

Remembering Eden in the Age of AI

Climate change revealed a world in which harm can be systemic, foreseeable, and devastating—beyond villains or excuses—and in which we found ourselves with responsibility spread so thin across so many actors that no one feels able to meaningfully answer for what must now be done. Harm accumulated slowly but relentlessly, dispersed across supply chains, consumption habits, policy delays, and technical infrastructures that no single actor controlled. Responsibility did not disappear because no one cared. It evaporated because it could no longer be located. The damage was undeniable, but the hands that caused it were everywhere and nowhere at once.

What climate change revealed was not only environmental fragility, but a deeper ethical failure: our growing capacity to generate abundance without sustaining accountability for its consequences. We learned how to extract, transport, optimize, and profit at a planetary scale while losing the ability to answer—clearly and concretely—for the worlds we were reshaping. Knowledge increased. Control multiplied. Responsibility thinned.

This was never merely a failure of political will or scientific literacy. It was a failure of orientation. We lacked a shared sense of what abundance was for, and therefore no clear limit to what could be justified in its pursuit. What was missing was not the capacity to produce abundance, but an ethic of stewardship capable of ordering power toward care. Systems designed to deliver prosperity quietly displaced care. Efficiency replaced attentiveness. Scale dissolved judgment.

From Climate Crisis to Artificial Intelligence

This loss of orientation did not remain confined to environmental systems; it became the background condition of modern technological life. Today, artificial intelligence functions as the operating layer of this technological background, mediating decisions at a scale and speed that exceed human judgment. Even as the climate crisis continues to unfold—slowly, unevenly, and often invisibly—artificial intelligence has emerged within this same moral terrain, accelerating the very dynamics climate change had already exposed.

AI did not create this ethical condition. It inherited it—and then intensified it. What climate change revealed over decades, AI now reproduces in real time: decisions made without decision-makers, outcomes without authors, harms without accountable agents. Automated systems learn, adapt, and optimize faster than responsibility can follow, dispersing agency across layers of code, institutions, and incentives until no one can quite say who should answer for what has been done.

In both contexts—climate and AI—the underlying problem is not a lack of information or even a lack of control. It is the absence of a normative horizon capable of tethering power to care. When

such a horizon disappears, abundance becomes extractive by default. Systems grow more powerful even as accountability drains away. What remains is a vacuum—felt everywhere, named nowhere—in which responsibility is endlessly deferred to processes no one fully governs.

Eden as Moral Horizon

At this point, it is worth naming the moral imagination that has been quietly guiding this reflection. In the biblical account of creation, the human vocation is framed not in terms of mastery or control, but placement and care. “*The Lord God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*” (Genesis 2:15) The name of that garden, Eden, means delight. The first human task is set within a condition of abundance ordered toward care, not domination.

This detail matters because Eden is not presented as a reward or an escape from work. It is the environment in which work becomes meaningful. To “work” the garden and to “keep” it—verbs that carry connotations of cultivation, protection, and attentiveness—is to participate in a form of flourishing that depends on limits. Delight is not consumption without restraint. It is the sustaining condition that makes restraint intelligible. Power is exercised, but always in ways that preserve the possibility of future delight.

Read this way, Eden functions not as a lost place, but as a lost purpose, a lost responsibility—the vocation that once tethered human power to care, and abundance to restraint.

When that vocation no longer governs our systems, responsibility does not vanish all at once. It thins. It disperses. It becomes procedural rather than personal, technical rather than moral. Systems continue to function—often with remarkable efficiency—even as the conditions that once made them life-giving quietly erode. Abundance detaches from care. Productivity accelerates beyond judgment. What remains is not rebellion, but drift: a loss of orientation that allows harm to accumulate without anyone quite intending it.

The crisis of accountability surrounding artificial intelligence is not a departure from this pattern, but its most concentrated expression. AI systems do not simply extend human agency; they reorganize it. Decisions emerge from models trained on histories no one fully remembers, operating within infrastructures no one fully oversees, guided by incentives that reward speed, scale, and optimization over judgment. Responsibility becomes distributed precisely to the point of moral inoperability.

This is why so many contemporary responses to AI ethics feel inadequate. Transparency promises visibility without restoring agency. Oversight assumes a degree of control that no longer exists. Appeals to alignment often function as rituals of reassurance, gesturing toward responsibility without reestablishing its conditions. The problem is not that no one wants to act responsibly. It is that responsibility has been structurally displaced.

Viewed through the Edenic norm, the failure becomes clearer. AI systems are routinely justified by the abundance they promise: efficiency, scalability, predictive power, and economic growth. But abundance alone is no measure of stewardship. The ethical question is whether these systems preserve the conditions under which care, restraint, and judgment remain possible. When optimization outruns understanding, when speed forecloses intervention, when harms are acknowledged only after they have propagated beyond repair, the vocation of responsibility has already been lost—even if no rules have been broken.

Climate change taught us, at great cost, that systems can function perfectly while the world they depend on begins to fail. Artificial intelligence now confronts us with the same lesson in compressed form. The danger is not malevolence, but moral weightlessness: a world in which systems act, effects accumulate, and no one can quite say who should respond—or how.

The temptation, in the face of such systems, is to seek renewed mastery: better governance, smarter oversight, more comprehensive control. Some of these efforts are necessary. None is sufficient on its own. The deeper crisis is not that our systems exceed our control, but that they no longer know what they are *for*.

Eden, understood as a lost purpose rather than a lost place, clarifies what remains possible. Responsibility does not begin with mastery. It begins with placement—with the acceptance of limits that make care possible. Such responsibility will be slower than optimization demands. It will appear inefficient where speed is rewarded. It will feel inadequate because it refuses the comfort of total control.

Yet this refusal marks the difference between stewardship and domination. If Eden is not a place we can return to, it may still be a purpose we can remember. And remembering it—quietly, stubbornly, without illusion—may be the most responsible act still available to us.