

Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, The Strange Stranger, and the Beautiful Soul

Timothy Morton

I shall investigate what ecological interdependence means, philosophically and theoretically. We may then specify the beings with whom we are interdependent. As we proceed, we shall descend from seeming logical abstraction, through deconstruction, into an unbearable intimacy with others. Ecological thinking – what I call *the ecological thought* – is precisely this ‘humiliating’ descent, towards what is rather abstractly called ‘the Earth’. Ecology is the latest in a series of great humiliations of the human, humiliations that might even constitute the human as such (in its humility, at least, if any). From Copernicus through Marx, Darwin and Freud, we learn we are decentered beings, inhabiting a Universe of processes that happen whether we are aware of them or not, whether we name those processes ‘astrophysics’, ‘economic relations’, ‘the unconscious’ or ‘evolution’.

The correct but surprising conclusion to draw from ecological humiliation, however, is not some form of nominalism or nihilism, but a politicized intimacy with other beings.

What is interdependence? Let's imagine a theorem called the Interdependence Theorem. It contains two simple axioms:

Axiom (1): $\forall a: \exists a: a = \sim(\sim a)$

Axiom (2): $\forall a: \exists a: a \supset \sim a$

Axiom 1 states that for every *a*, the existence of *a* is such that *a* consists of things that are *not not a*. Thus *a* is made of *not-a*'s, so the only way to define it is negatively and differentially. Thus *a* is *a* because it isn't *not-a*, while *not-a* is only *not-a* because it is *not a – a* and *not-a* are mutually determining. Axiom 1 states that things are only what they are in relation to other things.

Axiom 2 states that things derive from other things. While Axiom 1 is concerned with how things are (synchronically), Axiom 2 talks about origins (diachrony). In every case, things like *a* only exist such that a *not-a* exists. Nothing exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing.

Axioms 1 and 2 define interdependence across a range of phenomena. They summarize structural linguistics, for instance, because structuralism models signs as completely interdependent. The Interdependence Theorem also describes life forms. Diachronically, no life form exists that didn't arise from another one. And synchronically, life forms are different from each other in arbitrarily negative ways: there's no human-flavoured DNA as opposed to daffodil-flavoured DNA, for instance (the human genome is 35% daffodil). Since life forms are expressions of

DNA, they differ from each other negatively rather than positively, since DNA is a language.

Since life forms depend upon each other the way signs depend upon each other, the system of life forms is isometric with the system of language. Since language is subject to deconstruction, the system of life forms must also be subject to deconstruction. What happens when we subject the system of life forms to deconstruction?

Derrida describes deconstruction as thinking ‘the structurality of structure’. What type of structure? It’s open ended: it has no centre and no edge. Because language is an arbitrary system of negative difference, there is no sign that stands somehow outside the system to guarantee the meaning and stability of the other signs. This means language is infinite, in the strong sense that we can never fully account for its meanings or effects. It also means that meaning depends upon meaninglessness. And that language as a system is not a thing, not an object, but a strange infinite network without inside or outside. The process that makes signs manifest as appearance and meaning is *différance*: the process of difference (synchronic) and deferment (diachronic). The meaning of a word is another word, and strings of signs only gain significance retroactively. The meaning of a sentence is a moving target. You will never be able to know exactly when the end of this sentence is until after you’ve read it elephant. Coherence, in order to be coherence, must contain some incoherence.

The same view applies to the system of life forms. They are made up of other life forms (the theory of symbiosis). And life forms derive from other life forms (evolution). It is so simple, and yet so profound. Because of the ecological

emergency we have entered, we are now compelled to take account of this mind-changing view.

The implications of a deconstructive view of life forms are manifold:

- (1) Life forms constitute a *mesh* that is infinite and beyond concept – unthinkable as such.
- (2) Tracing the origins of life to a moment prior to life will result in paradoxes.
- (3) Drawing distinctions between life and non-life is strictly impossible, yet unavoidable.
- (4) Differentiating between one species and another is never absolute.
- (5) There is no ‘outside’ of the system of life forms.
- (6) The Interdependence Theorem is part of the system of interdependence and thus subject to deconstruction!
- (7) Since we cannot know in advance what the effects of the system will be, all life forms are theorizable as *strange strangers*.

Let’s sift through these implications.

- (1) *Life forms constitute a mesh that is infinite and beyond concept – unthinkable as such.* This is not just because the mesh is too ‘large’ but also because it is also infinitesimally small. Differentiation goes down to the genomic level. There is no human-flavoured DNA, no daffodil-flavoured DNA.

Most of the terms I considered were compromised by references to the Internet – ‘network’, for example. Either that, or they were compromised by vitalism, the belief in a living substance. Web is a little bit too vitalist, and a little bit Internet-ish, so I guess it loses on both counts. ‘Mesh’ can mean both the holes in a network, and the threading

between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy. It has uses in biology, mathematics and engineering, and in weaving and computing – think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics. It has antecedents in *mask* and *mass*, suggesting both density and deception.¹ By extension, ‘mesh’ can mean ‘a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare’.² In other words, it’s perfect.

