

# From Speculative Realism to an Aesthetics of Scale

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Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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September 2024

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This thesis is 84810 words in length.

Adam Edwards

September 2024

# Abstract

Speculative Realism promised to redefine (primarily Anglophone) Continental Philosophy. Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*,<sup>1</sup> became one of the most influential contributions in this corpus. Morton proposed a category of object to which very large and complex things belong and offered global warming as an exemplar *nonpareil* of a hyperobject and attempted to "establish what phenomenological "experience" is in the absence of anything meaningfully like a "world" at all."<sup>2</sup>

The thesis begins by interrogating both Speculative Realism and *Hyperobjects*, focusing on the implicit claim that there exists a scale of encounter at which experience, and world become inoperative concepts. I argue that *Hyperobjects* fails to address this challenge coherently and ultimately lead to conclusions that are both unsustainable and undesirable.

Through this critique, I examine the task Morton sets out in terms of hermeneutic phenomenology by turning to an overlooked aspect of Heidegger's later work, the gigantic. In doing so, I examine the enduring persistence of Heidegger's thought among contemporary far-right ideologies and ecofascism. By exploring Heidegger's use of scale in terms of aesthetic modes, I conclude that the vexing question of scale that *Hyperobjects* describes is an existing, if overlooked area of philosophical enquiry.

In the final section, I advocate for the role of philosophy in addressing the climate crisis. I argue that the question of scale should remain central to any philosophical intervention on this issue, and that philosophers have an ethical responsibility to produce work that actively engages with and leads efforts to mitigate the climate crisis. Ultimately, the thesis calls for a reorientation of philosophical practice towards aesthetic and ethical frameworks that respond directly to the urgent challenges posed by global environmental change.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 2–3.

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# Acknowledgements

This project, like every other, came about only through the support and generosity, often tacit or unknown, of a wide cast of players.

First, I'd like to acknowledge and thank my supervisory team at the UEA. For most of this project, that team consisted of Rupert Read and Tom Greaves. To both, I offer my thanks for their supportive, and at times challenging supervision and mentorship.

Beyond my supervisory team, I'd like to thank other members of the department for their support and guidance in the years I spent writing this project. I thank Catherine Rowett and David Nowell-Smith for their roles on the probation panel for my work. Their careful observations helped me shape my project in its infancy, and without their comments, the project would not have taken its current form.

Elsewhere in the philosophy department, I'd like to thank Philip Wilson for his mentorship and guidance as well as his great kindness and wit. I thank James Andow for his support and advice as I took up supporting teaching his undergraduate modules. Casting a wider net, I'd like to thank Sally Broughton-Micova, who offered me a lifeline when my project was floundering in troubled waters. I owe gratitude also to the wider community of postgraduate researchers at the UEA. Jack Manzi, Ben Carpenter, Marco Marchesin, and Sam Rajasingham all supported me in different ways over the years, and I'm very grateful for that support. Jasmine Kirkbride, Moe Suzuki, and Xing Huang supported me with their kindness, their camaraderie, and their patience as we raged and laughed through our research projects under the gloom of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond the academy, I would not have been able to complete this work without the compassion and support of friends, who often did not know that they had helped. I cannot name everyone, but Duncan Danger, Niki George, Katie White, Peter Dickerson, Ginny Benardout, Jake Champion, Jack Thirkettle, Erin Patel, Kristian Porter, Dylan Winter, Christine Lloyd, Georgie Rider, Paul Reed, and Craig Turner all deserve mention.

# Introduction

## Motivation

The COVID-19 pandemic and concomitant lockdowns, quarantines, self-isolation, social distance, cancelled Christmases, missed funerals, postponed weddings, etc. was not uniquely hard on PhD researchers. Indeed, I felt extremely self-conscious when I wrote to the school office at the university to argue that my research was “essential” and so I should be able to return to the hastily abandoned PhD office. Who was I to say that my work was essential, and how did this supposedly essential work hold up against the *truly* essential work of healthcare professionals, teachers, and other key workers? The process of writing a PhD is a notoriously solitary endeavour, and the loss, almost overnight, of a significant amount of social scaffolding was jarring for me, as for others. What of the informal chats with supervisors in corridors? The impromptu lunches with PhD colleagues? The reading groups, workshops, symposia?

Perhaps there were positives to the pandemic also. Disabled students finally had their long-ignored pleas heard as courses were made available online. People stopped ignoring minor illnesses and took care about how they might contribute to the spread of sickness through their actions. The protection of vulnerable members of society was prioritised, and the contributions of key workers were for a time recognised and celebrated, including by the political class which for so long has neglected and denigrated them. People cherished their social connections, took value in exercise, cared for one another’s health. Governments became immediately paternalistic, authoritarian in that the reach of the state extended into people’s lives in the most intimate details: wash your hands for thirty seconds, don’t kiss your lover, don’t touch your dying grandparents. People were told not to work, to stay at home. The experts were in, policy would be informed by science, the data were in charge. The government paid the nation’s wages while the people learned to bake, wrote novels or poetry, learned languages, took up hobbies and crafts. Was this the Keynesian dream, or the utopia of the fully automated luxury communists? For those who long argued for a universal basic income, a reduced work week, greater flexibility in the workplace, it seemed like things were changing.

The almost instant morphing of the world into its lockdown shape offered several insights that pertain to this project. After all, degrowth environmentalists have argued for the

winding down of global economies,<sup>3</sup> for many the goal of environmental action and the only way out of the insanity of infinite growth in a world with finite resources is for the spell to be broken, markets overturned and planned economic decline to take the place of nihilistic capital creation. The goal is not to see major economies spend more of their GDP on climate mitigation and adaptation, but to reduce those GDPs *in toto*. During the pandemic, global economies all but shut down, as visible in almost any growth chart. Ten years previously, the idea that every single economy would, at once, enter a period of rapid decline was, anecdotally, preposterous. One imagines anarcho-primitivists calling for such decline perhaps, but for mainstream environmental discourse, debates about sustainability, a 1.5°C temperature rise above pre-industrial levels, or net-zero invariably kick the ball into the long grass of 2050 or beyond.

More authoritarian approaches have seen restrictions placed on people's freedom to engage in polluting or otherwise environmentally damaging behaviour by extending laws on littering to car usage, for example.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, the doctrine of personal responsibility has been exercised to place the responsibility for mitigation and adaptation on the exercise of private liberty. The case-in-point for this doctrine has been the adoption of personal carbon footprints. Quite forgotten is the origin of this idea, in the offices of the PR firm Ogilvy's, at the direction of their client, BP, in the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> The idea that, at the direction of national governments, almost all world economies would, in effect shutdown, was simply not in the imaginary of even the most revolutionary environmentalists. National spending on measures like the UK's furlough scheme in which the state took on the burden of paying the wages of workers instructed to quarantine at home, ballooned in a way that would invite ridicule if, say a Green Party politician had appeared on a talk show to call for.

First, the shutdown of major global economies, the restrictions placed on people's freedoms, and the unprecedented level of international coordination between governments offered a glimpse of one future on the path of which we could embark to change the course of the climate crisis. Economic shutdown across the world occurred almost overnight. Governments blew budgets out of the water by paying workers to not work. There was in sight an end to almost all commercial air-travel; but for the insanity of the commercial

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Hickel et al., 'Degrowth: A New Logic for the Global Economy', *BMJ* 387 (2024).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Gilley, 'Authoritarian Environmentalism and China's Response to Climate Change', *Environmental Politics* 21, no. 2 (2012): 292.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Solnit, 'Big Oil Coined "Carbon Footprints" to Blame Us for Their Greed. Keep Them on the Hook', *The Guardian*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/23/big-oil-coined-carbon-footprints-to-blame-us-for-their-greed-keep-them-on-the-hook>.

aviation model that demanded empty planes fly regardless. There were of course, shocking inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as corruption at the highest levels of government that remains unresolved.

There were also often misjudged accounts of the rolling-back of human activity leading to a “healing” of the natural world. City streets now empty of human activity came alive with urban fauna, the pace of life slowed, and humans looked out of quarantine windows in wonder at the thriving diversity of the nonhuman world beyond. It was an electric moment that bled into online spaces through the filter of ironic trolling. Tweets containing postcard images of metropolitan waterways, parks, or other urban environments superimposed with cartoon creatures with the caption “nature is healing” became memetic.<sup>6</sup> This memetic mode of pandemic and lockdown response hinted at an aesthetic truth: urban environments indeed are nicer, more habitable, more nonhuman friendly when not choked with traffic. Walking through town is more pleasant when the air is not filled with exhaust fumes. Moments of social contact are more meaningful when (perhaps painfully) limited to a handful of people, or only at certain times.

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<sup>6</sup> Isa Lee, ‘Tweet! Tweet! We Can Hear the Birds Again: The Impact of User-Driven Platforms on Climate Conversations and Public Action’, *Remake*, no. 2 (2021), <https://remake.wustl.edu/issue2/lee-tweet-tweet-we-can-hear-the-birds-again>.



ruby 🐸  
@roobeekeane



Wildlife finally returning to Thames. Nature is healing 🌸



FIGURE 1 RUBY (@ROOBEEKEANE) "WILDLIFE FINALLY RETURNING TO THAMES. NATURE IS HEALING."

Crudely speaking, then, the pandemic has offered a vision for a possible future. The climate crisis might be mitigated by direct intervention by nation states and international consensus arrived at by deference of policy making to experts in the field. This may take the form of imposed restrictions on things taken for granted today, like international travel or unrestrained consumption, and may further impose limitations on time spent at leisure activities and the like. Crucially, these restrictions may be imposed without democratic consensus and without overt consideration of the potential damage to any individual's health, the health of the body politic is given the priority. This is the "pandemic response" model of mitigation or adaptation. Any such intervention would appear to open a route for extreme ideologies to permeate online spaces, where memetic and self-referential trolling risks radicalisation that may well bleed through the thin veil separating the on- and offline. Moreover, such a response relies on the technics of global capitalism in a way that cannot be used to solve the very problem it creates. This tension, in a nutshell, is what motivates this PhD.

## Aesthetics of scale

The climate crisis confronts us with questions of scale that exceed ordinary comprehension. Planetary climate models, global ecological feedback loops, and infrastructural systems extend far beyond local perception, challenging both our capacity to experience and our ethical responsibilities. At the same time, localised environmental practices, rooted in immediate contexts and community knowledge, offer intimacy with the natural world but risk isolating any agents from the planetary consequences of human activity. The tension between the global and the local, the measurable and the overwhelming, raises philosophical and political questions: how can we apprehend scale in a way that is neither abstractly quantitative nor bucolic and parochial; and how can such apprehension guide ethical and aesthetic responses to ecological crises?

Philosophical resources for thinking this problem are uneven. Kant's account of the mathematical sublime provides a way to encounter magnitude that exceeds sensory grasp without succumbing to paralysis: it describes an expansion of the cognitive horizon in the face of the immense. Heidegger's notion of the gigantic, by contrast, diagnoses the historical and ontological conditions under which large-scale technological and industrial processes become visible and operative, highlighting the embeddedness of scale in human history and in the logic of technological enframing. Taken together, these frameworks offer the possibility of thinking scale in a manner attentive both to experience and to historical-ontological conditions. Yet each also presents limitations: Kant's approach abstracts the sublime from its social and technological contexts, while Heidegger's privileging of the poetic risks a retreat into an idyll.

Contemporary speculative and object-oriented philosophies have sought to rethink relations with the nonhuman and grapple with questions of scale, yet they too fall short for environmental thought. Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realism challenges correlationist constraints but fails to engage with the ethical and political dimensions of the climate crisis. Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology emphasizes the autonomy of objects but risks depoliticising environmental relations and underplaying scale. Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects attends to the vastness of ecological phenomena but as a descriptive framework falls short of grasping the inherent normativity of things, leaving questions of political and ethical responsibility underdeveloped. Collectively, these approaches sketch important aspects of nonhuman agency and magnitude but do not provide conceptual tools capable of navigating the dual dangers of quietist localism and positivist domination.

This thesis addresses these gaps by proposing what I will call an aesthetics of scale.

Emerging from the conjunction of Kant's mathematical sublime and Heidegger's *Gigantic*, yet resisting Heidegger's turn to art, poetry, and *Gelassenheit* as necessary modes of disclosure, this framework seeks to apprehend magnitude without reducing it to calculable control or retreating into isolated localism. It recognises the political and ethical stakes of scale: nativist ecofascism contracts scale to exclusionary smallness, while biopolitical domination inflates it into totalising control over ecological and human populations alike. An aesthetics of scale offers a path between these extremes, allowing for the apprehension of vastness in ways that register tension, incompleteness, and the incommensurability of human and nonhuman scales.

In environmental aesthetics, this approach reconfigures the relation between beauty, landscape, and artistic depiction. Traditional aesthetics often privilege harmony, proportion, or the picturesque, subordinating magnitude to human comprehension. By contrast, an aesthetics of scale accommodates the unsettling and the uncontainable, permitting representations of nature that acknowledge both the vast and the intimately experienced, without reducing either to mere measure or mere nostalgia.

## Structure

This thesis is organised into three parts; each part is divided into chapters and sections as follows.

In Part I, I offer a critique of a group of philosophies together known variously as speculative realism, new materialism, speculative materialism, and object-oriented ontology (OOO).<sup>7</sup> I argue that for all the attention these philosophical and critical movements garnered, their various approaches are insufficient to the task of approaching the climate crisis.

In Part II, I attempt to “return to the thing” of speculative realism by reinterrogating its origins in Martin Heidegger's thought while maintaining a firm steer against Heidegger's enduring power to drag thought further right. I set out the ideological route from Heidegger's critique of modernity towards anti-technological radicalism and onwards to contemporary ecofascism. I also examine Heidegger's response to the dominating power of machination and attempt to chart a different course, given the valence of the climate crisis under which we must now all endure.

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<sup>7</sup> Pronounced “triple O.”

Part III consists of my attempt to recover the possibility of a genuinely radical ecological thinking, which was, in my view, the unrealised promise of speculative realism. By joining the dots between Kant's aesthetics and Heidegger's post-turn thinking in response to the overweening power of technology, I develop an aesthetics of scale, a mode of engagement with the world under the obtaining conditions of the climate crisis that navigates a middle path between the urge to retreat into localist quietism, and to dominate the crisis through mechanistic, global systems.

Though I think these philosophies have, in some cases, laudable aspirations, my criticisms are mounted around three prongs, which I develop primarily in Part I. First, these philosophies lack internal consistency. Second, they are too vague and do not produce reliable conclusions. Third, even if prongs one and two were overcome, these philosophies offer little that we, as ethically engaged members of a burning planet, should want. In developing the three prongs of this critique, I look closely at Quentin Meillassoux's, Graham Harman's, and Timothy Morton's work. I am interested in the imagination of scale in the case of each of these three thinkers. For Meillassoux, this comes in the form of the dramatic abyss of "ancestral time" that must cleave post-Kantian philosophers from utterances about the world that originate in, or rather reference, events that took place before the possibility of givenness. I question the scale of Harman's "many hells" caused by the withdrawal of objects from the site of their encounter. The lines on which it is useful to approach Harman's work is by focusing on two grounds: first, the idiosyncrasy of his reading of Heidegger's tool analysis and second on the importance of metaphor in his object-oriented-ontology. For Morton, scale takes the form of "hyperobjects," quasi-demonic things so vast and widely distributed across space and time as to throw up peculiar cognitive challenges to those that encounter them.

A wide range of authors produce work in the broad realm of new materialisms. In this thesis I focus only on the three I have already outlined. Though I have chosen to present the work in a different order, my investigation into speculative philosophies, began with Morton's *Hyperobjects*. The authors presented in this thesis then, are those that form the foundations, in my view, of Meillassoux's own speculative endeavour. Though writers like Ray Brassier, Jane Bennett, and many others have made contributions to this body of writing, their inclusion would diffuse the thesis too broadly, and as such I have chosen to restrict my focus.



The second part contains a lengthy reading of the terms of scale used in Heidegger's later works, particularly the *Contributions to Philosophy*.<sup>8</sup> I first explore the problematic relationship between Heidegger and his contemporary critics of modernity, most notably Ernst Jünger, and the contemporary (often inadvertent) appropriations of Heidegger's thought by the far-right, in particular novel formulations of far-right environmentalism and ecofascism. I contend that such manoeuvres by far-right ideologues are a risk and that any environmental projects ought to take good care not to fly too close to such positions. In 2.3. I offer a close analysis of Heidegger's use of "gigantic" in his later works, especially the *Contributions to Philosophy*. I trace the use of scale in aesthetic terms and try to sketch out what it is about things that are large and complex that are so vexing, and how environmental concerns connect to this aesthetics of scale.

The continued development and expansion of the reach of technology into our lives, and the wider world is vexing for those of us whose lives are in so many ways conditioned by our use of technology. Our use of technology requires the ongoing domination of the human and nonhuman worlds (the worlds especially, of those whose labour is exploited in the production of technology, without rights over the value they produce, reduced, as described above, to non-moral agents), the extraction and exploitation of natural resources, the abuse of work forces across the global supply chain, and a general instrumental picture of the world in which all nonhuman is reduced, in Heideggerian terms, to standing reserve. On the one hand, the young are so enmeshed with technological forces that extrication is an extreme measure, where it's even desired. On the other, people are complicit in the destruction of the natural world that they decry, by virtue of their participation, or entanglement in the systems of destruction that maintain the technological standard to which they are so wedded. As the political elite, and civil society at large prevaricate over taking substantive measures to mitigate or adapt to the now unavoidable climate crisis, the young, who have most to lose from being denied a future, rage against this inertia.

Against the milieu of political and identity experimentation, in which potentially vulnerable, socially isolated young people indulge in extremity (perhaps ironically) creating algorithmic echo chambers in which their own nascent beliefs are reflected back at them, that rage against climate injustice simmers. Extreme environmental views percolate alongside the radical libertarianism, polluted by far-right ideology, protected and amplified by the protection afforded it by self-appointed free speech defenders. Out of this percolation comes

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge Zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Vittorio Klostermann, 2003).

the marriage of extreme right-wing ideology and environmental philosophy, culminating in dangerous forms of explicit ecofascism, in which a protean cluster of beliefs around property rights, anti-technology radicalism, climate nihilism, and the destiny of the west vacillate.

At the centre of my concern in Part II is a dilemma to which I have already alluded. Its horns are, on the one side, the appeal of anti-technology and anti-modernity in terms of a viable response to, or route to adaptation regarding the climate crisis. On the other is the appeal of globe-spanning initiatives, and technological “solutions” to the crisis. I worry that both horns are very narrow, and each crosses an uncomfortable abyss. In the first case, the abyss is ecofascism, and in the second, a hyper-accelerationist form of capitalistic nihilism. I express a concern that devices like hyperobject theory or the ecological thought distilled from Morton’s work are reliant on precisely the kind of technological thinking that has brought about the climate crisis.

In the third part, I to gather these critical threads to explore what an aesthetics of scale could look like. I sketch out the role philosophers can play in shepherding the kind of deep adaptation needed in light of the climate crisis. It is already clear that I will use the term “aesthetics” regularly through this thesis, and it is worth clarifying what aesthetics is, as far as this project is concerned. Aesthetics in this thesis does not refer only to a philosophy of art or beauty but is a shorthand for a kind of sensory or perceptual experience that brings about an affective change. Encountering a work of art or music can bring about such a state, as well as can encountering a rainstorm or wild animal. Interpersonal interactions can certainly serve as aesthetic encounters as can isolated meditation. A definition of aesthetic isn’t necessary to proceed with this project, what matters is the sense of affective change, and, moreover, what can be done with that affective change. Aesthetics of scale then refers to the encounter with objects and processes we perceive as particularly large or complex, and the affective change that such an encounter engenders. In this section I begin to ask how this change in affective state can lead to or motivate the kinds of behaviours needed to bring about mitigation or adaptation in light of the climate crisis.

## Part I: Critique of new materialisms

“If I am inclined to suppose that a mouse has come into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, I shall do well to examine those rags very closely to see how a mouse may have hidden in them, how it may have got there and so on. But if I am convinced that a mouse cannot come into being from these things, then this investigation will perhaps be superfluous.”<sup>9</sup>

As a group of movements in contemporary (primarily) Anglophone continental philosophy, speculative or object-oriented philosophies emerged following the 2006 publication, and 2008 translation into English of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*.<sup>10</sup> Through this work, Meillassoux allegedly split the sky over the world of continental philosophy, illuminating an open secret at the heart of phenomenology, existentialism and post-structuralism, and at the various other theoretical frameworks in the Foucauldian, Derridean, Lacanian, etc. traditions. For Meillassoux, correlationism is a tacit dogma in post-Kantian critical philosophy by which neither thinking nor being can be considered apart from the other. As such, according to Meillassoux, any philosophy which eschews direct realism holds the philosopheme “correlationism” more-or-less closely to its figurative chest. Meillassoux’s project in *After Finitude* is to attempt to reclaim *le grand dehors* the great outdoors of pre-critical philosophy by transgressing the limits supposedly placed on thought by correlationism through radically speculative thinking.

Graham Harman’s intervention with speculative philosophies dates to 2007, when at a conference “Speculative Realism” at Middlesex University, Harman and Meillassoux gave papers along with Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant.<sup>11</sup> In the paper Harman presented, “On Vicarious Causation,”<sup>12</sup> he set out to address the problem of so-called “philosophies of access,” by which the possibility of philosophically interesting encounters is a privilege enjoyed by human subjects alone. By arguing that objects withdraw from any such encounter, rendering themselves inaccessible, Harman attempts to explain how such encounters are possible. Moreover, by criticising the privileged access by humans to such encounters, Harman can argue first that encounters between nonhuman objects are possible,

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<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). All references to *Philosophical Investigations* use this edition. From this point, I will identify the section of *Philosophical Investigations* with square brackets in-line as follows: [PI: 52].

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Speculative Realism: A One-Day Workshop’, in *Collapse III*, Urbanomic, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Graham Harman, ‘On Vicarious Causation’, in *Collapse II*, ed. Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2007).

and secondly that such encounters also involve the withdrawal of objects from the site of the encounter, such that no object is ever completely available to any other. Through OOO, Harman divides the world in two, into a sensual matrix on which all encounters between things take place, and through which they are mediated, and a hidden realm beneath it, in which an infinitely complex reality of real objects forever sinking away from each other churns endlessly. Wolfendale describes this cosmology “like the many hells of Buddhist lore,” with each realm composed of many infernal layers, each layer isolated from the others, and only available as a mirage on the horizon, containing endless depths in which “ever more intricate and malicious economies of action [are] yet to be explored.”<sup>13</sup>

Timothy Morton’s addition to the speculative realist corpus is his 2013 *Hyperobjects*<sup>14</sup> in which his explicit commitments to speculative realism, and Harman’s OOO, lead him to posit a new ontological category for very large or complicated events, processes and objects: hyperobjects. Morton’s work marks the intervention of speculative realism and OOO into environmental philosophy through the presentation of global warming as an exemplar of this new object category. Moreover, Meillassoux’s avowed anti-humanism offers a route towards an ecological philosophy through questioning the possibilities of a “world without us,”<sup>15</sup> that seems to offer a route towards the structures of deep ecology, while avoiding, for the most part, Heidegger’s philosophy. I examine in detail why this might be a desirable outcome for any project of environmental philosophy in Part II.

The term “speculative realism” is itself somewhat controversial, and agreement on the term only arose following a compromise proposed by Brassier. Meillassoux had preferred “speculative materialism,” which Harman rejected. Hamilton-Grant preferred “British idealism,” leaving only Harman who continues to widely use the moniker “speculative realism.”<sup>16</sup> Many of the writers working in and around speculative realism maintain active blogs, on which informal discussion and debate happen at a pace not allowed by the formalities of academic publishing. This too is not without controversy. Ray Brassier in 2011 gave an interview decrying the use of personal blogs to pursue philosophical discourse, “I don’t believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (Urbanomic, 2014), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*.

<sup>15</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 79.

exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students.”<sup>17</sup> Where I have consulted and referenced blogs in this thesis, it is with the intention that they serve a useful clarificatory purpose only.

I begin in 1.1. by introducing Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, reconstructing the key steps of his argument in *After Finitude*, namely the critique of correlationism, the problem of ancestrality, the facticity of correlation, and the necessity of contingency. I question the theory of time on which Meillassoux’s problem relies and offer a dissolution of the problem of ancestrality based on a challenge to the tacit assumptions on temporality on which Meillassoux’s argument depends. In 1.1.3. I offer a further challenge to Meillassoux’s critique originating in ecophenomenology and geomateriality, relying on recent work by ecophenomenologists to undermine the structures of this critique.

The meat of this section is 1.3. In which I provide a close analysis and criticism of Timothy Morton’s hyperobject theory. I extract from Morton’s work a stipulative definition for diagnosing hyperobjects, and several attendant criteria described in *Hyperobjects*. In short, my criticisms are that hyperobjects is an incoherent theory, is incompatible with Morton’s stated philosophical commitments, leads to unsustainable and undesirable conclusions, and amounts to reification fallacy and category error.

By way of conclusion, I reframe the challenge to environmental philosophies posed by speculative philosophies. In so doing, the archaeology of these theoretical projects provides the groundwork for the remainder of the thesis, a typology of the environmental crisis in aesthetic terms of scale, from the Kantian monstrous, to the Heideggerian gigantic, and on to the question of finitude.

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<sup>17</sup> Ray Brassier, ‘I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in the Truth: Ray Brassier Interviewed by Marchin Rychter’, *Kronos Quarterly* 1, no. 16 (2011).

## 1.1. Quentin Meillassoux

### 1.1.1. Speculative materialism

In this section I introduce Meillassoux's speculative materialism, setting out his critique of correlationism and the supplementary problems that animate his work: ancestral statements and the arche-fossil.

Meillassoux describes the problem his work seeks to address in the following terms:

In *After Finitude*, the problem that I encounter is that of explaining the possibility of science, physics, being able to describe a world without humans. For a transcendental philosopher, for what I call 'correlationism', this makes no sense – it is an absurd question to ask, 'What would the world be if there were no humans?' 'What would the world be like if we didn't exist?'<sup>18</sup>

Meillassoux offers the following definitions at the outset of his inquiry in *After Finitude*:

- Correlation: "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."
- Correlationism: "any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined."
- Correlational circle: "the argument according to which one cannot think the in-itself without entering into a vicious circle, thereby immediately contradicting oneself."<sup>19</sup>
- Ancestral: "any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to every recognised form of life on earth [sic]."
- Arche-fossil: "materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life."<sup>20</sup>

Meillassoux's principal development in *After Finitude*, and elsewhere, is the critique of correlationism, which he develops in the following terms,

If you speak about something, you speak about something that is given to you and posited by you. Consequently, the sentence 'X is', means: 'X is the correlate of

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<sup>18</sup> Ray Brassier et al., 'Speculative Realism', ed. Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2007), 328.

<sup>19</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 10.

thinking' in a Cartesian sense. That is: X is the correlate of an affection, or a perception or a conception, or of any given subjective act. To be is to be a correlate, a term of a correlation.<sup>21</sup>

The question Meillassoux addresses above regards the existence of a world absent humans. Specifically, Meillassoux's concern is with what, if anything, correlationist philosophies can say of or about events, objects or processes supposed to have occurred anterior to the emergence of life on Earth, the likes of which are made as a matter of course in the physical sciences (in agreeing on the likely dating of the accretion of the planet, for example). For Meillassoux, the motivation behind such an inquiry is to lead thinkers to the "great outdoors" of pre-Kantian philosophy, an absolute outside indifferent to humans or givenness, and free from the supposed prison of the correlation.<sup>22</sup>

Through this movement, Meillassoux's aim is to outflank the contemporary philosophies most wedded to correlationism by appeal to the counter-intuitive steps philosophers in such fields are wont to make in response to direct realism. Meillassoux compares this enquiry to questions about gaps in our phenomenal experience of the world, for example in finding a broken dinner plate on the kitchen floor, we're likely able to conclude that before lying broken on the floor it had been drying on the counter and fell perhaps because of a strong breeze, or an exploring cat. For Meillassoux an example of this kind is not comparable to an ancestral statement. He argues that correlationist philosophies mistake a gap in possible knowledge with a given gap in possible knowledge, in which the world, incomplete in its givenness includes events and possible counterfactuals which allow, for example, for the possibility of my having heard the plate crash against the tile floor, were the circumstances merely different. Ancestral statements, by comparison, refer to events with no possible subject of experience which could have perceived them if the circumstances were merely different. A statement like, "approximately 4.5 billion years ago, the sun was formed from the accumulation of matter at the centre of a large nebula" presents a correlational lacuna in which nothing is given for a possible subject of perception, as the statement purportedly describes a state of affairs in which the possibility of a perceiving subject is non-existent.

The "always-already in" -ness of phenomenological orientations towards the world constitutes the prison Meillassoux describes, resting on the supposed impossibility of gaining a vantage from which to see the territory in which one is embedded. This imprisonment

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<sup>21</sup> Brassier et al., 'Speculative Realism', 409.

<sup>22</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 7.

takes the form of an invisible cage, the bars of which we extend towards as our phenomenological consciousness engages in its dealings towards the world; it is entirely relative to the extent to which we are in fact able to transcend ourselves in our dealings in this world: a very narrow extent, in Meillassoux's thought. The outsideness beyond the bars of this invisible cage is of things that exist in themselves without reference to thought, unhindered by the boundaries of the correlational circle. At the outset, I want to set out two challenges to the assumptions that first, correlationism has the carceral character that Meillassoux ascribes to it and second, that "the great outdoors" properly obtains as an alternative or outside to it.

The outsideness of the great outdoors is an indeterminate sense of outsideness, which is to say, not much of a sense at all. If the correlation imprisons us, it is a prison in which the door is not locked (PI: 99).<sup>23</sup> For an absolute outside to make sense it must be muscular in its absoluteness, beyond the bars and inaccessible to the incarcerated within. If the correlation serves as a sort of Demiurge, trapping us in the world of illusions and correlates, it seems we always-already have the gnostic tools to escape, at least conceptually, the enclosure Meillassoux describes. Though the response to this must be that the access we as phenomenal subjects take ourselves as having to this great outdoors is in fact only access to the correlate of the great outdoors. Yet the correlate of the world, thought, language, etc. are equivalent to the world, thought, language, etc. Where these words have meaning at all, we are right to think that their use should be "as humble" as simple, concrete nouns like table, chair, and desk [PI: 96-97].<sup>24</sup>

### 1.1.2. Circles and illusions

Meillassoux articulates the correlational circle, according to which:

- a thing that is independent of thought cannot be thought of without contradiction,
- and, that which cannot be thought without contradiction is impossible,
- therefore, a thought-independent in-itself is impossible.

The circle enables Meillassoux to argue that for the correlationist, the absolute is nothing of the sort, "to think something absolute is to think an absolute for-us, and hence not think

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<sup>23</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 49.



anything absolute.”<sup>25</sup> The correlational circle as articulated seems to give rise to two epistemic “sins.” The first is the eliding of thinking and knowing, and the second is the blithe “slip” that sees epistemological concerns become ontological concerns. This first sin confuses the knowability of mind-independent things in the world with the possibility of thinking them. One may not be able to know some fact, whether empirical: how many rabbits there are on the university campus now, for example, or experiential: what it’s like to view the city as a soaring falcon does. While I cannot know them, I can think them and think about them, speculating as I will.

According to Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism, the thinker cannot think of anything other than the correlation, and despite the fact that the thinker may be able to imagine that the world is other than it is, or even other worlds entirely, the correlation itself is inviolable, because to attempt to think of its abolition is to hold it in thought, and thus to become “entangled in a pragmatic contradiction.”<sup>26</sup> By deployment of this gem,<sup>27</sup> the correlation is transformed and held in comparison to the non-correlated, an absurdity every bit like a four-sided triangle. The correlation, therefore, if only by comparison, is non-contingent, and an absolute necessity.<sup>28</sup>

The correlationist circle proceeds by unmasking the vicious circularity inherent in every attempt at absolutization, [sic] without regard for the substance of the arguments put forward. There is no need to examine Descartes’ proof, since the nub of the refutation pertains to the pretension to be able to think the absolute, rather than to any of the details deployed to that end.<sup>29</sup>

Meillassoux’s own words help to enunciate the second “sin,”

The correlationist – it’s true – doesn’t say that reality is the correlation. It’s the metaphysics of subjectivity that says that. He just says we cannot know anything apart from what we can perceive or conceive, etc. That’s all [...] You – the correlationist – say, “You cannot say anything about death”. Well, I can’t say

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<sup>25</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, ‘Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation’, in *Realismus Jetzt*, ed. Armen Avanessian (Merve Verlag, 2013), 46. My translation.

<sup>27</sup> That is to say, the worst argument in the world. See, David Stove, ‘Judge’s Report on the Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World’, in *Cricket Versus Republicanism*, ed. David Stove (Quaker’s Hill Press, 1995), 66–67.

<sup>28</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation’, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 30.

anything about what it's like to be dead, but I can speak about death as an absolute time which is able to destroy any determined entity.<sup>30</sup>

We can begin to develop the two core principles that unite correlationist philosophies, according to Meillassoux. First is the commitment that knowledge of the world is always relative to the knower, and consequently there is no means by which the extent that knowledge is either engendered by or corresponds to the thing itself can be determined. Secondly, the thinking subject is inseparable from the world, in which it is one object among many, and cannot be understood otherwise.<sup>31</sup> For Meillassoux the given gap opens especially wide for the Kantian transcendental subject, which on the one hand exists as a timeless structure encompassing the conditions of knowledge of all empirical subjects, and on the other is only capable of being grasped in time (having neither references nor meaning without instantiation),

The question arises whether the transcendental, whose task it is to show the conditions of the possibility of science, does not destroy the conditions for meaning - the question is whether *the spontaneous realism of science is in truth not the indispensable condition for the meaning of science statements*. So, we do not naively oppose correlationism with the idea of a reality that is dogmatically posited as lying ahead of us; we examine the terms of the meaning of an ancestral scientific statement.<sup>32</sup>

Kant makes a fundamental distinction between the understanding of space and time under transcendental realism against that under transcendental idealism. The transcendental realist regards space and time *qua* substance, which is to say, space and time exist “as things in themselves, which would exist independently of us and our sensibility and this would also be outside us according to pure concepts of the understanding.”<sup>33</sup> By comparison, under Kant's transcendental idealism, time does not exist in itself, such that “if one abstracted from all subjective conditions of the intuition of them; for in the first case it would be something that was actual yet without an actual object.”<sup>34</sup> For Kant, the problem with the understanding of

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Brassier et al., ‘Speculative Realism’, 445–46.

<sup>31</sup> Toby Lovat, ‘The Loss of the Great Outdoors: Neither Correlationist Gem nor Kantian Catastrophe’, *Perspectives*. 7, no. 1 (2017): 15.

<sup>32</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation’, 34. My translation, italics in original: “es fragt sich also, ob *der spontane Realismus der Wissenschaft in Wahrheit nicht die unverzichtbare Bedingung für den Sinn ihrer Aussagen ist*.”

