critique of Kant's abstract account of human rights (Benhabib 1986, p. 72), and her 1992 book *Situating the Self*, in which she revisits Hannah Arendt's critique of human rights by introducing the concept of the right to have rights (Benhabib 1992, p. 103).

Second, in tandem with Benhabib's research on human rights and human dignity over the last four decades, politicians, NGOs, scholars, and other members of the international community began to focus on these issues as well. In 1972, the United Nations organized the Conference on the Environment in Stockholm, the first of its kind to attempt to reconcile the environment with human rights. In Principle 1 of the conference's declaration, we read: "Man has the *fundamental right* to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an *environment of a quality* that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to *protect and improve the environment* for present and future generations" (UN 1972, p. 4,

emphasis added). Benhabib never confronts the 1972 conference or its subsequent impact directly, but it sets the stage for what I would characterize as her planetary ethics. I will return to this work in part 4.

Lastly, Benhabib's approach to the idea of a human right to the environment is moral. I here refer to the fact that she deals with both the Refugee Convention and the UDHR. By doing that, she, at least implicitly, accepts the shared foundation of these documents, namely humans' moral worth. More precisely, the Refugee Convention is grounded in Article 14 of the Declaration (UN 1951), and it is morally founded on the preamble of the Declaration—namely, the "recognition of the inherent dignity of each human" (UN 1948). Nonetheless, Benhabib seemingly overlooks this shared moral basis. If not, Benhabib could have linked her support for the revision of the convention to including climate refugees in an ecocentric reading of the collective nature of a human right to the environment. Such a right would have represented a more practical and efficient application of Benhabib's planetary ethics and its justification in an ecocentric notion of nature.

Before I study the Benhabibian human right to the environment in more detail, I will engage with three definitions of the concept (Fitzmaurice 1999). One states that without an environmental right, there are no human rights; another insists that the human right to the environment already exists or is developing; and another views such a right as part of other human rights. The human right to the environment also relates to the "three generations" of human rights, starting with the first: civil and political rights. Such a right would provide "individuals, groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGO access to environmental information, judicial remedies and politic processes" (Boyle 2007, p. 471). Note that this first account is *anthropocentric* and individualistic in its focus on "the harmful impact on individual humans rather than on the environment itself: it amounts to a 'greening' of human rights law, rather than a law of environmental rights" (ibid., p. 472). Regarding the second generation—economic, social, and cultural rights—the right to the environment would "treat a decent, healthy or sound environment and "would privilege environmental quality as a value, giving it comparable status" to the other second-generation human rights (ibid., p. 471). This perspective departs from anthropocentrism and "comes closer to seeing the environment as *a good in its own right* but nevertheless one that will always be vulnerable to tradeoffs against other similarly privileged but competing objectives, including the right to economic development" (ibid., p. 472, emphasis added). In dialogue with the solidarity-based third generation of human rights, an ecocentric alternative arises: to "treat environmental quality as a collective or solidarity right, giving communities ('peoples') rather than individuals a right to determine how their environment and natural resources should be protected and managed" (ibid., pp. 471–472). Importantly, while this alternative remains the most contested, "there are some significant examples of collective rights that in certain contexts can have environmental implications," such as the right of all peoples to freely dispose of their natural resources and the right to protection of minority cultures and indigenous peoples (ibid., p. 473).

My own definition of this concept builds on this final ecocentric and collective perspective and considers the human right to the environment, with Louis Jacobus Kotzé, to be "the right to an *ecologically* balanced, sustainable, healthy, clean, or

satisfactory environment that permits healthy living for human (and sometimes non-human) entities on Earth" (Kotze 2018, p. 136, emphasis added). This "Earth" evokes the Earth system and its relationship to planetary boundaries, along with the ramifications of the ecocrisis and their existential, collective, and global impact on humans (e.g., climate refugees) and the living and non-living components of more-than-humans (Abram 1996) (e.g., the climate). In short, my ecocentric approach to the human right to the environment involves the *entire* Earth and *all* its co-inhabitants.