If everything is interconnected, then there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground. Charles Darwin sensed it in thinking through the implications of the theory of natural selection. His amazement is palpable:

It is a truly wonderful fact – the wonder of which we are apt to overlook through familiarity – that all animals and all plants throughout all time and space should be related to each other in group subordinate to group, in the manner which we everywhere behold – namely, varieties of the same species most closely related together, species of the same genus less closely and unequally related together, forming sections and sub-genera, species of distinct genera much less closely related, and genera related in different degrees, forming sub-families, families, orders, sub-classes, and classes. The several subordinate groups in any class cannot be ranked in a single file, but seem rather to be clustered round points, and these round other points, and so on in almost endless cycles.³

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘mesh’, n.1.a–c.

2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘mesh’, n.2.

3. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105–6.

Every single life form is literally familiar, in that we are genetically descended from them. Darwin imagines an endlessly branching tree; ‘mesh’ doesn’t suggest a clear starting point, and those ‘clusters’ of ‘subordinate groups’ in the quotation above are far from linear (they ‘cannot be ranked in a single file’). Each point of the mesh is both the centre and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute centre or edge. Still, the tree image marvellously closes out Darwin’s chapter on natural selection, with its evocation of ‘the Great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications’.⁴ A ‘ramification’ is a branch and an implication, a branching thought.

(2) *Tracing the origins of life to a moment prior to life will result in paradoxes.* Sol Spiegelman’s discoveries concerning RNA show how you can’t draw a rigid narrow boundary between ‘life’ and ‘non-life’. In order for life forms to begin, there had to be a strange, paradoxical ‘pre-living life’ made of RNA and self-replicating crystals such as a silicate (strange that silicon may be the element in question).

‘RNA World’ abolishes the idea of a palpable, fetishized life substance, the sort Naturephilosophy imagines as *Urschleim*, a sentient gel.⁵ Curiously, the fantasy thing of idealist biology turns out to be this existential substance, as if idealism depended for its coherence on some metaphysical materiality. RNA World, by contrast, is structured like a language. At bottom, it is a set of empty formal relationships. This is the basis of a genuinely materialist biology.

4. Darwin, *Origin*, 107.

5. See Iain Hamilton Grant, ‘Being and Slime: The Mathematics of Protoplasm in Lorenz Oken’s “Physio-Philosophy”’, *COLLAPSE* V (May, 2008), 287–321.

Do you think a virus is alive? A virus is a macromolecular crystal that contains some RNA code. It doesn't reproduce as such, it only tells your cells to make copies of it. The cold virus is a huge twenty-sided crystal. If you think the rhinovirus is alive, then you probably should admit that a computer virus is also alive, to all intents and purposes. A computer virus also tells other pieces of code to make copies of itself. The life–non-life boundary is not thin and it is not rigid.

(3) *Drawing distinctions between life and non-life is strictly impossible, yet unavoidable.* This brings us to our third paradox. If 'pre-living life' is necessary for imagining the origins of life, then it is also the case that in the present moment, the moment of 'life' as such, the life–non-life distinction is also untenable. When we start to think about life, we worry away at the distinction between nature and artifice. Only consider the beings called viroids: Ten times smaller than virus, they are little circles of RNA code (Figure 1). They invade the transcription, rather than translation, parts of the host's reproductive machinery. Viroids are very ancient beings, dating back to RNA World.

1	CGGAACUAAA	CUCGUGGUUC	CUGUGGUUCA	CACCUGACCU	CCUGAGCAGA	AAAGAAAAAA
61	GAAGGCGGCU	CGGAGGAGCG	CUUCAGGGAU	CCCCGGGGAA	ACCUGGAGCG	AACUGGCCAA
121	AAAGGACGGU	GGGGAGUGCC	CAGCGGCCGA	CAGGAGUAAU	UCCCCGCCGA	ACAGGGUUUU
181	CACCCUUCU	UUCUUCGGU	GUCCUUCUC	GCGCCGCCAG	GACCAACCCU	CGCCCCUUU
241	GCGCUGUCG	UUCGGCUACU	ACCCGGUGGA	AACAACUGAA	GCUCCCGAGA	ACCGCUUUUU
301	CUCUAUCUUA	CUUGCUUCGG	GGCGAGGGUG	UUUAGCCCUU	GGAAACCGCA	UUGGUUCCU

Figure 1: Genome of PSTV (Potato Spindle Tuber Viroid)

(4) *Differentiating between one species and another is never absolute.* This is the lesson of Darwinism. 'Species' is a label that must be applied retroactively to life forms. There are

no species as such, no species-to-be, no point in evolutionary history to which we can point and say, 'Here is the origin of (say) *Homo sapiens*'. *The Origin of Species* has a cheeky title, for it's one of the least teleological books ever written. Darwin demonstrates that all the categories of the life sciences – species, variation, monstrosity – collapse into one another.