<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 426. A369. When citing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I will reference first the page number in this edition, followed by the pagination of the 1781 A text, then that of the 1787 B text, for example: “159, A26/B42.”

<sup>34</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 163. A33/B49.

time under transcendental realism is one of category error, in which the assumption that external objects can exist independently of their relation to the conditions of human sense and retain their time and space dependent relations and properties. The major error of transcendental realism is thus that the presupposition that space and time, along with all external objects are things themselves, is a conflation of given phenomena with things in themselves, a conflation of distinct perspectives on reality: one under the conditions of apprehension, and the other in which thought abstracts such conditions.<sup>35</sup>

The transcendental illusion arises with the tendency to speculate beyond the limits of human experience in search of knowledge about things that lie beyond those limits. These illusions arise when we attempt to apply the principles of human understanding, which are the basis of our sensory experiences, to things that are beyond the scope of those experiences. Our cognitive faculties are reflective of the structuring of perception by certain kinds of concept, namely the categories, which shape our understanding of the world. However, when we try to apply these concepts beyond the realm of possible experience, we end up with ideas that are beyond the grasp of human cognition. Concepts like infinity, eternity, and the existence of God are not in themselves transcendental illusions, but the apprehension that such terms refer to objects of possible understanding, is. While we may have the capacity to conceive of these ideas in a general sense, Kant suggests that our comprehension of such ideas is conditioned by our sensory and rational faculties, and as such their applicability as determinations is, ultimately, illusory. When engaging with such concepts, we cannot help but fall for the illusions they cast, because they exceed, or appear to exceed the limits of knowledge.

Under the Kantian project, knowledge of the world is finite because of the requirement that such knowledge of the world and the objects it contains be based in an epistemic-intuitive framework, a standpoint. Rather than supposing an insuperable veil of appearances, or the impossibility of thinking that which is not a thought, the standpoint entails the capacity to judge.<sup>36</sup> Meillassoux's error is in postulating the possibility of a standpoint-independent fact, and as such that things in themselves are real in a more significant way than those things that are merely for us. Where reality is the mere "function of an epistemic-intuitive framework,

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<sup>35</sup> Toby Lovat, 'Back to the Great Outdoors? A Kantian Reply to Meillassoux's Argument', in *Philosophy*, PhD (University of Brighton, 2018), 246.

<sup>36</sup> Beatrice Longuenesse, *Kant on the Human Standpoint* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

our empirical reality is neither less nor more real than any other empirical reality, whatever that might be.”<sup>37</sup>

Lovat’s critique of Meillassoux is that he conflates Kant’s epistemological distinction between phenomena and noumena with an ontological distinction between two different “spheres of reality.” As such, Meillassoux’s argument appears to “offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general,” rather than accepting differing scale of knowledge and possible knowledge gap between, on the one hand, humans and phenomena, and on the other, humans and noumena.<sup>38</sup>

Despite his critique of the PSR, it is unsurprising that Meillassoux’s avowedly rationalist argument is characterised by both the postulation of an unconditioned conditioning logical structure – hyper-Chaos – that might account for the necessary contingency or facticity of all things and an effort to demonstrate that its non-existence would be a contradiction.<sup>39</sup>

Ancestral events therefore exist in a temporal realm inaccessible to the transcendental subject, and the problem, then, is a matter of how it can be possible to assign meaning to such statements from a position of correlationism. Arche-fossils, which include, for example the background radiation of the universe or the possibility of radiocarbon dating, direct thought towards ancestral time. The problem this poses for the correlationist, according to Meillassoux, is that thought, so directed towards the status of a non-correlational thing - non-correlational because the correlate is contained within it, rather than it being contained within the correlate - falls victim to the correlational circle already described: the object of any thought must always be a thought. The challenge Meillassoux poses for the correlationist, is to ask how it can be possible for science to hold in thought a world wherein the spatio-temporal givenness of the world itself came to be in a time and space which preceded all forms of givenness.<sup>40</sup> Arche-fossils are used by Meillassoux to present the problem of ancestrality without assuming naïve realism, but rather taking arche-fossils to be absolute and non-relational to humans, the arche fossil must be “capable of existing whether we exist or not,”<sup>41</sup> a question which echoes the infamous 1951 debate between A. J. Ayer

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<sup>37</sup> Lovat, ‘Back to the Great Outdoors? A Kantian Reply to Meillassoux’s Argument’, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. A247/B304.

<sup>39</sup> Lovat, ‘Back to the Great Outdoors? A Kantian Reply to Meillassoux’s Argument’, 263.

<sup>40</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 28.

and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others, in which Ayer's proposition "there was a sun before men existed" was refuted by Merleau-Ponty, as "perfect non-sense."<sup>42</sup>

Statements of this kind reveal more about the philosophers who make them than they do about the world they purport to describe. We have, according to Ayer, some state of affairs X, and according to Merleau-Ponty, some other state of affairs Y. It is not incumbent on the audience of such statements of affairs to assume either a physically reductive stance or any hyperbolic idealism it stands in tension with, and indeed the question "for whom are such remarks intended?" hangs in the air. Whether X or Y coheres more or less well to a naive-materialist model of the world is not the business of the audience, which renders both X and Y as meaningfully true. We might resolve this by saying that the two true statements refer to two truths in two different worlds, which in its own way resolves the problem in Merleau-Ponty's favour. In Ayer's X, or rather the world that corresponds to Ayer's X is a world of spacetime, planets, stars, etc. because that world exists in the utterance of X. That it's more difficult to see the world that corresponds to Y, or that came to be with the utterance of Y is a failure of imagination rather than of Merleau-Ponty. Meillassoux's critique of correlationism is one such failure. In the case of Ayer vs Merleau-Ponty, we have "without humans there's no sun, and the world (world *qua* horizon or system of reference) that humans created is such a world in which the sun pre-existed humanity." In Meillassoux's case the confusion around the relationship between givenness and the account of givenness leads to "without givenness there's no possible account of ancestrality, and the account of ancestrality pre-exists any account of givenness.

We find "the trail of the human serpent is [...] over everything."<sup>43</sup> Without humanity there is no world, and thus no Sun. And yet, the world that humans have created is one such world in which the sun, objects in the cosmos, and the bedrock of the Earth pre-existed humanity. For Merleau-Ponty, "[the] nebula is not behind us, at our origin, but rather out in front of us in the cultural world."<sup>44</sup> Such things are true in the context of a particular language game, but like Chinese words on wallpaper, do not cohere as isolated, oracular remarks. It behoves us to consider with both charity and dose of scepticism what such remarks are intended to convey. Neither X nor Y achieves in its mere utterance a solipsistic monopoly on the

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<sup>42</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Consequences of Nonknowledge', in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>43</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Project Gutenberg, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 494.

language used, just as the white player does not determine the rules of chess for the black player by moving her pieces first (PI: 402, 403).<sup>45</sup> Objective truth, truth impervious to human subjectivity may well be out there as supposed by the naive materialist. Where it exists it is "the dead heart of the living tree,"<sup>46</sup> inflexible in what it prescribes and useful primarily in its support for the structures of reality on which it is conditioned.

You must be prepared to distinguish, at least in principle, between the sort of belief which embodies Truth and beliefs which are merely tools, beliefs which merely increase your chances of happiness. You must read James' remark that "the trail of the human serpent is over all" as a confession of despair.<sup>47</sup>

Meillassoux's conception of the relationship between subjective, phenomenal time and the realm of ancestral statements requires some elaboration. Rather than merely preceding phenomenal time beyond the limit of thought, ancestral time is, for the correlationist, generated in the phenomenal timeline of the correlational subject. At any point in time, for the correlationist, ancestral time is the product of a retrojection by the transcendental subject. Ancestral time can only be thought of as an experience of the subject that itself takes place within the phenomenal time the subject herself occupies. The accusation that phenomenology, and continental philosophy more broadly is inherently humanistic, or indeed anthropocentric arises again. Only the possible time experienced by the transcendental subject is given. In this way, ancestral time seems, for the transcendental subject of correlationism to exist outside, but adjacent and parallel to subjective time as something beyond experience and yet bound to the same temporal unity as the transcendental subject. To reconcile this with an account of time that is compatible with the natural sciences, Meillassoux proposes an absolute time which gathers both ancestral and correlational time under its auspices. In this absolute time, the subjective time of the correlationist is fixed between the uncorrelated ancestral past, and the unsubjectifiable possible future, in which is held the annihilation of possible subjects, and a return to (or inversion of) the ancestral,

This absolute must, as can now be guessed, take the form of *a time of radical inhumanity*, since it is possible for it to precede our humanity as a whole and to produce it, or to destroy it without being affected by it itself. A time that will not be a

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<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 207 (1999): 8.

form of thinking, but the creation and possible annihilation of all thinking, a time that will not be a stream of consciousness, but the stream in which forms of consciousness appear and disappear.<sup>48</sup>

According to Meillassoux, then, as the conditions of meaning belong to the transcendental subject, philosophies based in correlationism can only assign meaning to events supposed to occur under correlated, subjective time. Even if the transcendental subject is taken as timeless, even in uncorrelated, unsubjectified time, the conditions of meaning are only given by the subjective instantiation of the transcendental. For the correlationist to specify the conditions of ancestrality, the only means to do so is through the empirical subject, which can only exist in correlated time. For that subject, ancestral statements do not refer to an object or event about which only incomplete information is available, but they offer a given gap which can only be closed through speculative retrojection. Ancestrality, then, for the correlationist, is created retrospectively, with possible meaning only assignable to events or objects in ancestral time (for example by the physical sciences) in the subjectifiable present. The paradox that this position engenders can be summarised succinctly:

1. “All realism is immediately destroyed by the pragmatic contradiction which it inevitably seems to contain; but on the other hand,
2. Every anti-realism seems to contain a destruction of the meaning of science, since science allows us to discover an ancestral temporality that, in the light of correlationism, becomes, so to speak ‘crazy’.”<sup>49</sup>

It is not the case that correlationists are caught up in the supposed problems of ancestrality and arche-fossils that Meillassoux enumerates. First, Meillassoux’s account of time as, in effect, a property of material objects, or otherwise a descriptive schema that attaches like a label to objects and processes as a function of realism is worthy of scrutiny. Second, phenomenologists are not obliged to accept such descriptions of their own interaction with time and position in relation to the supposed problems of ancestrality and arche-fossils. A thematisation of time and survey of ecophenomenological orientations towards deep time follows in an attempt to challenge precisely what is happening with Meillassoux’s characterisations of the correlationists’ problems. I am concerned that the characterisation of

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<sup>48</sup>Meillassoux, ‘Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation’, 49. Italics in original: “die Form *einer Zeit radikaler Unmenschlichkeit* annehmen,”

<sup>49</sup> Meillassoux, ‘Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation’, 36.

time leads to a simple “dead end” in which the “phenomena of everyday conversation” has given way to the evanescent and ephemeral (PI: 436).<sup>50</sup>

### 1.1.3. Temporality

In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux addresses the problem that appears to arise when time is considered under the correlationist structure as described. Time falls into one of two recognisable templates, one phenomenal and subjective, the other mathematical and infinite, not unlike the classical distinction between *aiôn* and *chronos*. Yet it's possible to object quite easily to Meillassoux's characterisation of the problem of ancestrality based on this linear presentation of time, a presentation which Meillassoux does not stop to question. In *After Finitude*, time is presented as singularly directional, travelling from distant, ancestral past to the undetermined future, offering only slices, or snapshots of the present. This presentation is not without controversy, even within the physical sciences, non-linear temporal models offer alternatives, grounded in the same realism under which Meillassoux operates, to the linear presentation of time on which Meillassoux trades. It seems quite possible that a non-linear conception of time poses significant challenges to the argument against correlationism from ancestrality, challenges which Meillassoux does not appear to anticipate. Julian Barbour, for example, offers a theory in which the phenomenon of the passage of time is a function of changing states of affairs encoded in the very perception of change.<sup>51</sup> Under such a theory, the possibility of the ancestral statement, definitionally, appears to fail in a way that undermines the premise of *After Finitude per se*. Under such a model of temporality, there is no time *per se*, but rather a continuous perceptual illusion caused by our perceiving of states of affairs having changed from one possible configuration into another, with a tacit mental process of gap-filling deployed to produce the perception of time-passage between states. The point I mean to raise is just this: that there are conceptions of time beyond that which Meillassoux presumes, which remain compatible with the model of scientific realism to which his thesis is wedded, which the challenge of ancestrality fails to investigate, and which amounts, in a sense, to question begging.

Adopting a classical, linear model of time under the realism that Meillassoux endorses causes problems enough without the introduction of a challenge from non-linear models. The assumption, tacit in *After Finitude*, is that time consists of an infinite number of durationless instants arranged chronologically, with newer instants added constantly to the

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<sup>50</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 136.

<sup>51</sup> Julian Barbour, 'The View From Nowhen: Interview with Julian Barbour', in *Collapse V*, ed. Damian Veal (Urbanomic, 2009).



end of the line, including, presumably, the present instant. This chronological arrangement of instants must be (for the notion of ancestry to work) divided at some point between ancestral and correlational time, which is to say there is some theoretically identifiable moment during which the advent of life, or the accretion of the Earth, or some other event forces this transition from the former to the latter. This rendering of time, presupposes that an answer to such a question as “when did the Earth accrete” or less specifically, and “when did event X occur” must be available, and that answer may be given with complete precision, even if it is in principle impossible for us to conceive.<sup>52</sup> Meillassoux appears to assume that this type of question is of the same category as Augustine’s, “what then, is time?” rather than the kind of question that cannot be given with regard to physical sciences.<sup>53</sup>

Meillassoux is never explicit regarding the particular temporal model on which his argument from ancestry is based, though it seems safe to assume a model based in the direct materialism of the physical sciences, a sort of sceptical realist interpretation of practical realism synonymous with the model of time as a linear series of durationless instants described above; after all, this is the basis of his challenge to correlationists. This being the case, it seems possible to raise a number of apparently trivial, but nevertheless challenging rejoinders. Does Meillassoux truly suppose that any thought directed towards the boundary of ancestral time  $T$ , a time so remote as to be alien to the thinker, to *any* possible thinker, must be bounded at this moment, unable to extend beyond it in time at all? Is there such a great difference in a thought directed towards  $T+1$  as towards  $T-1$ ? Aren’t both moments, however they are divided, so foreign as to be as accessible, or inaccessible as each other? Can any thinker really say that she *can* in fact think about either? I am inclined to say that thought cannot be more meaningfully directed towards  $T+1$  than it can to  $T-1$ ; which is to say, the givenness or not of  $T+1$ , when perhaps some protozoon attained sentience makes that moment no more accessible in thought than  $T-1$ , at which time that same protozoon had yet to attain sentience.

This position, moreover, fails to account for the failings of the “time slice” theory of temporality accounted for by Bergson’s cinematic theory of time and duration.

If I consider duration as a multiplicity of moments bound to one another by a unity which runs through them like a thread, these moments, no matter how short the

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<sup>52</sup> Cf Michael Dummett, ‘Is Time a Continuum of Instants?’, *Philosophy* 75 (2000): 497.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted by Wittgenstein at PI: 89. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 47.

chosen duration, are unlimited in number [...] There will always be, between these mathematical points, other mathematical points, and so on, ad infinitum.<sup>54</sup>

Bergson was acutely aware of the provenance of this problem, articulated first in Zeno's dichotomy paradox, in which for an actor to move from a position 0 to a position 1, the actor must first travel from 0 to 0.5 performing an infinite number of such changes in position, represented as { ..., 0.03125, 0.0625, 0.125, 0.25, 0.5, 1 }, an impossible procedure.<sup>55</sup> The suggestion then, however tacit, that a theory of time as some substance composed of sequential, durationless instants opens Meillassoux to the criticism, alive in Bergson, of Zeno's paradox just enumerated. Each division of instants is itself divisible by an infinite number of further instants unless, it's conceded that these instants are not themselves durationless. In either such case, a problem arises in, on the one hand assigning duration to such instants; or on the other hand, in the division of one instant from another. Who, precisely, is it supposed has a hand in either process? The obvious answer, it would seem, is for the correlationist bogeyman of speculative realism to be assigned the blame for this procedure, but that strikes me as both disingenuous, on account of this temporal model being foisted on her, and also a denial of the way she actually uses or even considers time. To assign either role to the speculative philosopher, would be to force her to concede, effectively, to the terms of correlationism she rejects, and ask her to draw a line through this temporal model at which finitude is found, effectively writing "here there be dragons," in the void of spacetime beyond it.

We should not take for granted that we know what an ancestral statement such as "the accretion of the Earth occurred 4.5 billion years ago," actually means when relying on a model of time that is itself dependent on an infinite series of instants. It makes no more (or less) sense to say that one could "drop in" on any one of these infinitely numbered instants in series in correlated time than in ancestral time, when there is nothing that forces these instants into anything like the linear form that this classical model of time must take for the premises of the question of ancestrality to make sense at all. The point that it appears Meillassoux has missed, is that the targets of his charge of "strong correlationism," particularly Heidegger, but most likely the inheritors of his existential phenomenology also,

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<sup>54</sup> Henri Bergson, 'Introduction to Metaphysics', in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Marbelle L. Andison (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965), 185.

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, 'Physics', in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, trans. W. D. Ross (Princeton University Press, 1984), 239.

are not animated by such questions as “when did the Earth accrete” as they are the question of what it means to be alive in time, or more broadly, to exist temporally.

We come close, now, to trap Meillassoux warns us of, the correlationist circle, in which we’re to be wary of utterances on, or the attribution or positive attributes to such things as are supposedly unknowable, even in principle; to say that we cannot say anything about ancestral time is surely to say something about it. But I think the correlationist here is right to raise her hands at this objection and say, “so what?” It is not, after all, the correlationist who has a problem with talking about things in the supposedly unknowable past, but a problem that Meillassoux’s project ascribed to her. The correlationist’s understanding of time is not particularly challenged by ancestrality [PI: 154].<sup>56</sup> When time is considered not as an abstract object of philosophy (or even natural science), but as something closer to a medium in which our lives extend, the problem begins to dissolve. It does not seem controversial to say that most people know more or less exactly what they’re talking about with an utterance like “the Earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago”, and to suggest that doing so forces on them a choice between committing to a particular model of direct materialism or falling into a fallacy of reasoning (the correlationist circle) seems disingenuous at best. Time as something lived in the present<sup>57</sup> means something quite different depending on the many details which contribute to a complete picture of the present. Waiting for a bus is different, say, to an adulterer waiting for her spouse to leave (and paramour to arrive), a child waiting for Christmas morning, or a prisoner awaiting the day of her release. While the physicist and the philosopher may certainly mean different things when they write papers regarding what Meillassoux calls the ancestral, that is not the case when they cast their eyes upward at night and experience the sublime in the stars and galaxies of the firmament, each one an arche-fossil, to borrow Meillassoux’s parlance. The over analysis of time has the effect it seems of freezing one behind the illusory walls of time as private, durationless present, and it does not seem to me that this does any good at all.

Duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, whether the present is an ever-growing image of the past or a burden dragged along

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<sup>56</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> This is not to say that people don’t always live in the present, as colloquialisms like “she lives in the past,” over reliant on memory and nostalgia, or perhaps in the future: oriented towards some goal or other.”

[...] Without the survival of the past into present, there would be no duration, but only instantaneity.<sup>58</sup>

#### 1.1.4. Elemental time

The problem of ancestrality points to events and objects so ancient as to precede any possibility of givenness, any possibility that a perceiving subject could have an encounter there. Objects from beyond that deep and ancient abyss like the background radiation of the universe become arche-fossils that direct thought towards this abyss and supposedly challenge the correlationist's ability to say anything about the ancestral. The problem also points to events and objects into the future, bridging another abyss to a time ulterior to all givenness: beyond the end of the world.<sup>59</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, it seems clear that humans can and do perceive events in the deep past every time we gaze into the night sky and attempt to fathom the abyss of time and space into which we are gazing. Photons emitted by distant stars millions of years ago bounce against our retinas as we render, say, Andromeda in the night sky above us. For Heidegger, the sky is where time first reveals itself to humans, in the rising and falling of the sun and the wheeling of the distant stars overhead.<sup>60</sup>

The ulteriority of the world as suggested by the problem of ancestrality raises a form of eschatology. The eschatological question is one familiar in environmental projects, Routley's famous "last man" thought experiments spring to mind. In a world that (as we will come to see) is in large part known by its radical instability and fragility, thought, particularly thought that attends to the cluster of crises around which environmental philosophy turns, the end is always near. This fragility gives rise to a paradox in which stability is found in the elementals of the world: the ash, dust, and mud that remains after the collapse, and which endured long before it. Here the distinction between world qua totality of things, world qua socio-historical reality, and world qua horizontal structure is both clarified and, to an extent, disintegrated. These elements compose the things in the world, and to these elements, the content of the world must return.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Bergson, 'Introduction to Metaphysics', 179.

<sup>59</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 112–16.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Edward Robinson John Macquarrie (Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 471–72.

<sup>61</sup> Ted Toadvine, 'The End of All Things: Geomateriality and Deep Time', *Investigaciones Fenomenológicas* 7 (2018): 367–90. 369–370.

The encounter with the impossibly ancient is an everyday encounter. While it is passed over, for the most part, in silence, it occurs every time our feet brush the ground, or we gulp for air. I know that the material from which my body is made is impossibly ancient, held for the moment in this fleshy form, but bound invariably to return to the earth from which it was made. In the famous words of Carl Sagan, “The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself.”<sup>62</sup> There is no moment of time, however deep or remote, that is not carried with us in our own living bodies and our own experience of the world. The everyday encounter with the impossibly ancient might not be the “unsettling, vertiginous” phenomenology that peering into the stars produces, and indeed, serves to remind one that we are each embedded in the flow of time, which pulsates through our lives in a way that transcends the distinction between past and present.<sup>63</sup> “What Meillassoux misses is precisely the chiasm between lived time and natural time that makes any genuine encounter with the immemorial possible, and this is linked to his failure, throughout *After Finitude*, to thematize the problems of world and materiality on which his view depends.”<sup>64</sup> The interplay between lived and natural, or ancestral time is at the heart of the ecophenomenological reply to Meillassoux’s charges. There is some vestige of ancestral time in the beating of my heart, an “echo” of a time before time that registers in every moment of subjective, present, given time. The cosmic resonates in the present.<sup>65</sup>

Examples like the lithic and the cosmic present paradoxical encounters with deep time, as the age of these things, these arche-fossils, is not merely a number, but rather a representation of a world that is closed off to us and invites our imagination to fill in the gaps. This “refusal/invitation” predates the idea of scientific inquiry in favour of a reciprocal curiosity between self and world, evident in the apocryphal guess by Aristotle that fossils are the remnants of ancient life forms. As I, situated in the everyday passage of time, prepare for this encounter, I must recognize that the ancestral past is meaningful within our pre-scientific experience of time and that the deep evolutionary, geological, and cosmic dimensions of the past only make sense in relation to experience. Speculative realism may claim to deepen time, but it effectively flattens it by denying the importance of phenomenology: this is a strategy it shares with garden-variety naturalism. The consequence of this first point is that phenomenology is the only fruitful method for investigating the

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<sup>62</sup> *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, episode 1, produced by Karl Sagan, directed by Adrian Malone, n.d., accessed 12 September 2022, [https://youtu.be/JQ9mzxGf\\_dk?si=YN9K1oZ-h2MK5DyW](https://youtu.be/JQ9mzxGf_dk?si=YN9K1oZ-h2MK5DyW).

<sup>63</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, ed. Dominique Seglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Northwestern University Press, 2003), 117–19.

<sup>64</sup> Toadvine, ‘The End of All Things: Geomateriality and Deep Time’, 384.

<sup>65</sup> Toadvine, ‘The End of All Things: Geomateriality and Deep Time’, 385.

ancestral past *qua* its ancestrality.<sup>66</sup> This anticipates the second point in response to the charge of correlationism, as phenomenology has never been content with correlationism in Meillassoux's sense, "In short, the ancestral past is indeed meaningful within our lived, pre-scientific experience of time —and, furthermore, the deep evolutionary, geological, and cosmic dimensions of the past gain their true sense only in relation to experience"<sup>67</sup> As Meillassoux explains, the "paradox of the arche-fossil" is posed by the question, "how can a being indicate being's anteriority to manifestation?".<sup>68</sup> Meillassoux asserts that correlationism cannot genuinely address this query since it fundamentally contradicts the notion of being: "being is not prior to givenness; it presents itself as prior to givenness."<sup>69</sup> Despite this, phenomenology has persisted in pursuing the anteriority of the world by accepting the contradiction as a fundamental aspect of our experience of the world, rather than dismissing it as self-contradictory or illusory.

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<sup>66</sup> This is not to rule out the possibility that, for example, astrophysicists, can tell us important things about the ancestral past, but not in terms of their ancestrality, or in terms of what it means for me to relate to the deep time of the stars or the Earth's geology.

<sup>67</sup> Toadvine, 'The End of All Things: Geomateriality and Deep Time', 384.

<sup>68</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 32.

## 1.2. Graham Harman

In the previous sections I outlined Quentin Meillassoux's critique of correlationism, and his attendant concerns relating to ancestrality and arche-fossils. I argued against the carceral character of the correlational circle as Meillassoux describes it and rehearsed a critique of his argument from ancestrality in terms of embodied experience: an essentially ecophenomenological critique. In this section, I turn my attention towards Graham Harman's OOO. This section contextualises Harman's approach in two main ways, which together show that the overlaps between speculative materialism and OOO risk concealing the stark differences in epistemological commitments and conclusions between Meillassoux and Harman.

First, Harman's work in OOO builds on his doctoral-level work, in which he offers a reading of the equipment analysis in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. *Tool-Being*, contains the basic framework of Harman's ontology, and leads to his key philosophical developments, which include "withdrawal" and "the fourfold" distinction between real/sensuous objects/qualities. These theoretical manoeuvres by Harman create the space in which Morton's work develops. Harman's use of the equipment analysis is controversial. I draw on the work of Harman's critics while engaging with his own defences of his work to set out this controversy. It is necessary to begin this section by explaining how Harman charts a course from the equipment analysis to OOO.

Second, OOO represents a divergent development in the speculative realist corpus from Meillassoux's. I will describe OOO in as concise a way as possible, drawing particular attention to the differences between the two bodies of thought. Particularly, the critique of correlationism takes a different form in Harman's work to that it takes in Meillassoux's. For Harman, correlationism changes shape into the various "theories of human access" against which his work is largely directed, this distinction marks an important turn from Meillassoux's largely mathematical concerns, towards ground more familiar to those whose work descends from the transcendental philosophy. This will bear on the following chapter on Timothy Morton's contribution to speculative realism.

This two-pronged approach leaves a gap, namely regarding a 1914 essay by Jose Ortega y Gasset,<sup>70</sup> which Harman describes as "one of the most important philosophical essays ever

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<sup>70</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, 'An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface', in *Phenomenology and Art*, ed. and trans. Philip W. Silver (W. W. Norton and Company, 1975).

written.”<sup>71</sup> I return to this essay and its importance towards Harman’s, and therefore Morton’s work later, in 1.3.6. in which I analyse Harman’s use of Ortega y Gasset, setting the stage for one of my criticisms of Morton’s Hyperobjects, namely against agentiality.

### 1.2.1. Zeug

An unorthodox interpretation of the equipment analysis that Heidegger presents in *Being and Time* initiates Harman’s work in OOO. The equipment analysis describes the manifold of equipment in which Dasein is engaged in its concernful dealings with the world. By default, equipment is revealed to Dasein in a mode of *Zuhandenheit*, readiness-to-hand, which is to say that objects in the world are absorbed in the manifold, allowing Dasein to go about its concernful dealings. Various conditions can lead to equipment instead being revealed in the mode of *Vorhandenheit*, presence-at-hand. Under *Zuhandenheit*, Dasein is absorbed in the manifold of equipment as it goes about its concernful dealings: hammers, nails, roofs, and doors all disappear into the background as Dasein deploys this equipment to its various ends, in order to achieve some end. There are two kinds of ‘end’ to be distinguished: the ‘in-order-to’ of the ends of equipment e.g. ‘in order to drive in the nail, in order to build the house, etc.’, and the ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ that is ultimately Dasein itself. For Harman, there is a necessary elision between these two ends. Under *Vorhandenheit*, some issue thrusts equipment out of the manifold, leading to its thematisation: the hammer is too heavy and I do not have a spare (*Aufsässigkeit* obstinacy), broken and beyond my skill to immediately fix (*Auffälligkeit* conspicuousness), or missing and beyond my power to locate (*Aufdringlichkeit* obtrusiveness).<sup>72</sup> Under these conditions, Dasein comes to encounter objects, as they become obstacles between Dasein and its goal within the “as” structure.<sup>73</sup>

For Harman, the true insight that the equipment analysis reveals (although Heidegger, his students, interlocutors and interpreters overlooked this revelation) is that not only to all things, as equipment, oscillate between readiness-to and presence-at hand, but also that humans have no privileged position in this manifold.<sup>74</sup> The flattening of the ontological status between humans, nonhumans, and world means that i) encounters between nonhumans are possible and, ii) humans themselves are possible objects of encounter by

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<sup>71</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican, 2018), 74.

<sup>72</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>73</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary of Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (The MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>74</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Open Court, 2002), 20–21.



nonhumans.<sup>75</sup> While he passes over important nuances like the unready-to-hand,<sup>76</sup> Harman also ignores the idea that Dasein is ‘onto-ontological’; that is, ‘ontic’ and thus having a role as equipment, as unready-to-hand (e.g. my arm breaks as I swing the hammer!) and as objects (of physiology, biology etc.), and in that sense they are not special, and at the same time they are ontological beings, i.e. the ones who articulate the modes of being in which the world appears.<sup>77</sup>

This leads Harman to place objects at the centre of his philosophical work, hence the moniker, object-oriented ontology. Two issues that Harman addresses with this move are those of over- and under-mining. By the former, objects are diminished by being considered somehow less than the sum of their parts, and by the latter they are less than the whole that they co-constitute. In the case, say, of a bridge, the object “bridge” can be undermined by the argument that the bridge object is less than the sum of its constituent parts: the girders, bolts, and weld-lines, yes, but also the processes of manufacture, design, and planning that constitute the bridge-object. On the other hand, the bridge can be overmined by the argument that it is less than the objects of which it too is a part: transit infrastructure, the movement of goods and people across a body of water, and so on.

Though these are among the moves that Harman makes variously in *Tool-Being* and elsewhere, there are controversies in such assertions about the equipment analysis that should not be blithely passed over. Presence, is more than mere malfunction.<sup>78</sup> Objects do not exhaust one another in the encounter, “no sensual profile of [an object] will ever exhaust its full reality, which withdraws into the dusk of a shadowy underworld.”<sup>79</sup> My encounter with a rock, a crow, a train, or other, more vexing objects like grammar or global warming never exhausts the possibilities of the object of the encounter. Never do I fully encounter a rock, which conceals the fullness of its lithic reality. Its weight in my hand, its cold, slippery surface, its sharp edges are mere sensory qualities that shimmer into presence over the veiled underworld of its real qualities. For me, this rock suggests a tool, its shape in my hand might allow me to cut or dig with it, as my ancient ancestors might have. It reminds me of the short wall of piled flints in my childhood garden. Yet despite the dimensions of this encounter, the rock remains concealed, neither do I encounter the crystalline lattice of its innermost

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<sup>75</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Zero Books, 2011), 39–40.

<sup>76</sup> William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time* (Continuum, 2006), 57–59.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Indiana University Press, 1982), 78.

<sup>78</sup> Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes*, 62.

<sup>79</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 42–43.

physical structure, nor do I encounter a flint-landscape as an ant or beetle might, according to Harman's ontology.

For Harman, the consequence of the inexhaustibility of objects in their encounters begins to establish a fourfold along axes of real/sensual and objects/qualities. Objects "withdraw" from the encounter leaving only their qualities behind for the other parties of the encounter.<sup>80</sup> Yet the qualities that remain cannot be the primary qualities with which Meillassoux is so concerned: mathematical descriptions of states of affairs. No more can I encounter those qualities of a flint than of a pale star in the distant void. What remains in the encounter is another category of qualities, what Harman calls, sensual qualities. Likewise, real objects submerge to an abyssal depth, forever out of reach as I grasp at the sensual object.

### 1.2.2. The Fourfold

Borrowing Heideggerian terminology, Harman invokes a fourfold to describe the relations between cardinal points drawn across two axes: real/sensual and object/quality. This permits four positions: real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities.<sup>81</sup>

"Real object" describes an object in itself, independent of human access and beyond the realm of interaction and encounter: real objects withdraw from encounters. "Real quality" describes any essential quality of a thing, though such a quality remains inaccessible through any encounter. "Sensual object" describes an object as it appears in any encounter; the intentional object of Husserlian phenomenology. "Sensual quality" describes any property of an object as apprehended by a seer in an encounter, but which does not (and cannot) reveal the object in its fullness.

Real objects always withdraw in Harman's ontology, and as such only sensual objects are available to us in any encounter. We have no access to the real object, only its silhouette in the form of its sensual counterpart. The appearance and outward manner of a sensual object never truly reveals the object, and as such the sensual is the most basic level at which any encounter happens. Real objects cannot encounter each other, nor can sensual objects encounter real objects, only sensual objects are able to brush against one another in an encounter, never fully revealing themselves or the real objects they mask.

We can imagine an encounter with a tree to illustrate the interactions of the fourfold:

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<sup>80</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 73.

<sup>81</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 50.

1. Real object: the tree as it exists in itself, beyond any perception or relation. It has a depth that cannot be fully accessed by humans, animals, or even scientific instruments.
2. Real qualities: the tree's intrinsic properties, such as its cellular structure, chemical composition, its homeotic genes, all of which are real but inaccessible.
3. Sensual object: the tree as it appears to seer encountering the tree, the impression of the tree as a tree.
4. Sensual qualities: the specific details the seer perceives, how the bark feels under their touch, the way the leaves shimmer in the wind, the smell of pine in the air.

In the case of a human seer encountering the tree, the sensual object appears in the seer's perception, perhaps as part of a landscape, or as a landmark, obstacle, etc. Only sensual qualities are available from sensual objects, the particular hue or shape of its leaves or the texture of its bark which might indicate species, season, age of the tree, etc. The encounter with these qualities is not exhaustive, the real object "tree" remains withdrawn and no matter how closely the seer examines it, or what methods of examination she uses, the tree in its entirety is never fully available: Husserlian adumbration. A squirrel encountering the same tree also encounters only a sensual object, but not the same sensual object as the human seer. The squirrel encounters, perhaps a structure for climbing, for shelter, for food. Its sensual qualities might overlap with those encountered by the human seer but might also be quite peculiar: the scent of acorns or the purchase of the bark for claws. Regardless, these qualities still do not, and cannot exhaust the tree, which remains as a real object hidden from human and squirrel alike.