I would also suggest that Benhabib's thinking likewise supports an ecocentric human right to the environment, for two reasons. First, she applies such concepts as the Earth and the Anthropocene in relation to today's ecocrisis and its consequences (such as climate refugees), thereby ontologically adopting the entire Earth system as her point of departure. Second, I discern in her writing the collective dimension of this ecocentric approach as well. In the following passage from her 2018 book *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin*, Benhabib situates herself in relation to collective human rights:

> the subject of human rights law is the *individual person*, even if the circumstances and causes leading individuals to seek refuge and asylum are always collective; in centering on the individual, the law is forced to neglect the *interdependence of economic, climate-related, military, and other factors in the society of states*, which give rise to these collective circumstances. (Benhabib 2018, p. 114, original emphasis; see also Benhabib 2004, pp. 3, 145; Benhabib 2002, p. 175)

This ecocentric inclination, I would argue, brings with it useful possibilities while we wait for the Refugee Convention to be revised, as Benhabib would appear to prefer; it might help the world community develop the requisite moral, legal, and political frameworks to handle the issue of climate refugees and other challenges more effectively in our times of ecocrisis.

4 Toward a Planetary Ethics

Thus far, I have explored the first two lines of thought most relevant to climate refugees in Benhabib's theoretical legacy: her contribution to the discourses of cosmopolitanism and global justice in relation to revising the Refugee Convention to include climate refugees and her contribution to the discourses on human rights and human dignity with which she opens the door to a human right to the environment. Now, I will turn to the third line of thought in what I describe as Benhabib's multidimensional framework regarding climate refugees: her feminist and critical-theoretical rearticulation and development of discourse ethics, especially in terms of her ecocentric planetary ethics. This ethics is planetary in recognizing climate refugees in the first place, as well as the interwovenness of the human and the more-than-human worlds, and it is the normative core of Benhabib's multidimensional framework. In all its mutually enriching moral, legal, and political dimensions, it clearly recognizes both human nature and the living and non-living components of non-human nature as ecologically or ecocentrically affected parties sharing certain

existential preconditions. In line with Benhabib, I would characterize these preconditions as vulnerability, dependency, the ability to be injured, and affectability. Accordingly, all these coexisting and cohabitating as well as interwoven and interacting parties deserve protection.

4.1 Vulnerability, Dependency, and Sensibility

For decades, Benhabib has engaged in philosophical feminist debates, which has been preoccupied with issues such as postmodernism, subjectivity, feminist contributions to ethics, and Arendtian feminist theory. She has done so both within and beyond critical theory, ultimately grounding her planetary ethics, to some extent in a feminist and critical-theoretical account of philosophical anthropology—an account that perceives humans as conditioned by being vulnerable, dependent, and sensible bodies. I would argue that vulnerability, dependency, and sensibility also interconnect human nature and non-human nature through their coexistence and cohabitation on Earth.

This viewpoint of vulnerability, dependency, and sensibility arises, I argue, in Benhabib's 2014 lecture "From the Right to Have Rights to the Critique of Humanitarian Reason": "[I]t is also because we are *embodied* and *vulnerable* creatures whose *bodily existence* makes us *susceptible* to experiences of torture, rape, slavery, servitude, degradation and violence that we must be *protected*" (2014, emphasis added). From my out viewpoint, this characterization can be connected my ongoing thesis regarding climate refugees. This point initially appeared in Benhabib's 2004 book *The Rights of Others*: "Just as the facts that we are all *mortal* beings, *physically* members of the same species and afflicted by similar *basic needs* to assure our *survival* constitute conditions in our reasoning about justice" (2004, p. 34, emphasis added). Earlier, in her 2002 book *The Claims of Culture*, Benhabib elaborates on her view of the human condition in terms of "the *greatest vulnerability*," by which she means that "when we enter life we are *helpless as infants*, and when we leave it we are *equally helpless* in the face of death" (2002, p. 84, emphasis added). Her most detailed account of the human condition is found in one of the earliest texts, her 1992 book *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. Here, she explains that human nature is ontologically characterized by being "embodied" (Benhabib 1992, p. 6; see also pp. 153, 161, 162). This embodiment makes humans "vulnerable and dependent" as well as "embedded and fragile" (ibid., pp. 5, 217; see also pp. 6, 50, 162). Our shared embodiment makes humans "affective" (ibid., pp. 59, 161), referring to, for example, the sensory apparatus and the many ways individuals can sense ourselves, others, and reality at large through sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Moreover, Benhabib (ibid., pp. 159, 161) claims that being "emotive" is fundamental to our humanity, meaning that our senses and feelings play a significant role in our emotional processing. Because humans are vulnerable, we are "linguistically socialized" creatures—we can formulate, express, and communicate the need for being included and protected through mutual and dialogical relationships (ibid., p. 6). Being physically vulnerable on this fundamental level implies that humans are exposed to "suffering" through,

for example, violations of our inherent dignity (ibid., pp. 50, 161). As mentioned, humans are even "finite" given their mortality (ibid., p. 5). These human conditions of embodiment, sensibility, vulnerability, dependency, and mortality play significant roles in Benhabib's philosophical anthropology.