(5) *There is no 'outside' of the system of life forms.* Once life 'begins' – and thinking this origin is practically impossible – everything else becomes linked with it. This is what most of us mean when we think ecologically: Everything is connected to everything else. There are strong metaphysical versions of this consequence (such as Gaian holism), and weak reductionist ones. I'm on the weak reductionist side.

This implication profoundly implies that there is no environment as such. Your DNA doesn't stop expressing itself at the ends of your fingers. A beaver's DNA doesn't stop at the ends of its whiskers, but at the end of its dam.⁶ A spider's DNA is expressed in its web. From the perspective of the life sciences, the environment is nothing but the phenotypical expression of DNA code. This includes oxygen (anaerobic bacterial excrement). And it includes iron ore (a byproduct of archaic metabolic processes). You drive and fly using crushed liquefied dinosaur bones. You are walking on top of hills and mountains of fossilized animal bits. Most of your house dust is your skin. The *environment* looks like not a very successful upgrade of the old-fashioned term *nature*.

6. See Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

(6) *The Interdependence Theorem is part of the system of interdependence and thus subject to deconstruction!* Since the Interdependence Theorem is only possible to state in language, and since it describes language itself, the Theorem recursively falls prey to its own premises.

The First Axiom states, ‘Things are made of other things’. The Second Axiom states that ‘Things come from other things’. Implication 4 asserts that we cannot rigorously differentiate between one species and another. Yet in order for Axiom Two to be valid, we must be able to distinguish one species from another! Since ‘Things come from other things’, there must be a distinction between one thing and another thing. Yet if we draw this distinction – if we think the word ‘distinction’ means something – there is no way one species can arise from another species. A dinosaur, a bird: there are continuities between them. And yet a dinosaur is not a bird. This is Zeno’s paradox.

Axiom 2 is in still more trouble. Consider a candle and its flame. If there were no difference between the candle and its flame, then the flame could not arise, distinct from the candle. But if the candle is indeed different from the flame, then there is no way the flame can arise from it!⁷ Thus ‘different from’ and ‘comes from’ are now reduced to something meagre. The very terms of Axiom 2 have shrunk. They are themselves subject to Axiom 2!

Now consider Axiom 1, ‘Things are made up of other things’. Think of a car: it’s made of wheels, chassis, steering wheel, windows, and so on. Where is the car-ness in these components? Nowhere. Yet we can’t say that just

7. I am adapting a Buddhist argument about emptiness. Nagarjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, tr. and commentary Jay L. Garfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4, 44, 110–111, 160–1, 177, 190–1, 231–44.

any old thing will do to put a car together: a car is made of just these components, not other ones. We have reduced Axiom 1 to bareness, by using Axiom 1 itself!

Human beings are made up of arms, legs, heads, brains, and so on. So are birds, duck-billed platypuses, and sharks. These organs are made up of cells. So are plants, fungi, amoebae and bacteria. These cells contain organelles. These organelles are modified bacteria such as mitochondria and chloroplasts. They themselves contain DNA. This DNA is a hybrid fusion of bacterial DNA and viral insertions. DNA has no species flavour; moreover it has no intrinsic flavour at all. At the DNA level it becomes impossible to decide which sequence is a 'genuine' one and which is a viral insertion. In bacteria there exist plasmids that are like pieces of viral code. Plasmids resemble parasites within the bacterial host, but at this level, the host-parasite duality becomes impracticable. It becomes impossible to tell which being is a parasite, and which a host.⁸ We have discovered components without a device of which they are the components – organs without bodies.⁹ Indeed, the human genome contains endogenous retrovirus derived sequences, and one of these, ERV-3, may confer immunosuppressive properties to the placenta, thus allowing embryos to coexist with the mother's body. You are reading this because a virus in your mom's DNA may have prevented her from spontaneously aborting you.¹⁰

8. Dawkins, *Extended Phenotype*, 200–23, 226.

9. I am inverting Deleuze and Guattari's phrase 'the body without organs'. See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

10. Mark T. Boyd, Christopher M.R. Bax, Bridget E. Bax, David L. Bloxam, and Robin A. Weiss, 'The Human Endogenous Retrovirus ERV-3 is Upregulated in Differentiating Placental Trophoblast Cells', *Virology* 196 (1993), 905–9.

At the DNA level, the whole biosphere is highly permeable and boundariless. There is less substance: ‘Organisms and genomes may [...] be regarded as compartments of the biosphere through which genes in general circulate.’¹¹ How do we know we haven’t learnt how to sneeze because rhinoviral DNA codes directly for sneezing as a means to propagate itself? Yet we have bodies with arms, legs, and so on, and we see all kinds of life forms floating and scuttling around, as if they were independent. It isn’t an undifferentiated goo.