Suppose the tree is struck by lightning, an object-object encounter. According to Harman we now have the possibility of real objects encountering each other. Encounter here is not the experience of a human or a squirrel but the revelation of the real qualities of both the lightning and the tree: the tree's combustibility, its resistance to electrical currents; the lightning's temperature, voltage, etc. Regardless of the revelation of real qualities in this encounter, neither tree nor lightning is exhausted in this encounter, as in any. The brightness of the lightning flash, or the osmotic potential of the tree's cell membranes remain concealed in an encounter of this kind, as do any other sensual properties.

In any example, real objects withdraw from the site of an encounter. No encounter can exhaust the objects of the encounter, be they human-human, human-nonhuman, or nonhuman-nonhuman. The discovery of sensual objects and qualities serve only as partial revelations of the truth of the real object, which submerges ever deeper as one grasps at it. The fourfold calls into question the idea that objects are reducible either to their perceptions (phenomenology) or their physical components (scientific reductionism). Instead, objects withdraw from access, and relations between them happen in a realm of interaction where aspects of objects are revealed but never in their entirety.

### 1.2.3. Discerning OOO

To begin to establish the distinction between Meillassoux's and Harman's understanding of the problem of correlationism, one can turn to Harman's own words:

To summarize in reverse order, Kant holds as follows:

- A. The human–world relation stands at the center of philosophy, since we cannot think something without thinking it.
- B. All knowledge is finite, unable to grasp reality in its own right.

Meillassoux rejects (b) while affirming (a). But readers of my own books know that my reaction to Kant is the exact opposite, reject- ing (a) while affirming (b), since in my philosophy the human– world relation does not stand at the center [sic].<sup>82</sup>

There are four positions that can arise in response to the critique of correlationism, all points on a spectrum ranging between naïve realism and absolute idealism. These are: i) naïve realism (things-in-themselves exist and are knowable), ii) weak correlationism (things-in-themselves exist, unknowable but thinkable), iii) strong correlationism (things-in-themselves are unknowable and unthinkable, they are meaningless, but they may exist), and iv), absolute idealism (things-in-themselves are unthinkable, unknowable, and impossible). Following Meillassoux, we can place Kant at ii), Heidegger at iii), and Hegel at iv).<sup>83</sup> Meillassoux's own position is roughly iv), though the various manoeuvres of *After Finitude* see this position radicalised into his own speculative thinking: i) and ii) must be rejected, closed off as they are by the correlationist circle, while iii) and iv) maintain the possibility of things in themselves, necessitated by contingency, even if they are unknowable.<sup>84</sup> By

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<sup>82</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 23.

<sup>84</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 36.

comparison, Harman sees his attempts to radicalise position ii) weak correlationism as the genesis of OOO, by taking finitude not as a “special feature of human knowledge, but a general feature of relation in all its forms.”<sup>85</sup> This is contrary to the power of the correlation, which limits human knowledge on the one hand, and on the other privileges the human-world relation over any other combination of relations involving nonhumans and the world.<sup>86</sup>

Meillassoux’s project is motivated by the limitations on human knowledge imposed by the correlation, to which he responds by reawakening the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, concluding, essentially, that only primary, mathematical qualities are knowable. Harman’s is motivated by the limited ontology that the correlation requires: that only humans can have philosophically meaningful encounters in the world. His attempt at radicalising weak correlationism is predicated on the turn to a flat ontology that denies a special ontological status exists solely for humans, and that encounters between nonhumans are not, ipso facto less than encounters between humans and the world.

#### 1.2.4. Philosophies of human access

For Harman, then, correlationism is not so much a matter of the limits of knowledge as it is with Meillassoux. Instead, correlationism takes the form of “philosophies of human access” which centre the human agent at the centre of a network of human-nonhuman relations, denying the ontological status to the nonhumans that would allow them to make relations between themselves absent any human agent. This challenge to correlationism *qua* ontological primacy of humans among networks of nonhuman relata draws on Harman’s reading of the tool-analysis and his refinement of a Fourfold of real/sensual objects/qualities. From this he extracts his critique of philosophies of human access, namely that humans have ontological parity with nonhuman objects, and as such object-object relations are every bit as philosophically interesting as human-object relations.

To reiterate, the fourfold explains and demonstrates that human access is not the primary measure of philosophically interesting relationships in the world. First, objects withdraw from access, meaning that real objects always exist beyond experience, the noumena of Kantian thought. Any engagement with objects is thus mediated by my encounter with sensual objects (phenomena) projected by and ultimately concealing the real object. objects are not reducible to thought or perception. Objects that go unperceived by human seers:

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<sup>85</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 133–34.

<sup>86</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 9.

rocks, trees, telegraph poles, and banks of fog, retain real qualities independent of any human perspective or apprehension. Moreover, objects relate to one another in ways beyond human ken. When a wildfire tears through heathland, the real object of the fire and the real qualities of gorse and heather interact in a way that is essentially, through the mechanism of withdrawal, beyond the limits of human perception and understanding. Crucially this revelation of real qualities by interaction with real objects does not itself depend on any human seer: unobserved asteroids clashing in the distant depths of space reveal real qualities of one another quite beyond the possibility of human apprehension.

The critique of philosophies of human access extends to the supposed boundaries of phenomenology and its inheritors on the one hand, and empiricism and scientific reductionism on the other. In the former case, phenomenological approaches to encounters can be described as a configuration of the “for us” that limits the world to the encounter between the human and nonhuman. In this case, the world of sensual objects presents philosophers with a problem about access to things themselves. Similarly, attempts in natural science to describe the world by appeal to real qualities, revealed through the interactions of other real objects, can never full grasp the real object of study, as real objects continually withdraw from the site of encounter.

OOO attempts to overcome the limitations of correlation as reformulated by Harman by arguing that a) all objects (human and otherwise) have equal ontological status, and b) objects do not require the presence of a human seer to interact as described by their operations under the fourfold. The effect is a de-anthropocentrism in which human experience is removed from the centre of philosophy. Instead of being overly concerned with phenomenological questions like “how do humans encounter the climate crisis,” OOO asks, how do objects interact with one another, absent any human seer? Given Harman’s project in terms of the radicalised Kant he describes, the answer would appear to be “somehow, though we don’t know quite how.”

#### 1.2.5. Comparing speculative realism with OOO

Both Harman and Meillassoux critique correlationism, the idea that we can only access reality as it is correlated to human thought or perception. As has become clear, the approach to correlationism taken by each is different. For Harman, correlationism is a mistake of anthropocentrism, in which humans are taken to have ontological primacy and thus exclusive access to “encounters.” For Meillassoux, correlationism’s carceral character

prevents thought from trespassing into mind-independent reality, which remains the proper domain of mathematics.

As I demonstrated in 1.1.1., Meillassoux's critique emerges in the problem of ancestrality, which we can summarise as follows. 1) Natural sciences offer facts about the world that predate the possibility of givenness, e.g. "the accretion of the Earth took place c. 4.5 billion years ago. 2) Philosophies that do not endorse naïve materialism (correlationist philosophies) cannot explain events that happened at a time that predates the possibility of givenness. 3) Therefore, correlationist philosophies cannot account for scientific statements about deep time. For Meillassoux, the solution is a turn to mathematics, which he proposes provides access to reality without the need for human mediation or givenness, in essence, correlationism is defeated by a turn to mathematical realism. This leads Meillassoux to the conclusion that the world exists without necessity, overturning the principle of sufficient reason and turning toward "absolute contingency" in which, for no reason at all, any fact about the universe could change at any moment.

Harman concludes that correlationism is a problem, but as correlationism for Harman is a matter of human access, he must reject Meillassoux's solution. Whereas Meillassoux argues that mathematics is the path to access reality absent any human seer, for Harman access of this kind can (like any form of access) never be complete. Objects of mathematical enquiry, like all other objects withdraw from the site of encounter, so even mathematical facts about the world describe only sensual objects and sensual qualities, though they purport to describe real objects and real qualities. The object-orientation of OOO, then, is Harman's move to decentre human agents from a position of ontological primacy under correlationism.

### 1.3. Timothy Morton

In this section I turn to analyse the criteria proposed by Timothy Morton for the diagnosis of the very large or complex events, processes and objects he collectively terms “hyperobjects.” I examine each of the five criteria explicitly given in *Hyperobjects*, and locate a further criterion largely passed over in the text and examine this in turn. After outlining the principal conceptual challenges and inconsistencies that arise when hyperobjects as an object category is subjected to sustained scrutiny, I argue that these criteria are insufficiently precise, and that the examples used to satisfy or demonstrate the theory only exaggerate the challenges this theory faces. I further argue that on several fronts the concept of hyperobjects is too broad to retain any meaning. Morton is explicit that *Hyperobjects* consists of his “attempt to specify hyperobjects with greater and greater accuracy,”<sup>87</sup> and despite some prevarication on his part<sup>88</sup> I intend to treat *Hyperobjects* as an attempt to define, and subsequent works to defend this theory. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that Morton’s explicit commitments to speculative realism and object-oriented ontology are incompatible with his conception of hyperobjects *talis qualis*.

The “hyper” of hyperobjects appears at a glance may relate to the “hyper-Chaos” described by Meillassoux in *After Finitude*, as the spoils of his Pyrrhic victory over correlationism, the supposed tacit dogma of post-critical thought by which only the correlate of thinking and being is accessible, and neither in itself. “Our absolute, in effect, is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, a *hyper-Chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable.”<sup>89</sup> (Emphasis in original). If indeed hyperobjects relates, even remotely, to Meillassoux’s hyper-Chaos (there is no explicit connection in Morton’s work), then it would seem to lead to a strange juncture. On the one hand, hyper-Chaos leaves us with a universal absolute by which everything is possible, and “only the possible destruction of every order”<sup>90</sup> is guaranteed. On the other hand, hyperobjects leaves us in a universe populated by seemingly strange entities, distorted to our view by the extremes of scale both spatial and temporal guaranteed by their definition. Yet this distortion hides their truly “hyper” aspect: that everything is a hyperobject, and such being the case there exist no hyperobjects at all. Far from describing the strange ontologies of such complex things as global warming, Morton’s example *par excellence* of a hyperobject, and the difficulty with which we engage with or encounter such things, we are left only with an unknowability they

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<sup>87</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 28.

<sup>88</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 23.

<sup>89</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 64.

<sup>90</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 64.



share with all objects, from the very large to the very small, and from the very complex to the very simple. This veil of unknowability may seem familiar, and far from marching at the vanguard of a new, a speculative method of philosophising about the crumbling world we inhabit, is an attempted rehabilitation of the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon at the heart of the correlationist position Morton opposes. Later in the thesis, I will argue for a reformulation of the “hyper” of hyperobjects as a mode of encounter with the kinds of thing Morton attempts to describe.

At this stage I want to stress that I consider *Hyperobjects* an important but troubled work. Firstly, it makes a genuine attempt to re-establish the boundaries of object categories and grapples imaginatively and originally with the “speculative” of speculative realism. I also hold that *Hyperobjects* provokes important and interesting philosophical problems, two of which Morton explicates early in the work:

Hyperobjects thus present philosophy with a difficult, double task. The first task is to abolish the idea of the possibility of a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them [...] The second task is to establish what phenomenological “experience” is in the absence of anything meaningfully like a “world” at all: hence the subtitle, “Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World.”<sup>91</sup>

Morton’s second question particularly animates my research. In the absence of world, what manner of phenomenological experience is possible? The loss of world that Morton describes is neither the eco-eschatology at work in environmentalist discourse, nor the messianic end to which Meillassoux alludes. I argue that Morton equivocates between various uses of world (*qua* background, *qua* phenomenal horizon, *qua* totality of objects, etc.)

While *Hyperobjects* may confront us with philosophically interesting questions, I maintain that the problems with this work are such that it cannot be accepted without significant revision, revision of the sort that I suggest may not be worth conducting. This chapter may seem polemical in places, and that in part is an acknowledgement of the treatment, by Wolfendale, and others, of Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology. As discussed in the preceding chapter, there is only unsteady ground for those who have built their theoretical systems on the foundations of OOO. My aim here is to provide a similar, if more concise, treatment of *Hyperobjects*. It may seem at times uncharitable to scrutinise *Hyperobjects* in this

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<sup>91</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 2–3.

way, but I insist that the popularity and influence of Morton's theory, neither abandoned nor disavowed in the time since its publication, demands close attention of this kind. I spoke with Morton in person in May 2024 following a book launch in which he suggested, "I'd never write *Hyperobjects* now," and that *Hyperobjects* should instead be read as a sort of Buddhist theosophy.<sup>92</sup>

### 1.3.1. Towards a stipulative definition of "hyperobjects"

Hyperobjects are first described in Morton's 2010 work, *The Ecological Thought*,<sup>93</sup> and are the subject of his 2013 *Hyperobjects*. The principal definition of a hyperobject, is that it is any being widely distributed in space and time relative to humans.<sup>94</sup> In his 2018 book, *Being Ecological*, Morton adds, "a hyperobject is a thing so vast in both temporal and spatial terms, that we can only see slices of it at a time."<sup>95</sup> This preliminary definition is complicated by Morton's assertion later in *Hyperobjects* that spacetime itself is an example of a hyperobject.<sup>96</sup> The initial examples Morton provides give some indication as to the breadth of his project. They include: a black hole, the Florida Everglades, "the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium," plastic bags, capitalism, and global warming.<sup>97</sup> If these examples all succeed in satisfying the criterion for wide distribution in space and time relative to humans, then it seems that they must do so to differing degrees. Taking any two such examples for comparison is illustrative in this regard. The sum total of the Earth's nuclear material is necessarily more widely distributed in space and time than merely the sum of the plutonium, yet if both satisfy the criterion of wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans, then a question of sufficiency versus adequacy arises in turn.<sup>98</sup> Both examples satisfy the criterion sufficiently, yet the former, "the sum total of the Earth's nuclear material," does so more adequately than the latter, the sum of the plutonium. Introducing a third or fourth example exaggerates this difference yet further at the extremes, while muddying the waters significantly for those examples between them:

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<sup>92</sup> Personal correspondence with Timothy Morton, May - July 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 130–35.

<sup>94</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Pelican Books, 2018). 91.

<sup>96</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 61.

<sup>97</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> I have borrowed the use of the terms "sufficiency" and "adequacy," and the tension between them from the sense in which they are used legally. In contract law, consideration need only be sufficient, and need not be adequate, so, for example, an exchange of money always satisfies the need for consideration, regardless of how much money is actually offered by either party. (*White v. Bluett* 1853)

1. The following proposed hyperobjects exhibit wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans:
  - a. a black hole,
  - b. the Florida Everglades,
  - c. all plastic carrier bags on Earth,
  - d. a single plastic carrier bag.
2. The extent to which these proposed hyperobjects exhibit wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans varies.

If it's the case that to classify as a hyperobject, a thing need only sufficiently satisfy the criterion of wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans, and need not adequately do so, two further considerations arise. First, any object that can demonstrate to any extent wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans satisfies this criterion, and secondly that any other criteria used for diagnosing hyperobjects can be similarly satisfied. When assessing the remaining of Morton's criteria, I will assume that this second consideration applies, namely that an object satisfies a given criterion if does so to any degree at all.

This criterion of wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans is not without significant ambiguities. It might seem facetious to ask, "wide in relation to which humans? To all humans? Wide in which dimensions?" yet questions like these must be addressed to specify hyperobjects with any degree of accuracy at all. An adult hippopotamus is wider in terms of space and mass than any human, as is a skyscraper, which additionally has the capacity to outlast any individual human. In *Hyperobjects*, Morton uses the example of a Styrofoam cup as a hyperobject, suggesting that the cup's material capacity to outlast an individual human's lifespan satisfies the criterion of wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans.<sup>99</sup> In this case then, it seems that individual humans, and their possible extensions in space or time are the canon by which this criterion is measured. This clarification around the possible hyperobjecthood of simple, discrete items such as the Styrofoam cup, rather than conglomerates such as "the sum total of X," allows for this criterion to be satisfied if the item exhibits wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans. In the case of the Styrofoam cup, its capacity to outlast the possible lifespan of an individual human sufficiently satisfies this criterion. Seth Daves develops this line of argument to suggest a clarification of this criterion as follows:

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<sup>99</sup>Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 60.

- A hyperobject is any object that is widely distributed in space or time relative to humans.<sup>100</sup>

Against this clarified definition, any number of objects, from Styrofoam or ceramic cups to computer screens, sequoias, and dictionaries might, as material objects, outlast the possible lifespan of any individual human, and thus satisfy this criterion for hyperobjecthood. If the use of the temporal extensions of individual humans is taken as the line of demarcation for identifying hyperobjects, then it seems appropriate to use the same line when considering the spatial aspect to this criterion. On this account, a hyperobject is any object with possible spatial distribution that is wide relative to any individual human. Hippopotamuses and skyscrapers do indeed seem to qualify. I find this deeply unsatisfying; and such moves as taken by Daves and Crockett<sup>101</sup> to expand hyperobjects as a category to include more and more types of things seem unnecessary when such breadth of scope is built into the principal definition of hyperobjects. It seems that Morton's intention in *Hyperobjects* is not to argue that any item that is simply bigger or older than one person or the next qualifies as a hyperobject, yet this seems the unavoidable consequence of an imprecise attempt at a definition.

### 1.3.2. The scale of ecological thinking

Morton develops in *The Ecological Thought* a point of view that he considers “the cornerstone of the ecological thought,”<sup>102</sup> by evoking Raphael's entreaty to Adam against speculation on the vastness of the cosmos in *Paradise Lost*: “the clear hyaline, the glassy sea; of amplitude almost immense, with stars numerous, and every star perhaps a world of destined habitation.”<sup>103</sup> For Morton, a view that encompasses the immensity of the hyaline sea, populated with innumerable stars is precisely the viewpoint to be cultivated in search of the ecological thought. Contrary to the position that the criterion of wide spatio-temporal distribution be satisfied if either spatial or temporal distribution is wide in relation to a single human, “the ecological thought” asks us to adjust our focus from individual humans to a larger, cosmological scale. This position brings us closer to what it seems Morton intends of hyperobjects: they are so vast that human experience cannot encompass the entire thing, whether spatially or temporally human experience only compasses a sliver of the existence of a hyperobject. The examples Morton provides that seem to support this position, from “the

<sup>100</sup> Seth Daves, ‘Hyletic Phenomenology and Hyperobjects’, *Open Philosophy* 2 (2019): 526.

<sup>101</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (Fordham University Press, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 23.

<sup>103</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 216. Cited by Morton at Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 21.

ecological thought,” include global warming, capitalism, the Everglades, etc. The root of this position lies in Harman’s OOO, specifically in the notion that objects, whether sensual or real “withdraw” from one another in such a way that the site of the encounter so discrete that it is, in the case of all parties to the encounter, a site so abstract as to appear foreign to all.

I have so far couched this examination in such terms as “possible spatio-temporal extensions,” or the “purely material capacity” of objects, and I want to address these choices. In the former case, the possibility of objects of the kind Morton describes to endure beyond the possible lifespans of individual humans, and the attendant possibility of extending wider spatially than individual humans is somewhat problematic. How is it possible to say whether a given object will indeed outlive, or prove much larger than us? Considering another of Morton’s examples, the Florida Everglades, it certainly seems likely that they will endure beyond my death and certainly are larger in spatial terms than the extension in space of any possible human, satisfying this criterion for hyperobjecthood. However, it’s certainly possible to imagine that the Everglades will be destroyed in any given human’s lifetime, either literally through an apocalyptic event or by the loss of such qualities as make the Everglades the Everglades, perhaps through the slow unravelling of the ecosystems that comprise it, for example. Any object, from a Styrofoam cup to capitalism might conceivably be destroyed or degraded to such an extent that it ceases to endure, even though it might have existed since before any individual human came into existence. Global warming is widely distributed in time relative to the particular human typing this chapter, but humans *qua* humanity must precede anthropogenic global warming, and may, with appropriate optimism, endure long enough to outlast or rectify it. Global warming, the exemplary hyperobject given in *Hyperobjects* is no more such a thing than, say, humanity as the sum total of humans past, present, and future. There remains a more interesting dimension to this discussion of the possibility of an object’s endurance in space or time beyond the existence of humans, individual or otherwise, which cuts to the core of the issues at stake with Morton’s commitment to speculative realism or object-oriented ontology.

In short, Morton appears to commit uncritically to a form of naïve or direct realism, with which any commitment to speculation, as configured by Meillassoux’s radicalisation of correlationism is largely incompatible. We must briefly return to the discussion of the critique of correlationism in section 1.1.1. Correlationism is the dogma of post-critical thought that both thinking and being are inaccessible by themselves, and that only the correlation between the two is accessible, and that moreover “every philosophy which

disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism.”<sup>104</sup> From a position of direct realism, questioning the truth of propositions like “black holes will outlast humanity,” or any other ancestral statement, is incoherent, and recalls again the debate between Ayer and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>105</sup> The commonsensical position is that Ayer’s proposition is true, and that to hold otherwise is mistaken. For a correlationist like Merleau-Ponty, propositions about a world prior to givenness only come about in a world as given. In the *Zollikon Seminars*, Heidegger addresses the supposed problem of ancestry in terms that seem to anticipate Meillassoux, and particularly Meillassoux’s accusation of “strong-correlationism,”<sup>106</sup>

It is simply presupposed that the earth *is* and already *was* earlier. The customary statement is: the earth already existed at a time when man did not yet exist. But then the ‘is’ of this statement, and thus the being of the earth, being as such, is undetermined. [...] The decisive point is that at least one can say that the earth can exist for a moment without human beings. [...] Nevertheless, in one way or another, the ‘is,’ that is, being, remains undetermined. Thus, it will never be clear, and can never become clear, what all these statements about the being of the earth prior to, or without human being, are supposed to mean.<sup>107</sup>

Whether the object in question is as vast as a black hole or as small as a Styrofoam cup is irrelevant when considering what remains of the thing without the presence of a human being, Dasein, etc. to which it is given. It’s preceded by Heidegger’s analysis of care in *Being and Time*, “Of course, only as long as Dasein is, ‘is’ there Being. When Dasein does not exist, ‘independence’ ‘is’ not either, nor ‘is’ the ‘in-itself’. [...] In such a case it cannot be said that entities are, nor that that they are not.”<sup>108</sup> The possibility of thing’s being, whether thematised as contingent on the existence of Dasein or not, depends on the positioning of an enquirer, and it’s this positioning that proves problematic for the enquiry into the being of entities absent humans. The critical point is that these questions pertain to possible times, and while it’s possible to abstract the human enquirer from the equation, it’s not possible to

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<sup>104</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Bataille, ‘The Consequences of Nonknowledge’, 111.

<sup>106</sup> In the preceding chapter I analysed Meillassoux’s allegations against his “arch-correlationists,” Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In this chapter I can only repeat my disagreement with these allegations on the basis of such work on Heidegger as has arisen from Føllesdal’s writings on Husserl, and on Wittgenstein as from the *New Wittgenstein*, and *Beyond the Tractatus Wars*. See, Dagfinn Føllesdal, ‘Husserl’s Notion of Noema’, paper presented at APA Symposium on Phenomenology, 1969. Also, Dagfinn Føllesdal, ‘Noema and Meaning in Husserl’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990): 263–71. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols - Conversations - Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Northwestern University Press, 2001), 177.

<sup>108</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 225.

abstract the concept of time. Time, however, remains dependent on the positioning of the human enquirer in order to maintain any meaning at all. Attempting to abstract further dissolves the very question of what being is or is not possible in a possible past or future that lacks any human at all.<sup>109</sup>

A distinction is to be made regarding the reorientation of Heidegger's thinking from the concerns of *Being and Time*, and those in the later works, including the *Zollikon Seminars* and the *Contributions to Philosophy*. Specifically, and in contrast to the future-orientation of Dasein in *Being and Time*, the *Contributions* and later Heidegger more generally address the historical unfolding of being, the emerging of history (*die Geschichte*) in the historical (*das Historische*). The distinction between *die Geschichte*, *die Historie*, *das Historische*, etc. is reducible to the ontological/ontic. *Die Geschichte* is the history that happens, while *die Historie* is the study of events that took place in the past, the objects of historiological inquiry.<sup>110</sup> Meillassoux's position is more interestingly nuanced,

To think science is to think the status of a becoming which cannot be correlational because the correlate is in it, rather than it being in the correlate. So, the challenge is therefore the following: to understand how *science can think a world wherein spatio-temporal givenness itself came into being within a time and a space which preceded every variety of givenness*.<sup>111</sup>

The materiality of the arche-fossil he uses to demonstrate the problem of ancestrality doesn't in Meillassoux's case presume direct realism but considers this material as absolute and non-relational to the human, "capable of existing whether we exist or not."<sup>112</sup> Morton's materialism, conversely, is dependent on Harman's object-oriented ontology, in which the direct materialism that allows beings the capacity to endure without human presence is structured in terms of a fourfold of withdrawal,<sup>113</sup> which in turn seems to be little more than a rehabilitation of the Kantian noumenon.

### 1.3.3. A non-hierarchical ontology?

There is a dissonance between the non-hierarchical ontology to which Morton's work is wedded and the anthropocentrism of the principal definition of hyperobjects, namely that

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<sup>109</sup> William Blattner, 'Is Heidegger a Kantian Idealist?', *Inquiry* 37, no. 2 (1994): 193.

<sup>110</sup> Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 93.

<sup>111</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 28.

<sup>113</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Open Court, 2007).

they are widely distributed in space or time relative to *humans*. Morton attempts to address this concern, adding that “the hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge: it’s *hyper* relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans,”<sup>114</sup> this feels like an impoverished attempt to pre-empt criticism of this kind. Ultraviolet rays (and presumably all spectrums of light) inhabit radically different scales to worms and lemons. Things widely distributed in space and time relative to worms and lemons have no significance at all when compared to those things that are widely distributed in space and time relative to ultraviolet rays, which by necessity travel at the speed of light. By the time global warming causes the Earth’s average annual temperature to exceed 4C higher than pre-industrial temperatures, perhaps by 2100, a passing ultraviolet ray (*if* such things can be considered as discrete objects themselves) may well have reached the exoplanet HD156668b, roughly 756.8 trillion kilometres away. Yet Morton requires us to accept precisely that a hyperobject like the Everglades, by virtue of its wide spatio-temporal distribution in relation to humans, by virtue of “interobjectivity” consists in the interaction of the aesthetic properties of objects. I will turn to Morton’s criterion of interobjectivity in due course.

Either hyperobjects cease to exist as such when there is no human for which they can exist, or hyperobjects endure as non-relational entities with no regard for the existence or otherwise of humans. In the former case, Morton commits to the correlationism that speculative realism intends to avoid. In the latter Morton’s provisional definition of hyperobjects as relational to humans fails. In either case, hyperobjectivity as a theory begins to look somewhat incoherent. Were Morton truly committed to the radically flat ontology that object-oriented ontology seems to demand, a hyperobject cannot merely be diagnosed in terms of its relation to humans, an anthropocentric move of the kind Morton disavows.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, a workable definition of hyperobjects in spatio-temporal terms would need to be either:

- A hyperobject is any object widely distributed in space or time relative to any object,

OR

- A hyperobject is any object widely distributed in space or time relative to all objects.

Apropos my comments above, that conglomerate entities necessarily entail wider distribution in space and time than non-conglomerate entities, “all objects” would clearly

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<sup>114</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 21.



demonstrate wider distribution in space and time than any proposed hyperobject. This second formulation points to an absolute, or infinite entity, only the likes of which could possibly exhibit wide spatio-temporal distribution in relation to all objects. As we will see, Morton insists on the finitude of hyperobjects, which, I argue, precludes the second formulation. We are left with the first reformulation of Morton's principal definition above, that a hyperobject is any object widely distributed in space or time relative to any object. As I've already shown, this criterion can be considered satisfied if a candidate hyperobject merely sufficiently can do so. Global warming and capitalism join the herbal tea on my desk, which by virtue of its size relative my pen passes the threshold from mere objecthood to hyperobjecthood. Not languishing in a diminished state, my pen, by virtue of its longevity in relation to the tea, likewise joins this pantheon of hyperobjects.

#### 1.3.4. Viscosity, nonlocality, and agentiality

Developing the attempt to discern hyperobjects, Morton proposes six principal criteria: Viscosity, Nonlocality, Temporal Undulation, Phasing, Interobjectivity, and Agentiality. In truth, the boundaries of these criteria are porous, to the extent that attempting to apply them in terms of necessity and sufficiency is likely to frustrate, and most probably miss the point of hyperobjects as formulated by Morton, demonstrated above. In this section and those that follow (1.2.4., 1.2.5., 1.2.6) I will address three of these criteria: viscosity, nonlocality, and agentiality. Attempting to separate these criteria out would lead to significant repetition, each criterion addresses similar supposed qualities of hyperobjects, and the problems arising in one extend, I argue, into the others.

According to Morton, Viscosity is the property of hyperobjects that leads to the realisation that humans are all always already embedded in and among hyperobjects. "hyperobjects come in and out of phase with human time, they end up 'contaminating' everything, if we find ourselves inside them."<sup>116</sup> Explicitly borrowing from Harman's flat-ontology, Morton expands to explain that humans are not alone in being embedded in and among hyperobjects.<sup>117</sup> Other objects, and presumably also hyperobjects are similarly embedded in this manner, "All objects are caught in the sticky goo of viscosity, because they never ontologically exhaust one another even when they smack headlong into one another."<sup>118</sup> This repeated commitment to object-oriented ontology, particularly Harman's notion of

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<sup>116</sup> Morton, *Being Ecological*, 125.

<sup>117</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 13–14..

<sup>118</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 36.

“withdrawal,” by which real objects that encounter one another “withdraw” behind the veil of a sensual object proves vexatious for Morton’s project, as I will show below.

Nonlocality accounts for the ways in which it is possible to encounter phenomena that emerge as manifestations of a hyperobject without encountering the hyperobject itself. Global warming may prove the cause of both 2018’s Saddleworth Moor wildfire, as well as 2020’s fires across California and the US Pacific coast, but neither fire is itself the hyperobject “global warming,” though owing to the looseness of the criterion discussed above, it seems likely that both fires satisfy this criterion, and thus qualify as hyperobjects themselves. Regardless, the hyperobject is nonlocal in that it is not reducible to the manifestations that might be thought of as products or extensions of the hyperobject itself.

Agentiality is the property of hyperobjects that enables them to exhibit agency, or otherwise to exert ethical demands over human actors. Agentiality is left largely undeveloped in *Hyperobjects*, not appearing as a complete chapter as do the other criteria addressed here.<sup>119</sup> By insisting on the agential capacity of hyperobjects, and by extension, I argue, the same capacity in all objects, Morton tacitly, and uncritically endorses a continuity between ontology and ethics that is variously inseparable from the problems with flat ethics I consider below, and epistemically naïve, attempting to ignore the problem of epistemic finitude, by which I mean the inability of humans to know what it’s like to be other than human, in favour of a circular theory of embeddedness, or, Viscosity. In such a world, “Thought is freed from the constraint of its finitude by the mobilisation of metaphor,”<sup>120</sup> which is to say that by the over-application of metaphor, and by means either of sloppiness or sleight of hand, metaphor is mistaken for reality. Drawing on Lingis’s configuration of the Kantian transcendental a priori in the ethical demands it’s possible for nonhuman objects to make of human actors, he cites the example of a cigarette butt smouldering in the undergrowth of a dry sequoia forest,<sup>121</sup> “A hammer ‘wants’ to be held in a certain way. A forest path issues directives to my body to walk at a particular pace, listen for animals, avoid obstacles. A cigarette butt demands that I put it out.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> An account of the Agentiality of hyperobjects is developed more explicitly elsewhere in the literature, for example, see, Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism*; Daves, ‘Hyletic Phenomenology and Hyperobjects’.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Rekret, ‘A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology’, *Subjectivity*, 2016, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Alphonso Lingis, ‘The Imperative To Be Master’, *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (1980): 95–107.

<sup>122</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 141.

Summarising briefly at the outset, my principal objection to the criteria viscosity, nonlocality, and agentiality is not so much a to do with their incoherence, as with the case of spatio-temporal distribution, but due to the unacceptable commitments I argue they force upon anyone committed to upholding them, and their incompatibility with any flat ontology. Before addressing these commitments, it's worth highlighting again the asymmetry in the extent to which Morton's examples exhibit Viscosity. Nuclear materials and global warming are invoked as examples that satisfy this criterion, as I've already used nuclear materials to illustrate an earlier point, I'll continue to use this example.<sup>123</sup> Morton is also explicit that radioactive materials provide, "a good example of viscosity [...] The more you try to get rid of them, the more you realise you can't get rid of them."<sup>124</sup> Consider the following three examples I propose as possible hyperobjects, which I believe would all sufficiently satisfy the conditions of my stipulative definition:

1. The sum of all nuclear materials on earth
2. Just the plutonium
3. A 1kg piece of plutonium-239 stored in New Mexico.

It seems necessarily to be the case that if indeed I am embedded within a vast matrix of hyperobjects, including 1, 2 and 3 above then I am more embedded within 1 than with 2 or 3, which are themselves embedded within 1, alongside each other and me. Yet if all 3 are hyperobjects, then 1 must also be embedded within 3, along with 2 (and me). The extent to which these examples are entangled with either me or any other object must vary, unless there is some mechanism by which their entanglement with each other, with other objects, and with an individual human can vary in such a way that the notion retains coherency. Example 1. would include the material stored at the nuclear power station fifty kilometres or so from my home, which would appear to exert more influence over my life than does a supposed kilogram of plutonium-239 in New Mexico. In the case of the former, it may influence, at the least, which beach I choose to visit in a way that the latter cannot. It may well prove to be the case that all things are connected, enmeshed together in the way Morton describes, but it seems clear that they're not connected to the same degree. The Norfolk Broads, by sheer virtue of proximity exert more force in my life than do the Florida Everglades, I consider the Broads for summer weekends or public houses on the water, ways in which I do not compass the Everglades. If I am embedded in some perceptual matrix with both, then this matrix would seem to correlate very roughly with personal geography, which

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<sup>123</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 27.

<sup>124</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 36.

raises the same issue around sufficiency and adequacy as laid out previously, and seems to run contrary to the large-scale, ecological thinking Morton seeks to cultivate. Morton appears to reject this position, on the basis of objects being embedded in, or otherwise connected to one another. By my proximity to the nuclear material in Suffolk, he would seem to argue, I am connected with the hyperobject 1. above, and through this am further connected to the hyperobjects 2. and 3. Morton calls this connection between all objects the mesh, “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things.”<sup>125</sup>

### 1.3.5. Ethical imperatives

Leaving aside temporarily the problem that ontological deprivileging of the human presents to the principal feature of hyperobjects, that they be widely distributed in space and time relative to humans, it presumably allows humans to be formed into discrete categories in the same way as other objects in this viscous morass. Nuclear material *qua* hyperobject is formed of, and dissolves into other discrete hyperobjects, including the sum of the uranium, the sum of the plutonium, etc. If humans are enmeshed in viscous folds with nuclear materials, global warming, and the Everglades, there seems no reason why humanity, or humans cannot be divided in such ways as other objects are. Just as we end up with “the sum total of nuclear materials on Earth,” or “just the uranium,” it seems we have to end up with statements like “the sum total of humans on Earth, or just the gays.” Far from being merely non-anthropocentric, this sort of statement starts looking actively misanthropic, deeply sinister, and ought to be rejected outright. Yet if there exists some sort of ethical commitment to not objectify discrete groupings of humans in this way, the commitment to flat ontology would seem to require a similar ethical commitment regarding the various nonhumans caught up in this viscosity. This criticism isn’t so much that Morton advocates a flat ethics alongside a flat ontology, but rather that the proposition that humans and nuclear materials have the same ontological priority, or that neither is reducible to qualities, social constructions, linguistic functions, etc. ought to lead to questions about the source and bestowal of value, etc. that are absent in Hyperobjects.