Likewise, Benhabib's critical-feminist anthropology also relates to the interplay between climate change and climate refugees—after all, the human condition is at stake: climate refugees are, for instance, affected by the violation of their human dignity and human rights, as they are entirely excluded from the abiding anthropocentric version of the Refugee Convention. Yet, since climate refugees are obviously part of human nature and therefore existentially preconditioned by their affectability, vulnerability, and mortality, they depend on being included in mutual relationships with others through care and solidarity. Along these lines, to which I will return below, non-human nature can also be portrayed as vulnerable and dependent in the Anthropocene, through the continual and rapid erosion of its limited resources, for example. Consequently, non-human nature depends on a more stable Earth system to function and avoid further degradation.

4.2 Concrete Universalism

The disputes involving universalism versus particularism, the right versus the good, or, for that matter, liberalism versus communitarianism are central for many critical theorists and others in the academy. Within critical theory, Benhabib and Jürgen Habermas, to mention but two thinkers, have engaged deeply in conversations about ethics, political philosophy, and other normative disciplines. Universal reasoning, of course, implies the viability of a moral status or legal right that ought to provide all human beings the same protection. Still, by moving from universal to planetary normative reasoning, Benhabib seems to require something other than the universal in terms of humanity. At the same time, the above existential preconditions may sound too particular or contextual to serve as the building blocks of a Benhabibian ethics that seeks to provide planetary guidelines. I find the opposite to be true, however, and point to what Benhabib—with a Hegelian locution—terms a concrete universal, which I would extend to the notion of concrete universalism itself: "[O]ne could aspire to a form of *universality* that did not simply dismiss the moment of constitutive otherness" (2011, p. 161, emphasis added; see also p. 162). She then continues, "there is *no particularity without universality* and that subsumption is ubiquitous, as all our concepts" (ibid., pp. 161–162, emphasis added), though "[c]oncepts that are concrete universals do not operate by subsumption alone; they show that the particular is itself caught in the *dialectic* of the universal and the particular, and that the concrete universal is itself a manifestation of the contradictions within the particular" (ibid., p. 162, emphasis added). Lastly, concrete universalism "captures the dynamic process through which the particular is constituted" (ibid.). Accordingly, it is linked to "human persons as a 'concrete other' with specific histories, needs, and trajectories" (ibid., p. 49).

In my reading of Benhabib, the above human conditions of affectability, vulnerability, dependency, and mortality are ontologically grounded in just such a concrete

universalism. For example, we could say that vulnerability is *concrete* because it is subjectively and sensibly experienced and bound to a particular and unique embodied life; vulnerability is also *universal* because it is a necessary condition shared by all humans (Lysaker 2020b). Here, that is, Benhabib draws on her feminist and phenomenological insights to explain what is at stake when, among other things, the human right of the environment is violated, as is the case for climate refugees. The strength of concrete universalism vis-à-vis a more abstract universalism (i.e., the empty formalism of which Hegel accuses Kant) or mere particularism and relativism is that such normative concepts are universal because they should protect humans from violations of their moral, legal, and political status. At the same time, they are concrete because they point to what exactly is being violated, to what degree, and with what consequences in the interests of avoiding such violations in the future. As a result, normative concepts justified by concrete universalism will be more relevant and applicable in actual cases such as climate-related migration by appealing to experiences without losing sight of the objective: to reach beyond contextual boundaries (e.g., families, groups, or states).

In addition, as I showed above, Benhabib argues that the basic moral right to both exit and enter a society (which is so pertinent to climate refugees) requires defending individual autonomy. I believe the Benhabibian idea of autonomy is *relational*—it is related, that is, to the human conditions of vulnerability and dependency. Autonomy, then, is a *gradual* capacity that develops through one's mutual relationships with others. In turn, these dependency relationships protect us in our vulnerability—when our inherent dignity or moral right to enter a sovereign territory is violated, for example. Happily, this vision of relational autonomy is compatible with Benhabibian concrete universalism (Benhabib 1992, p. 152). Given the aforementioned need to supplement the moral right to exit with a corresponding moral right to enter, a definition of autonomy as relational is particularly useful to vulnerable groups such as climate refugees. An acknowledgment of our shared relational autonomy is consonant with, I believe, a moral recognition of their need for protection on an existential level, which moves our normative reasoning beyond the constraints of state borders and other territorial boundaries.