(7) *Since we cannot know in advance what the effects of the system will be, all life forms are theorizable as ‘strange strangers’.* The Interdependence Theorem does not reduce everything to sameness. The way things appear is like an illusion or magical display. They exist, but not that much.

I use the phrase ‘strange stranger’ because Derrida’s notion of the *arrivant* is the closest we have as yet to a theory of how the mesh appears up close and personal.¹² The arrivant is a being whose being we can’t predict, whose arrival is utterly unexpected and unexpectedly unexpected to boot. The strange stranger is not only strange, but strangely so. They could be us. They are us.

STRANGE STRANGERS

Our encounter with other beings – and with our being as other – is *strange strangeness*. And with this we should drop the disastrous term *animal*. Haeckel’s drawings of

11. K.W. Jeon and J.F. Danielli, ‘Micrurgical Studies with Large Free-Living Amebas,’ *International Reviews of Cytology*, 30 (1971), 49–89, quoted in Dawkins, *Extended Phenotype*, 160.

12. Jacques Derrida, ‘Hospitality,’ *Acts of Religion*, ed., tr. and intro. Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 356–420.

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Figure 2: Ernst Haeckel, *Phaeodaria*, from *Kunstforen der Natur* (1904)

radiolarians show beings that look like geometrical plots rather than squishy organisms (Figure 2). That's because they are. The trouble with animals is that on some level they're vegetables, beings that just grow – isn't this the governing theme of many a horror story? And the trouble with vegetables is that they're algorithms. Consider *The Algorithmic Beauty of Plants*, a beautifully illustrated text readily available online.¹³ Instead of illustrating plants, you can generate algorithms that plot them. Plant scientists now model plant growth using software like this. If an algorithm can plot a rose, surely the thing itself is a map of its genome, a three-dimensional expression of the algorithm's unfolding? I can only conclude that I, a supposedly sentient life form, am also subject to these rules.

Strange strangers are uncanny in the precise Freudian sense that they are familiar and strange simultaneously. Indeed, their familiarity is strange, and their strangeness is familiar. Strange strangers are unique, utterly singular. They cannot be thought as part of a series (such as species or genus) without violence. Yet their uniqueness is not such that they are utterly independent. They are composites of other strange strangers. We share their DNA, their cell structure, subroutines in the software of their brains. They are absolutely unique and so capable of forming a collective of life forms, rather than a *community*. *Community* is a holistic concept that is greater than the sum of its parts. Since the Interdependence Theorem implies that there is no whole (such as 'animals', Nature and so on), *community* can only ever be a conceptual construct.

13. Przemyslaw Prusinkiewicz and Aristid Lindenmayer, *The Algorithmic Beauty of Plants*, with James S. Hanan, F. David Fracchia, Deborah Fowler, Martin J. M. de Boer, and Lynn Mercer (Przemyslaw Prusinkiewicz, 2004); available at <http://algorithmicbotany.org/papers/>.

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By contrast, *collectivity* signifies the conscious choosing of a coexistence that already exists whether we think it or not. Yet because of strange strangeness, this choosing cannot be a totalizing grip, or final pinning down. Collectivity is 'to come', in the sense that it addresses the *arrivant*, who is necessarily to come, evanescent and melting to the exact same extent as she, he or it (how can we tell for sure?) is disturbingly 'there'.

These are the precise coordinates of the global warming crisis. We are faced with the ability to choose our coexistence with other life forms and accept responsibility for global warming; or reactively to wait for 'the market' to sort it out. (Funny how we can imagine the end of the world as we know it, but not so well the end of capitalism.) The discourse of community cannot help us to jump across this open historical moment into the future, because it is intrinsically conservative, if not reactionary, if not, at times, fascist. Community implies a boundary between inside and outside, which implies inclusion and exclusion: scapegoating. The antagonistic energy of the community is pasted onto the scapegoat, who is then sent outside the community to purge it of its contradictions. Collectivity posits that the antagonisms are directly a feature of coexistence as such. Thus these antagonisms have to do with an inadequate politics of collectivity itself, which must henceforth be revised to address the antagonism. The two models are deeply asymmetrical. It is not that collectivity embraces more life forms: it is not just a bigger, 'new and improved' community.

If we are to achieve a radical ecological politics, then we must acknowledge the difficulty of the strange stranger. We are faced with an apparent paradox: materialism and what mistakenly goes under the sign of 'mysticism' are

inextricably interlinked. Our ecological existence is ‘nearer than breathing, closer than hands and feet’.¹⁴ We’ve got others – rather, others have got us – literally under our skin.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

What conclusions can we draw?

There is no nature, never was, never will be. There is therefore no ‘world’ as such. Indeed, there is no ontology – no ontology is possible without a violent forgetting of the intrinsically incomplete, ‘less than’ level we have been describing. Thus no phenomenology is truly grounded in reality. Ecophenomenology therefore contains an internal limit caused by the humiliating paucity of the ‘incomplete’ ontic level.

