



Dead And Alive: Ecocentrism And Anthropocentrism As Superpositions Through Paradox Of Schrödinger's Cat In Last Contact

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Abstract

Ecocentrism – the concept where the nature is considered dominant and have the intrinsic value, where all the living and non-living things are protected for their own merit. The opposite of this is the concept of *Anthropocentrism* – Humans are considered dominant and places human as the centre, where the nature is only valued for the utilization of the humans. This paper tries to describe the concepts of Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism as superposition that attempt to impose certainty on the fundamentally uncertain, shaping humanity's response to unknown, through the theoretical paradox of Schrödinger's Cat, examining the science fiction short-story *Last Contact* (2007) by the hard science-fiction author, Stephen Baxter. The story portrays an apocalyptic atmosphere, where the Universe is about to collapse by the Big Rip. Through the lives of Caitlin and Maureen, the narrative explains the philosophical reflection on how humans construct meaning in the face of cosmic indifference and how the ecocentric world returns, destroying the anthropocentric structure. The mother–daughter relationship drives the narrative as the story further humanizes this collapse, turning the scientific apocalypse into a meditation on observation, meaning, and surrender. Drawing the experiment of Schrödinger's Cat, Baxter's story can be symbolically situated as the quantum state of uncertainty, revealing how both ecological and human-centered ideologies attempt to collapse this uncertainty into certainty as super-posit explanations. This paper argues that Baxter's *Last Contact* (2007), the boundary between life and death, human and non-human, consciousness and cosmos, exploring ecocentrism and anthropocentrism as superposition responses and not some enlightened underpinnings, attempting to make the indifferent universe observable and bearable.

Keywords: Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism, Schrödinger's Cat Experiment, *Last Contact*, Stephen Baxter, Science Fiction, Superposition, Apocalypse.

Ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are two concepts that have long shaped the ethical and philosophical approaches to the natural world, where ecocentrism views nature as having an intrinsic value, independent of human use, emphasizing the integration of all beings and systems and anthropocentrism places humanity at the center, granting value to nature only in terms of its utility to human needs. Though seemingly opposed, both the positions, share a metaphysical foundation, where each attempts try to impose order, understanding, and moral coherence on a universe, which is fundamentally indifferent to human significance. When these concepts are read through the lens of quantum uncertainty, as represented by Schrödinger's famous thought experiment, these worldviews can be seen not as competing moral absolutes but as coexisting responses to the same existential crisis.

Introduction of the concepts of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism in literature was done by the early poets and writers like Kalidasa, through his works, *Abhinjanashakunthalam*, *Meghadutam* etc..., where he portrays the healthy relationship between nature and human. Starting from the foundational work of ecocentrism, by Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), other writers and authors of science fictions have also contributed a bunch of literary brilliance, where the earth will be destroyed by the anthropocentric era. *The Cherry Orchard* (1903) by Anton Chekov and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), by Amitav Ghosh are other examples of such works, where they try to criticize the anthropocentric relationships between human and nature. Not only literary works, but many movies were created based on this theme, where the nature gets manipulated, destroyed and decayed by the human activities. Films like *Avatar* (2009 & 2022), *Elysium* (2013), *Snowpiercer* (2013) are narratives which portrays, apocalyptic, human centric point of views and the role of humans in the destruction of the planet, except of the movie *Avatar*, which could be read in both ecocentric and anthropocentric viewpoints. On the other hand, movies such as *Aavasavyuham: An Arbit Documentation of an Amphibian Hunt* (2022), *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) etc..., portrays human nature relationships and showcases the significance of nature. Such a kind of narrative is the *Last Contact* (2007), by Stephen Baxter, which explores both the anthropocentric problems and ecocentric revival.

Baxter's, short story, *Last Contact* follows the narrative of Caitlin, a astrophysicist, and her mother, Maureen, as they await the universe's end supposedly meant to happen in October 14th, caused by the *Big Rip* – a cosmological event where dark energy tears apart all matter; "Just as gravity pulls everything together, the dark energy is pulling the universe apart, taking more and more of it so far away that its light can't reach us anymore. It started at the level of the largest structures in the universe, super clusters of galaxies. But in the end it will fold down to the smallest scales. Every bound structure will be pulled apart. Even atoms, even subatomic particles. The *Big Rip*" (Baxter, 2007, pg no. 136). The story's tone is both intimate and cosmic, as the interplay between the personal moments between mother and daughter are juxtaposed with descriptions of cosmic dissolution. Caitlin's role as an astrophysicist symbolizes human rationality and anthropocentric control – the effort to understand, calculate, and even domesticate the unknown through reason. On the other side, Maureen, embodies a kind of ecocentric acceptance, grounded not in denial but in recognition of her own smallness within an infinite system. The story's emotional power lies in this duality, where two consciousnesses, one scientific and one emotional, is grappling with an event that renders both perspectives equally insignificant. As the *Big Rip* draws closer, Baxter blurs the boundary between scientific observation and existential surrender, as the mother and daughter surrenders to the collapse of the universe whole heartedly, wanting to experience the end, while all others are put to sleep consuming a blue pill. Caitlin, even, rejects the offer of the Oxford, which is trying to establish a sort of shelter, to outlive the end of the Earth.