Perhaps worse, ethically speaking for Morton’s project, is the recognition of this kind of problem with regard to nonhumans in environmental discourse in the earlier work *The Ecological Thought*, “You will see absolutely no references to ‘the animal’ or, even worse, to ‘the animal question,’ as some contemporary philosophers put it (have they forgotten the

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<sup>125</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 38.

resonance of ‘the Jewish question’?)”<sup>126</sup> I do not think that the commitment in Speculative Realism to a flat ontology entails, necessarily, a flat ethics. There is a difference between the statements “all things equally are,” and “all things are equally.” Indeed, I think it is difficult to truly compass what a radically flat ethics would look like. That is not to say that I cannot see how value or ethical concern can (and probably should) be decentred from the human; yet it is one thing to extend value to more broadly include nonhumans and another to grant nonhumans the capacity to attribute value. In this sense, ethics, as currently understood is always anthropocentric, in that it always humans that are doing the valuing. Even the most enlightened ethicist, in attempting to understand how and what nonhumans might value is revealed as the source of value attribution.<sup>127</sup> This is particularly vexing for object-oriented ontology, when we are not merely talking about the equal ontological status of cetaceans and canines, and thus in a flat-ethical terms as possible attributors of value, but also of fungi, bacteria, and viruses, to say nothing of rocks, radioactive material, or capitalism.

A radically ecological ethic appears possible in the recognition of the power of nonhuman actors to act in value bestowing roles, or rather, in their interaction with and participation in, locate value thorough an ecology. Under such an ecological ethic, the sequoia indeed is valued not merely instrumentally, as object of value, but also ecologically in its roles as: habitat, oxygen producer, carbon trapper, food-provider, etc. Humans are included in this ecological ethic, and their interactions with any particular sequoia or grove contribute to the location of value on which this ethic might be established. The reciprocal interplay of actors in any ecology

Morton’s earlier invocation of a hammer, “A hammer ‘wants’ to be held in a certain way. A forest path issues directives to my body to walk at a particular pace, listen for animals, avoid obstacles. A cigarette butt demands that I put it out,”<sup>128</sup> seems provocatively aimed at Heidegger’s equipment analysis and the modes of being to which it leads. The influence exerted on Morton’s work by Harman’s idiosyncratic reading of the equipment analysis is passed over in silence, and without addressing the problems and legitimate critiques of that analysis leaves Morton in a somewhat troubled position, not far off an argument from authority. While I have so far been content to leave the interrogation of Harman’s reading of Heidegger in the hands of Wolfendale, it would be useful here to visit briefly his reading of

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<sup>126</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> Tom Greaves and Rupert Read, ‘Where Value Resides: Making Ecological Value Possible’, *Environmental Ethics* 37, no. 3 (2015): 340.

<sup>128</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 141.

the equipment analysis, a concise formulation of which can be found in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*,<sup>129</sup> and which is reconstructed in detail by Wolfendale.<sup>130</sup> Harman responds to a “serious problem” with the “typical reading” of Heidegger by which theoretical knowledge must arise from a silent ground of average everydayness, “it is true that phenomena in consciousness fail to do justice to the full depth of things, to their inscrutable being withdrawn from all presence. Yet it is also the case that the practical handling of entities fails to do them justice as well.”<sup>131</sup> From this, Harman makes such a move as to say (crudely) that “the map is not the terrain” and the mapmaker and the hiker both have different structural relations to the terrain, and that neither exhausts the terrain in its fullness. There will always be aspects of the terrain that are forgotten in either’s account, be they the gorse thickets *for* warblers, dikes *for* ferns, ferns *for* slugs, etc. In each case the terrain is encountered not in its entirety, but in its “sensual” presentation to the object involved in the encounter,

A raindrop does not make contact with the full reality of the mountain, and neither does a snowflake, a gust of wind, or a helicopter crashing into its face. All of these objects encounter the mountain-object only in some translated, distorted, oversimplified form, despite their apparent lack of ‘consciousness’. The withdrawal of one object from another is not produced by a magical entity called the mind, but is the very nature of relationality, even among mindless hammers and atoms.<sup>132</sup>

Such encounters, according to Harman, remove the reality of an object to a hidden core, inaccessible to the seer, but hinted at (if not revealed) through the sensory qualities it projects, the intentional object of Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>133</sup>

Returning to Morton, the issue at stake in the configuration of such objects as hammers is the ontologico-categorical situation of the ready-to-hand.<sup>134</sup> When such things as hammers give themselves in the mode of readiness-to-hand, it is the pre-ontological understanding of Dasein, concerned with and in-order-to that seizes the hammer *qua* hammer, which is revealed in the act of hammering. To say that a hammer, “‘wants’ to be held in a certain way,” ignores that the hammer is only revealed as a hammer in the act of hammering in-

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<sup>129</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 135–36.

<sup>130</sup> Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes*, 39–95.

<sup>131</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 135.

<sup>132</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 136.

<sup>133</sup> Graham Harman, ‘Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities (2006)’, in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Zero Books, 2010), 131–34.

<sup>134</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 101–3.

order-to address the towards-which of Dasein's concerned dealings.<sup>135</sup> It's well-rehearsed, but bears repeating: the hammerer uses the hammer to drive the nail, to build the house, to provide shelter, etc. in-order-to fulfil its being as X. Configured in these terms, the cigarette butt appears in the mode of unreadiness-to-hand, faced with its obstinacy, Dasein's stance of practical engagement with the world leads it to address the disturbance caused by this obstinacy, whether by repairing a broken hammer, or smothering the cigarette butt.<sup>136</sup> Things like cigarette butts don't belong in environments like ancient sequoia groves, they belong in ash trays or bins, and transposing the burning cigarette butt to a desert, or to wet concrete changes this ethical dynamic altogether. Smouldering quietly on the rain-slick asphalt of a car park, does the cigarette butt continue to exert its supposed demand to be extinguished? The entire encounter is misleading, as the principal site of my encounter would appear to be with the forest, or the car park, an encounter in which the cigarette butt is a mere interruption. A truly non-anthropocentric reading of this encounter would abstract the human "I" out of the case altogether. Does the cigarette butt impose the same ethical demands on, say, a passing cervid, or the towering sequoias themselves? What ethical failing then, do we ascribe to the forest that stands idly by and allows the cigarette butt to spark a conflagration, or is the burgeoning fire owed the same right to flourish as the primeval trees, both being ontologically equal? Certainly, Harman's reading of the equipment analysis, and the consequent moves that grant such things as fires and forests the capacity to encounter (but never exhaust) one another pushes the narrative in this direction.

### 1.3.6. Metaphorical imperatives

Alphonso Lingis was Harman's teacher at the Pennsylvania State University in 1990,<sup>137</sup> and in some form Lingis's imperatives have survived even into Harman's recent work.<sup>138</sup> Particularly for Harman the imperative is a quality of objects themselves, and explicitly not mere metaphor,<sup>139</sup> yet what is gained by positing the supposed imperative, central to the notion of the agentiality of objects as a metaphysical rather than metaphoric quality? It seems to me that reclaiming, "owning" even, the metaphor allows for a reframing of human-nonhuman relations in such a way that is compatible with the search for a nonanthropocentric (or at least a deanthropocentred) ethics without accepting the

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<sup>135</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 98–102.

<sup>136</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 103–4.

<sup>137</sup> Graham Harman, 'Alphonso Lingis on the Imperatives in Things (1997)', in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Zero Books, 2010), 14.

<sup>138</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 67.

<sup>139</sup> Harman, 'Alphonso Lingis on the Imperatives in Things (1997)', 18.

problematic metaphysics of object-oriented ontology. Harman regards a 1914 essay<sup>140</sup> by José Ortega y Gasset as “one of the most important philosophical essays ever written, and crucial for ontology no less than aesthetics.”<sup>141</sup> This short essay, preface to a poetry collection, treats mostly with the notion of the muse as related to poetics, but also explores, briefly, metaphor, with an example from the poet López Picó, that a cypress “is like the ghost of a dead flame.”<sup>142</sup> For Harman, Ortega y Gasset’s essay raises a number of lessons that point-to, or precede his object-oriented ontology. First, Ortega y Gasset treats metaphors as reversible, a mistake which Harman argues throws open the abyss between real objects and their real qualities, one of the pillars of object-oriented ontology. Secondly, Ortega y Gasset’s “executant I,” is taken to open another gap, this time between real objects and their sensual properties,

There is the same difference between a pain that someone tells me about and a pain that I feel as there is between the red that I see and the being red of this red leather box. *Being red* is for it what hurting is for me. Just as there is an I-John Doe, there is also an I-red, an I-water and an I-star.<sup>143</sup>

Harman’s account of metaphor must account for his commitment to this divide between real and sensual objects and qualities, the fourfold of object-oriented ontology. For Harman the objects of the metaphor are necessarily inaccessible and the only media through which sense can be made of any metaphor is a new object, an “I” inserted into any aesthetic encounter, the third of his lessons from the essay. In this schema, the metaphor encountered by this I is the relation between the real object “cypress” and the sensory qualities “ghost of a dead flame,” a chimerical new object. Just as Morton’s rejection of anthropocentrism poses problems for his account of the agentiality of hyperobjects, so Harman’s interposing of the “I” into aesthetic encounters, making the primary interpreter of relations between nonhuman object, in effect, the human subject, those relations are reduced to impoverished versions of the kinds of relations human subjects can have, and seems to serve to unsettle the claim that there is no ontological primacy peculiar to humans.<sup>144</sup>

Returning to Lingis’s (and Morton’s) cigarette butt, and it appears the same “I” is missing whether considered either a metaphorical or literal moral agent. In either case, the “I” of the

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<sup>140</sup> Ortega y Gasset, ‘An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface’.

<sup>141</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, 74.

<sup>142</sup> Ortega y Gasset, ‘An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface’, 140.

<sup>143</sup> Ortega y Gasset, ‘An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface’, 134.

<sup>144</sup> Stephen Mulhall, ‘How Complex Is a Lemon?’, *London Review of Books* 40, no. 18 (2018): 29.



encounter is lost, forcing an uncomfortable choice on the speculative realist. If read as metaphor, *pace* Morton, the “I” points to a lacuna in the notion of agentiality, in which “I” acts as the subjective mediator of the encounter, through which the ethical imperative must be interpreted. If read as Morton intends, explicitly not as metaphor, the “I” appears in a form more akin as the object of Meillassoux’s correlationist’s codicil, which reformulates the imperative as something like, “the cigarette butt wants me to put it out, *for me*.” In a sense, this discussion of agentiality merely obfuscates what seems too obvious to say explicitly, that on seeing a cigarette butt smouldering among the dry leaves of an ancient forest, I want to put it out. Changing slightly the configuration of this supposed encounter into one with a metaphor is less vexed than trying to insist that objects issue ethical demands. Reconfiguring “the smouldering cigarette butt issues ethical demands,” to “the smouldering cigarette butt is an issuer of ethical demands,” reveals the metaphor at work.

None of this is to propose that nonhuman objects, nor nonanimals, cannot elicit an affective response motivating ethical action.<sup>145</sup> The vulnerability of a kitten is sufficient to affect me in such a way as to encourage me to seek to care for the creature, just as the revulsion I feel at the sight of a mosquito on my skin affects me in such a way as to crush it. Seeing markings that indicate a tree has been marked for felling might well provoke an affective response, enough in some cases to motivate protest activity, perhaps the spiking of those trees.<sup>146</sup> The encounter with the lithic, or other indicators of elemental time likewise seems adequate in provoking an affective response, albeit at the risk of reducing stone, fossil, earth or mountain to mere objects of an aesthetic gaze.<sup>147</sup> Artefacts too seem capable of provoking affective responses, even if merely sentimental, my favourite chair or the watch my grandfather gave me, for example.

The imperative does not arise from the object or metaphor in question but arises from the seer as an affective response to an aesthetic situation. Whether motivated by revulsion at the damage the burning cigarette stub might inflict, or a caregiving affect towards the forest, or

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<sup>145</sup> I do not accept the notion that “affect” and “affective” imply passivity of emotional response *pace* eg. William James. Read and Hutchinson address this, Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read, ‘Practising Pragmatist-Wittgensteinianism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>146</sup> Spiking is the practice of driving metal spikes into trees, either near the base where loggers might be expected to saw, or along the length of the tree. The spikes destroy saws and other logging equipment, at significant risk to the operators of the machinery. The practice was commonly used by environmental activists, most notably Earth First! in the 1980s and 1990s. Tree spiking was made a federal felony in the USA in 1988.

<sup>147</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 247–52.

any other affective response, it is I that want to put the cigarette butt out. There is a secondary metaphor at work, of course, in that the cigarette butt burning on the forest floor is itself a metaphor for global warming. In this second case, there is a projection of the metaphor onto reality that makes it fail to register. I cannot stamp out global warming through the action of my boot. It requires a complete reorientation of mine, and millions of other people's lives, but also it is not the simple, discrete, concrete object of the metaphor.<sup>148</sup>

### 1.3.7. The elision of metaphor, ontology, and ethics

Leaving aside Harman's misreading of the equipment analysis the issue of the agentiality of nonhuman objects, including such things as Morton calls hyperobjects, is one that haunts the various theoretical positions variously identifiable as "new materialisms," in which Latour's actor-network-theory (ANT) is incrementally widened in the pursuit of anti-anthropocentrism. The adversity to anthropocentrism given in these positions poses a false binary in which critique and suspicion are opposed by enchantment, openness to the vitality of matter, or the "cultivated discernment of the web of agentic capacities."<sup>149</sup> The expansiveness of ANT leads to theories of embeddedness, including Morton's Viscosity, and ultimately to the deprivileging of the ethical status human actors, or actants, to use Latour's terminology. An actant need not be human in ANT, and is understood as any source of action with coherence enough to produce effects, change events, "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial," whose "competence is deduced from performance."<sup>150</sup> The focus of ANT on the relations between actants is innocuous enough in sufficiently limited systems, but no serious analysis can help but widen even the simplest of systems to the extent that large-scale abstractions, including the kinds of thing Morton calls hyperobjects, are drawn in to the web of actants. The proposition that nothing exists outside of these relations between actants rests on the uncritical acceptance that the relata concerned actually exist.

The flattening of ontology is bound up in attempts to change the way we relate to nonhumans, and the ways in which that relating occurs would appear to be aesthetic and ethical. It is an effort to decentre the capacity to bestow value from the purely human and extend, or at least recognise the value inherent in the nonhuman, or is self-bestowing.<sup>151</sup> Levi Bryant explains how efforts towards a flat ontology expand the identification with nonhuman centres of value,

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<sup>148</sup> Rupert Read, *Applying Wittgenstein* (Continuum, 2007), 106.

<sup>149</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 38.

<sup>150</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. VIII.

<sup>151</sup> See for example, Greaves and Read, 'Where Value Resides: Making Ecological Value Possible'.

There is a process of ever-widening identification and ever-narrowing alienation which widens the self. The self is as comprehensive as the totality of our identifications. Or, more succinctly, our Self is that with which we identify. Identification is a spontaneous, non-rational, but not irrational, process through which the interest or interests of another being are reacted to as our own interest or interests.<sup>152</sup>

This points to a need to begin such a process with an understanding that nonhuman things can value, attend to how/what they value, and re-examine humans from that position. There are notable cases of people attempting this process, I particularly have in mind such nature writers as Charles Foster, or Thomas Thwaites, who have attempted to live as badgers, otters and foxes, in Foster's case<sup>153</sup> or goats in Thwaites'.<sup>154</sup> I further think there is an additional role played by nature writing in mediating encounters between humans and nonhumans, whether animals or locales, for example in the case of Nan Shepherd.<sup>155</sup> While attempts like these to understand or embody the experience of being nonhuman in an attempt to arrive at an idea of how or what such things value might have some merit, I maintain that they further exaggerate the limits of what it's possible to imagine or know, in terms of epistemic finitude. Pretending to be a badger by sniffing around in urban woodland might well lead to an appreciation in some sense of the hardships endured by badgers and the attribution by such mustelids of value on things like food sources or secure sets. This sort of speculative activity is possible with urban mammals or birds, nonhumans with environments or worlds that largely intersect with our own, in a way that it is radically impossible to do with such nonhumans that do not. I contend that there exists an epistemic gap, preventing us from fruitfully engaging in such activity with, say, a blood fluke as its object, the world of which consists of the membranes of mammalian internal organs.

The world of the blood fluke, its environment *Umwelt* calls to mind Uexküll's famous discussion of the intricacies of the life of a tick, which smelling the butyric acid of a mammal's skin leaps from a leaf or blade of grass with the aim of landing on a passing animal. After a successful leap, the tick simply burrows into the flesh of whatever prey it has alighted on and drains what blood it can before disembarking, laying its eggs, and promptly dying. Not only do we learn how the tick navigates its small world, but also that a tick can

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<sup>152</sup> Levi R. Bryant, 'Larval Subjects', 2006, <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/>. Accessed 03/11/2020

<sup>153</sup> Charles Foster, *Being a Beast* (Profile Books, 2016).

<sup>154</sup> Thomas Thwaites, *Goatman: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2016).

<sup>155</sup> Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Canongate Books, 2011).

lie in wait for passing prey for at least 18 years without risk of starvation.<sup>156</sup> Blood flukes and ticks lie at the far end of an epistemic spectrum of which animals it is possible to imagine being in the way that Foster and Thwaites do.<sup>157</sup> I do not want to say that we cannot know anything about what it is like to be a badger, goat or blood fluke, but it seems apt to say that there remain limits to what, exactly, can be known of the nonhuman. An incomplete, or simplified picture of a thing can still be correct in some ways, and it would be strange to argue that anything less than a complete picture of a thing necessarily misrepresents it. It would also be wrong, I think, to say that nonhumans are so inaccessible to us that the only way to gain knowledge (even incomplete knowledge) of a thing is to literally become it.<sup>158</sup> There are things we can know about badgers, obviously, but without being trite, the sorts of things we can know would appear to be limited to precisely the kinds of things we *can* know. We can know what it's like to sniff through refuse in search of food, but even this act would seem to be completely wound up in, and held against what we actually understand by things like food, refuse, etc. I can know the taste of blood, but not in the way that a tick, lacking taste buds or even a circulatory system of its own knows blood. It seems that in all cases what we can know is limited by the knowledge that any such activity is extended role play, which may be entertaining, and even illuminating, but doesn't seem to point towards true knowledge of what it's like to be one particular nonhuman or another.

### 1.3.8. Temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity

While the criteria Viscosity and Nonlocality refer broadly to the supposed spatial characteristics of hyperobjects, the remaining criteria, Temporal Undulation, Phasing, and Interobjectivity refer to their supposed position in and relation to time. Temporal Undulation attempts to account for the large timescales involved when considering hyperobjects, and the wide temporal distribution necessitated by their definition. In the account of Temporal Undulation the supposed weirdness of hyperobjects emerges, uncanniness becoming another necessity of hyperobjects.<sup>159</sup> Phasing offers a temporal counterpart to its spatial analogue, Nonlocality, “Hyperobjects are *phased*: they occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis

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<sup>156</sup> Jakob von Uexküll, ‘A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans’, in *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With A Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O’Neil (University of Minnesota Press, 2010). 44-52.

<sup>157</sup> I would imagine that this spectrum is closely tied to the charisma of the animals in question.

<sup>158</sup> CF Mulhall’s criticism of Harman’s assertion that simplifications are falsehoods, Mulhall, ‘How Complex Is a Lemon?’, 30.

<sup>159</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 55.

[...] We only see pieces of them at once, like a tsunami or a case of radiation sickness.”<sup>160</sup> Together, Nonlocality and Phasing account for the assertion in *Being Ecological* that hyperobjects can only be accessed one slice at a time, and bring together the spatial and the temporal that forms the principle basis of Morton’s stipulative definition, “Space can no longer be construed as an absolute container, but rather thought of as a spacetime manifold that is radically *in* the universe, *of* it rather than ontologically outside it.”<sup>161</sup>

The uncanniness of hyperobjects emerges from their wide distribution in time, which Morton construes in terms of Gaussian distribution and Lovecraftian cosmic horror,

Hyperobjects are *Gaussian*, disturbingly squishy and mollusk-like [*sic*]. The undulations of the mollusk [*sic*] flesh of spacetime fail to drop to zero. Gravity waves from the ‘beginning of time’ are right now passing through my body from the edge of the universe. It is as if we were inside a gigantic octopus. H. P. Lovecraft imagines the insane god Cthulhu this way.<sup>162</sup>

The use of H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction to describe hyperobjects is apt for what Morton seemingly intends of his theory; for vast entities far beyond human ken drifting through the universe, brushing against our fleeting lives to maddening effect. In Lovecraft’s hyperbolic fiction, the object of horror, construed in apophatic terms as “nameless,” “unspeakable,” “indescribable,” etc. point not to the object itself, but to a comprehension of the thing’s incomprehensibility, and the threat latent in horror fiction is the threat of thought’s being either overwhelmed or unable to parse the object of horror. In this sense horror can be thought of not merely in affective terms, but epistemological terms also: thought itself becomes a threatening horizon.<sup>163</sup> Configuring hyperobjects in this way transforms them into objects *of horror*, but crucially not into objects of the kind that can sustain transitive relations with affects like horror itself. One cannot be afraid of the dread god Cthulhu itself, because such a thing exists beyond the limits of thought; fear can only dwell on its grasping tentacles or the long shadow beneath its chiropteran wings. Such horror doesn’t result from the abundance of psychological stimulation, but rather “the vacuity of any correlation between subject and object, between self and world.”<sup>164</sup> Hyperobjects, as objects of horror would seem to function in a similar way, we cannot fear a thing like global warming, which is too large,

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<sup>160</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 70.

<sup>161</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 56.

<sup>162</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 64.

<sup>163</sup> Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 3* (Zero Books, 2015), 120.

<sup>164</sup> Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 3*, 121.

too diffuse for an affect like fear to grasp. Rather our fear must take as its objects such things as flash floods or wildfires, the loss of treasured habitats or the extinction of species. Such horror refutes both anthropocentric and anthropomorphic views of the world: the world both for and as human yet avoids misanthropy. To assume an anti-humanism at work places the human back at the centre of consideration, but rather reveals the world as indifferent to the human.<sup>165</sup> The problem that this quality of hyperobjects points towards is that, if we are only able to be afraid of such things as flash floods or wild fires, and are unable to take global warming itself as an object of fear, then restorative action is largely bounded to such things that we can be directly affected by, and that our action can have some aversive effect on: putting out fires and piling up sandbags, for example. Without a means by which global warming itself can become an object of fear we are bound up in a double problem, first that we cannot simply wait for an event of some magnitude that irrefutably reconciles incidents like flash floods to the idea of global warming, and we similarly have no way to account for our own inaction on the matter, knowing all we do about the world.<sup>166</sup>

### 1.3.9. The uncanny

Morton blames the Temporal Undulation of hyperobjects for the uncanny effect they provoke.<sup>167</sup> Uncanniness is a concept in Moton's vernacular with changeable meaning; I examine the uncanny *qua* aesthetic mode more thoroughly in 2.3.7. On the one hand it serves as a synonym for such aesthetic affects as fear, anxiety, surprise, revulsion, and so on. Otherwise, it signposts the "uncanny valley" as described by roboticist Mori Masahiro in 1970.<sup>168</sup> In short, the uncanny valley describes the revulsion and fear we experience in encounters with nonhuman things that nevertheless look like humans, with very lifelike robots or prosthetics provoking stronger negative affects than those that are more obviously nonhuman, such as industrial machinery. The uncanniness of hyperobjects lies in the realisation that we are in the valley; its walls loom over us and there's no path out. We are trapped in and among such massive things as global warming, and far from experiencing a sense of aesthetic sublimity, of vulnerability in the face of a distant threat, we find instead that we have been threatened all along and will continue to be so. The uncanny resides in this perceptual transformation of the familiar into the threatening. In terms of global warming, it's the intrusion of menace into the everyday; the weather, the sorting of

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<sup>165</sup> Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 3*, 125.

<sup>166</sup> Hutchinson and Read, 'Practising Pragmatist-Wittgensteinianism', 180.

<sup>167</sup> I return to the uncanny in 2.3.7.

<sup>168</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 130–33. As a Japanese name, Mori is the family name, Masahiro the given name.

recycling, decisions about commuting, etc. Morton draws attention to this in his discussion of the decision about driving a car in his *Dark Ecology*,<sup>169</sup> As Heidegger put it in the introductory remarks to his Bremen lectures, “The human does not see what *has* long already arrived, and indeed *has* happened, of which the atomic bomb and its explosion are only final eruptions [...] What is this helpless fear still waiting for, if the dreadful [*das Entsetzliche*] *has* already happened?”<sup>170</sup> According to Morton, the uncanny arises in the Heideggerian account of the technological “enframing” of the world, which now is removed from the foreground and pushed into the contextual matrix of equipment, which thanks to the commitments of object-oriented ontology includes hyperobjects, as well as “rocks and their toys.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> ADDIN ZOTERO\_ITEM CSL\_CITATION

{“citationID”:“2OBHRbbB”,“properties”: {“formattedCitation”:“Timothy Morton, {\i}Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence” (Columbia University Press, 2016), 10.”,“plainCitation”:“Timothy Morton, Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence (Columbia University Press, 2016), 10.”,“noteIndex”:167},“citationItems”: [{“id”:80,“uris”: [“http://zotero.org/users/local/5zYWBF8b/items/XL2JHA86”],“itemData”: {“id”:80,“type”:“book”,“event-place”:“New York”,“publisher”:“Columbia University Press”,“publisher-place”:“New York”,“title”:“Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence”,“author”: [{“family”:“Morton”,“given”:“Timothy”}],“issued”: {“date-parts”: [ [“2016”] ] },“locator”:“10”}],“schema”:“https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”} Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>170</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günther Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Indiana University Press, 2009), 254.

<sup>171</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 56.

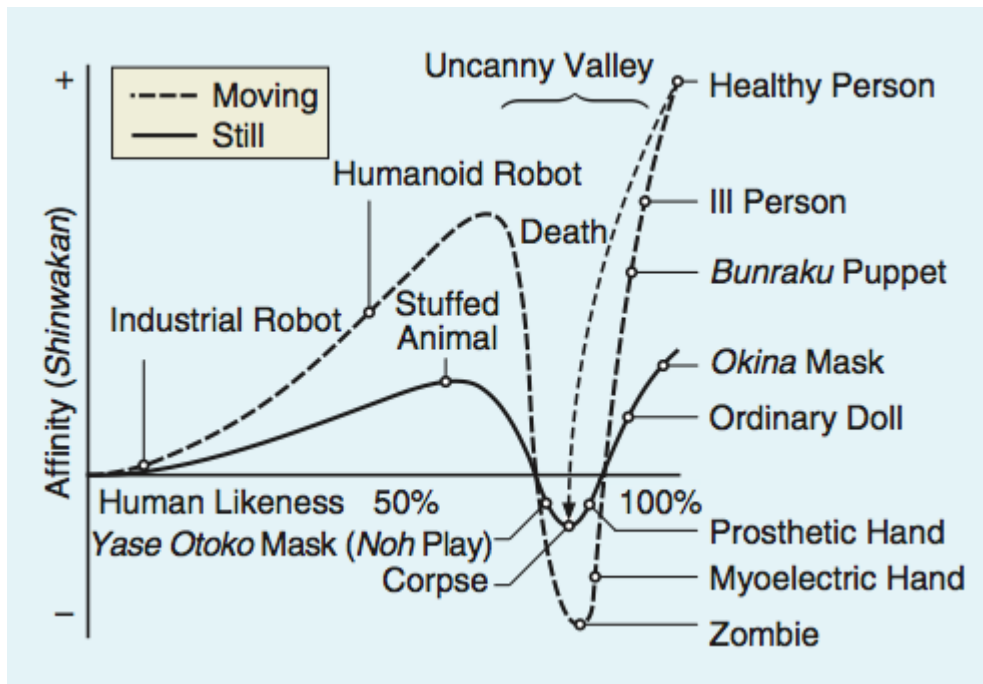


FIGURE 2 THE UNCANNY VALLEY<sup>172</sup>

There is a problem with this characterisation of Heidegger's conception of the uncanny and its relationship to technology. To make this characterisation wholesale is to dismiss the ambiguities in Heidegger's account of the uncanny, which on the one hand describes the alienation of the public sphere engendered by technology. Yet there is an ontological dimension to the Heideggerian uncanny, a distinction Heidegger doesn't particularly disambiguate. *Being and Time* factors the uncanny/unhomely *unheimlich* as a feature of Dasein's anxiety in being-towards-the-world, particularly its thrown-ness. Being thrown into the world, Dasein finds itself confronted and pursued by the uncanny as it seeks shelter in the public.<sup>173</sup> The feeling by which one's life is haunted secretly by another, in which one is estranged, in some sense, from one's authentic self. Here, Morton's assertion that hyperobjects have brought about an end of the world, rendering the use of the word "world" itself inoperative, points away from Heidegger's use of the uncanny in terms of anxiety. Without a working concept of "world," the notion of thrownness is in disarray.

The notion of uncanniness that Morton seems to be focused on, is a sense of unfamiliarity with the world we find ourselves in, a world which we seem to know in greater detail than ever before, yet which is forever less intimate as a result. I want to characterise this use of the uncanny by Morton by returning to Heidegger, as a change in the way in which we engage

<sup>172</sup> Masahiro Mori, 'The Uncanny Valley: The Original Essay by Masahiro Mori', *IEEE Spectrum*, 12 June 2012, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/the-uncanny-valley>.

<sup>173</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 285–87.



with the world in our average everydayness through the various modes of being in which Dasein encounters the world. This sense of the uncanny seems to cut close to a feature of hyperobjects that I think Morton has missed, likely because of his twofold concern with a) correlationism as a real problem, and b) maintaining the various commitments forced on him by speculative realism and object-oriented ontology. The point that I mean to develop later in this thesis is that the things Morton calls hyperobjects, things like global warming and nuclear waste don't possess some quality "hyper," but rather that our engagement with such things opens "hyper" as a mode of being. In this sense then, hyperobjects as a theory begins to look like an example of ontological fallacy, that merely naming a thing brings it into existence as discrete object in the world, rather than merely a feature of grammar or object of thought, etc. Having a name for something like global warming is not enough to conjure into existence a tentacular cosmic horror of the sort Morton seems to have in mind. The fallacious reification of the large or complex, particularly with regard to their extensions in space and time recalls particularly Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness:

There is no element whatever which possesses this character of simple location [...] I hold that by a process of constructive abstraction we can arrive at abstractions which are the simply-located bits of material, and at other abstractions which are the minds included in the scientific scheme.<sup>174</sup>

The uncanny would seem to be an appropriate way to think towards the timescales involved in the phenomena that Morton describes. He uses the terms horrifying, terrifying, and petrifying to describe the scales at which hyperobjects exist. The horrifying is a temporal scale created by the knowledge "that 75 percent of global warming effects will persist until five hundred years from now. I try to imagine what life was like in 1513." The terrifying is a larger scale based in the knowledge that 25 percent of the carbon produced over the last century will endure up to 30,000 years from now. The petrifying, then, is a scale based in the knowledge that up to 7 percent of the carbon produced since the industrial revolution will remain in the atmosphere in around one hundred thousand years.<sup>175</sup> The pressures of scale are extraordinary, uncanny, I would argue and pose serious questions about how on Earth we can encounter such a thing as global warming. Similar questions were posed in the 2010 documentary film *Into Eternity*,<sup>176</sup> in which film maker Michael Madsen explored the construction of the Onkalo spent nuclear fuel facility in Eurajoki, Finland. The facility will,

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<sup>174</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Pelican, 1948), 59.

<sup>175</sup> Daves, 'Hyletic Phenomenology and Hyperobjects', 58–59.

<sup>176</sup> *Into Eternity*, directed by Michael Madsen, Denmark, 2010, 75 minutes.

upon completion, be capable of storing roughly one century's worth of spent nuclear fuel, in a spiralling construction carved deep into the granite bedrock. The most interesting discussions arising from this construction concern the enormous scale of time for which the facility, once filled, must remain secure. To use Morton's parlance, the scale involved is petrifying. Considerations around how to warn future humans not to enter the sealed site, without knowing now what languages will be spoke in Finland in five hundred, a thousand or two-thousand years from now, give way to the demand that this structure must last not merely longer than any human structure has ever endured, but must survive longer than the entire span of sapient human history. Undoubtedly the semantic challenges arising in such a project and the sublime sense of scale involved in considering what this structure means is variously humbling and fearful; yet altogether different, I insist, from serious consideration of the infinite to which Morton compares the scales at which hyperobjects operate.

## 1.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I've laid out my critiques of three prominent thinkers in the speculative realist movement, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Timothy Morton.

My criticism of Meillassoux's project concerned primarily his treatment of time, and the assumption of a Humean-classical form of realism with regard to time that fails to anticipate conceptions of temporality that lie beyond this one paradigm. With recourse to a resolute Wittgensteinian reading of his problem of ancestrality, I've attempted to dissolve the problem. I've further argued that in foisting this tacit assumption about temporality onto the target of his criticism, Meillassoux has, in effect begged the question of ancestrality *ex ante*. Additionally, I've attempted to add to recent criticism of Meillassoux on the grounds of an incomplete engagement with Kant's transcendental idealism.

The bulk of this criticism was directed toward Morton's hyperobject theory, which I've demonstrated to fail as a coherent theory when scrutinised closely. Particularly, I've shown that Morton's central definition for hyperobjects, their wide spatio-temporal distribution relative to humans, even if granted, causes significant problems for a project wedded to the anti-correlationism of Meillassoux, and falls in the shadow of anthropocentrism, the demon that haunts environmental philosophy.