Science and capitalism have ensured that we are now directly responsible for what we used to see outside ourselves as Nature, if only in the negative. It is now the task of philosophy and politics to catch up with, and I hope surpass, this state of affairs. What has been called Nature (I capitalize it precisely to ‘denature’ it) is now on ‘this’ side of history and politics. That’s the difference between *weather*, which just happens to us, and *climate*. We can’t see climate directly, but we can take direct responsibility for it, bring it on ‘this’ side of history. Walter Benjamin asserts that when weather becomes a topic for collective action (as now), it stops being that thing ‘over yonder’ called the weather. It ‘stand[s] in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon [it] in politics and history emerges’.¹⁵

14. George Morrison, *The Weaving of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1994), 106.

15. I develop this in *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge,

The same goes for the strange stranger as opposed to 'the animal'. We shall soon regard the phrase 'the animal question' with as much queasy horror as 'the Jewish question' – and for the same reasons.

Let it be' is over. Heideggerian environmentalism fails at a fundamental level. Since being itself is in question, there is not much to 'let be' in the first place. We are faced with a Romantic irony in which we cannot rid ourselves of our conscious implication in the interconnected Universe. Our minds, in short, are part of the interdependence. There is no 'reality' in which we are 'embedded' separate from our awareness of this reality. And yet, and at the very same time, there is not nothing at all. The Interdependence Theorem is not nominalism, let alone nihilism.

For Heidegger, Being lets things be. Poetry gives us unique access to this letting-be quality of Being. Cue a thousand environmental maxims, poems, attitudes. But what do we let be? When letting-be becomes a political question, the Being really hits the fan. Do we let Exxon be? Do we let global warming be? Do we let the Sixth Mass Extinction Event (for which we ourselves are responsible) be? The Interdependence Theorem means that Nature becomes historical, and therefore political. Letting be therefore becomes a tacit choice to maintain the status quo.

There are Heideggerians who seriously suggest this. Interventions into the substance of reality are seen as inevitably failed attempts to not let be. The ideological language of immersion in the lifeworld – profoundly environmentalist language, derived from Heidegger – is

complicit with current social and ecological conditions. This sounds counterintuitive, but it's no different than driving past what looks like two separate buildings that turn out to be part of the same structure, a type of parallax. Insisting on our embeddedness (like Iraq War reporters) in the 'world' is – shocking thought – part of the problem. In particular, this is because ideas come bundled with attitudes. While the language of embeddedness insists that we are up close and personal with reality, the attitude it codes for is cosy, vicarious, aesthetic distance.

'Leave no trace' was a slogan from an environmentalist movement about picking up after yourself when you go hiking. 'Leave no trace' is a translation of 'Let it be'. Imagine Heidegger in a hide: the stupefied, plangent hush of his prose tells of a huntsman waiting for Being, with a gun or binoculars – even if the gun is only the gun of the fascinated gaze. "Be vewy vewy quiet," as Elmer Fudd says, on the hunt for Bugs Bunny.¹⁶ Letting-be conjures the 'meditative' quiet of the forest. Here is a Buddhist lama writing what I hold to be the definitive passage on the affinity between contemplativeness and violence. The lama is recounting the words of a visitor from the city of Birmingham to his monastery in southern Scotland. The visitor was a little hesitant to do any actual meditation:

Well, it's nice you people are meditating, but I feel much better if I walk out in the woods with my gun and shoot animals. I feel very meditative walking through the woods and listening to the sharp, subtle sounds of animals jumping forth, and I can shoot at them. I feel I am doing something worthwhile at

16. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 182.

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the same time. I can bring back venison, cook it, and feed my family. I feel good about that.¹⁷

Let it be! Pull! Bang! What a fantastic sight! Shhh, quiet, I'm trying to kill this rabbit. Quietly, meditatively, I insert my knife gently and smoothly into its neck, mindfully and meditatively I slit its throat ... In the rabbit's blood I can smell the quiet of the fields, the 'toilsome tread' of the paws on their daily round, the search for something to nibble ... this rabbit corpse is a moving environmental poem, like a pair of old shoes in a Van Gogh painting ... mmm ...

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.¹⁸

I have recently been accused of not knowing what Nature is because I have never killed an animal that I've subsequently eaten. This is a criterion that I am happy not

17. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 35–36.

18. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 15–87 (33–4).

to have fulfilled. Heideggerianism, the quintessence of the contemplative ecophenomenological mode in which a lot of Nature-speak now addresses us, is marked by a trace of violence, an unspeakable violence towards the world it so lovingly appears to reveal to us. The very worn insides of the peasant shoes about which Heidegger rhapsodizes so beautifully in his essay on the origin of the work of art are made from leather, which is animal skin. A certain kind of intellectuality revels in the anti-intellectualism afforded by Heidegger's language, which demands a passive submission almost taboo elsewhere in the modern Humanities. This passivity finds its virtual analogue in the happy, servile authenticity of the peasant woman, which Heidegger deduces from Van Gogh's shoes. Contemplation here appears deep but not genuinely disturbing: it is a superficial vicarious experience of an imaginary other's suffering. Substitute a gas chamber or Hiroshima human shadow, or a simple pair of Nikes, for the shoes, and this supposed contemplativeness becomes unnerving. You can imagine committing a murder in a beautiful, mindful, Heideggerian way. Aesthetically powerful descriptions of the natural world, then, are not only a waste of time, but might unwittingly aid the 'other side' of the contemporary coin, which sees the world as an exploitable resource or as objects of instrumental reason (the difference between a cow and beef would be the application of this instrumentality).

Heidegger's contemplative language is so seductive that in countless ecocritical and ecotheoretical texts, he is often the sole representative of a noninstrumental point of view. We cannot ignore this rhetorical mode, and not just because there are many adaptations of it. The Heidegger

meme is seductive because it speaks to something profound, something often called spiritual. In order to get over Heidegger, we have to go underneath him.

Ecology is about intimacy. Instead of insisting on being part of something bigger, ecological thinking leads to a different framework: intimacy, not holism. Thus organicism is no longer a workable mode of aesthetics and politics. Organicism believes that form can fit content like an invisible glove, leaving no trace. Organic form is greater than the sum of its parts. Most environmentalisms – including systems theories – are organicist. World fits mind and mind fits world, as William Wordsworth asserted. In the margins of his copy of the poem where Wordsworth laid this out, William Blake wrote: ‘You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted ... & please your lordship’.¹⁹

Desire is inescapable in ecological coexistence. Yet environmentalism as currently formulated tries to transcend the contingency of desire, claiming that its desires if any are natural. Organicism partakes of environmentalist chastity. ‘Nature loving’ is supposedly chaste (impossible formula! like courtly love, or Neoplatonic love), and is thus slave to masculine heteronormativity, a performance that erases the trace of performance.²⁰ ‘Leave no trace’. If you look like you are ‘acting’ masculine, you aren’t. Masculine is Natural. Natural is masculine.

Organicism is a performance of no-performance. It is ‘un-perversion’, with all the ambiguity a double negative

19. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. D.V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 667.

20. See Timothy Morton, ‘Queer Ecology,’ PMLA (forthcoming).

can muster, a desire that erases its trace as soon as it appears. Organicism articulates desire as erasure, erasure-desire. The curtain rises on a pregiven holistic world. But interdependence is not organic: it's differential. Things only look like they fit, because we don't perceive them on an evolutionary or geological time scale. Sphex wasps paralyze crickets to feed to their young. If you move a paralyzed cricket away from in front of the burrow that the Sphex wasp who paralyzed her is inspecting (for the presence of grubs), the wasp will redo the same behaviour, moving the cricket back meaninglessly to the entrance of the hole, without dragging her in.²¹ 'Nature' dissolves when we look directly at it, into assemblages of behaviours, congeries of organs without bodies. Nature looks natural because it keeps going, and going, and going ... like the undead. And because we keep on looking away, keeping our distance, framing it, sizing it up.

Blake heard the voice of authority in organicism. Authoritarian organicism gains its power by naturalizing difference. Nature is unmarked ('leave no trace'). It is established by exclusion, and then by the exclusion of exclusion. We must rediscover what has been excluded from the book of Nature. Ecology must unthink *ecologocentrism*. I mean precisely a version of what Derrida calls logocentrism, the creation of a metaphysical scheme that sets up a sign as a Master signifier that magically stands outside the system of meaning, and guarantees the meaning and coherence of all the other signs.²² Once this is established, we know what's in and what's out, what's up and what's down, what's marked and what's unmarked.

21. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, 360–361, 613–614.

22. For further discussion see Timothy Morton, 'Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals', *SubStance* 37.3 (2008), 37–61.

The Interdependence Theorem does not allow this knowledge to congeal.

Perhaps we could give ecocentrism the slip by saying that Nature is beyond concept. Beyond concept, Nature is, a Nature for which there are no words. But we are already using words to describe this wordless Nature. Thus a negative theology of the environment must fall prey to the deadly logos it wishes to transcend.²³ Thinking you can escape metaphysics by outlining a hyperessential being beyond being only repeats the problem.²⁴ 'Nature is not unnatural.' A negative theology of the environment is the ultimate chastity – it refuses even to name the non-name, refuses even to non-name it.

NO MORE BEAUTIFUL SOUL

Intimacy means we are caught in desire. Hegel held that philosophy wasn't just about ideas, it was about attitudes towards ideas. These attitudes were as yet unthought ideas, ideas that hadn't yet been realized consciously. If, as Donald Rumsfeld has claimed, there are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, there are also, as Žižek adds, unknown knowns – things that we know, but we don't know that we know them: the unconscious, if you like psychoanalysis. Once you realize what your attitude towards an idea is, that attitude itself becomes an idea, towards which you have yet another attitude, which you'll need to figure out – and so on in a progression that Hegel calls the phenomenology of spirit.