In the realm of speculative fiction, the tension between humanity's desire for control and the cosmos' indifference has long served as a mirror to our existential anxieties. Stephen Baxter's short story *Last Contact* (2007) exemplifies this dialogue between the human and the cosmic, between meaning and meaninglessness, through a deceptively simple narrative of a mother and daughter facing the universe's imminent collapse. The story could be seen through the lens of the intertwined concepts of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, positioning them as *superpositions* – means the states of coexisting uncertainty rather than oppositional certainties – by invoking the paradox of Schrödinger's Cat, where Baxter's account becomes a literary experiment, dramatizing how humanity oscillates between ecological humility and anthropocentric control while trying to find meaning in the face of universal entropy. When analyzed deeply, the end of ecocentrism and the beginning and rule of anthropocentrism and the ecocentric revival could be traced in the story, even though the humans try to maintain a calm agreement with the nature, planting new sapling and nurturing them. One such individual is Maureen, who takes care of her garden, even though the end is arriving near. "The lawn is all right. I do like this time of year when you sort of wake it up from the winter. The grass needs raking and scarifying, of course. I'll reseed bits of it, and see how it grows during the summer. I might think about getting some of it re-laid. Now the weather's so different the drainage might not be right anymore" (Baxter, 2007, pg no. 135)

Erwin Schrödinger's *cat* paradox, conceived in 1935, describes a scenario where a cat is placed in a sealed box, where it is simultaneously alive and dead until observed, illustrating the principle of quantum superposition (Schrödinger, 1935). The experiment exposes the limits of human perception and interpretation, suggesting that reality does not resolve into a single, stable state without human intervention

or, more profoundly, that human observation itself transforms the unknown into the known, making it a superposition. This philosophical implication resonates deeply in Baxter's *Last Contact*, where the collapse of the universe is both an observable scientific phenomenon and a metaphysical crisis of human meaning – both ecocentric and anthropocentric. The story questions, what happens when humanity faces an event that cannot be observed or survived, which they eventually try to survive by creating the shelter, when the Big Rip, clearly rips off every single thing. "The Rip works down the scales that larger structures break up first. The Galaxy, then the solar system, then planets like Earth. And then the human body" (Baxter, 2007, Pg no. 140). The narrative oscillates between rational explanation and emotional immediacy, much like Schrödinger's cat oscillates between life and death. Caitlin's scientific updates are counterbalanced by Maureen's mundane acts of care, reminiscing about the past. These gestures of domesticity serve as small acts of ecological humility, re-centering human experience within the material cycles of life and decay. Yet, they also illustrate the anthropocentric impulse to do something, to impose coherence through ritual in the face of annihilation. "There's talk of establishing a sort of shelter in Oxford that could survive the end of the Earth. Like a submarine, I suppose. And if you wore a pressure suit you might last a bit longer even than that. The design goal is to make it through to the last microsecond. You could gather another thirty minutes of data that way" (Baxter, 2007, Pg no. 140). The story, therefore, becomes an allegory of human consciousness as a superposition of knowing and unknowing, of control and surrender.

The paradox of Schrödinger's cat aligns closely with Timothy Morton's (2013) concept of *hyper-objects*, where the entities are so vast in time and space such as climate change or the universe itself, that they exceed human comprehension. The end of the universe in *Last Contact* functions as a hyper-object, where the event is omnipresent yet incomprehensible. Humanity's attempt to interpret it becomes an act of faith, which mirrors both religious superstition and scientific rationality. Here, ecocentrism and anthropocentrism merge into a single epistemic gesture, portraying both as superstitions of certainty, comforting illusions constructed to make an indifferent universe bearable. The story's philosophical depth emerges through its interplay of observation and collapse, in both literal and metaphoric portrayals. In quantum physics, an observer collapses a system's wave function, determining one outcome from many possibilities. Correspondingly, Baxter's narrative collapses the human desire to know into the inevitability of unknowing. Caitlin's final act of meeting her mother moments before the cosmic collapse and spending time together sitting in the pergola, symbolizes the collapse of uncertainty into meaning. She does not seek to survive but to witness the end of the Universe, not to understand, but to be present in that moment. In this way, the narrative reflects Schrödinger's cat, where the universe is simultaneously alive and dead until the final moment of observation, when consciousness itself ceases to exist.