Through these criticisms I've attempted to lay bare that the challenge that arises in the conceptualisation of the climate crisis. In many cases, the descent from epistemic questions to ontology is so sudden as to prove numbingly easy to gloss over, yet the descent is not always a complete one. Meillassoux's claims about the ancestrality of the world may seem epistemic, "how could we know about the world before humans", but this seems to contain within itself and ontological position. If there is anything that we do know about the world, we ought to be able to say, as a minimum, that it exists beyond the walls of thought, and that states of affairs within the world could be different without threatening its existence. All a sceptic of Meillassoux's position can say to this is, "yes, but things could also be different," to which Meillassoux need only agree to reassert his position. An equivocation lies at the heart of this position in the difference between "things may be different to how I know them to be," and "things may be different from the way, in fact, they are." While this may serve to

temporarily tie Meillassoux's critics in knots, it's possible to utter equivocal sentences of this kind and not be committed to either position or the other.<sup>177</sup>

The political, environmental weight of Meillassoux's work isn't immediately apparent, but the ancestral argument invites reflection on the historical reality of world absent of humans, a world without us. For those of us engaged in environmental projects, this question ought, I think, be open to discussion as a route towards an environmental or deep ecological philosophy as an alternative to the well-rehearsed Heideggerian route. This reflection, or imagination of the possibility of a world without humans is, I think a necessary procedure for serious reflection on the environmental crisis, and the least misanthropic of available reflections is, I'd argue, the best available of such reflections.

In this chapter I've opened the frameworks of the speculative realists and begun to orient them towards the investigation of the environmental aesthetic with which the remainder of this thesis is concerned. In the next chapter I continue this investigation with an analysis of the climate crisis in terms of aesthetics, notable the scale ranging from colossal, to monstrous, and sublime. In this I begin to sketch a topography of scale of the aesthetics of the climate crisis, which will lead me to, in the third chapter, a similar analysis of the Heideggerian aesthetic of scale, focussing on the gigantic. In the concluding chapter, I develop these analyses into a contribution to this topographical device that is suited to contemporary understandings of the climate crisis.

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<sup>177</sup> Thorne Christian, 'Outward Bound: On Quentin Meillassoux's After Finitude', *Commonplace Book*, 23 November 2011, <https://sites.williams.edu/cthorne/articles/outward-bound-on-quentin-meillassouxs-after-finitude/>. Accessed 12/12/2020.

## Part II: Gigantic aesthetics

“The goal of fascism is to replace politics with aesthetics; that’s all they have, they just have inspiring symbols and stories, and on a policy level it makes no fucking sense, and the people are literally insane, but, they have compelling aesthetics.”<sup>178</sup>

Having raised several definitional and conceptual issues with Hyperobjects, and the core works of speculative realism more broadly, I return, in this chapter, to the root of the issue that motivates this project as I see it. On the one hand, speculative realism represents in some way a turn towards aesthetics as first philosophy, or at least places aesthetics at the centre of philosophical thinking in a way that I think is a positive move for the development of “post-divide” philosophical work. Yet, the issue that proves elusive in the works of Meillassoux, Harman, and Morton as shown, is an improper regard for the question of scale. In the case of Meillassoux, this question lies silently in the expanses of time and space conjured by the question of ancestrality. In Harman’s work, it coils in the abyss that lies between objects that withdraw ever further from one another. In Morton’s the question of scale is an elastic mesh that binds disposable cutlery, photons, and the forces of global capital. In each case, a tacit question about how the aesthetic of scale unfolds remains unacknowledged.

In this chapter, I examine the aesthetic of scale and situate that aesthetic in the crisis of modernity of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I identify the threat of nihilism and the powerlessness that the encounter with objects of great scale provokes. In the case of modernity, this encounter was typified by the discovery of the global forces that mobilised the Great War, in which the scale of any individual action was so dwarfed as to pale into insignificance. I want to begin to suggest a parallel between such an expression of nihilism in the face of the Great War and that expressed by the framing of the climate crisis. In such a configuration “modernity” is perhaps replaced by “environmentalism” as an enframing of thought that offers the same nihilistic conclusion as modernity. The climate crisis, then, is for us as the Great War was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: an impersonal and immense, but unseen danger, at once thrilling and terrifying, profoundly aesthetic in character, that holds us suspended over

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<sup>178</sup> Joshua Citarella, ‘Joshua Citarella’, 1:10:18, *Yung Chomsky on Physical Fitness and the Left*, th 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6nNTKye9ySzN9Bbs00E0Oh?si=raSlXWpGQOSbI9X3p7yjcw>. Accessed 18/09/2022.

a wide abyss of nihilism, a nihilism of “world” in which “world” as an operable concept is largely destroyed.

In this, at least, Morton is broadly correct, I think. He errs, however, in positing hyperobjects as a solution to understanding this nihilism, rather than recognising them as the monster he set out to slay. There is, I think, an undeniable phenomenon that “massive, large-scale illusions shred human minds, making access to reality difficult.”<sup>179</sup> Having unpicked the illusion that hyperobjects, etc. offer, I now seek to set out an alternative by leveraging the crisis of modernity that shook European thought through the early twentieth century, and which can, I think, offer decisive lessons as we grapple today with a new crisis that has, or will come to define our age.

First, I address several concerns that arise in the handling of Heidegger’s thought, particularly the ideological foundation that his work offers, often tacitly, to contemporary far-right movements. I am concerned particularly about Heidegger’s critiques of modernity and technology and their enduring appeal to certain far-right narratives that demand, I believe, attention. Inasmuch as Heidegger’s later thought bears on praxis-oriented environmental projects, so it bears on contemporary far-right movements, and especially those far-right movements overtly operationalising concern for the environment and ecofascist theories of nature, which proves something of a Gordian Knot at the core of even mainstream environmental discourse. Going beyond mere author association, I want to establish a conceptual connection between right wing environmental discourse and the scalar aesthetics with which this section is chiefly concerned. This connection is tightly bound to the critique of modernity, the metaphysics of people and place, and the dual role of technology in allowing human mastery over the world, and in mastering humanity.

This is not merely a matter of author-association of the type that reads: “We all know that Heidegger was a Nazi, it’s worse than everyone used to pretend, so now whenever we talk about Heidegger, we also have to mention the Nazis.” Rather I think that disregarding the question of scale gives ground to ecofascistic ideologies in an insidious way. As I will show, the symptoms of scale emerge in the vagaries of modernity and the drive to technologize, in response to these forces, reactionaries are given the opportunity to seize an oppositional position against the faceless “global.” When Morton enjoins readers to participate in the ecological thought, the “space-scale,” “religion-scale”<sup>180</sup> thought he proposes is necessary to

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<sup>179</sup> Wendy Farley, ‘Truth, Beauty, and Climate Change: A Dialogue with Continental Philosophy about Living With Denial’, *Environmental Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2015): 257.

<sup>180</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

take in the climate crisis, is the kind of thought that must propose planet-scale “solutions” to the many problems of a world in crisis. This is one of the core tensions I feel pervades environmental discourse. On the one hand, the cry for global solutions may amount to mere wishful thinking, but moreover it creates a dependence on technological and technologizing forces that create objects against which malicious actors can position themselves. On the other hand, the rejection of the call to the global indulges the very localist concerns to which the far-right appeal.

Next, I sketch the grounds of Heidegger’s philosophical project in the concerns that animated much of pre-war German Imperial intellectual life. While much of this ground is already well travelled, I locate a number of conceptual overlaps that mark out, I think, the parallel between modernity and the world of climate breakdown that I seek to lay against one another. Referring back to the first section of this chapter, I illustrate how the concerns that motivate a range of political actors today are pasted almost wholesale from those that obtained a century ago when the conceptual and ideological roots of European fascism were laid.

Thirdly, I offer a close reading of Heidegger’s uses of the gigantic (*Riesenhaft, die Riesenhaftigkeit, riesig, etc.*) in the post-war writings. I examine the gigantic, developed in Heidegger’s later work, primarily *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*,<sup>181</sup> but also notably “The Age of the World Picture,”<sup>182</sup> and around 20 other volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*. In the chapter that follows I refer extensively to *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*<sup>183</sup> and the two available English translations, by Rojcewicz & Vallega-Neu,<sup>184</sup> and Emad & Maly.<sup>185</sup> For simplicity, I use subtitles referring to the numbered sections and remarks in *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, which are consistent across translations, and square brackets to indicate the pagination of each section in the *Gesamtausgabe* edition published by Vittorio Klostermann. Any square brackets in that section refer to page numbers in the *Gesamtausgabe* edition, while I use footnotes to indicate citations from the two translations. For example, [GA: 65, 107] refers to page 107 of *Gesamtausgabe* 65, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*. Any unattributed translations from German are my own. For the sake of simplicity and

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<sup>181</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, trans. Daniela Vallega-Neu Richard Rojcewicz (University of Indiana Press, 2012).

<sup>182</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture (1938)’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, trans. Julian Young (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>183</sup> Heidegger, *Beiträge Zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*.

<sup>184</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*.

<sup>185</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Indiana University Press, 1999).

consistency, I refer to GA: 65 as *Contributions*. Finally, I turn to Heidegger's "On the Question Concerning Technology"<sup>186</sup> and attempt to situate the critique of technology in the post-Kantian aesthetic mode.

## 2.1. The threat of ecofascism

Heidegger's later work, from *Contributions*, to the various<sup>187</sup> lectures and seminars of the *Gesamtausgabe* that have been published to date mark a well-noted turn from the concerns that animated him in the 1920s and that motivated his writing of *Being and Time*,<sup>188</sup> published first in 1927. In these post-turn writings, Heidegger's challenge against ontotheological thought and the attempt to wrestle philosophy away from metaphysics penetrates some of the concerns that have in part motivated this research project. From the orientation towards technology, towards the world of nonhumans, towards the aesthetics of scale, Heidegger's later works offer a range of conceptual equipment suitable for use in a project such as this one. Yet taking up this equipment is not ethically neutral. Heidegger's relationship with the NSDAP continues to vex our use of his philosophy, as the oft-drawn parallel with Nietzsche's misappropriation by Nazi ideologues appears to have been roundly allayed with the publication of the *Black Notebooks*.<sup>189</sup> Moreover, far-right actors and those invested in far-right movements continue to interpret Heidegger's later writing (though such interpretations are by no means mainstream) in their attempts to actualise such far-right ideologies as identitarianism, traditionalism, and ethnopluralism. With these considerations in mind, I seek to use Heidegger's later writings in developing my own aesthetic response to the climate crisis while warding against the intrusion of, or potential concession to, such ideologies. In such cases it strikes me as clear that the practice of philosophy *cannot* be ethically neutral, and in doing philosophy one accepts the burden of several ethical demands, which, I venture, include the provisos that through philosophy one should seek to avoid harm. Rather than mere branch of philosophical investigation, ethics instead pervades philosophy in its entirety.

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<sup>186</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (Harper Perennial, 2013).

<sup>187</sup> Charles Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>188</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>189</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings XII-XV: Black Notebooks 1939-1941*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Indiana University Press, 2016).



### 2.1.1. Provisional definition of ecofascism

At the outset, a provisional definition of ecofascism may prove useful. As a somewhat storied term, it has been used more often in the past to decry the alleged authoritarian tendencies of mainstream green political parties, or more broadly in protest against any proposed positive action by governments to intervene in the climate crisis. An illustrative example of this is *The Little Green Book of Ecofascism: the Left's Plan to Drive Up Your Energy Costs and Hike Your Taxes!*,<sup>190</sup> by James Dellingle, a British journalist and former editor of Breitbart Europe, who writes prolifically in denial of the climate crisis and has repeatedly incited violence against climate scientists and activists, having called even for “Nuremberg-style” trials to administer capital punishment to such individuals.<sup>191</sup> The term is perhaps more interestingly used to describe the intersection between any politics and philosophy of nature or the environment and the ideology of the far-right. The term is used to describe the environmental policies of Europe’s totalitarian states and the various ideological policies of Nazi Germany, including *Lebensraum*, *Blut und Boden*, *Heimatschutz*, etc. that intersect with forestry, agriculture, and identity. Today, the term is deployed to describe the environmental positions of the far-right. The association of environmental thought with the radical right is not an obvious one. There is a justified tendency to assume that right-wing actors are more likely to take denialist positions, downplaying the impact of the climate crisis, its anthropogenic character, the role of the state in any climate action, etc. Typically, such views coincide with the interests of major extractive industries and combine free market ideology with denial of climate science. Such positions are not eco-fascist. Instead, to locate eco-fascism one should return to those Nazi ideologies, and in particular the quasi-mystical relationship between a people and the land that emerged in the *Volksisch* movements of 19th Century German romanticism and the post-Weber notion of the disenchantment of modernity, to which I will return in 2.2. below.

The term eco-fascism is storied, with antecedent ideologies rooted in romanticism, nature-mysticism and the decline of European imperialism in the early twentieth century. The idea found use in the American Wise Use Movement in order to resist attempts by the federal government to restrict private property rights over ecologically significant environments and

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<sup>190</sup> James Dellingle, *The Little Green Book of Eco-Fascism: The Left's Plan to Frighten Your Kids, Drive Up Energy Costs and Hike Your Taxes!* (Biteback Publishing, 2014).

<sup>191</sup> Joe Romm, ‘Denier Dellingle Wishes For “Climate Nuremberg”, Says “Hanging Is Far Too Good” For Climate Scientists!’, *Think Progress*, 7 April 2013, <https://archive.ph/20160926183139/https://thinkprogress.org/denier-dellingle-wishes-for-climate-nuremberg-says-hanging-is-far-too-good-for-climate-scientists-3ea3c77d55e3#selection-329.0-329.104>.

has been used routinely to denigrate environmental campaign groups seeking legislative restrictions on polluting or consumptive industries.<sup>192</sup>

A reasonably common theme arising in environmental discourse is the Malthusian notion that there is an upper limit to the number of humans that the planet can sustain, and that increasing human populations places undue pressure on ecosystems, which must therefore decline and have their capacity to sustain life diminish.<sup>193</sup> In Pentti Linkola's accelerationist configuration of deep ecology, perhaps properly called ecofascism, it's desirable that either ecosystems should collapse in the global south and reduce the overall human population, or that such events and others that reduce the overall human population (war, disease, etc.) are desirable. His much-quoted appropriation of Hardin's lifeboat ethics<sup>194</sup> demonstrates the position well enough:

What to do, when a ship carrying a hundred passengers suddenly capsizes with only one lifeboat? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides of the boat.<sup>195</sup>

This appropriation by Linkola is not the distortion one might hope. Hardin's output was unified by his white nationalism, American nativism, Islamophobia, and apparent belief in manifest destiny. The only places, in general, that his output is considered in totality are far-right forums and blogs, where he is often celebrated as a hero. Such sites as VDARE.com, stormfront.org, and The Occidental Quarterly, host articles exploring Hardin's contributions to providing racism with an intellectual veneer, and recognise him as "one of the intellectual pillars of modern scientific racism and white separatism."<sup>196</sup> Hardin was explicit that environmentalism could be weaponised against immigrants, minorities and poor nations, and moreover that seizing a weaponised environmentalism was a condition for the eventual epoch-defining triumph of white, American civilisation over the brutish barbarity of the global poor.

Attendant to this position is belief that environmental ethics is reducible to responsible

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<sup>192</sup> James McCarthy, 'First World Political Ecology: Lessons From the Wise Use Movement', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 34, no. 7 (2002): 1281–302.

<sup>193</sup> Garrett Hardin, 'Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor', *Psychology Today* 8 (1974): 38–43.

<sup>194</sup> Hardin, 'Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor'.

<sup>195</sup> Pentti Linkola, *Can Life Prevail?*, trans. Eetu Rautio and Olli S. (Arktos Media, 2004)..

<sup>196</sup> *Garrett Hardin* (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.), <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/garrett-hardin>.

resource management, and that responsible management demands an overall reduction in consumptive behaviours, and one way to achieve that is a decline in human populations. Such positions fail to acknowledge that, but-for the unequal distribution of resources as a result of capitalism and Euro-American imperialism including the unequal distribution of ecologically destructive activities (relatively few people do most of the polluting) the world could sustain far larger human populations than the Malthusians project.<sup>197</sup> A billionaire emits, on average, as much as 1 million times as much CO<sub>2</sub> per year as someone in the bottom 90% of income distributions. A person not in the richest 1% of humanity emits an average of 4.1 tonnes of carbon per year, 20 of the world's billionaires emit an average of 8194 tonnes each, a two-thousand fold increase on the average of the vast majority.<sup>198</sup> And yet, this environmental ethics *qua* resource management model further leans on a stewardship model of human-nonhuman interactions, whereby a duty is placed on moral agents to safeguard and protect nature and the environment. This readily leads, in the thinking of the far-right, to racist rhetoric about non-white peoples being unable or unwilling to fulfil this duty and therefore being deprived of the rights over the environment and moral status that such a duty confers. In this rubric, the non-white “other” cannot be trusted to protect their environment, and this neglect is the cause of ecological decline in such environments. This position justifies exclusionary policy positions designed to prevent the other from expatriating to “white” countries, as the moral duty to protect the environment from harm, may mean preventing people who would do harm from having the opportunity of doing so. This position fails to account for the disproportionate impact of environmental policies of western states (such as carbon offsetting, waste export, etc.) on the ecologies of people in the global south. The reason such countries are in such dire environmental states may be a result of colonialism and settler ideology, rather than a moral failure of the peoples living there.

Closely connected to both questions around anthropo- and biocentrism, is the notion that just as individual nonhuman species inhabit almost exclusively geographic regions with peculiar ecologies, so different races of humans ought to inhabit exclusively separate ecologies. This position is couched as ethnopluralism by the far-right. Fascism in the past has

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<sup>197</sup> ‘Resources and Consumption’, Population Matters, accessed 18 September 2024, <https://populationmatters.org/the-facts-resources-consumption/>.

<sup>198</sup> Matt Grainger and Annie Thériault, *Richest 1% Emit as Much Planet-Heating Pollution as Two-Thirds of Humanity* (Oxfam, 2023), [https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-emit-much-planet-heating-pollution-two-thirds-humanity#:~:text=According%20to%20SEI's%20research%2C%20a,tons%20CO2%20equivalent%20per%20year](https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-emit-much-planet-heating-pollution-two-thirds-humanity#:~:text=According%20to%20SEI's%20research%2C%20a,tons%20CO2%20equivalent%20per%20year.). Accessed 13/01/2024.

relied upon quasi-mystical ideas around the relationship between place and those people that live there, or whose claim of real or imagined ancestry engenders a peculiar bond between a people and the land. Such ideas have antecedents in the romantic *Wandervogel* movement and other late nineteenth century German youth movements, but developed into the Nazi Party's *Blut und Boden* policies, the idea that the *Volks*, cannot thrive outside of "their" land , and that such people have inviolable rights over that land, including the right of conquest, as with the German *Lebensraum* which justified the Nazi expansion of Germany into Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>199</sup> A number of contemporary movements that are not explicitly fascist, but that focus on the notions of belonging and autochthony are nevertheless adopted by the far-right. The aesthetic ideals of the purity of the untouched landscapes of, for example the Pacific northwest, contribute to utopian visions of Cascadian bioregionalism on the one hand, and militant right-wing anarchism on the other.<sup>200</sup>

Ecofascism, as construed here doesn't dwell so much in the authoritarianism of historical fascist regimes, nor in terms of the state imposition of biopower. It is a reactionary ideology averse to state intrusion, presenting, in essence as critique. This is not by any stretch a universally acknowledged vector of approach.<sup>201</sup> Rather, it refers to the interweaving of radical forms of environmentalism, like deep ecology, where one might find calls for democratic principles to be suspended for the benefit of the biosphere, with a reactionary politics that promises the restoration of dignity, pride, and nobility to a particular ethnic, tied to the restoration of an ancestral place, itself degraded by the influence of alien ideas, and peoples.<sup>202</sup> This definition is rooted in contemporary political praxis which offers a pithy definition that comes closest to the one I have in mind,

A prevalent narrative used by VRWE [violent right-wing extremist] actors is that the solution to climate change is halting immigration and eliminating non-western and non-white 'over populators' who are damaging the environment. This line of thinking is rooted in ecofascism, which is a reactionary ideology combining

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<sup>199</sup> Kyle Boggs, 'The Rhetorical Landscapes of the "Alt Right" and the Patriot Movements: Settler Entitlement to Native Land', in *The Far-right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, ed. Bernhard Forchtner (London: Routledge, 2020). 300-304.

<sup>200</sup> I have in mind here the occupation of a federal wildlife reserve in Oregon in 2016 by right wing militants in protest against federal restrictions on ranchers using common land for grazing. Conrad Wilson and John Rosman, 'Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Occupation Ends', *OPB*, 11 February 2016, <https://www.opb.org/news/series/burns-oregon-standoff-bundy-militia-news-updates/malheur-occupation-ends/>.

<sup>201</sup> Patrick Hassan, 'Inherit the Wasteland: Ecofascism & Environmental Collapse', *Ethics & the Environment* 26, no. 2 (2021): 80.

<sup>202</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, 'The Threat of Ecofascism', *Social Theory and Practice* 21, nos. 207-238 (1995): 209.

ecological and fascist arguments to justify violence against people who are considered destructive to the ecosystem.<sup>203</sup>

### 2.1.2. Heidegger and the contemporary far-right

The Heidegger received by his interpreters through most of the Twentieth Century was a character sanitised to a considerable extent, of the ideologies that animated the Nazi regime in Germany. It's "an open secret" that the extent of Heidegger's involvement with the National Socialist party and his own ideological commitments to its ideals were on the one hand minimised in the secondary scholarship, and censored by his literary executors, including members of his immediate family.<sup>204</sup> In his lifetime, Heidegger edited his earlier works following denazification to exculpate himself of allegations that he was fully invested in Nazism. This includes examples of abbreviations changing form ("N.soz." an abbreviation of *Nationalsozialismus* National Socialism, transcribed as *Naturwissenschaft* natural science), the omission of incriminating passages from later editions of antebellum works, and the strategic manipulation of publication timelines. Together, these form a picture not only of Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi regime and the extent of his ideological buy-in, but also his efforts, and the efforts of others to obfuscate both factors and rehabilitate his image after the war.<sup>205</sup>

Heidegger's embrace of "rootedness-in-soil" *Bodenstaendigkeit*, to describe the *Dasein als Volk* of the rooted, German people, (quite different from the *Bodenslos* unrooted, and thus intrinsically un-German Jewish identity), intersects with the *Blut und Boden* Blood and Soil ideology of the Nazi Party. Blood and Soil has resurfaced among the contemporary far-right as an ideological cornerstone of the New Right in American and Europe. Indeed, the fatal far-right "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia saw around 250 people marching through the University of Virginia's campus chanting "blood and soil," along with other racist slogans.<sup>206</sup> For contemporary far-right actors, Heidegger provides a "fig leaf of intellectual respectability," contributing to the rehabilitation of far-right ideas and the

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<sup>203</sup> EU Counter Terrorism Coordinator, *The Role of Climate Change and Environmental Concerns in Violent Extremist and Terrorist Radicalisation in the EU*, Note (Brussels, 2024), 2, <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4188/eu-ctc-violent-environmental-extremism-twp-paper-5982-24.pdf>.

<sup>204</sup> Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology* (Yale University Press, 2022), 26.

<sup>205</sup> Richard Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology*, 36–41.

<sup>206</sup> David Neiwart, *Explaining 'You Will Not Replace Us,' 'Blood and Soil,' 'Russia Is Our Friend,' and Other Catchphrases from Torch-Bearing Marchers in Charlottesville*. (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/10/10/when-white-nationalists-chant-their-weird-slogans-what-do-they-mean>.

airbrushing of the far-right's history of violence and criminality.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, it contributes to a narrative-shifting that allows members of far-right organisations to cast themselves as victims of a censorious liberal elite that refuses, in spite of its professed enlightenment ideals, to give airtime to conservative views, a position amplified by mainstream right wing figures.<sup>208</sup>

The emergence in Heidegger's work of the distinction of *Seyn* from *Sein*, in which the former becomes the medium in which Dasein's being is acted out and by which it is sustained marks a movement in his later thinking enough to create space for the thought against which I wish to guard. "Being [Seyn] is the ether in which man breathes. Without this ether, he would descend to the mere beast and his whole activity to the breeding of beasts."<sup>209</sup> *Seyn*, then, is the background, the milieu in which beings with being are discovered and in which they stabilise in their presence against the dynamism of *Seyn*. It is "as a clearing in which entities can come to a stand. [...] The throw that throws the human into a basic state in which he is to be based, in which he becomes the ground for the truth of being."<sup>210</sup> This dynamism is a function of time, of the historical particularities of any one age. So, pre-industrial Dasein comes to a stand<sup>211</sup> against, and is discovered in the particularity of its age; the world in which she stands is a world of parochialism, of subsistence, of stratified social classes, etc. Today, Dasein stands against, and is discovered in a milieu of data, of global connectivity, of digital or carbon footprints, etc. *Seyn* concerns history *qua* *Geschichte*,<sup>212</sup> the ontological history of Dasein and its expressions of being in its everyday dealings with the world of its age, its world-picture. The distinction between standing *in* and standing *against* bears further attention. The former is characterised by an absorption in which Dasein's concerned dealings are essentially authentic. By contrast, in standing against, Dasein is discovered in conflict with and antagonism to the world and lacks the essential authenticity of standing in.

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<sup>207</sup> Wolin, *Heidegger in Ruins: Between Philosophy and Ideology*, 316.

<sup>208</sup> Adam Gabbatt, 'Claim of Anti-Conservative Bias by Social Media Firms Is Baseless, Report Finds', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/feb/01/facebook-youtube-twitter-anti-conservative-claims-baseless-report-finds>.

<sup>209</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Ohio University Press, 1985), 98.

<sup>210</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Besinnung* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), 224.

<sup>211</sup> Heidegger's uses of *stehen* and *stellen* warrant closer attention, to which I will turn shortly. I underline stand here to draw attention to this significance.

<sup>212</sup> To be contrasted with *die Historie*: the ontic "history" as a field of study, cf Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Indiana University Press, 1985), 5–6.

As Heidegger's thought develops post-turn towards the later writings on technology,<sup>213</sup> this distinction, like Dasein itself, dissolves into the standing reserve of world *qua* resource.

We should attend to this concern for Dasein's engagement with the world-picture closely. Dasein's temporality: its being-towards-death, its care for its own being; and its relationality: its own history, and its being-with-others defines it, and allows for a collective construal of Dasein. So understood, Dasein only is in relation to others, "if fateful Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with others, its historicizing is a co-historicizing and is determinative for it as *destiny*. This is how we designate the historicizing of the community, of a people."<sup>214</sup> Heidegger's use of "*wir*, we" marks the inclusivity of Dasein's relational character. Dasein's care for its own being extends beyond the limits of its own history and instead is found most authentically in and among an historical *people*, a people whose destiny is only to be understood in terms of the interpenetrated whole of history and the collective.<sup>215</sup> A people, then, is described in historical and cultural terms, not as a biological, racial uniformity, but as a shared culture and shared destiny.

Antecedents for this turn permeate Heidegger's work, from *Being and Time* and on towards the turn. In the "Rectorship Address" of 1933, marking Heidegger's formal assumption of the role of rector of the University of Freiburg. At the outset, Heidegger posits a cultural racism in terms of the essence of the German university, and the "spiritual mission [...] of the German people."<sup>216</sup> This claim about the metaphysical identity of the German people as Germans with a particular historical identity and destiny. A development of the same theme can be found in the sections of *Contributions* concerning the philosophy *of* a people,

As little as we could be permitted not to understand this, so much does it matter to know that a highest rank of being must be attained if an 'ethnic principle' by which to measure historical Dasein is to be brought into play as something already mastered [...] The philosophy 'of' a people can therefore not be predicted or prescribed on the basis of some sort of natural aptitude or capacity of that people.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

<sup>214</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 436. My emphasis.

<sup>215</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Richard Polt (Indiana University Press, 2010), 200.

<sup>216</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Rectorship Address: The Self-Assertion of the German University', in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Indiana University Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>217</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 35.

While *Contributions* contains some efforts to mitigate against the burgeoning *Blut und Boden* ideology of the ruling NSDAP at the time of the work's composition,<sup>218</sup> the replacement of race with culture as the principal axis around which identity turns serves as a move later to be seized upon by New Right thinkers.<sup>219</sup> Dasein's expansive inclusivity, no longer as the centre of personal authenticity, but as *Dasein als Volk*, Dasein as a people, points to the collective spirit of a people ontologically standing in and against a particular *Seyn* as the location of authenticity. The "quasi-mystical"<sup>220</sup> connection between the blood of the German people and the land can be overcome by appeal to this basic concession of the centrality to identity of culture over race. The development of Heidegger's distinction between worldview and philosophy should cast doubt on whether this is a position his later thought can accommodate. The extent to which a notion of culture can encompass a people and amount to an identity seems just the kind of essentialism that *Seyn* is posed to reject. This unity does not erase the distinctiveness of ethnies within the unified cultural identity. The perception of modernity's diminishing of these distinctions by fostering a "super-identity" is a prime motivator in reactionary ideology. In contrast, micro-cultures are deeply embedded in specific locations, characterized by local customs, environments, and histories.<sup>221</sup>

The sense in which Dasein must stand in *Seyn*, differs, somewhat, from the *Bestand* standing reserve, the *Gestell*<sup>222</sup> in which the natural is taken as manipulable substance, towards which Dasein's power to control, direct and appropriate is directed under the *Seyn* of the age of climate crisis, of the Anthropocene. As *Gestell*, the world is mere resource, purely present-at-hand, apt for exploitation and waiting, in a sense, to be realised, manipulated, and consumed. Yet to stand, whether *stellen* or *stehen*, each with nuances as varied as the English equivalents (to take a stand, to stand in place, to stand up for oneself, to stand a picture on the mantelpiece, to stand among friends, etc.), Dasein is placed in a *Gestell* frame of a world-picture in which the world is revealed only through the exercise of technological power. Yet the standing reserve does not simply contain objects, those things that are stripped of their own, independent thingness. *Bestand* is not composed simply of objects, it is, moreover,

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<sup>218</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 387–88.

<sup>219</sup> I borrow this moniker from the French *Nouvelle Droite* movement, most famously championed by Alain de Benoist in his configuration of ethnopluralism, but widely influential among the contemporary far-right, from Alexander Dugin's 4<sup>th</sup> political theory to Richard Spencer and the US Alt Right.

<sup>220</sup> Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (AK Press, 1995), 18–19.

<sup>221</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, trans. Arthur Wills (Routledge, 2002). 99.

<sup>222</sup> Heidegger, 'Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is', 271–74.



objectless.<sup>223</sup> The world as technological manifold threatens the character of Dasein's collective construal. The world as such is construed as one bereft of the history, authenticity, and spirituality of the character of a people, but is instead a one of technocratic universalisation, of *Seinsvergessenheit*, oblivion of being.<sup>224</sup> For contemporary far-right intellectuals like Dugin, any politics, regardless of extremity is preferable to a surrender to the "soullessness of modernity," and offers in its mere existence as an alternative to the globalising politics of liberal democracy, an unambiguous renewal of the power of the human spirit.<sup>225</sup> The attraction of a politics, not expounded by Heidegger, but nevertheless grounded in the plight described in *Contributions*, that claims to offer a restoration of the unique character of a people, to reinvigorate this quasi-mystical connection between people and place in response to its perceived degradation by the forces of modernity, including globalisation, mass-migration, etc. should be clear.<sup>226</sup>

Heidegger's attraction to contemporary far-right movements goes beyond the situation of culture over race as the locus of political thought, particularly as far as the environmentalism of those movements is concerned. Replacing the language of overt racism for that which proposes to preserve as separate but equal the cultural identities of different ethnies, serves an obvious role in framing racism's "cultural turn."<sup>227</sup> "Ethnopluralism" goes so far as a term to disguise itself among the constellation of vocabularies more obviously at home in left-leaning discourse.<sup>228</sup> The discovery of this disguise alongside the tension between local and global that emerges from the communal *Dasein als Volk*, draws attention to a threat of infiltration by far-right ideologies into mainstream environmental discourse. Apparently purified of its blood and soil mysticism, ethnopluralism nevertheless hangs on a spurious notion of culture *qua* performance grounded in particular ethnies operating under biologically determined, hereditary "predispositions."

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<sup>223</sup> Richard Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger* (State University of New York Press, 2006), 85.

<sup>224</sup> Julian Göppfarth, 'Rethinking the German Nation as German Dasein: Intellectuals and Heidegger's Philosophy in Contemporary German New Right Nationalism', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 258–59..

<sup>225</sup> Ronald Beiner, 'Who Is Aleksandr Dugin?', *Crooked Timber*, 2015, <https://crookedtimber.org/2015/03/10/who-is-aleksandr-dugin/>.

<sup>226</sup> Zimmerman, 'The Threat of Ecofascism'.

<sup>227</sup> Daniel Rueda, 'Alain de Benoist, Ethnopluralism and the Cultural Turn in Racism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2021, 1–23.

<sup>228</sup> Blair Taylor, 'Alt-Right Ecology: Ecofascism and Far-Right Environmentalism in the United States', in *The Far-right and the Environment: Politics, Discourse and Communication*, ed. Bernhard Forchtner (London: Routledge, 2020), 279.

### 2.1.3. From anti-tech radicalism to ecofascism

The discussion of far-right environmentalism, or rather the appropriation by far-right actors of environmental language and aesthetics to contain radical right-wing ideology goes beyond the historical survey of antebellum Germany and the ensuing rise of the Nazi Party.

Ecofascism is a concern now. At the heart of contemporary ecofascism is the interplay between the reactionary racist politics by which the far-right is readily identified, and a radical environmentalism that re-aligns the environmental concerns of the age with racist hierarchies; either locating responsibility for environmental collapse with the othered ethnic and/or proposing “solutions” to the climate crisis rooted in violent, racist hierarchies.

Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul took up, in their own ways, the analysis of technology’s place in society and humanity’s orientation towards it.<sup>229</sup> The alignment of technological critique with political violence was expressed in the bombing campaign perpetrated between 1978 and 1995 by Theodore Kaczynski, the “Unabomber.” In 1995, Kaczynski used the threat of violence to induce the New York Times to publish his “manifesto,” *Industrial Society and its Future*.<sup>230</sup> Kaczynski had been influenced by Ellul’s *The Technological Society*, remarking, “I had already developed at least 50% of the ideas of that book on my own, [...] I was delighted, because I thought, ‘Here is someone who is saying what I have already been thinking.’”<sup>231</sup> Outside of academia, Kaczynski is much more widely known than Ellul or Mumford. The former is the subject of extended documentaries and TV serials, the latter two are not. Of course, Kaczynski’s ideology is more widely known precisely because of the violence he committed. One might argue that Ellul and Mumford are less well known because their works are not in themselves noteworthy in the way that a mass-bombing campaign is, after all, *Industrial Society and its Future* was only published under the threat of continued bombings, a sentiment echoed among the far-right actors online, “I honestly wish Uncle Teddy wasn’t a terrorist and instead just published the manifesto and let it get popular decades later. Then we could openly endorse it and not get called incel psychos.”<sup>232</sup>

For even more mainstream environmentally conscious authors, like “reformed environmentalist” Paul Kingsnorth, *Industrial Society and its Future* can leave conscientious

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<sup>229</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1934). Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (Jonathan Cape, 1965).

<sup>230</sup> Theodore Kaczynski, ‘Industrial Society and Its Future’, unpublished manuscript, 1995.

<sup>231</sup> Alston Chase, ‘Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber’, *The Atlantic*, 1 June 2000, [https://web.archive.org/web/20141024101112/http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/06/harvard-and-the-making-of-the-unabomber/378239/?single\\_page=true](https://web.archive.org/web/20141024101112/http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/06/harvard-and-the-making-of-the-unabomber/378239/?single_page=true).