23. See Kate Rigby, 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis,' *New Literary History* 35.3 (2004): 427–42.

24. Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,' in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., *Derrida and Negative Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 74.

Like a vanishing point in a perspective picture, ideas select for certain ways of being understood. Some call this strange feature ideology. Ideology is not well understood, because we think it means belief, which we think means an idea you are holding onto tightly – these two assumptions are themselves ideological, and obscure what ideology is. Attitudes are automated features of ideas – they just pop up when you have them. They aren't subjective states independent of ideas. That's why attitudes are hard to get rid of: they're hardwired into 'that' side of reality, rather than 'this' one. If it were just a matter of prejudice, we'd all have grown up long ago. But as Marx saw, the attitude that sees attitude as prejudice (we call it the Enlightenment) suffers from its own blind spots, having to do with illusions of freedom and autonomy.

Nature seems incontestably 'there' – as many have reminded me, because what I need, as a theory guy, is a good strong dose of it to set me straight. In *Environmental Literary Criticism*, Karl Kroeber says that what 'postmodern theorists' need is a night out in a Midwestern thunderstorm, a ritual hazing that now sounds horribly like waterboarding.²⁵ But is the 'thereness' – more like the 'overthereness' – of nature a lie in the form of the truth? What attitude is this truth enabling?

Hegel gave the attitude a name: the Beautiful Soul, which he found typified in Romanticism.²⁶ The Beautiful Soul suffers from seeing reality as an evil thing 'over yonder'.

25. Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 42.

26. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, analysis and forward by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 383–409.

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Is this not precisely the attitude of many forms of environmentalism? Ironically, the attitude that *nature* enables is the dreaded dualism, Cartesian and otherwise, from which nature-speak from Romanticism to environmentalism has sought to extricate itself. Nature is ‘over yonder’; the subject is ‘over here’. Nature is separated from us by an unbridgeable ontological wall, like a plate glass window – plate glass was the Romantic-period invention that enabled shops to display their wares as if they were in a picture frame, and therefore belonged to another order of reality. Plate glass is a physical byproduct of a quintessentially Romantic production, the consumerist. Not the consumer, but the consumerist: someone who’s aware that she is a consumer, someone for whom the object of consumption defines her identity, along the lines of that great Romantic phrase, invented once by the gourmand Brillat-Savarin and once again by Feuerbach, “You are what you eat.”²⁷

This phrase implies that the subject is caught in a dialectic of desire with an object with which it is never fully identical, just as Wile E. Coyote never catches up with Roadrunner in the cartoon. If Wile E. Coyote ever did catch Roadrunner, he would eat Roadrunner, at which point Roadrunner would cease to be Roadrunner and would become Wile E. Coyote. There is in effect a radical separation between subject and object. Yet consumerism implies an identity that can be collapsed into its object, so we can talk of vegetarians, hip-hop fans, opium eaters, and so on.

27. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke II, Kleinere Schriften*, ed. Werner Schuffenhauer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972), 4.27; Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, trans. Anne Drayton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 13.

One style stands out, a meta-style that Campbell calls bohemianism and I call Romantic consumerism.²⁸ This type of consumerism is at one remove from regular consumerism. It is ‘consumerism-ism’, the realization that the true object of desire is desire as such. Romantic consumerism is window-shopping, enabled by plate glass, and now by browsing online, not consuming anything but wondering what we would be like if we did. In the Romantic period, reflexive consumerism was limited to a few avant-garde types: the Romantics themselves. To this extent Wordsworth and De Quincey are only superficially different. Wordsworth figured out that he could stroll forever in the mountains; De Quincey figured out that you didn’t need mountains, if you could consume a drug that gave you the feeling of strolling in the mountains (sublime contemplative calm, and so on). Nowadays we are all De Quinceys, *flâneurs* in the shopping mall of life. This performance is ever more pervasive: we haven’t really exited the Romantic period.

Romantic consumerism can go one step higher than the Kantian aesthetic purposelessness of window-shopping, when it decides to refrain from consumerism as such. This is the attitude of the boycotter, who emerges as a type in the proto-feminism of the Bluestocking circle in the 1780s and 1790s, and which Percy and Mary Shelley, and many

28. Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); ‘Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century England: A Character-Action Approach,’ in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 40-57. Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5, 9, 50-51, 57, 107-108; ‘Consumption as Performance: The Emergence of the Consumer in the Romantic Period,’ in Timothy Morton, ed., *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (New York and London: Palgrave, 2004), 1-17.

others, practiced. The product boycotted was sugar, which was sentimentally described as the crystallized blood of slaves. The boycotter transmuted objects of pleasure into objects of disgust. To display good taste, you have to know how to feel appropriate disgust, how to turn your nose up at something. The zero degree performance of taste would be spitting out something disgusting, or vomiting. The height of good taste is abstaining from sugar, and spice if you are one of the Shelleys, who held correctly that spice was a product of colonialism.