4.3 All Ecocentric Affected Parties

One key issue when engaging with Benhabib is whether her planetary ethics—which originates in anthropocentric and ontologically dualist accounts of discourse ethics—can be *extended* to encompass non-human nature. I would say yes, as I understand her feminist and phenomenological approach to existential preconditions—especially sensibility, vulnerability, the ability to be injured, dependency, affectability, and mortality—to articulate the normative core of her planetary ethics, as I discussed above. By virtue of being non-anthropocentric, ontologically holistic, and ecocentric, her ethics clearly aims to protect both human nature and non-human nature. In turn, both parties should be recognized as potentially ecologically or ecocentrically affected at the level of their life projects. In the case of both humans and more-than-humans, a life project refers to,

for example, humans' collaboration at work, apple trees growing to maturity, and water cycles providing for the delivery of atmospheric water to the Earth. The Benhabibian moral approach appears to argue this claim based on the assumption that all these entities possess an inherent moral value, in this case referring specifically to the interconnection and interdependency of human and non-human nature in the Earth system.

In Benhabib's 2011 book *Dignity in Adversity*, she introduces the abovementioned concept of a planetary ethics as part of the chapter titled "Utopia and Dystopia in Our Times":

> We become aware that the *consequences* of our actions *inalterably affect* those in *remote parts* of the world through global calamities such as *climate change, droughts, typhoons*, financial catastrophes, and spread of diseases. We need to develop both a planetary ethics to guide us in the face of the devastation we are causing to the *earth as a species*, and a global public sphere, as a sphere of action and deliberation, in which we interlock through ever more interdependent formal and informal spheres and institutions toward republican federalism. These would be the concrete utopia of our times. (Benhabib 2011, pp. 193–194, emphasis added)

Benhabib here connects all affected parties via a non-anthropocentric, ontologically holistic, and ecocentric version of discourse ethics, which discerns a particular moral awareness developing in today's globalized, plural, and complex world. She also specifies several aspects of today's planetary ecological crisis, such as climate change, droughts, and typhoons, aligning her planetary ethics with an ecocentric definition of nature.

Benhabib further explicates the relationship between affectability and normativity elsewhere in the same book:

> [I]n my view, rights articulate moral claims on behalf of persons, and *even on behalf of nonhuman beings such as animals and the environment that can be deeply and irretrievably affected by our actions*. Although to raise a moral rights claim puts pressure on political and legislative institutions to generate a justiciable legal entitlement, not all such rights claims result in specific legal entitlements. For example, *to speak of the rights of endangered species is a moral claim that can eventually be translated into a legal entitlement*. Whether this takes the form of forbidding whaling off the coast of Japan or instituting positive measures, such as to protect the Gold Eagle in the United States, is an open question to be decided by democratic peoples. Moral rights do not directly dictate the specific content of legal entitlements. (Benhabib 2011, p. 79, emphasis added)

Here, significantly, Benhabib holds that being affected—which presupposes being affectable in the first place—is basic to any planetary ethics. Of course, not all parties will be heard in this discourse of affectability—think, for example, of the inhabitants of small island states and other peoples of the Global South, or future generations, or non-human nature. Still, and this is another noteworthy

insight from Benhabib's planetary ethics, since *all existence* is ontologically affectable, we must look for new ways to safeguard all these affectable and potentially affectable parties and bring them into the discourse (Lysaker 2021). Lastly, to the extent that non-human nature is affected by the actions of human nature—which presupposes the basic, shared capacity to be affectable—non-human nature should also have a voice, so that its moral claims can be channeled into legal and/or political frameworks, processes, and interactions.

Interestingly, we find traces of such a planetary-ethical imaginary in several of Benhabib's earlier works as well, such as the 2002 book *The Claims of Culture*, where she states the following:

> Discourse ethics has been charged by many critics with exhibiting a rationalist bias, in that it appears to restrict the domain of moral discourse only to those who can linguistically represent themselves in the discursive context. *But clearly we have moral obligations toward all beings whose interests and well-being we can affect through our actions, whether or not they are capable of linguistic competence*. This is certainly true; yet we should not ignore that the content of these obligations is itself subject to discursive debate among parties, *some of whom act as advocates in the name of those who cannot adequately represent themselves*. The whales do not speak to us, even though we can communicate with certain species of dolphins. But the argument about preserving some species by *protecting their habitats* from commercial fishing and touristic use, etc., is an argument made by various human *advocacy groups* like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Japanese, Canadian, and Russian fishermen, and their respective governments. (Benhabib 2002, pp. 190–191, note 7, emphasis added)