<sup>232</sup> Rosie Gray, ‘Gen Z’s Worship of the Unabomber’, *UnHerd*, 12 September 2022, <https://unherd.com/2022/09/gen-zs-worship-of-the-unabomber/>.

readers worried about agreeing too much with a mass-murderer.<sup>233</sup> Kaczynski touches a nerve in environmentally engaged readers with descriptions of the vivid, vibrant life he enjoyed “alone” in the woods and the rage he expressed at the thoughtless destruction of particular environmental aesthetics due to the encroachment of the society he had tried to abandon,

The best place, to me, was the largest remnant of this plateau that dates from the Tertiary age. It's kind of rolling country, not flat, and when you get to the edge of it you find these ravines that cut very steeply in to cliff-like drop-offs and there was even a waterfall there [...] I went back to the plateau and when I got there I found they had put a road right through the middle of it [...] You just can't imagine how upset I was. It was from that point on I decided that, rather than trying to acquire further wilderness skills, I would work on getting back at the system. Revenge.<sup>234</sup>

The rage against technology, and particularly the technological forces that work destruction against the world is a relatable paradox. Technology has transformed peoples' lives around the world. Gen Z, and even the millennial generation<sup>235</sup> came of age, or even spent their entire lives, in a period of unprecedented technological expansion and technology has grossly and obviously invaded almost every area of life. The experience of helpless rage in our lives wedded to technology, manifest in encounters of the kind that require one to dismiss an advert delivered directly to the palms of our hands, or accepting cookies at every new web page, and checkboxes opting us in (or out) our email marketing. The orientation towards technology under such circumstances is one in which the technological equipment on which so much of our everyday dealings depends oscillates between readiness-to and presence-at hand.

The continued development and expansion of the reach of technology into our lives, and the wider world is vexing for those of us whose lives are in so many ways conditioned by our use of technology. Our continued use of technology requires the ongoing domination of the human (the world, especially, of those whose labour is exploited in the production of technology, without rights over the value they produce, reduced, as described above, to non-

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<sup>233</sup> Paul Kingsnorth, 'Dark Ecology', *Paul Kingsnorth*, 2014, <https://www.paulkingsnorth.net/dark-ecology>. Originally published in *Orion* archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170315060735/https://orionmagazine.org/article/dark-ecology/>

<sup>234</sup> Theodore J. Kaczynski, 'Letter to M.K.', in *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski* (Feral House, 2010), 374–75.

<sup>235</sup> I take “Gen Z” to mean those born between the mid 1990s and the early 2010s, and “millennial” to mean those born between the early 1980s and the mid 1990s.

moral argents) and nonhuman world, the extraction and exploitation of natural resources, the abuse of work forces across the global supply chain, and a general instrumental picture of the world in which all nonhuman is reduced, in Heideggerian terms, to standing reserve. On the one hand, we are so enmeshed with technological forces that extrication is an extreme measure, where it's even desired. On the other hand, people are complicit in the destruction of the natural world that they decry, by virtue of their participation, or entanglement in the systems of destruction that maintain the technological standard to which they are so wedded. As the political elite, and civil society at large prevaricate over taking substantive measures to mitigate or adapt to the now unavoidable climate crisis, the young, who have most to lose from being denied a future, rage against this inertia.

There appears to be an epistemological gap somewhere in technology's coils. We are so enmeshed in the conveniences afforded by technology that we not only struggle to articulate precisely what we gain from technology, but that we also cannot properly imagine what we stand to lose if we were to wholesale attempt to wean ourselves off, or out of it. There are two distinct uses of "technology" that it might be unclear whether I have elided them at this point. "Technology" *qua* smartphones, the internet, etc.: devices and techniques used by humans for our convenience; and "technology" *qua* revelation in the sense of Heidegger's philosophy. I will expand at length on the latter in 2.3. I wish to be clear that though I do not mean to elide these two uses of the term, I think this gap is equally present in both.

In the former use, technology as the devices and methods used by all of us, to some extent or another, I do not think we can avoid this epistemological gap. This not the "gotcha" of a bad faith actor like the eponymous "Mister Gotcha,"<sup>236</sup> but an observation that even if I were able to discard by phone, eschew the internet, live a utopian, bucolic, Thoreauvian, Kaczynskian life in a cabin in the woods, I would still be captured by technology in this former sense. Yes, I would need the technologies of carpentry, and a system of knowledge enabling me to catalogue edible roots, etc. but technology has by this stage entered my body, such that I carry it about with me.<sup>237</sup> "The Hell within him, for within him Hell//He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell//One step no more than from himself can fly//By

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<sup>236</sup> Matt Bors, 'Mister Gotcha', *The Nib*, 13 September 2016, <https://thenib.com/mister-gotcha/>.

<sup>237</sup> Chelin Jamie Hu et al., 'Microplastic Presence in Dog and Human Testis and Its Potential Association with Sperm Count and Weights of Testis and Epididymis', *Toxicological Sciences* 200, no. 2 (2024): 235–40.

change of place.”<sup>238</sup> Technology has wounded me,<sup>239</sup> such that even if I were able to successfully retreat from it, I would bear scars of its trauma wherever I sought to hide. “When we cannot visualise what it means to live without the conveniences we’re afforded by authoritarian technics [...] we cannot even say clearly what we gain from them, so how can we know what we stand to lose?”<sup>240</sup>

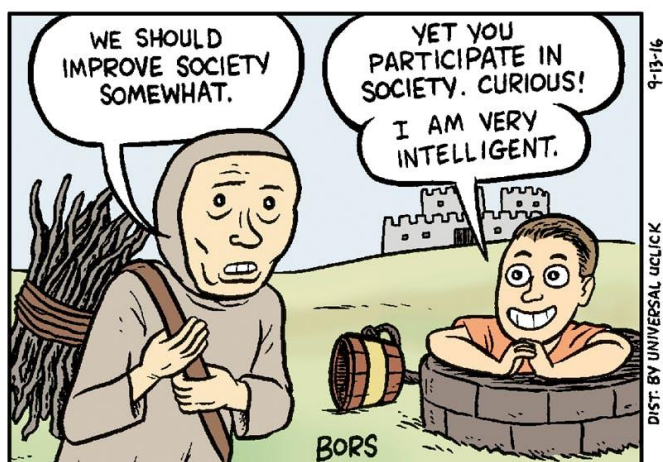


FIGURE 3 MISTER GOTCHA

The trauma of technology and its intrusion into life, along with the kind of aesthetic trauma described in Kaczynski’s motivating statement above come close to a Twenty-First Century crisis in the vein of the crisis of modernity that plagued Europe in the first part of the last century. A horror, disgust, and discontentment with the conditions of the world, from ecological collapse to grotesque inequality, and a generalised anxiety surrounding identity and place. Just as these conditions proved fertile for the propagation of far-right ideology with mystical inflections in the aftermath of the First World War, so do they now.

Kaczynski’s rage at the system, his declaration of action, as well as a certain masculine aesthetic (Kaczynski has been deemed a “Sigma male” by some masculinist corners of the internet),<sup>241</sup> all increase his appeal to disenchanted youths. After all, a lonely, angry young man can more easily aspire to the “Sigma” than to the “Alpha,” as no social interaction is

<sup>238</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*. 106.

<sup>239</sup> Cui Guo et al., ‘Effect of Long-Term Exposure to Fine Particulate Matter on Lung Function Decline and Risk of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease in Taiwan: A Longitudinal, Cohort Study’, *The Lancet Planetary Health* 2, no. 3 (2018): e114–25.

<sup>240</sup> Derrick Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy* (Seven Stories Press, 2016), 253.

<sup>241</sup> “Sigma male” emerged as a term in the far-right blog-sphere in roughly 2010 to describe an idealised “lone wolf” character holding the fictional financier-turned-serial-killer Patrick Bateman as its unironic Sigma exemplar. Unlike the “Alpha male,” the Sigma does not lead a pack, nor does he wish to, he cuts his own path according to his own values: Günseli Yalcinkaya, ‘Rise and Grind: How “Sigma Males” Are Upturning the Internet’, *Dazed Digital*, 13 January 2022, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/55208/1/rise-and-grind-how-sigma-male-memes-are-upturning-the-man-o-sphere>.

required. This masculine aesthetic occurs throughout ecological thinking, and it's no great leap to see how Kaczynski fits the archetype. "Much American ecocriticism is a vector for various masculinity memes, including rugged individualism, a phallic authoritarian sublime, and an allergy to femininity in all its forms."<sup>242</sup>

There remains quite a leap between the kind of anti-tech radicalism of Kaczynski and the kinds of racist ideology I've mentioned. "Industrial Society and its Future," nor any other writings suggest that he is concerned with race. Indeed, Kaczynski's revolutionary strategy incorporates multiculturalism as a necessary component, and recognises the entanglement of capitalistic systems of oppression in a way that is uncomfortably close to intersectionality,<sup>243</sup> going so far as to describe Nazism as "kook ideology."<sup>244</sup> Nevertheless, we find "Industrial Society" cited in the manifestos of far-right terrorists like Anders Breivik, who in 2011 murdered 69 people in Oslo and Utøya; Norway Brenton Tarrant who murdered 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019; and Payton Gendron, who murdered 10 people in Buffalo, New York in 2022. Kaczynski continues to inspire environmental extremists, including the Mexican terrorist group, *Individualidades Tendiendo a lo Salvaje* Individualists Tending Toward Savagery (ITS), and Deep Green Resistance.<sup>245</sup> Also known as *Reaccion Salvaje* Savage Reaction, ITS was denounced even by Kaczynski on account of its lack of discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate targets, political naivety, and encouragement of collateral damage collectively amounting to a form a nihilism.<sup>246</sup>

I mention ITS as a way of circling back to the aesthetic motivation behind reactionary violence and the easy slide from anarchism and terrorism to fascism. ITS has achieved international notoriety, claiming responsibility for attacks on property everywhere from Lima and Mexico City to Edinburgh and Athens.<sup>247</sup> ITS is reported to incorporate a ritualistic aesthetic, using joss sticks in fuses or packing white sage into its bombs as a way of

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<sup>242</sup> Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA* 125, no. 2 (2010): 273–82. 274.

<sup>243</sup> Joshua Farrell-Molloy and Graham Macklin, *Ted Kaczynski, Anti-Technology Radicalism and Eco-Fascism* (International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 2022), <https://icct.nl/publication/ted-kaczynski-anti-technology-radicalism-and-eco-fascism/>.

<sup>244</sup> Theodore J. Kaczynski, 'The Truth About Primitive Life: A Critique of Anarcho-Primitivism', in *Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski* (Feral House, 2010), 150.

<sup>245</sup> Sean Fleming, 'The Unabomber and the Origins of Anti-Tech Radicalism', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 27, no. 2 (2021): 207–25.

<sup>246</sup> Theodore Kaczynski, 'Ted Kaczynski on Individualists Tending Toward Savagery (ITS)', *The Wild Will Project*, 28 November 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180117093302/https://www.wildwill.net/blog/2017/11/28/ted-kaczynski-individualists-tending-toward-savagery/>.

<sup>247</sup> EU Counter Terrorism Coordinator, *The Role of Climate Change and Environmental Concerns in Violent Extremist and Terrorist Radicalisation in the EU*. 12.

purifying the target of their explosions, banishing the evil of civilisation from the blast site.<sup>248</sup> Terrorist acts take on a ritual mode, transforming the ideology and attendant attack as an expression of the totality of an eco-extremist world picture, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of reactionary violence; anti-technology radicalism; reformed, radical environmentalism; and misanthropy.

What far-right discourse takes from Kaczynski is his polemical advocacy for the overthrow of industrial-technological society through violent revolution and his critique of the political left, which is construed, on the one hand as an unwitting accomplice to the forces of technology, and on the other as an emasculating influence that erodes some basic human dignity.<sup>249</sup> It is easy, then, to elide the liberal values against which Kaczynski rails: globalisation, the reach of technology, exploitation and destruction of the environment, etc.; with the liberal values against which he does not: multiculturalism, racial equality, etc. Kaczynski's attacks on the left have obvious appeal to the far-right, e.g. that leftism is a symptom of inferiority or over socialisation and his assertion that "a movement that exalts nature and opposes technology must take a resolutely anti-leftist stance and must avoid all collaboration with leftists. Leftism is in the long run inconsistent with wild nature, with human freedom and with the elimination of modern technology."<sup>250</sup> This is the ideological line of attack that resonates with ecofascist ideas, and that environmental positions must be reclaimed from the left. In the manifesto published before his attack on a Christchurch mosque, Tarrant wrote, "for too long we allowed the left to coopt the environmentalist movement to serve their own needs. The left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation whilst simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment [sic]." Ecology as such is filtered through the ideology of the far-right such that statements of fact about the world under the climate crisis become infected with reactionary, fascistic structures. Where the climate crisis disproportionately impacts those in the global south, this can be construed as a moral failing of non-white ethnies. Where ecological failure or other pressures lead to migration, this can be construed as, "foreigners, having ruined things in their own lands, are now coming for ours," while ignoring the legacies of historical colonialism and imperialism and their continuations today. In either case, the concomitant decline of ecological and social structures in "white homelands," as a function of the climate crisis can be safely blamed on immigration, and the

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<sup>248</sup> John H. Richardson, 'Children Of Ted', *New York Magazine* (New York), 10 December 2018, <https://www.magzter.com/stories/Lifestyle/New-York-magazine/Children-Of-Ted>.

<sup>249</sup> Farrell-Molloy and Macklin, *Ted Kaczynski, Anti-Technology Radicalism and Eco-Fascism*.

<sup>250</sup> Kaczynski, 'Industrial Society and Its Future'. S.214.

reactionary is then free to advocate for the preservation of the homeland from the rapacious onslaught of the alien.

Kaczynski's appeal to ecofascists can be split into two factors: ideological and symbolic. The ideological factors include his anti-modernism and anti-technology agenda, which align with the romantic and mystical idea of a bucolic, rural life and the traditions of place.

Additionally, his call to protect "wild nature," or environments not impacted by human management, appeals to the ecofascist belief that nature is inherently hierarchical and that the end of liberal globalised civilisation is a way to return to these principles, which would allow the true and rightful heirs of the world to reclaim their right from the effete leftists who have leveraged civilisation to usurp the world. The symbolic factors of Kaczynski's appeal include his status as a resistance figure who appears to have rejected society to live a life of principle and discipline; his conformity to a solitary, masculine archetype; and his willingness to use violence, casting him as a martyred freedom fighter or guerilla.

Kaczynski's integration into the far-right aesthetic world along with the ideological sleight of hand described above illustrates the way in which an aversion to technology and desire to resist or reject the excesses of modernity can facilitate a slide into right wing extremism.

When ideas about ethnic superiority, racial destiny, and the rootedness of peoples wind their way into environmental discourse, even well-meaning actors can find themselves apparently endorsing misanthropic positions.

## 2.2. Aesthetics and modernity

Approaching Heidegger's aesthetics warrants an appraisal of the wider intellectual and aesthetic context into which his work intervenes. In a meaningful sense, Heidegger's philosophical project is a product of the political and social environment of Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. By this I don't mean to be otiose, one could say such of any writer working at any time, and I don't think it serves well to suggest that that process of historicity produced some lacuna in which, as it happens, Heidegger was shaped, but in fact any thinker falling into that space would have turned out similarly. Yet, the sense that the German peoples, the principalities unified under the Prussian military aristocracy of the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Hapsburgs, stood on a precipice over the abyss of nihilism that was the essential destiny of the west cannot easily be ignored. In truth, the factors that today animate the far-right, and some veins of environmental discourse simmered as Europe drew towards the Great War. The sense, engendered by materialism, vulgar individualism, and the commodification of the everyday; that something primal or essential to a people was atrophying created, and perhaps still creates, a yearning



for some event that would let loose the isolating burdens of modernity and restored the dignity of the human spirit. In the historical case, that event was to prove to be the Great War.<sup>251</sup> Though *Being and Time* would not arrive until almost a decade after Germany's defeat in the Great War, and the dissolution of the great German speaking powers, the central question with which Heidegger treats, the question of humanity's ontological status is thrown into focus by the both the first instance of "total war" directed towards the elusive but singular end of "victory," and the ensuing technical-rational view of the world that the post-war adoption in Germany of Fordism and Manchesterism entailed. In this milieu, philosophy's status was not to be that of another technical discipline, but a way of living, of behaving, of doing.<sup>252</sup>

### 2.2.1. Ernst Jünger's aesthetics of the Great War

Heidegger's scepticism towards modernity and the value of technology itself bears relation to the work of Ernst Jünger, with whom Heidegger corresponded until his death in 1976.<sup>253</sup> Jünger has the distinction of being one of the few thinkers cited by Heidegger in *Contributions*, and the influence of his works, especially "Total Mobilization"<sup>254</sup> and *The Worker*<sup>255</sup> (1930 and 1932 respectively) is obvious. Jünger's description of the transformation in the Great War of the partial mobilisation of warring states in which military accomplishments (and concurrent hardships) that were in the history of Europe, principally a matter for a martial aristocracy, become instead a matter that penetrates into the body of a nation and its people far more deeply. Such is that case that "toward the end," not even a seamstress working at home can avoid the appropriation of her work by the demands of total mobilisation (*totale Mobilmachung*).<sup>256</sup> Moreover, the development of the craft, and principal site of warfare, from regimental volleys of musket-fire to the aimed shot of the modern rifle, and culminating in the milky eye of the bomber squadron leader, who no longer sees the difference between combatants and civilians - even "the child in the cradle" is drawn into this mobilisation.<sup>257</sup> While total mobilisation reaches its apogee in the manifestation of war,

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<sup>251</sup> Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics and Art* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>252</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Indiana University Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>253</sup> Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger, *Correspondence 1949-1975*, trans. Timothy Quinn (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>254</sup> Ernst Jünger, 'Total Mobilization', in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin and Richard Wolin, trans. Joel Golb (The MIT Press, 1998), 119–39.

<sup>255</sup> Ernst Jünger, *The Worker: Dominion and Form*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming, trans. Bogdan Costea (Northwestern University Press, 2017).

<sup>256</sup> Jünger, 'Total Mobilization', 122.

<sup>257</sup> Jünger, 'Total Mobilization', 125.

it survives the signing of a peace by the transformation it has worked on society: every individual is now part of a process of production towards an end: the waxing and waning of the twin maws of consumerism and demand for materiel.<sup>258</sup> The role of each individual in the process of production extends beyond the purely physical, but extends also into the political, cultural, and spiritual. Where the process of production is an end in itself (and is not directed, for example, towards warfare), an abstraction extends between the individual and the whole in which the distinctiveness of peoples and cultures is eroded, such as Jünger perceived in the modernising of Atatürk and the Fascism of interwar Italy.<sup>259</sup> The doctrine of production for its own sake has brought about an obsession with quantity, which manifests not only as a quantity of things, of possessions or wealth; but also in ephemera like public opinion, in which the body politic is now submerged.

Such concerns weren't confined to Heidegger and Jünger but moved through the German interwar reactionary intelligentsia. For Oswald Spengler, this new modernity brought about a fundamental change in the orientation between the individual and the world.

Foreshadowing Heidegger's later critique of technology, Spengler wrote "One doesn't see land full of pasturing herds without thinking of the evaluation of their meat-stock."<sup>260</sup>

Scheler's critique likewise took aim at this framing of the world, in which the end of technology was not to produce machines to further material ends or ease the burden of labour on workers, but rather to create all possible machines as an expression of the human will to dominate, which exists as an end somewhat tautologically because of the will to dominate.<sup>261</sup> While Heidegger dismissed Spengler and Scheler as "quite ordinary"<sup>262</sup> interpreters of Nietzschean psychology, he found Jünger's development of the same more passable, though nevertheless criticised his situation of nihilistic modernity in individuals rather than as the metaphysical destiny of humanity, set in motion by the Socratics. For Jünger, modernity existed as a phenomenon outside of the terms of classical economics, located in the Worker *qua* incarnation of the Will to Power. Jünger's Nietzschean conception of modernity and technology compassing a turn in the progress of the Will to Power presents technology not in terms of *techne* as a particular skill or mastery or mechanical processed, but rather a movement of the world in which humanity brings forth a

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<sup>258</sup> Jünger, 'Total Mobilization', 126.

<sup>259</sup> Jünger, 'Total Mobilization', 137–38.

<sup>260</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Arktos Media, 2015), 67.

<sup>261</sup> Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics and Art*, 30–31.

<sup>262</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill (Indiana University Press, 1995), 54.

certain historicity of the Will to Power.<sup>263</sup> Moreover, Junger's interpretation of the "great event" of the First World War, and by extension the interpretation of modernity as a sublime event best understood in aesthetic terms. We can go further and say that events like this (the Great War) cannot be read in anything but aesthetic terms. Moral or political judgments will ultimately fail to account for the momentary occurrence of events unfolding between myth and history on the one side, and on the other, some abyss of quite unknowable time. The transition we find ourselves in is characterised by the scale of modernity expressed at every level. In that vein, Junger's writing can be understood not merely as description of the horrors of war, but as something speculative directed towards that abyss.

Regardless of Heidegger's dismissal of Spengler's interpretations of Nietzsche, Spengler's influence on Heidegger is hard to ignore. Particularly as regards Spengler's preoccupation with the deleterious effect of technology on the human spirit, and its role in the decline of the west *qua* civilisation.<sup>264</sup> Though later, Heidegger's talk of the three bonds (national community, shared destiny, and spiritual mission)<sup>265</sup> that unite the German students in their relationship to one another and the national socialist state in his 1933 "Rectorship Address" exemplifies the influence of such Spenglerian themes as set out in *Man and Technics* and developed later in *The Decline of the West*.<sup>266</sup> Borrowing Rockmore's analysis of the thematic overlap between the two, one finds at least:

- Shared concern for the relationship between technology and the destiny of human being
- The link between technology, culture, and history
- The analysis of technology in terms of instrumentality
- The idea that struggle, including technological struggle, is ennobling
- That care is future-directed
- The conviction that we have now arrived at an historical turning point, within which technology is a main component
- A condemnation of our enslavement by machines and technology.<sup>267</sup>

Though the perceived decline of civilisation remains a vital theme in the philosophical and political writing of the period, an important line of distinction can be drawn between

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<sup>263</sup> Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics and Art*, 46.

<sup>264</sup> Tom Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy* (University of California Press, 1991), 220.

<sup>265</sup> Heidegger, 'Rectorship Address: The Self-Assertion of the German University', 113–14.

<sup>266</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West: Volumes 1 & 2*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (Random Shack, 2016).

<sup>267</sup> Rockmore, *On Heidegger's Nazism and Philosophy*, 219.

Spengler, Scheler, Jünger, and others, and Heidegger. For the former, the decline is predominantly an historical event, the result of the technological mastering of the human, for whom technology is an essential demonstration of the will to power, but that also produces the human by mastering human as animal. Such an historical account of this decline is accompanied by the longing for the pre-fallen world that inhabits the mythology of the fascistic aesthetic.<sup>268</sup> Conversely, for Heidegger, the “fall” of Dasein is not the same as the historical “fall of man” pointed to by the reactionaries of the time. Ontologically, Dasein’s fall is “into the *world*, which itself belongs to its Being.”<sup>269</sup> Heidegger is explicit that this fall is not a falling-from a more pure or ideal state, but *into* a world of beings. To fall, in this sense, is to be thrown.<sup>270</sup>

### 2.2.2. Machination and “total mobilisation”

The attitude towards modernity and technology explicated by Spengler and extracted and refined by Heidegger from Jünger’s account of total mobilisation begins to transform, in *Contributions*, into “machination” (*Machenschaft*). Heidegger takes steps to distance the ordinary use of the term, a negative sort of scheming or planning towards some endeavour from his own.<sup>271</sup> Indebted, initially perhaps to Jünger, Heidegger’s development of machination relocates it from individual beings to “beings in the whole.”<sup>272</sup> The emergence of machination as not scheming, but as a power of manipulation and domination that hangs over being, marks modernity’s attitude towards beings, by which objects are given over to and determined as self-making products as the interpretation of *physis* φύσις by *techne* τέχνη and *poesis* ποίησις. The surrender of *physis*, the dynamic of growth and irruption of beings into their self-most selves, to *techne* is, according to Heidegger, determined from the first beginning of metaphysics in the west.<sup>273</sup> Technological thinking that transforms beings under the power of machination into things that are essentially manipulable, malleable, and controllable is a “metaphysical necessity” brought about from philosophy’s first beginning, “the most striking aspect of [Heidegger’s] account was his insistence that racial breeding, the

<sup>268</sup> Umberto Eco, ‘Ur-Fascism’, *The New York Review* (New York), nd 1995, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/>.

<sup>269</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

<sup>270</sup> Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 99–100.

<sup>271</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 99.

<sup>272</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad (Continuum, 2006), 21–22.

<sup>273</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 100.

annihilation of the human essence, thoughtlessness and so on, were not historical aberrations, but had been set in motion by Western philosophy from its beginning.”<sup>274</sup>

Heidegger makes a noteworthy distinction between the total mobilisation of *totale Mobilmachung* and “the machination of beings” *totale Mobil-machung*.<sup>275</sup> Jünger’s worker fills the role of the Nietzschean archetype that goes “over and beyond the human so far – the ‘last human’ – into another form.”<sup>276</sup> Under the power of total mobilisation, the comportment of the worker towards the world of work (the mobilised world) must take the form of machination, as the world given to the worker is determined in the will to power.<sup>277</sup> Machination does not depend on the worker, but rather the representation of the world in terms of machination makes possible the “making” in terms of both *poesis* and *techne*.

The threat of *Seinsvergessenheit*, illustrates Heidegger’s scepticism towards technology, and to the world that it reveals. Technology reveals machination,<sup>278</sup> and reveals the world as standing reserve in which the farmer no longer “gives the seed over to the powers of growth,” but rather forces a surrender of the land to the power of machination, as the farmer fabricates food in the same expression of modernity as “the fabrication of corpses in gas chambers.”<sup>279</sup> The loss of distinction between consumerism and genocide is cruel, unless consumerism and its corollaries (globalisation, materialism, etc.) are taken to be genocidal themselves; genocidal towards the ontological distinctiveness of the people, whose standing in the age is ground away beneath the weight of this monolith, such that its identity, history, and culture is at risk of obliteration. Such a move seems somewhat cynical, and itself a product of the domination of machination, in and by which such mechanistic modes of thinking are consequences of this domination, against which Heidegger railed.<sup>280</sup> Indeed, it is only with the power of hindsight that Heidegger and other philosophers were able to apprehend the disconnect from reason in mass society and the ethical reality that allowed the propagation of philosophical falsehoods about ethnies that allowed “the participation of

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<sup>274</sup> Robert Bernasconi, ‘Machination (Machenschaft)’, in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 276.

<sup>275</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘On Ernst Jünger (2)’, in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Indiana University Press, 2009), 204–5.

<sup>276</sup> Heidegger, ‘On Ernst Jünger (2)’, 205.

<sup>277</sup> Vincent Blok, *Ernst Jünger’s Philosophy of Technology: Heidegger and the Poetics of the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2017), 79.

<sup>278</sup> Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, 274.

<sup>279</sup> Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, 270.

<sup>280</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 100.

whole populations directly and indirectly in irrational beliefs that culminated in unprecedented mass death.”<sup>281</sup>

Such scepticism and its expansion into existential dread anticipates and is expanded upon in the discursive manoeuvring of the contemporary far-right. The notion that modernity, through the infiltration of technology and its attendant expressions (globalisation, materialism, etc.) has disenchanted life, degraded the spiritual identity of the individual, and threatens the oblivion of *Dasein als Volk* (if rendered differently) is so expanded. The local is pitted against the global as an overbearing enemy technocracy that stands to destroy the ontological distinctiveness of the people, its traditions, heritage, *Geschichte*, etc. This concern for the local allows for the reclamation of “nature” as an absorbed relata in the manifold of identity containing tradition, heritage, and culture. Concern for the natural, construed here as a site among others in which identity is grounded, is easily turned against the global, as the enemy that threatens oblivion. Such politicks that demand, then global responses to problems perceived to be global are construed as the dominating, technocratic enemy to be resisted, an overbearing elite that claims to know what is best from a place quite apart from these sites of identity for the local. Climate and environmental movements that intervene in these sites then seem to commit two grave crimes. The first is an imposition from a position of remote power against the people for whom the local is a concern tied to identity, such that an attack on one aspect of this manifold is an attack on all. A directive to replace agricultural land with solar panels, for example, attacks not only the significance of a particular field or tract of land, (which is never *merely* a field, but a place where the farmer works, where young lovers gambol among ears of wheat, where a community is built by seasonal work, etc.) but points to the second: the treatment of the natural as something manipulable, placing it under the auspices of the *Gestell*.

A case in point for the complex relationship between right-wing ideology, environmental quasi-romanticism, and agricultural protectionism manifested in the summer of 2022 during the UK Conservative Party’s abortive installation of Liz Truss (“A terminal lightweight, whose main qualification for being prime minister appears to be her ideological closeness to fossil fuel interests [...]”<sup>282</sup>) as Prime Minister, who championed the restriction of solar

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<sup>281</sup> Farley, ‘Truth, Beauty, and Climate Change: A Dialogue with Continental Philosophy about Living With Denial’, 257.

<sup>282</sup> Rupert Read, *Do You Want to Know the Truth? The Surprising Rewards of Climate Honesty* (Simplicity Institute, 2022), 105.

energy farms.<sup>283</sup> This policy decision dates to at least 2014, when Truss was Environment Secretary, and reduces to two principle concerns: aesthetic (“It makes my heart sink to see row upon row of solar panels where once there was a field of wheat or grassland for livestock to graze,”<sup>284</sup>) and food security (“It’s a real problem if we are using productive agricultural land for solar farms.”<sup>285</sup>). The aesthetic nostalgia for an England of wheat fields and grazing livestock, and the threat against it by the ingress of progressive, technocratic forces of modernity by Truss (who serves as mere exemplar) ignores the implicit contradiction of her second concern. Truss mistakes “productive agricultural land” with “England’s mountain green” and “pleasant pastures seen,” allowing national mythology the illusory power to conceal that productive agriculture is far more like the “dark, Satanic mills” of Blake’s poem as the bucolic idyll invoked to celebrate them.<sup>286</sup> “Agriculture is now the mechanised food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example, uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be released for either destruction or for peaceful use.”<sup>287</sup>

The line drawn between the fabrication of food, the fabrication of corpses, and the fabrication of “cultural obliteration,” is more tightly wound than surface analysis might suggest. The domination of machination, revealed through technology, which reduces beings to resources ties such fabrication events together. The fabrication of food (on a gigantic scale) demands the destruction of place in the sense that place centres and offers a site for the performance of culture. Fabrication entails extraction, and extraction removes food from the site that is destroyed in its production. The absurdity of the global economy of today rests largely in the economy of exporting food from a particular “site” (say, soybeans from destroyed rainforest in Brazil), and the concomitant demand for the import of food from elsewhere to replace that lost to “fabrication.” The imbalance between such processes plausibly connects the fabrication of food to the fabrication of corpses in the sense of manufactured shortage and scarcity, whether deliberate or not. Jünger too draws the production of food into the manifold of modernity’s dominance with an oblique reference to

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<sup>283</sup> Simon Evans, “Truss Plan to Block Solar Farms Is Deeply Unpopular – So Why Is She So Keen?”, *The Guardian*, th 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/12/truss-plan-to-block-solar-farms-is-deeply-unpopular-so-why-is-she-so-keen>. (Accessed 12/10/2022).

<sup>284</sup> Tom Bawden, ‘Environment Secretary Liz Truss Under Fire Over Plan to Scrap Solar Farm Subsidies’, *Independent*, th 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/environment-secretary-liz-truss-under-fire-over-plan-to-scrap-solar-farm-subsidies-9804965.html>. (Accessed 12/10/2022)

<sup>285</sup> ‘Solar Farms Are a Blight on the Landscape, Says Minister’, *BBC News*, th 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29679312>. (Accessed 12/10/2022).

<sup>286</sup> *Parry: Jerusalem*, directed by Waynefleet Singers, 1991 (Decca Music Group Ltd., 2018), <https://youtu.be/kXLh8da5d9g>. (Accessed 12/10/2022).

<sup>287</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 15.

von Bismarck's agricultural protectionism in 1879, by which wealth was stealthily reappropriated from the bourgeoisie to the landed gentry by enlisting the peasantry in an idealised form as a bulwark against the sinister (perhaps even gigantic) forces of American grain imports.<sup>288</sup> The relationship between food production, agricultural protectionism and naval supremacy in the pre-war German Empire featured in Weber's only articles written for an anglophone audience.<sup>289</sup> Here, Weber's advocacy for a *Weltpolitik* and restriction of submarine warfare points to his later drive for German de-escalation precisely so that German agriculture could reconnect with the global forces of the world economy.<sup>290</sup>

For Jünger, the economic arrangement of the world constituted a dictatorship that went beyond the mere manipulations of the bourgeoisie, "the economy in itself, the economic interpretation of the world, forms the centre of this cosmos, and it is the economy which acts as a gravitational force on each of its parts."<sup>291</sup> The discomfort caused by modernity and the domination of the global model of economic control was not confined to Germany. In his letters to Bertrand Russell, D. H. Lawrence railed against this model of civilization, "[...] we *must* start a solid basis of freedom of actual living – not only of thinking. We *must* provide another standard than the pecuniary standard, to measure *all* daily life by. We must be free of the economic question. Economic life."<sup>292</sup> The economic development of civil society, its publicness, and the concomitant emergence of busyness (*Betrieb*) marks modernity's degeneration of society into a purely commercial activity. Nothing original or authentic is possible because busyness reduces all language to idle talk in which opinions are traded but nothing of any substance can possibly be uttered.<sup>293</sup> Such existence we see played out in Lawrence's fiction, and other essays also, with participation in the busyness of the life economic forming a sort of living death in *The Rainbow*,<sup>294</sup> and the loss of the possibility of the authentic being of the proletarian brought about by machination, "They went down pit, but even pit was no more the happy subterranean warren it used to be. Down pit everything was made to run on lines, too, new lines, up-to-date lines; and the men became ever less

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<sup>288</sup> Ernst Jünger, *The Worker*, trans. Bogdan Costea (Klett-Cotta, 1981), 17.

<sup>289</sup> Guenther Roth, 'Max Weber's Articles on German Agriculture and Industry in the Encyclopedia Americana (1906/1907) and Their Political Context', *Max Weber Studies* 6, no. 2 (2006): 202.

<sup>290</sup> Roth, 'Max Weber's Articles on German Agriculture and Industry in the Encyclopedia Americana (1906/1907) and Their Political Context', 205.

<sup>291</sup> Jünger, *The Worker*, 18.

<sup>292</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *D. H. Lawrence's Letters to Bertrand Russell*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Gotham Book Mart, 1948), 29.

<sup>293</sup> Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics and Art*, 23.