The attitude of the boycotter is that she has exited consumerism, but this attitude is itself a form of consumerism. It's a performance of a certain style of aesthetic judgment. Believing you've exited consumerism might be the most quintessentially consumerist attitude of all. In large part this is because you see that the world of consumerism is an evil world. 'Over yonder' is the evil object, which you shun or seek to eliminate. 'Over here' is the good subject, who feels good precisely insofar as she has separated from the evil world.

Hegel's Beautiful Soul claims precisely to have exited the evil world. Hegel doesn't claim that the world may or may not be evil – what is wrong with the Beautiful Soul is not that it's prejudiced and rigid. The world is not some object about which we can have different opinions. The problem is far subtler than that. It's that the gaze that constitutes the world as a thing 'over yonder', is evil as such. The environmental fundamentalism that sees the world as an essential, living Earth that must be saved from evil, viral humans is the very type of the Beautiful Soul's evil gaze. Ironically then, this environmentalism is not spiritual, if by spiritual we mean transcending the material

world, but deeply committed to a materialistic view that sees evil as a concrete thing that must be eliminated.

This environmentalism is a form of anti-consumerism, which puts it at the summit of consumerism, not beyond it. It is the most rarefied and pure form of consumerism. Beautiful Soul Syndrome (BS) plagues it, because it sees consumer objects, and consumerisms (the various styles), as so many reified things ‘over yonder’, from which it distances itself with disdain. How do we truly exit from the Beautiful Soul? By taking responsibility for our attitude, for our gaze. On the ground this looks like forgiveness. We are fully responsible for the present environmental catastrophe, simply because we are aware of it. No further evidence, such as a causal link that says humans brought it about, should be required. Looking for a causal link only impedes us from assuming the direct responsibility that is the only sane, ethical response to global warming and the Sixth Mass Extinction Event. It’s worse than a waste of time to keep trying to convince people that environmentalism is a right way of thinking – a right attitude. The current ecological emergency should have proved to us that the environmentalist attitude – that there is a ‘world’ that is separate from me, that nature exists apart from human society – is not only wrong, but also dangerously part of the problem, if only because it provides a good alibi while impeding us from doing anything about our dilemma. The message of ecological awareness should not be ‘We Are the World’ (that awful charity song) but rather, ‘We Aren’t the World’. And never were: letting go of a fantasy is even harder than letting go of a reality.

Beautiful Soul Syndrome wants to induce the correct aesthetic appreciation of the world. But this aesthetic attitude

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can never truly become an ethical one. Kierkegaard terrifyingly showed how insidious Beautiful Soul Syndrome is, in his narrative of the seducer in *Either/Or*.²⁹ Aestheticization is synonymous with evil because it holds the world at a distance from which to size it up. Thus the attitude that says, 'We need more evidence on global warming before we act' ironically joins the attitude that says, 'If only you could experience nature in the raw, you wouldn't have these evil beliefs about destroying it.' In both cases, violence hides beneath projections of innocence. Both statements come bundled with attitudes of awaiting some compelling, unmediated aesthetic experience issuing from beyond the subject. They are both examples of Beautiful Soul Syndrome: both require a certain aesthetic distance, an evaluative, pseudo-contemplative, 'meditative' stance.

If you beat up the Beautiful Soul, however, and leave it bleeding to death in the street, aren't you also a victim of Beautiful Soul Syndrome? However much you try to slough off the aesthetic dimension, doesn't it stick to you ever more tightly? At a certain limit, transcending Beautiful Soul Syndrome means forgiving the Beautiful Soul, recognizing that we are responsible for this Syndrome, whether we picture ourselves that way or not. The only way out of the problem is further in: jumping into our hypocrisy rather than pretending to be disillusioned and beyond ideology, without attitudes. This is a test case for our ability to progress in social collectivity. It means dropping various supporting concepts that provide the background against which regular thinking takes place: *nature, environment, world, life*. We can't have our cake

29. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, tr. and intro. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 243–376.

and eat it too: that's consumerism, which is Beautiful Soul Syndrome. The only way out is in and down, which is why I call my approach *dark ecology*.

Dark ecology realizes that we are hopelessly entangled in the mesh. Dark ecology finds itself fully responsible for all life forms: like a detective in a noir movie, it discovers it's complicit in the crime. Dark ecology is melancholic: melancholy is the Earth humour, and the residuum of our unbreakable psychic connection to our mother's body, which stands metonymically for our connection with all life forms. The irony of dark ecology is like being caught in your own shadow. Hegel disliked Romantic art because its ironies reminded him of the Beautiful Soul. He describes it in hauntingly environmental terms in his lectures on aesthetics.³⁰ Environmental awareness is, finally, a sense of irony, because it is through irony that we realize that we might be wrong, that identity might not be as solid as we think, that our own gaze might be the evil that we see.

30. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.527.