As I read her, Benhabib is extending the moral domain of her version of discourse ethics by arguing that even non-human nature—e.g., species such as whales and dolphins, together with their habitats—can be affected by the impacts of human activities (e.g., our ecological footprint). Therefore, regarding the interplay between affectability and normativity, a moral status should be ascribed to all these existing entities to protect them against further degradation. Benhabib underscores here, too, the importance of moral representation in terms of advocacy groups. In contexts where affected parties of a non-human nature cannot voice how they are affected by human nature, we should develop alternative arrangements—e.g., climate disobedience and environmental organization on all scales—that can represent these parties. Consequently, Benhabib's philosophy of nature is ontologically holistic in terms of integrating all existence (see Lysaker 2020b), which I find to be implied whenever and wherever Benhabib mentions the Anthropocene.

This philosophy of nature resonates with new insights in Earth system science and other relevant research fields that seek to show how living and non-living components of non-human nature are interconnected. In short, these researchers believe that everything is connected to everything, and all existence consists of *potentially* affected parties. The short-term and long-term impacts of human activities may affect both living and non-living parts of non-human nature through, for example, climate change and biodiversity loss.

Later, in her 2004 book *The Right of Others*, Benhabib addresses issues similar to those in her book *The Claims of Culture*—namely, what she calls the problem of scope for discourse ethics: "[M]any beings we would want to recognize as moral agents and as moral victims [i.e., affected parties] such as very young children, the differently-abled, and the mentally ill, would seem to be *excluded* from the moral conversation" (2004, p. 13, emphasis added). While she does not list non-human nature as such, I interpret this statement through the broadest ecocentric framing available within Benhabib's non-anthropocentric and ontologically holistic philosophy of nature as *all existence*. As mentioned before, Benhabib holds that her idea of moral advocacy extends to all "the representatives of this being" (ibid., p. 14), including "the moral interests [even] of beings who are *not full* participants in moral discourses" and therefore "ought to be and can be *effectively represented* in discursive contexts" (ibid., emphasis added; see also Benhabib 1992, p. 58, note 30). Importantly, Benhabib here too seems to adopt a planetary ethics that is non-anthropocentric, ontologically holistic, and ecocentric in its scope:

> [S]entient beings capable of pain, such as animals with developed nervous systems and, some would argue, even trees and *ecosystems, are alive and can be affected* by our actions. (Benhabib 2004, pp. 13–14, emphasis added)

The above quote raises a crucial natural-philosophical question: Who or what should be ascribed a moral value and why? I would argue that Benhabib's planetary ethics here clearly builds on a philosophy of nature that incorporates everything from climate refugees to the Earth system, and that a Benhabibian imaginary of the all-affected principle should be normatively justified as a moral principle of *all ecocentric affected parties* and, thus, the affectability of all existence.

5 Conclusion

This article responded to the following question: What would a systematic Benhabibian approach to climate refugees look like? To address this issue, I reconstructed some of Benhabib's foundational writings to evaluate whether her theoretical legacy would be relevant to the issue of climate refugees and the intertwined ecological and migrational crises in the Anthropocene. Based on what I describe as her multidimensional framework involving mutually intersecting moral, legal, and political dimensions, I found her thinking to be extremely relevant to a planet presently confronted with an acute and existential ecocrisis. As I explained in the article, Benhabib could be seen to endorse revising the Refugee Convention to include climate refugees; to advocate for the idea of a human right to the environment to better address climate refugees; and to articulate an ecocentric planetary ethics protecting climate refugees and the rest of nature.

The article contributes to the current debate with respect to themes of climate refugees as well as cosmopolitanism, global justice, human rights, human dignity, feminism, and critical theory, and I will propose two directions for further research into Benhabib's impact. First, one might revisit her iterative democracy model, which sees democracy as an activity that "not only changes established understandings in

a polity but... also transform[s] authoritative precedents" (Benhabib 2004, p. 19; see also Benhabib 2006). In a time of ecocrisis, for example, children and youth who are unable to vote might yet engage democratically as members of Fridays for the Future or other global environmental efforts by criticizing adults and attempting to change authoritative precedents. From the perspective of Benhabibian cosmopolitan justice and planetary ethics, one could also take on ecocide—namely, "the extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been severely diminished" (Higgins 2012, p. 3). Perhaps, some transnational moral order might develop a new international criminal court to address this ecological crime. Here, Benhabib's theoretical legacy remains a rich resource for research invested in solutions to our age of ecological emergency.

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