<sup>294</sup> N. S. Boone, 'D. H. Lawrence Between Heidegger and Levinas : Individuality and Otherness', *Renascence* 68, no. 1 (2016): 57.



men, more mere instruments.”<sup>295</sup> Concern, then, that the absorption of life as lived into the matrix of economic relations brings about the loss of authenticity and stands between beings and the possibility of their doing or saying anything of import was not solely rooted in the romanticism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century German Empire.

The aesthetic turn that such a move points to is borne out by Jünger’s ideal of the new Nietzschean character embodied in the worker, artist, and soldier, for whom the sublimation of the body into the aesthetic whole was a wilful and necessary choice in order to produce a man capable of carrying the burden of technology. Jünger’s idealised proletarian warrior-poet alone can understand the necessity of hardship and the self-objectification, mortification and abnegation required to bridge the nihilism of modernity. In a prescient line written in *The Manchester Guardian* at the outbreak of the Great War, Lawrence wrote of soldiers departing to the front that, “There were no individuals, and every individual soldier knew it. He was a fragment of a mass, and as a fragment of a mass he must live and die or be torn. He had no rights, no self, no being. There was only the mass lying there, solid and obscure along the bank of the road in the night.”<sup>296</sup> Lawrence’s predictions and Jünger’s experience collide in the expression of technological mastery in war, “[the shells] were directed against an enemy a mile and a half away, men unseen by any of the soldiers at the guns. Whether the shot they fired hit or missed, killed or did not touch, I and the gun-party did not know.”<sup>297</sup> In Jünger’s reflection on battle, we find an answer to Lawrence’s puzzlement, “The battle as Les Eparges was my first. It was quite unlike what I had expected. I had taken part in a major engagement, without having clapped eyes on a single live opponent.”<sup>298</sup>

### 2.2.3. Agrilogistics

In the organisation of resources for the maximisation of production, in terms of agriculture, but of the technological drive more broadly is a form of exploitation. On the one hand, yes, we can say that agriculture dismisses the welfare of, say, animals, or can be highly pollutive in terms of surface run off, fertiliser and pesticide use, etc. More to the point, it is exploitative in its dismissal of the foundational value-relationships between nonhumans (and humans) on which an ecological ethic turns. The technological system on which calculation

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<sup>295</sup> D. H. Lawrence, ‘Enslaved by Civilisation’, in *Assorted Articles* (Martin Secker, 1930), 124.

<sup>296</sup> D. H. Lawrence, ‘With the Guns’, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/18/first-world-war-dh-lawrence-1914-with-the-guns>. Accessed 06/09/2022.

<sup>297</sup> Lawrence, ‘With the Guns’.

<sup>298</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffman (Penguin, 2003), 33.

and organisation depend produces domination, “organisation is control.”<sup>299</sup> The plough breaks the earth in both the sense of cutting its surface, but also in the sense of “breaking a prisoner.” It transforms the land on which it is employed, allowing the farmer to determine what will grow where.

Agriculture, along with left and right leaning versions of the stewardship model of environmentalism, that says, essentially, that humans have a duty to exploit the world while bearing a thought for other people, and thus not over-exploiting it, are based in the assumption that human dominion of the world has already been achieved. This domination is hard won, and must be continually fought for, as the natural world always “rises to reclaim”<sup>300</sup> what humans have won through conquest. As such, we can perceive an endless war between humanity and nature, a war that has to be fought in the totalising terms of Junger’s total mobilisation. Under the power of technology, the relationship between humans and their world is oppositional, and the necessities for our lives, be they resources like food and water, shelter, or such essentials as petrochemicals, are extracted as the right of a conqueror. And, just as conquerors maintain the power to assert their own hierarchies of power over those they conquer, inevitably with themselves at the top, so agriculture creates a hierarchy that places the human conqueror above the world they have dominated.<sup>301</sup> For Jensen, this is how “the myth of human supremacy” comes to control our thoughts. The imposition of any kind of organisational structure on the world is the deployment of an authoritarian, oppressive device. Even a theoretical organisational structure sets out to control, by organising from an hierarchical position over that which is categorised. If this is the case, then technology has squared the circle and dominated us just as we employ it to dominate the world.

In his *Dark Ecology* Morton treats agriculture through this technological lens, in terms of a logistics of agriculture, giving rise to the portmanteau “agrilogistics.” Morton offers three axioms on which agrilogistics depend:<sup>302</sup>

1. the principle of noncontradiction is inviolable
2. existence is presence
3. existing exceeds any quality of existing

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<sup>299</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 187.

<sup>300</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 243.

<sup>301</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 235.

<sup>302</sup> Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 51.

The inviolability of the principle of noncontradiction seems to be a nod to the genealogy of Morton's thought from the origins of speculative materialism; it is consistent with Meillassoux's hyper-chaos, and most else that follows it. His second axiom, that "existence is presence" appears to read "existence is presence qua *Vorhandenheit*," a straight comparison to the possibility of "existence as readiness qua *Zuhandenheit*." In the latter case, existence is a state shared by entities as they move in and out of the manifold of readiness-to-hand. In such a case its Dasein that exists in terms of existentials, and the different state of being afforded to objects as they move around the continuum of ready-to or present-at is contingent on Dasein. The hammer cannot be "too heavy" without anyone for whom it is too heavy to use in the intended way. Taking for granted the non-hierarchical, generous ontology of Morton's existing commitments to the possibility of hyperobjects, can this axiom be interpreted in a way that says presence does not require Dasein, and that things can be present-at-hand even without Dasein? The point he is surely to broaden the possibility of Dasein to nonhumans, such that, which the hammer cannot be "too heavy" for hammering without a person to use it as such, it can nevertheless be "too heavy" to use for nesting material. Nature writing provides other examples, consider J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*<sup>303</sup> in which a country road viewed from the peregrine's eye appears as a like a grey river sliding across the countryside, no more or less a feature of the landscape viewed from above than a copse of trees or an actual river. We can imagine it vanishing into the manifold of other objects ready-to-hand before the peregrine's eye, an aid to navigation, a demarcation of territory and we can also imagine the obstacle it poses when it obscures prey, or for the hedgehogs that try to cross it, etc. In the move from the state of readiness to the state of presence, things are reduced to the merely manipulable in precisely the way Heidegger describes the reduction of all things into the standing reserve or *Gestell*. Technical solutions or mitigations to the climate crisis that emerge out of modernity and technology amount to business as usual; more of the same. Proposals that involve geoengineering, carbon capture, or other non-existent technologies continue to reduce the substance of natural world to standing receive, manipulable at will in a sort of "happy nihilism."<sup>304</sup>

Morton uses *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and the eponymous character's role in the harvest, by which her participation in the mechanics of agriculture shows her to be a mere piece of something gigantic "agriculture makes her so much a part of a machine, a piece of a gigantic

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<sup>303</sup> J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine* (Harper Collins, 2011).

<sup>304</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 52.

device, a weird contradiction between appearing and being.”<sup>305</sup> She’s not just a person anymore, she’s part of the machinery of agriculture, every bit as much as the soldiers observed preparing for war in Italy by Lawrence, or the members of Jünger’s regiment depicted in *Storm of Steel*. Each is simultaneously revealed as a tiny part of the conceptual-technological whole to which they contribute, be it agriculture or war, and each whole is turned towards its end, whether fields of wheat or Flanders Fields. Yet within the manifold of each conceptual-technological whole, Tess of the d’Urbervilles and Jünger alike *are*. Their existences extend through and perforate the technological whole: the harvest, and the battle, but this extension isn’t limited by the whole they’re caught up in. Jünger’s depiction has the benefit of being autobiographical, his writings a sort of episodic view of the relationship between his existence and the technology of modernity and war. Looking at the romance inherent in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* or perhaps *Sons and Lovers* we see chapters granting this episodic character too. What we see is existence conditioned by its participation in the machinery of modernity, whether agriculture, warfare, or mining. Crucially, each finds a dignity and moral uprightness in the participation of the working class in dangerous labour (agriculture, mining, and combat) which in each case conditions the existence and character of those participants.

How then, does our participation in the climate crisis condition us? Does our participation in the mechanisms that contribute to the planet’s declining suitability for our habitation condition us in a comparable way? Agriculture, mining, and warfare are totalising for the characters, fictional and otherwise, that participate in and endure them. Out being-in and participating-in any particular situation lacks the episodic nature of an epistolary account. Our being-in the technological world is total and there is no getting out. The great outdoors of Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism would be useful as a device here, but the temptation when talking about limits or finitude to “peek over the fence” remains. Luckily, we don’t need to go outside our technologically conditioned lives or escape the supposed knot of the correlation; we can make do with a better vantage point instead.

Except for Junger’s account, the role played by danger in the examples I have in mind can be overlooked easily enough. Though *Sons and Lovers* painfully describes the decline in health and relationships brought on by Walter Morel’s work as a miner, and the horror of his accident, this danger and decline is transient.<sup>306</sup> Likewise in *Storm of Steel*, while Junger’s austere aesthetic describes a totality of danger in which he is an enmeshed participant, the

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<sup>305</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 3.

<sup>306</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (Harper Press, 2010).

danger too is transient, battles are won or lost, wars come to an end. The power exerted on existence by such events is enormous and lasting, of course, but this totality is, as it were, at scale. That scale may be gigantic, as in the chilling absorption of materiel requisitions into the overall aesthetic of battle, but it is nevertheless definite. Our own situation *vis a vis* the climate crisis is quite different, as I've intimated. The enormity of the gigantic whole in which we are enmeshed, and which conditions our existence lacks this definite quality. As I have discussed, we can stop short of considering this in terms of infinitude, but it is indefinite. The climate crisis is here to stay and offers nothing of the respite afforded by the end of the working day, season, or conflict.

Heidegger remarks that in humanity's fixation on the possible moment at which the atom bomb might explode and the anxiety toward what might be after that moment, we have missed that the explosion is just the final moment in an event that has long been underway, that the important, pivotal moment has already happened.<sup>307</sup> Morton uses a similar logic to explain agriculture as "a far older machination, a weapon of mass destruction slowly and effectively destroying everything."<sup>308</sup> Agriculture serves the role in Morton's *Dark Ecology* as technology does for Heidegger, but it's only under the conditions of modernity that technology reaches its destructive apex for Heidegger. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, modernity hasn't transformed the technology of agriculture and achieved the end of reducing the field and all those in it to standing reserve. Indeed, the harvest is a time of joy, of courtship, of remembrance, and the site of those happenings has not been transfigured by modernity into mere resource. The field is still a place for courting, for gambolling, etc. in a way that it cannot be when modernity seizes the technology of agriculture. Agriculture is, of course, a prerequisite for modernity's seizure of the technology of farms and ploughs, but no more so than the cudgel is a prerequisite for the nuclear arms race.

If agriculture is the bomb that exploded long ago, the shockwave of which rings out from our distant, mythic past, then the plough is analogous to the cudgel with which Caine smote Abel when the Earth first drank human blood. Caine and Abel (as third and fourth humans) were the first farmers in the Judeo-Christian world-myth, and the story of agriculture is one that begins with this kin slaying. If this amounts to the Freudian totemic murder, then the relationship between agriculture, death, and guilt is at the heart of our orientation towards others and the world. We can, of course, ignore the Freudianisms for all but their

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<sup>307</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. and trans. Albert Hofstadter (Harper & Row, 1971), 145–61.

<sup>308</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 5.

metaphorical value. But the plough-as-weapon and agriculture-as-genocide totems recur in environmental discourse.<sup>309</sup> Certainly, agriculture can be a tool of genocide. The Great Famine in Ireland of 1847,<sup>310</sup> British colonial policy in India,<sup>311</sup> and the Great Leap Forward famine in China of the early 1960s<sup>312</sup> examples of the weaponization of agricultural policy in pursuit of either overtly racist, genocidal ends, as mere extensions of capitalist realism's antecedents; or of the ignorance and inertia of centralised management of food-policy, although the factors contributing to these famines are complex and cannot be reduced to single-cause soundbites. It is not a careless or blithe comparison when Heidegger draws a parallel between the production of food on industrial farms and gas chambers, nor are we talking, here, about the common "farming is ecocide" trope.

There are some convincing reasons to think the current model of agriculture is bad. The image offered by farmers of bucolic country scenes with animals roaming across grassy knolls is an illusion that we've mostly seen through. We know for the most part that farms are factories that produce food products, producing huge amounts of pollution that leach into soil and waterways, and often keep animals captive in quite horrific conditions. Those that don't are wont to wage chemical warfare on animals outside of the system of production in order that supplies aren't damaged. One reason is the destruction of ecological diverse habitats in order to support farmland turned towards supporting human food consumption, or towards growing food to feed animals, which humans eventually eat. Rearing animals to consume them later is one of the many bizarre inefficiencies that arise under the global-capitalist paradigm of food production. Various market forces, starting with consumer demand, bring about a hugely inefficient process of food production. Consumers want meat, so retailers are obliged to sell it to them. To sell it, retailers must buy it. In order to be bought, animals must be turned into meat by being transported to abattoirs (where they endure extremes of suffering that are difficult to parse, though certain exploitation-horror movies might come close to depicting, and humanising, the extent of the slaughterhouse-interior).<sup>313</sup> Animals must first be moved from farms to slaughterhouses, but first, at the farms they must be reared for months or years. In the name of capitalistic efficiency these

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<sup>309</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 187.

<sup>310</sup> Joseph R. O'Neill, *The Irish Potato Famine* (ABDO Pub. Co., 2009).

<sup>311</sup> Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Clarendon Press, 1981).

<sup>312</sup> Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation*, trans. Charles Hartman and J. R. Foster (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>313</sup> Harriet Stilley, "'You'd Probably Like It If You Didn't Know What Was in It.'" Looking Behind the "Leatherface" of the Meat Industry in Tobe Hopper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Gothic Nature Journal*, no. June (2020), <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/the-leatherface-of-the-meat-industry/#:~:text=The%20careful%20alignment%20of%20Sally,our%20own%E2%80%9D%20>.

animals are most often subjected to lives of incarceration and degradation (those that are afforded limited luxuries like being labelled “free-range” have any associated production inefficiencies paid for by the end consumer – does anyone truly believe that the extra pound or two paid for a “free-range” animal (chicken) makes much difference to the chicken’s conditions?). These animals must be fed for months or years, and the food bought from other farmers. The end product in this chain is a foodstuff that requires five grams of protein to be inputted for each gram of protein produced, and nine calories consumed for every calorie produced.<sup>314</sup> This truncated chain of events is calibrated to extract at scale as much capital as possible at each link in the chain, yet the inefficiencies in terms of environmental damage are flabbergasting. A massive reduction in the amount of meat demand and the turning over of land used to feed humans via animals to the production of food for humans (many of them already produce soybeans to feed to cows) would eliminate much of the ecological damage and animal suffering that this chain entails.

The subject of descaling agriculture demands careful treatment. When I hear or read of demands to reduce meat production and consumption, I am reminded of agriculture’s genocidal history. I don’t doubt that calls to descale agriculture are well intentioned, though tend to arise in quarters where local food production is a viable option. I worry about a salient misanthropy that idea of reducing the scale of agriculture amounts to its weaponisation against those who live in the global south, or other parts of the world where local food production is not an option. One might reply that, but for the power of technological intervention, such communities would not exist anyway, or that a deliberate descaling of agriculture and concomitant dismantling of such communities in an ordered retreat now is better than waiting for some future date when the collapsing climate makes such places unsuitable for habitation by humans. Such places, whether “impossible” desert cities or population centres so dense that the available land for agriculture cannot possibility support the people dwelling there.

As a system of dominance, agriculture promises safety to the one that imposes this system. Is there any authoritarian system that’s deployed to the primary benefit of those under its sway (rather than those at the top). While agriculture as a tool of this kind creates boundaries between humans and nonhumans, it further creates boundaries between “humanity” and

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<sup>314</sup> Michael Dent, ‘The Meat Industry Is Unsustainable’, *ID Tech Ex* March (2020), <https://www.idtechex.com/en/research-article/the-meat-industry-is-unsustainable/20231#:~:text=Meat%20is%20a%20very%20inefficient,produce%201%20calorie%20of%20meat>.

“nature,” or (at the risk of saying something too broad) between “nature” and “culture”. Agriculture creates the distinction between nonhuman things that exist for us, and the rest. It is a system of enslavement and exploitation for those in the former camp, and a licence to the genocidal annihilation of everything else. There is no such thing as biodiversity in an agrilogistic space. All species that are permitted, are permitted because they either enhance the production of produce, or have some tangential benefit like outcompeting invasive species or preventing other creatures from eating crops, preying on hens, etc.<sup>315</sup>

Mumford introduces the idea of authoritarian technics, in which solutions to problems (technics) arise under specific conditions. Such technics either arises as a communal event with diverse, diffuse, and democratic access built in from their conception, or they deny access by default, remote and controllable only by a qualified clique, the high priests of whichever field. The bucolic idyll like in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* gives a glimpse of an age of agriculture in which the technic of food production had not been subordinated by technology and transformed.

e rural tradition around harvests, agriculture, etc. are nevertheless evocative of some ancient time. Any system that organises control out of the hands of a demos and into the sole authority of another clique meets Mumford’s definition of authoritarian technic. In order for modern agriculture to function, a vast manifold of related authoritarian technics must obtain: centralised manufacturing, distribution, logistics, technical interventions beyond the majority, etc. Agriculture qua food production can only be democratic or non-authoritarian in the sense that anyone can grow herbs in a box on their kitchen window, or plant a garden even a community garden – as long as they have access to a garden or a community: under capitalism the ability to access things like gardens and plots of land suitable for growing a modest crop is itself centralised into the hands of the bearers of capital, and fundamentally not in the hands of a democratic or community group.<sup>316</sup>

Agriculture and agrilogistics creates an aesthetics of utility, a function over form model of value in which the beautiful and the good (and any judgement of value either relative or absolute) is reduced to the most productive.<sup>317</sup> It provides, on the one hand for a utilitarian aesthetic where considerations of beauty are based on the production of utility, and any system that maximises utility can be taken as beautiful *in toto*. The individuated expressions of the system are not beautiful in any way that’s contingent on the perception on encounter

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<sup>315</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 43.

<sup>316</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 183–86.

<sup>317</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 45.



between any given individual and this expression, but beautiful instead contingent on the obtaining productivity of the system.

Any individual aesthetic encounter between seer and seen, then, does not derive its aesthetic value from the judgements or affective changes of the seer, but on the seer's knowledge of the system which confers value on the object. The seer might view a crop plant that has been engineered to maximise its value as a food product may find it to be ugly or have aesthetic disvalue, perhaps on account of it seeming poorly proportioned, top heavy, drab, etc., but according to Morton that seer fails to understand that the system of agrilogistics has supplanted her own system of possible value judgements with a system that finds aesthetic value in the maximisation of economic value. It's the replacement of heathland or wildflower meadows with, say, rape flower monocultures. On a kind of ecological aesthetics where value is located in relationships between codependent inhabitants of a given biome, which would (could) find no value in a monoculture on account of the absence of shared interests between entities.<sup>318</sup> Yet this agrilogistic aesthetic finds value only in quantity such that a monoculture, by virtue of its maximisation of space use, its yield, etc. and the express minimisation of competitive or redundant species maximises its aesthetic value as a function. So, seeing a field of rape flowers or tulips, we're correct to attribute aesthetic value under such an auspice, but cannot attribute ecological aesthetic value. What's more, the relationship between scale and aesthetics is pretty much cognitivist in that without knowledge of the wider system on which such value is contingent, we cannot have that value.

This seems like an expression of the gigantic at work. Quantity as such is transformed into a quality, which in this case is the predicate for attribution of aesthetic value. Agriculture and agrilogistics creates an aesthetics of utility, a function over form model of value in which the beautiful and the good is reduced to the most productive. The axioms that Morton describes for agrilogistics skirt around the gigantic but allude to the transformation of quantity to quality, which will become our working definition for the gigantic. According to the third axiom, the maximisation of existence takes precedence over any quality of existence. Yet when quantity is changed into a quality of existence, a strange spiral emerges where this one quality, the scale of existence, appears to surpass both its quantity and any qualities of existence. This axiom and the transmutation of quantity to quality makes clear that the purpose of agrilogistics is simply the maximisation of life, and that anyone who questions

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<sup>318</sup> Greaves and Read, 'Where Value Resides: Making Ecological Value Possible'.

that axiom has erred, “So toxic and taboo is undoing axiom 3, one automatically assumes that whoever talks about it is some kind of nazi.”<sup>319</sup> The problem that ecologically minded people must tread when approaching the subject of intensive agriculture, or arguably any aspect of climate mitigation and adaptation, is to create the space to allow for the necessary conversations about creating a model of food production that does not destroy the planet, while warding against the intrusion of ecofascistic modes of thought. This played out, in a way, during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in 2020 and 2021 in the stilted public debate framed as a choice by the authorities to maximise the number of lives saved with no regard to the quality of life of those saved, or the quality of life of those least at risk of infection by COVID-19.<sup>320</sup> It may well be the case that a public conversation about the priorities of a lockdown regime would have been beneficial, but legalistic assertions of the kind made, for example, by Lord Sumption when addressing Deborah James, a TV talk-show host with a terminal illness, “I didn’t say [your life] was not valuable, I said it was less valuable.”<sup>321</sup> This “in the wild” formulation of the repugnant conclusion of Parfit’s mere-addition paradox<sup>322</sup> offers a glimpse of how conversations about the climate crisis should not be framed, but, as I’ve suggested, the COVID-19 pandemic offers perhaps the only non-wartime example of mass, coordinated, international action by world governments to address a common problem.

### 2.3. The gigantic

In this section, I present a close reading of *Contributions*, and particularly the development of Heidegger’s use of the term “gigantic” through this, and other works. Though the gigantic appears in roughly 20 volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*, the confused chronology of the publication sequence poses something of a challenge, that makes an attempt to make any such examination in chronological sequence somewhat fraught. Heidegger himself seems to have viewed *Contributions*, composed 1936-1940 as requiring preparatory reading in the form of the various lectures and seminars written after *Contributions*, but published long before it.<sup>323</sup>

We can take preliminary direction on the meaning of “the gigantic” from Heidegger’s remarks in § 260 of *Contributions*, “The gigantic was determined as that whereby the

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<sup>319</sup> Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, 51.

<sup>320</sup> Archie Bland, ‘Experts Unconvinced by Lord Sumption’s Lockdown Ethics’, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2021/jan/19/less-valuable-experts-unconvinced-by-lord-sumptions-lockdown-ethics>.

<sup>321</sup> Bland, ‘Experts Unconvinced by Lord Sumption’s Lockdown Ethics’.

<sup>322</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 431–33.

<sup>323</sup> Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (UCL Press, 1999), 140.

‘quantitative’ is transformed into a ‘quality’ of its own, into a kind of greatness.”<sup>324</sup> This explanation is mirrored later, “The gigantic is, rather, that through which the quantitative acquires its own kind of quality, becoming therefore a remarkable form of the great.”<sup>325</sup> There is sufficient overlap between these passages to arrive at something like a stipulative definition. It is worth noting that I do not think the construction of a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, nor even the strict use of a definition more broadly construed to be appropriate approaches to clarifying the use of the term. Such an activity would seem to fall into the trap that Heidegger’s concern with modernity and the gigantic attempts to descry; namely the technologizing drive to understand and determine all things in advance, and to perform philosophy as a technical discipline, improperly subordinate to technology, and not the reflective questioning of being, e.g., philosophy *qua* meditation. However, I think it is of potential merit in grounding the exploration of the term’s use across the *Gesamtausgabe* from the outset, setting out, as it were, knowing where the path is, if not where it leads. Indeed, the developing of definitions would seem to fit Heidegger’s description of calculation, disclosing step-by-step along the guideline of a thread given beforehand,<sup>326</sup> a predetermination of the matter under consideration consistent with the domination of machination, which is to be opposed by philosophy.

### 2.3.1. Method and motivation in *Contributions*

The philosophical thought of *Contributions* takes the form of meditation (reflection, mindfulness), a meditation we are enjoined as engaged readers to participate in. Meditation then, takes the form of the earnest questioning of the truth of *Seyn*, and in this questioning of how and when we are of this essential being, to draw us, as engaged readers into the essence of the truth of *Seyn* [GA: 65, 43]. Such meditation is always a meditation on the self and comes by its essence to understand the self as historical (*geschichtliches*), of understanding the inheritance of our being from *Seyn*, the medium and manifold in which being comes into itself [GA: 65, 44]. This meditation clears the way for a new beginning of thought, an inceptual thinking of the basic essence of being-ness, *die Seiendheit*, or οὐσιᾶ [GA: 65, 66]. Meditation is an essential preparation for the later sections of *Contributions*, it is a necessary going down as much as it marks a transitory phase, a going-over for thought between the first and the other beginning [GA: 65, 66]. It is a going-down in the way of Zarathustra, who

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<sup>324</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 348.

<sup>325</sup> Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture (1938)’, 222.

<sup>326</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same’, in *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Harper Collins, 1984). II-37.

follows the setting sun in descending from his mountain hermitage.<sup>327</sup> Such a going-down is then a matter of placing oneself into a position of vulnerability, from which it is not merely possible, but likely, even, that an assault on the project of meditation will follow, and threatens to undermine the clearing of thought on which the clearing of ground for the inceptual thought depends. The form of meditation that philosophy takes in *Contributions* is that plight of being stretched across the abyss, in which going down is as much a transition of the condition of thought as is going over.<sup>328</sup>

Meditation as a going down in which the historical self is discovered leads thought towards the understanding of the gigantic, but this understanding should be conditioned with the rediscovery of the worldview (*Weltanschauung*), not merely as a means of uncovering the world, but at least in the terms of Being and Time, as a “modality”<sup>329</sup> of being-in-the-world [GA: 2, 59-62. Cf. GA: 2, 301].<sup>330</sup> Heidegger’s conception of worldview in *Contributions* has matured from the broadly ontic/ontological distinction of *Being and Time*. Heidegger understands worldview in the context of its genealogy from the Analytic of the Sublime in the Third Critique, by which, in terms of the mathematical sublime, reason is able to compass the entirety of the infinite sensible world under a single, unified intuition.<sup>331</sup> In this light, Heidegger takes worldview as arising in the scientific philosophy exemplified in Hegel and Fichte, as a weak gathering together of values left groundless in the arisen distinction of science’s technical, cultural meaning [GA: 65, 37]. “Worldview” remains the worldview of an individual, in which a dogmatic acceptance that each individual has their own worldview and is “allowed their own opinion,” gives way to a radical subjectivism [GA: 65, 38]. As worldview is conditioned in the modes of individual subjectivity, it is itself subject to the vicissitudes of situations of each. There is, then, an arbitrariness to a “worldview” which compasses and shapes the opinions and lived experiences of the individual while simultaneously totalising the world and thus diminish the individual in service to the total [GA: 65, 39-40]. In its power to totalise, “worldview” dominates everything which might arise under its auspices, such that anything created under its power is determined in advance as business *qua* busyness (*Betrieb*) [GA: 65, 40]. Worldview is contrasted with philosophy,

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<sup>327</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (Wordsworth Classics, 1997), 3.

<sup>328</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 8.

<sup>329</sup> Sebastian Luft, ‘Worldview (Weltanschauung)’, in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 830.

<sup>330</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 85–90.

<sup>331</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, 2007), 138.

which is not *just* meditation, but the will to uncover the ground of being's history, the "terrible" enquiry into the truth of being [GA: 65, 36]. Like machination, worldview is a consequence of the metaphysics of philosophy's first beginning and shares its structures of domination. Yet to achieve a state of dominance, worldview requires an adversary; the master loses his status without a slave. So, worldview must assert itself against philosophy, which, lacking the will to itself, is ultimately dismissed as mere erudition [GA: 65, 38]. The role of philosophy, then, becomes something like the untangling of the *ontic* worldview in which the ontological is conditioned.<sup>332</sup>

The first mention of the gigantic in *Contributions* arrives in this examination of worldview, in §14 *Philosophie und Weltanschauung* [GA: 65, 36-41]. Here, the gigantic is a characteristic of machination, that mode of domination in which beings are thought of as manipulable and malleable towards some end *in advance*. Business is the result of the transformation that human creativity undergoes under machination, which has only the appearance of true creativity [GA: 65, 40]. The use of this term remains undeveloped until the consideration of worldviews resumes in § 45. *Die "Entscheidung"* [GA: 65, 96-101]. Here, the gigantic again appears as a characteristic, this time of technology. Worldview and culture are resources and "technology" in the battle over the conditions of survival and thriving in (a world of?) gigantic proportions. This battle is the preparation of the technologized animal out of being, the gigantism of technology coarsens and lessens the instincts (of the animal) [GA: 65, 99]. In these preliminary sketches, the gigantic is yet to take on its meaning as is matured in the later parts of the text. Here it denotes an undetermined character in the interplay between technology, machination, worldview, and culture, all of which are symptoms of the age that was determined by philosophy's first beginning, and the maturity of ontotheological thought from the metaphysics of the first. Even culture, technology and worldview are subsumed eventually by and disappear into the standing reserve of Gestell.

### 2.3.2. Loss of being in mass society

The questions of the abandonment by (*Seinsverlassenheit*), and oblivion of being (*Seynsvergessenheit*) direct the development of the gigantic in the second part of *Contributions*, "The Resonating," or "The Echoing:" "Resonating of the essential occurrence of being out of the abandonment by being through the compelling plight of the forgottenness of being."<sup>333</sup> Here, the quality of gigantism attaches to its "contrivances," the enjoyment of

<sup>332</sup> Karilemla, 'Heidegger's Contrasting Notion of Worldview in the Early, Middle, and Later Writings', *The Humanistic Psychologist* 43, no. 3 (2015): 250–66.

<sup>333</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 82.

which by the “human masses” demonstrates the abandonment by being, but also that the nihilism towards which the abandonment by being draws the human is in some sense indirect.<sup>334</sup> The contrivances of the gigantic are elsewhere related to the kinds of technology that bring about the collapse of entities into mere resource, such as “eradication of great distances by the airplane” and the presentation by broadcasts of “foreign and remote worlds in their everydayness”<sup>335</sup> This annihilation, native to the age of technology is something like arriving at the condition wherein other beings have no essence and so are reduced to pure manipulability before machination. In the encounter with such annihilated beings, we recognise that technology renders us also possible objects of annihilation. The age of technology, all things present themselves to us as “mere resource,” depriving them of ontological, existential status, which is to say a status such that the “object or person or practice is something without which we would cease to be who we are.”<sup>336</sup> As such, all entities are reduced to their manipulability, utility, function, etc., means by which other entities approach and achieve their varied ends. Just as chalk is encountered as equipment that allows me to write on a board *in order to* teach a class, *in order to* achieve the end of becoming a well-rounded and employable doctoral student, so too do the students in that class present as instruments towards that end. The entities I encounter in my activities as an employable doctoral student, *all* such entities, are granted mere instrumental importance in the course of my achieving certain ends. Moreover, the ends being pursued under such a rubric are themselves transformed; they *merely* permit the pursuit of further, related ends. Where something as obvious as “employment” is the purported end, we arrive at an end that, when reached, demands work towards itself as a further end, i.e., remaining in a state of employment. The towards-which of the equipment structure appears lost, in that the usable (that which is reduced to resource) does not disclose its meaning in its use towards such ends [GA: 2, 70-71].

Under the dominion of technology, all entities present themselves as mere resource, and as such, at best, are granted instrumental importance. Nothing, then, can be said to be truly capable of having existential importance.<sup>337</sup> According to Heidegger, *Seinsverlassenheit* is the ground of the essence of Nietzschean nihilism [GA: 65, 119]. The abandonment by being denotes a loss by beings of their ownmost *beyng*. Quite unlike Nietzsche, however, is

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<sup>334</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 95.

<sup>335</sup> Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture (1938)”, 222.

<sup>336</sup> Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language and History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200.

<sup>337</sup> Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language and History*, 201.

Heidegger's claim that regardless of any act of willpower on our parts, intrinsically value-less things cannot be made valuable.<sup>338</sup> The loss of being through *Seinsverlassenheit* causes beings to appear as mere things, objectively present and lacking the subjective substance of true beings. This further entails a flattening of being, in which the objectivity of beings does not permit for any one or another to emerge in any mode other than the present-at-hand, and so all things are encountered in this attitude [GA: 65, 115]. Though beings may offer the appearance of existing without this loss, as with the veiling of *Seinverlassenheit* by the Platonic-Christian worldview, and its secular successor, the scientific worldview. This veiling, cloaking, concealing of *Seinsverlassenheit* lies in the iterative gains of the gigantic. [GA: 65, 120]. Unveiling the abandonment by being is the province of philosophical meditation, which calls into focus the destruction brought about by the gigantic.

The gigantic now describes not only a transformation of quantity into quality, but a means by which the abandonment (of beings) by being is occluded. The relationship between the gigantic, machination, technology, and being bears comment. On the one hand it is a building up in terms of the creation of a worldview under the auspices of machination in the age of technology, through which the urge to dominate, to bring under the power of technology by regarding beings as essentially calculable ("Calculation is meant here as a *basic law of comportment*, not as the mere deliberation or even the cleverness of an individual act,"<sup>339</sup>) in advance permits the bewitching (*Verzauberung* [GA: 65, 124]) that transforms quantity into quality, rendering the gigantic incalculable in turn. While one might *know* that a rise in global temperatures to 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels is "bad" in whatever way, the folding of the quantitative into the qualitative renders such a statement largely meaningless *for me*, absorbed as I am in my concernful dealings with things in the world. This bewitching, that pushes thought towards constant attempts at calculation, arises from the "hex" (*Behexung*) cast by technology when machination reaches complete domination, pervading and penetrating everything, such that this enchantment can no longer be resisted. The gigantic is not merely a changeover of category, from quantity to quality, but a "change in the history of being itself."<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Hans Sluga, 'Heidegger's Nietzsche', in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Blackwell, 2005), 106.

<sup>339</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 96. Author's emphasis.

<sup>340</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 107.

### 2.3.3. The illusion of modernity and the plight of the Earth

The notion that modernity has the power to bewitch or cast illusions over a people held a particular valence in the years during which Heidegger compiled *Contributions*. Indeed, the philosophers working around Heidegger, in terms at least of philosophical genealogy (with Husserl, Weber, Michels, etc. preceding him, and Levinas, Tillich, Arendt, etc. succeeding him) seemed acutely aware of the power of the illusion cast by modernity across Europe, and perhaps wider, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writing near the end of his life, Husserl lamented the encroaching of modernity into the domains cleared by the enlightenment.<sup>341</sup> Husserl's concern at this stage with the same question that animated Heidegger through the compilation of *Contributions*, that of the understanding of the possibility of metaphysics ("universal philosophy") in terms of its relationship to philosophy's beginning. For Husserl, at least, the question was undecided, the only means for its determination being the development of philosophy out of the naïve rationalism of the previous century,

It is the only way to decide whether the *telos* which was inborn in European humanity at the birth of Greek philosophy [...] is merely a factual, historical delusion, the accidental acquisition of merely one among many other civilisation and histories, or whether Greek humanity was not rather the first breakthrough to what is essential to humanity as such, its *entelechy*.<sup>342</sup>

That rationalism gave rise to the conditions of modernity that allow for the revelation of technological domination that Heidegger, Jünger, and many others descried and decried. This tendency was, according to Husserl, a "well-fitting *garb of ideas*, that of the so called objectively scientific truths [...]" Yet under the illusion of modernity, the costume is mistaken for true clothing, the actor for the character, and so "[...] through the garb of ideas [we] take for *true being* what is actually a *method*."<sup>343</sup> The reality, for Husserl, is that which is parsed through the hermeneutic method. The error which the illusion elides is hermeneutics as metaphysics in which individuals are forgotten, obliterated in ideas with which we have garbed them.