Ecocentrism in this context does not emerge as moral superiority but as recognition of limit, where the cosmos, in its vastness, becomes a reminder of what Val Plumwood (2002) describes as the *ecological self*, where an identity is formed not through dominance but through embeddedness. Maureen's quiet acceptance of death, her willingness to watch the end without fear, embodies this ecological self, while on the other hand, Caitlin's scientific efforts, though noble, exemplifies anthropocentric denial. Yet, Baxter refuses to condemn either position – instead, he holds them in superposition, revealing their shared function as meaning making devices within an indifferent cosmos. The use of apocalyptic imagery in the story reinforces this idea, where, traditional apocalyptic narratives, often present the end as a moral reckoning, a final validation of human values, Baxter subverts this structure, as the apocalypse here is not punishment or transcendence but it is entropy itself. There is no divine or cosmic justice but only the collapse of matter and meaning. In this, Baxter's story participates in what Ursula Heise (2016) terms as *eco-cosmopolitanism* – a worldview that situates humanity within, rather than above, the web of existence. The Big Rip here is not against humanity but beyond it – the end of anthropocentrism and the return of ecocentrism, even through complete destruction. The mother-daughter relationship grounds this cosmic vastness in emotional immediacy, where Maureen and Caitlin's final interaction, when they watch the stars vanish, redefines intimacy as a form of ecological awareness. "The ground burst open. The scrap of dewy lawn flung itself into the air, and Maureen was thrown down, her face pressed against the grass. She glimpsed houses and trees and people, all flying in the air, underlit by a furnace-red glow from beneath. But she was still holding Caitlin. Caitlin's eyes were squeezed tight shut" (Baxter, 2007, Pg no. 145). Their bond reflects the cyclical nature of life and death which is another kind of superposition where loss and love coexist. As Maureen remarks about the signals she has been receiving, "Goodbye. Maureen yelled. 'They were just saying goodbye'" (Baxter, 2007, Pg no. 145), her words echo both scientific truth and spiritual resonance. This

fusion of cosmology and tenderness elaborates Baxter's larger philosophical point, that the human need for meaning is itself a quantum phenomenon, like a wave collapsing under the weight of observation.

From a critical standpoint, *Last Contact* can be read as an allegory for the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch marked by human impact on Earth's systems, where anthropocentrism, here, is a superstition of control or the belief that humanity can observe, predict, and manage planetary processes. Meanwhile, Ecocentrism, conversely, risks becoming a superstition of surrender, an idealization of pure or pious nature detached from human entanglement. Baxter's story resists both extremes. Instead, it presents a vision of coexistence within uncertainty, where observation itself becomes an ethical act. The invocation of Schrödinger's Cat deepens this interpretation, as in the experiment, observation defines reality, where in Baxter's universe, observation defines meaning. Caitlin's scientific gaze and Maureen's emotional acceptance represent two modes of collapsing the wave function, where two ways of resolving the unbearable ambiguity of existence. Yet both ultimately fail, because the collapse of the universe annihilates both the observer and the observed. This ending forces the reader, to confront what Jane Bennett (2010) calls *vibrant matter*, which is the agency of non-human forces that persist beyond human comprehension, where the universe, indifferent yet alive, continues to exist in its own quantum space, free from anthropocentric interpretation. Thus, the story's closing scene, where the world dissolves into light, is not tragic but transformative. It suggests that meaning, like matter, is neither created nor destroyed but redistributed across scales of existence. In the silence that follows, the reader becomes the final observer, collapsing the story's uncertainty into their own emotional reality, where the narrative's power lies precisely in its refusal to provide closure, as *Last Contact* ends not with certainty, but with surrender.

The short story serves as a meditation on the human condition in a universe governed by uncertainty. Through the dual lenses of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, interpreted as superpositions within Schrödinger's paradox, the story exposes how both scientific rationality and ecological humility are, strategies to impose coherence on chaos. By juxtaposing the intimate with the infinite, Baxter transforms a cosmic apocalypse into a human moment of grace, revealing that the ultimate superstition is not belief in God or science, but belief in certainty itself. The universe, like the cat, remains both alive and dead until the final observer disappears.

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