Heidegger's most sustained treatment of the gigantic is in § 70-71 of *Contributions*, both titled *Das Riesenhafte* (§ 260 shares this title). Where the gigantic at last is refined, taking on

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<sup>341</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Northwestern University Press, 1970), 10.

<sup>342</sup> Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 15.

<sup>343</sup> Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 51. Emphasis in original.



“incalculability” in the face of calculation *qua* “basic law of comportment” [GA: 65, 121]. The incalculable gigantic is then, something that falls outside the possibility of encounter by way of its becoming the condition *for* the possibility of encounter, denying reflection as a transcendental mode of encounter. Its incalculability is the “announcement of beyng [...] in the form of the plight of the lack of a sense of plight” [GA: 65, 136]. The latter sense of plight, the plight that’s lack provokes the former, is the abandonment by and oblivion of beyng, and the descent into nihilism, which is clarified as not the mere loss of goals (telos), but as the essential consequence *of* the abandonment by being. The incalculability of the gigantic arises from the history of being in which the quantitative *qua* a “way of having size,” [GA: 65, 138] comes to dominate being. It is not so much the case that quantity is transformed into quality, but that the “original essence” of quantity is found in the objectification of beings that arises in the basic comportment of calculation. Quantity conditions the possibility of the encounter with beings in such a way that representation, the systematic, machinational organisation of beings within a worldview, determines the calculable as essentially possible, and the incalculable as not [GA: 65, 136].

The “plight of the lack of plight” that Heidegger is concerned with in this treatment of the gigantic invokes the contemporary discourse on the climate crisis. In particular, the notion that we, as agents in the world’s most developed economies lack a true sense of either the scale of the climate crisis or the magnitude of its likely effects. Our plight now is that we do not grasp the immediacy or immensity of the climate crisis in terms of the effort now required to avert or mitigate against its most disastrous consequences or truly reckon what those consequences might be. The immediacy and immensity of the problem is most acutely grasped, perhaps unsurprisingly, by those least able to take action to remedy it.

This was demonstrated aptly at the COP26 climate summit in November 2021, to which the USA sent more than 1000 delegates, while only four representatives from Pacific Island nations were in attendance. Among delegates from outside the G20 group of nations, calls for immediate, radical action to reduce carbon emissions were vocal and scathing in their critique of more developed economies’ prioritisation of their continued economic growth over climate caution. By comparison, G20 nations mostly demurred.<sup>344</sup> The climate crisis has attained the incalculability of the gigantic, in that its scale, its “way of having a size” is such that its ontology no longer allows transcendent reflection. Its immensity, rather,

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<sup>344</sup> Marthe de Ferrer, ‘COP26: Who Is Being Left out of the Climate Conversation?’, *EuroNews*, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/11/01/the-missing-voices-of-cop26-who-is-being-left-out-of-the-climate-conversation>. Accessed 13/11/2022.

foregrounds the possibility of encounter in such a way that calculation is the only means by which engagement with the gigantic of the climate crisis is possible, a mode of comportment which is doomed to never compass the incalculable gigantism that is essential to the representation of the crisis, “the real emergency is precisely that collectively we don’t treat this situation as remotely anything like an emergency. In that sense, the emergency is that we feel no emergency. Call this the ‘meta-emergency.’”<sup>345</sup> Whether configured as “plight” or “meta-emergency,” the gigantic scale of the crisis eludes our grasp. It is a problem and a tragedy that defies reason, and the understanding of it in terms of a terrible unfolding event in which we are both jailor and jailed is lost or avoided on account of the impossibility of thinking it *as world*.

In the autumn of 2022, against a backdrop of global disruption to energy supply chains exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reportage has begun to acknowledge the possibility of power blackouts in the United Kingdom.<sup>346</sup> This amounts to a rare admission on the part of mainstream media organisations that 1) the lifestyles of those in the developed world are contingent on the supply of energy, 2) that such supplies are grounded in the extraction and transportation of fossil fuels, and 3) such supplies are precarious, or otherwise not guaranteed. The rarity of this acknowledgment that the living standards of those in wealthier countries serves as a challenge to the fundamentals of capitalism and market abundance to which we are so wedded, and from which the plight arises, “if we *believed* there were ethical or logistical limits to consumption or that pollution affects ecosystems and climate, we might live differently.”<sup>347</sup>

#### 2.3.4. Calculability, scale, and research

With calculability established as a mode of comportment towards the world, towards beings, and the gigantic understood as the essential quality of the representation of the incalculable-impossible, Heidegger appears to arrive at an impasse in which that which is incalculable is nevertheless compassed by the overweening power of machination. The quantitative is represented by calculability in the objectification of beings, and representation itself is a form, or expression of machination: a means of organising, structuring, planning, etc. of

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<sup>345</sup> Rupert Read and Wolfgang Knorr, ‘Stop Saying “Climate Emergency!”? (Until, Collectively, We Mean It?)’, *Brave New Europe* (London), 2022, <https://braveneweuropa.com/rupert-read-wolfgang-knorr-stop-saying-climate-emergency-until-collectively-we-mean-it>. Accessed 13/11/2022.

<sup>346</sup> Pippa Crerar and Alex Lawson, ‘Government Tests Energy Blackout Emergency Plans as Supply Fears Grow’, *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/nov/01/government-tests-energy-blackout-emergency-plans-as-supply-fears-grow>. Accessed 13/11/2022.

<sup>347</sup> Farley, ‘Truth, Beauty, and Climate Change: A Dialogue with Continental Philosophy about Living With Denial’, 266. My emphasis.

things in accordance with the constraints of the world picture. In this impasse the aesthetic mode of the gigantic is revealed, much in the way as is the analytic of the sublime. The gigantic, which cannot be represented or calculated is nevertheless represented/calculated *as such*. Much as the negative theologian cannot speak of what God is, through apophasis she *can* speak of God, with careful attendance to the *via negativa*. The sublime similarly arises through the impossibility of human faculties in compassing the infinite, yet in that failure activating the supersensible and taking power and delight in the closing-off of the mathematical sublime.

Heidegger's long-time interlocutor, Jünger began to trace this relationship between calculability, scale, and sublimity in the aftermath of the First World War. Writing at the opening of the Battle of the Somme, he observed, "Now we stood before a battle of materiel with gigantic mass."<sup>348</sup> Compared with the earlier engagements of the war and near-collegial exchange of fire across the static trenches at Douchy, the opening manoeuvres of the Somme are not characterised by heroism or the promise of "a manly act, a merry rifle fight on flowery, blood-dewed meadows"<sup>349</sup> that the idealistic soldiery had been promised. Instead, the war entered a new phase, one characterised by sheer mass of military resource and of unruly activity, busy-ness by another name.<sup>350</sup> Yet it's wrong to suggest that the war had changed, or a new quality has been descried, but rather that the basic historical character of the Great War as one conditioned by modernity, and the machinational power of technology, calculation, and representation was discovered. This war must always have had this character, even though this was concealed at the outset. Yet the objectification of the ends of combat, and the imposition of machination over the field is foreshadowed in Jünger's first engagement at Les Eparges, in which "[I fought] without having come face to face with an opponent."<sup>351</sup> Importantly, Junger understood the aesthetic mode revealed in the discovery of the incalculable-gigantic character of the war, "It's much easier to describe these sounds than to endure them, because one cannot but associate every single sound of flying steel with the idea of death."<sup>352</sup> This reversal of the quasi-mystical experience of the sublime, in which that which is experienced cannot be expressed, or that mere language is ill-equipped to convey the magnitude of the experience bears comment.

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<sup>348</sup> Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern* (Klett-Cotta, 2001), 78.

<sup>349</sup> Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern*, 7.

<sup>350</sup> Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern*, 78.

<sup>351</sup> Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern*, 38.

<sup>352</sup> Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern*, 80.

In several prescient passages in § 76. *Sätze über die Wissenschaft*, Heidegger describes the impact of the advance of the machinational-technological on university departments in similar terms to Jünger's realisations during battle. Namely that the division between the natural sciences and the humanities will widen and the essential distinctions between them forgotten in the university's move from "site of research and teaching" to "business establishment" [GA: 65, 155]. The loss of essential distinctions, the confusion between exactitude and rigour [GA: 65, 149-150] creates a hierarchy of disciplines, ordered according to the dictates of the worldview [GA: 65, 153]. As businesses, universities will lose the essence of the university, keeping only a semblance of "cultural decoration," in which the *universitas*, which is the proper process of the university is closed off in the pursuit publication metrics. There is no place in this vision of the university for philosophy as meditation on the truth of being, which can only provide a home for philosophy as "erudition and system-building" [GA: 65, 156]. This is not to diminish the importance of the natural sciences in the academy, but points to a failure in the institution of the university to recognise the onslaught of machination and technology in the domain that is properly the site for the unfolding of *universitas*. The "hard" sciences are rigorous in their exactitude, and the demand that the humanities conform to this exactitude in the pursuit of rigour undermines their essential nature: that their rigour demands ambiguity, hermeneutic dialogue, discourse, etc.; all essentially inexact, and so foreign to the university as conditioned by technology [GA: 65, 157].

Heidegger appears to advance a succinct version of a slippery slope argument against the expansion of the "hard" sciences at the expense of the humanities, and philosophy *qua* meditation. Considering the role of the technologically conditioned university as business and the place of the sciences as essentially productive of research towards the ends of publication for its own sake, then "[the] gigantic future advancements in the sciences are to be expected and indeed can even be calculated. The advancements will raise the utilization [sic] and exploitation of the earth."<sup>353</sup>

1. Production and publication of scientific research leads to technological advancement
2. Technological advancement leads to the deployment of new technologies
3. New technologies cause the exploitation of earth and degradation of humanity
4. There is a moral duty not to exploit the earth and degrade humanity
5. We should not produce and publish scientific research.

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<sup>353</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 122.

Of course, there are several quite significant hurdles one can raise for an argument of this kind, both in its specificity as enumerated and more generally. Research need not necessarily lead to technological advancement. Even when technologies are advanced, their deployments are not guaranteed (a nation might develop the technological means to deploy certain kinds of bioweapon but never produce such a weapon). New technologies need not exploit the earth, even if their production is resource intensive: hypothetical carbon capture technologies that might have a net-negative impact on the environment; and need not necessarily lead to the degradation of the human: technologies that improve literacy or facilitate access to medical care, for example. A moral duty asserted under 4. need not be assumed *prima facie*.

Regardless, the development of the sciences towards their essential ends requires that the advancements described become less and less remarkable, regardless of how technically challenging to implement or wondrous in their effect. It's no exaggeration to say that I possess technological devices nigh unimaginable 20, 30, or 40 years ago, not to mention the time that Heidegger was composing *Contributions*. And yet with every iteration of the iPhone; with every increase in connectivity speed allowing me faster and easier to access a library's worth of information in the palm of my hand; with machines I can verbally command to play music (almost any music ever recorded), order groceries, or operate the lights in my home; the wonder that ought to inhere in each such feat of technological advancement is negligible. With the technologies that allow me to eat meals better seasoned than were the meals of past potentates and avoid deprivation from the ravages of novel respiratory viruses comes a dismissal of the significance of each subsequent advance. One takes for granted that a technological solution exists, or will come to exist, for any problem or inconvenience that arises in life. The advance of technology is such that its penetration into life denies the thought that its continuation is anything but inevitable, and that technological progress is so much an axiom of modern life and of modernity.

The myth of modernity was popularly advanced in recent years by John Gray,<sup>354</sup> with provocative examples addressing and perhaps making headway in the task of dispelling the illusion of progress, a long shadow cast by modernity. This critique of modernity cleaves to the line that demarcates the political left and right, a descriptive method in which "progress" is taken as the form of contemporary western civilisation, not a feature of it.<sup>355</sup> In this way a

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<sup>354</sup> John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (Farrar, Strouss, and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>355</sup> Rupert Read, 'Wittgenstein and the Illusion of "Progress": On Real Politics and Real Philosophy in a World of Technocracy', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 78 (2016): 283.

questioning that challenges whether this or that example of some new technological or political development represents progress or not is answered with a resounding “yes.” But such questioning seems to miss the point or at least elide the deeper question with the surface one. When progress is taken as the form of civilisation, the question “is that progress?” must come to be an ethical one, in which progress is taken to mean “progressive.” If technological and economic developments are just a matter of what our civilisation is then the important question that remains is of implementation and deployment. Wittgenstein’s cultural pessimism directs the questioning: can we really call “progress” such things as the increase of a nation’s GDP or the wealth of its most abundant capital-holders when its people languish in poverty? What is a nation’s GDP *for* if it doesn’t afford the nation an overabundance of wellbeing and culture? Such questions can easily be given an environmental valence: what is progress *for* if it produces conditions that undermine its own basis?

### 2.3.5. Nature and aesthetics

The concern for the intrusion of the gigantic into the domain we might now call “environmental” arises again later in *Contributions*. In § 155. *Die Natur und die Erde*, Heidegger’s attention here anticipates Morton’s worry in *Ecology Without Nature*, and *The Ecological Thought*, surrounding the intrusion into “nature” of technology. Not mere, rude technological interventions in “nature” in the manner of extractive industry, but the representational intervention that predetermines “nature” as resource and thus essentially *for us*. “Nature” as *physis*, the irruptive “site of the moment” is destroyed by its separation from beings by the sciences, becoming itself one being among others.<sup>356</sup> Rather than a location for the event of *beyng*, “nature” so construed is given over to calculation and machination. The result is hollowing out of the productive abundance at the heart of nature as *physis*, leaving a husk of scenery and space for the leisure of “the masses,” those inauthentic beings that are left over when humans too are taken by the power of machination. The reduction of “nature” to scenery, the scenic, the picturesque or “landscapes” plays out in the framing of much “classic” environmental aesthetics.<sup>357</sup> “Landscape aesthetics,” in which an essential frame is posited around an aesthetic experience and the reciprocity of the embodied site of aesthetic encounter is ignored, is a view of environmental aesthetics to be, I think, avoided. As Morton puts it elsewhere, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it

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<sup>356</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 218.

<sup>357</sup> Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics And The Environment : The Appreciation Of Nature, Art And Architecture* (Taylor & Francis, 2002), 3–5.

from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.”<sup>358</sup>

These considerations are alive in Morton’s work far prior to the publication of *Hyperobjects*. In, “Why Ambient Poetics,” Morton begins to articulate an aesthetics that bridges the forbidden subject-object divide that predicates the anthropocentrism of picturesque aesthetics so rooted in romanticism.<sup>359</sup> The appeal to ambience addresses the absence in landscape aesthetics of the understanding of the place of the viewer in the aesthetic context that she is participating in. This is to say, the framing of landscape produces an illusory barrier between the observer and observed which does nothing to recognise the reciprocity of engagement in environmental aesthetics. The interaction between the “viewing subject” and the “aesthetic object” is not merely one-sided as the frame might suggest, but rather involves such interactions as the exchange of breath, the effect of ambient temperature on the body, the caress of wind through hair, etc. The embodied subject and the vagaries of the environment’s influence on that body should be viewed as a cornerstone of ambient aesthetics. Moreover, understanding aesthetic encounters not as rarefied occasions of studied contemplation on beauty, but as an ongoing engagement between the embodied subject and the environment changes the mode of aesthetic understanding into one in which the configurations of the sublime, the beautiful, the monstrous, etc. seem not to cohere. When taking, for example the aesthetics of weather, not only are tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory senses engaged to different extents at different times,<sup>360</sup> but the entire site of encounter changes as the body moves through this environment. The experience extends through space and time such that the sense of radiant glory at the encounter, say, of the summer sun dancing over a shimmering sea of golden grasses, might take on quite different senses, say, as the sky begins to bruise and glowering dark clouds threaten a tumultuous summer storm.

An appeal to ambience as a mode of the aesthetic encounter of the embodied perceiver with its environment seems to evade Heidegger’s concern in *Contributions* that the domination of nature by technology leaves only the possibility of a hollow abstraction in place of an authentic encounter. Yet the invocation of scale also bears on the embodied perceiver in interesting ways, “immensity is within ourselves.”<sup>361</sup> Bachelard’s meditations on “intimate

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<sup>358</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>359</sup> Timothy Morton, ‘Why Ambient Poetics: Outline for a Depthless Ecology’, *The Wordsworth Circle* 33 (2002): 52–56.

<sup>360</sup> Madalina Diaconu, ‘Longing for Clouds: Does Beautiful Weather Have to Be Fine?’, *Contemporary Aesthetics* 13 (2015).

<sup>361</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (The Orion Press, 1964), 184.

immensity” in *The Poetics of Space* offer a rejoinder to the notion of gigantism and scalar aesthetics that bears comment and reflection. As Bachelard describes the encounter with the forest, the sense of scale that weighs on the perceiver when wandering through the forest has very little to do with the facts of the matter; whether measured in miles or metres, the forest presents a façade of limitlessness that is the same as far as the wanderer is concerned.<sup>362</sup> The true scale of the forest is concealed in the tangle of branches and the veil of leaves, the sky replaced with a canopy held aloft by columnar trunks, the space between drunks becomes liminal and the leaf-scattered carpet suggests paths suited to the perceiver’s feet. The sense that, regardless of the true scale of the forest, one is easily lost in it, and the literary device that a traveller is easily turned around in the woods creates a scale within a scale, an internal complexity that creates depth beyond that allowed by the limitations of mere space. To borrow Wittgenstein’s short commentary on Heidegger, “the mystical is the feeling of the world as a finite whole. “Nothing can happen to me,” i.e., whatever may happen, it’s meaningless to me.”<sup>363</sup> Time likewise has its own internal logic in the aesthetic of the forest, “there are no young forests,”<sup>364</sup> and the perception of time in the forest is one of depth disassociated from the comings and goings of people, of tilling or harvesting that comes with fields and meadows or the busy-ness of people in motion in the town.

The poetic ambience of towns and cities has a different character to that of Bachelard’s forest. It forms instead “a direct incarnation of capitalism’s abstract notion of value, for example in communitarian space (where, for example, hanging out washing is forbidden), lawns, huge vacant parking lots, gigantic airport concourses.”<sup>365</sup> Towns present an ambient character that is given over, more or less completely, to the forces of technology and machination. Public space is most often, in truth, private, and subordinate to the demands of corporate capital, and to which any intervention (artistic, communitarian, political, etc.) is determined, and calculated in advance on the basis of its service to the ends of those demands. Works of art, in privately owned public space serve to increase the value of that space such that even artistic attempts at subversion ultimately also serve this end.<sup>366</sup> This

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<sup>362</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 185.

<sup>363</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein Und Der Wiener Kreis* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013), 68.

<sup>364</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 188.

<sup>365</sup> Morton, ‘Why Ambient Poetics: Outline for a Depthless Ecology’, 52.

<sup>366</sup> I have in mind the interventions of street or graffiti artists, of whom Banksy is perhaps the most famous. In the summer of 2021, the artist produced several pieces in East Anglian seaside towns, including Lowestoft. At least one of the *public* murals painted on a *private* surface was subsequently removed by the landlord and sold to a private buyer. Daniel Cassady, ‘Banksy Mural “Gifted” to East Anglia Town Has Been Sold to Private Buyer after Being Removed by the Owners’, *The Art Newspaper*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/17/banksy-mural-gifted-to-east-anglia-town-has-been-sold-to-private-buyer-after-being-removed-by-the-owners>. Accessed 06/07/2022.



extends to the availability of environmental-aesthetic amenities, in that a house with stunning sea-views can command a higher sale price than another nearby without. An example like this one brings landscape framing and picturesqueness back to the fore, with windows providing the literal frame for a landscape-model of environmental aesthetic value, as though the house simply “came with” a picture on a particular wall, with an important distinction. A painting hung on a wall can be removed if the new owner doesn’t like it, whereas a framed landscape view cannot. What the owner “has” is access to the place one stands and the frame through which one views the particular aesthetic object. While she might brick up the window or throw up a wall a few metres from the window in such a way as to block the view, nothing changes, except the frame. Even if (as is probably always true) the removal of this frame means that no one will ever see that particular view again, one might still see the same scene from a different angle, but the particular view in question is seemingly lost, despite nothing having changed with any of its content.

Ambience changes this framing in a way that seems somewhat more meaningful. Regardless of the destruction of a view (or viewpoint), the house with a sea view is still near the sea, and as such the sound of waves breaking against the beach or the changeable coastal weather are still part of the ambient aesthetic milieu. One needn’t linger on the coastal example, nor that of a house, Bachelard’s forest and urban environs work just as well in describing the interplay of ambience and aesthetics. Either a site surrounded by ancient woodland, or adjacent to a major highway surely serves here also. Ambience of this sort seems resistant to the dominating power of machination. Whereas discrete aesthetic features like public artwork or a view are vulnerable to the calculation in advance, ambience, or ambient features do not. While it remains so that the aesthetic content of any given environmental encounter can be changed by external factors without intervention from the experiencing subject (a tree could be felled), when considered in terms of ambience such an intervention marks of change in degree of aesthetic engagement, rather than a change in kind. Indeed, ambience, and environmental aesthetics more broadly is determined by the dynamism of aesthetic qualities in question.<sup>367</sup> Irrespective of this, a simple rejoinder to bolster Heidegger’s concern that objects in nature, or rather nature itself (*natura* vs *physis*) remains subject to the powers of calculation and machination, and as such conditions the possibility of aesthetic experience (as with all other possible experiences) preventing the disclosure of that experience by the subject’s faculties of reflection.

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<sup>367</sup> Emily Brady, ‘Global Climate Change and Aesthetics’, *Environmental Values* 31, no. 1 (2022): 34.

Bachelard's meditation on the internal immensity of the forest focuses attention on a "daydream" of temporal scale such that "the details grow dim and all picturesqueness fades."<sup>368</sup> The aesthetic encounter of the forest is such that it makes clear the embeddedness of the perceiver in a reciprocal perceptual manifold, in which seer and seen are engaged in an elemental exchange of seeing. Reflection, then offers the extension by which the ambience of the encounter becomes the encounter, which can then be sought in other such encounters, giving one sight of the frame through which one's aesthetic engagement with the world is ordinarily seen. Yet if the gigantic forecloses the possibility of the disclosure of experience by reflection, then the shift from ambience as quality of encounter to encounter itself is likewise stalled.

The ambient aesthetic is in some sense inhabited by the experiencing subject. It is inhabited and extends into our habitations, what Heidegger would mark as distinct from the "dwelling place." Wherever we are "at home" be that in our literal homes, our places of work, or even engaged in some task ("he's at home when he's painting,") or if these are places of habitation but not dwelling, "the chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there."<sup>369</sup> Nevertheless, ambience extends into these spaces and offers a liminal zone in which mediation between dwelling-place and mere habitation, or perhaps other environments too. The notion of dwelling itself betrays hints of the gigantic, or at least of the calculable in advance of machination and technological dominion, in that dwelling is "the end that presides over all building. Dwelling and building are related as ends and means." Moreover, dwelling is in some sense central to being, "we are dwellers" and the character of dwelling is sparing and preserving, where sparing is a letting go of a thing, leaving it to its own nature, its self-sameness.<sup>370</sup>

There's an important distinction between negative and positive aesthetic attributes that shimmers around the edge of any discussion of environmental aesthetics. Aesthetic judgements that any object of aesthetic consideration is ugly, ominous, desolate, etc. are held in contrast against those judgments that a thing is pleasant, homely, verdant, etc. In the world that obtains under the climate crisis, where flashfloods, wildfires, record-smashing temperatures, etc. are increasingly commonplace, and as such less attention worthy with each such event, judgements of negative aesthetic attributes are similarly frequent. Indeed, the misapplication of aesthetic descriptors is no less jarring with environmental phenomena

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<sup>368</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 189.

<sup>369</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', 145.

<sup>370</sup> Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', 145.

than with works of art. To describe a *Longquan* celadon bowl as “clumsy” while seemingly a misuse of the term, or a failure of the agent to properly appreciate to object, nevertheless does not provoke the sort of cognitive dissonance caused by describing a bleached coral reef as “comforting.” The former appears to be an example of the kind of description that could be “caught on inspection,” which may be wrong, or betray a lack of taste or refinement on the agent’s part but nevertheless is coherent as an aesthetic descriptor.<sup>371</sup> By comparison, the latter appears to fail on the same terms.

### 2.3.6. Clarifying the gigantic

Though the gigantic is mentioned in several intervening sections (notably § 250. *Die Zukünftigen* and § 255. *Die Kehre in Ereignis*) it is in the final section of *Contributions*, that Heidegger continues the clarification of the gigantic. He discusses it at length in chiefly three sections: § 260., § 262., and § 274. It’s across these three sections that Heidegger comes closest to offering what might suffice as conditional criteria for diagnosing the gigantic. First he makes the remark that the gigantic is determined where “the ‘quantitative’ is transformed into a ‘quality’ of its own.”<sup>372</sup> And yet Heidegger is explicit that the gigantic is not some quality that commences once a certain numerical threshold is breached, but that rather it is in the ground of the “decisiveness and exceptionlessness of ‘calculation.’”<sup>373</sup> Those things that require representation through appeal to the quantitative, through appeal to descriptors of scale or immensity, despite giving the mere appearance of being, in fact, gigantic nevertheless are contained by it on account of their grounding in in the machinational power of calculation and representation within the world picture. Quantitative must be kept separate from machination and retained as *a way* of having some size, scale, immensity or another. While it is the case that, in order to be revealed as gigantic, the quantitative must be subjected to, or rather develop under the power of calculation, it relies on representation within the worldview, by which it is essentially dominated.

He proceeds by offering four examples of the possible forms of the gigantic, namely: slowing down *Verlangsamung*, publicity *Öffentlichkeit*, naturalness *Natürlichkeit*, and reduction *Verkleinerung*. [GA: 65, 441-442]. Heidegger couches each example in the representation of its opposite. The slowing-down of history is laid against the semblance of the speed at which historiological development is represented, which pass quite blithely over the “real time” of those whose being extends through those periods. An historiological statement like “The

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<sup>371</sup> Dorothy Walsh, ‘Aesthetic Descriptions’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 10 (1970): 243.

<sup>372</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 348.

<sup>373</sup> Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, 348.

Kiel Canal was widened to allow passage of dreadnought-class ships between 1907 and 1914” makes no *historical* statement about being, traversing seven years in one breath but saying nothing about the being of even one person involved, from Kaiser to labourer. The publicity of the unification of beings is laid in contrast with the closing off and concealment of the destruction of being. Natural is held up against the technical-logical which brushes aside the essential questioning of being. Not only is the question brushed aside, but its worthiness as a question is also thrown into view.<sup>374</sup> The exactitude of technical-logical mode is such that those questions that might number among the most important and timeless are denuded of meaning by the gigantic. The reduction, or diminution of beings is held up against the appearance of their expansiveness, achieved through the means of calculative control over them. Our being is easily enough expanded, for example through our social dealings (including, now, through internet media), but authentic engagement is curtailed but the moderation of being through such extensions such that the question of being is again pushed aside. What draws together these expressions of the gigantic, then, is a return to *Seinsverlassenheit*, the abandonment of being by being, and moreover in the gigantic a repudiation of philosophy *qua* meditation, the earnest questioning of and searching for the truth of being [GA: 65, 43].

In this configuration, each form of the gigantic is demonstrated by Heidegger in the form of a movement in thought that conceals another, more foundational than the initial, more open thought. Attempting the same sort of movement in a way that includes the environmental is illustrative. Can we say that the move towards the environmental conceals the destruction of the environment? By attending to the creation of a world of sustainable solutions that limit the destruction of the environment, or even the recovery of the environment, typically in managed ways, we see the loss of the place for the dwelling of mortals. Dwelling is not building, dwelling is an act but also existence, dwelling is being, and the loss of the dwelling-place is the loss of being. Dwelling is dwelling-in, and the loss of the dwelling-place by transforming the earth by the grandest acts of calculation and machination changes earth from dwelling place to something controlled and conceived in advance towards some other end, even though we might think that end is desirable. “United from themselves, earth and sky, the divine and the mortals belong to the simplicity of the united fourfold. Each of the four mirrors, in its own way, the essence of the others.”<sup>375</sup> The earth and the sky are reflected in each other, literally: pollution that fills the air changes temperatures which changes the

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<sup>374</sup> (I am minded to cite the common philosophy anecdote of the analytic philosopher’s rejoinder to a question like “what is the meaning of life”

<sup>375</sup> Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, 264.

food that can be grown in one place or another, and so the customs of the mortals no longer align with the dictates of earth and sky. The gods then fail to reflect the fourfold in that the holy times and sites are debased by the destruction of earth and sky, and so the world no longer worlds.

It is the essential character of mortals to be *in* the fourfold as dwellers,<sup>376</sup> and the basic character of dwelling is sparing or preserving; and sparing or preserving it a matter of letting be. For mortals, dwelling is the sparing of the fourfold, preserving and letting it *be*.<sup>377</sup> To dwell and preserve the Earth is to set the Earth free to itself, it is the studied avoidance of mastery and so runs contrary to calculation. We dwell under the sky in that we leave the sky to itself, we do not interfere with the days and the nights, and we spare the seasons. Yet how has environmental destruction and damage changed this? Now that night is day, both at the flick of a switch in the home, or of the sodium glow that bleaches out the night sky in large towns and cities; and now that the seasons are blurred and jumbled together, with spring bursting forth in the winter months and the summer being unbearable. We spare the gods in waiting with grace and watching with calmness, we do not pre-empt them by making gods of ourselves, nor by raising up idols in their place. Most of all, mortals dwell in their own nature, and to spare themselves they must attend to their lives as limited by death, and to bring themselves and others towards the understanding of death that they might live more fully. This is to dwell, and dwelling unfolds alongside that among which mortals stay: things.

Things do not merely exist, they act in themselves, “The thing things the world” and in thinging they hold together the fourfold.<sup>378</sup> The action of things, their thinging is the gathering together of themselves in a manifold of readiness, from among which a thing can emerge into presence, “All that is present, is equally near and equally remote.”<sup>379</sup> Yet things are unable to thing, and the fourfold it seems has nothing at all holding it together. When I say things cannot thing, I mean that there is no coherent manifold of things in readiness from which any individual thing can irrupt into presence as there are no things held in readiness under the aegis of the world as obtains under the climate crisis. This world casts everything as already present on account of its place within the matrix of environmental degradation and collapse. Food items are present as things that contain the world’s many food crises, computers are present as things that require distant servers and that connect

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<sup>376</sup> Heidegger, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, 145.

<sup>377</sup> Heidegger, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, 150.

<sup>378</sup> Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, 263–65.

<sup>379</sup> Heidegger, ‘Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is’, 263.

everyone in a gigantic display of global connectivity, vehicles (combustion, electric, and manual) are present as things that reflect the burning of fossil fuels and both the apparent insignificance of an individual car journey and the apparent futility of just one bicycle journey.

So, the urge to save the world, to prevent environmental disaster, or at least mitigate its worst effects conceals the destruction of the environment as earth, effectively separating it out from the fourfold. Environment, things we environ. Environing technologies aren't just things that dig holes or take down trees, but include anything that allow us to take the world as environment, which is something that can be controlled, remade, etc. So, in addition to literal, material technological interventions, I am also talking about the way we construct and frame the environment in language, in news, in culture, and also in daily discourse. Environing technologies change us as much as they change the environment, there is an innate reciprocity between mortals and the earth in such a way that to partition off a part of the earth and to environ it suggests that there's a part of the mortals that is similarly isolated and envired. Technologies like agriculture and gardens, or mass-transit systems, sewage management, warfare and others reshape the earth in gigantic ways; as does pollution, etc. But ways of seeing the environment change our understanding of it: maps and topographical surveys, satellite imaging, weather and tidal detection systems perform similar roles to landscape painting or the picturesque in that they represent the world in a certain way, shaping it into "environment" and representing the world in a way that shows technological dominance, altering our understanding of what the world/nature/environment is, and who or what it is for.

The framing we use to critique any such environing technology, whether in the rude terms of mechanical intervention or calculative analysis of the world, or of the technologies of language or culture that construct the world as environment, needs itself to be critiqued on the same terms. Any such framing is itself a form of the technology that it purports to explain. Any attempt, then, to disrupt those paradigms of thought, language, and culture that shape or alter our understanding of the world as environment changes that understanding by challenging the ground of the position that it alters. This strikes me as a troubling ambiguity. On the one hand, various environing technologies have allowed us to produce a world in which beauty and aesthetic pleasure are available on interactions with an environment. We've been able to secure human flourishing by making it possible to synthesise medicines or to demarcate areas of biotic significance as out of bound for human interventions. Likewise, we can mitigate natural disasters, predict the onset of dangerous

weather conditions or tsunamis. Where dangers and disasters are manmade, we can isolate them to some degree, as with areas polluted by radioactive materials like the area surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, or the town of Pripjat near the ruins of the Chernobyl reactor. Moreover, without a concept of environment, without the deployment of both verbal and mechanical technologies, the very idea of climate as a global rather than local concern does not cohere.<sup>380</sup> Without the intervention of networked computers that process data collected by infrastructure like weather balloons, sensor buoys, satellite thermometers, the tapestry of information that aggregates into our understanding of climate does not exist. Could also say that hyperobjects, in that they propose a mode of representation do nothing more than other, similar environing technologies do in terms of offering a way of organising and arranging our knowledge about the environment. It does nothing to assuage the fact that environment exists as a bizarre abstraction, cut off from world *qua* earth *qua* fourfold.

### 2.3.7. On “The Question Concerning Technology”

Though the term gigantic does not appear in either “The Question Concerning Technology,” or “The Origin of the Work of Art,”<sup>381</sup> both essays treat with the themes of modernity, power, and aesthetics, with which the preceding section treats. In particular, the question of revelation in both pieces, of the role of both technology and of art in revealing or unconcealing the world, and the adherence of each to an antecedent frame into which each is produced. In the case of technology, Heidegger points to the uncanniness of a teleological definition of technology in terms of instrumentality that holds as well for “the jet aircraft and the high-frequency apparatus” as it does for simpler technologies like the weather-vane.<sup>382</sup> As for art, the distinction between the verbal work of art, and the noun-form work of art arises, out of which emerges, especially in the first draft of the essay, that the occurrence of the work of art (n.) necessitates the work of art (v.)<sup>383</sup>

In the case of technology, the essence of which is, at root, its threat to the original possibility of the revelation to Dasein of the access to “a more primal truth,”<sup>384</sup> the question is found in its supposedly teleological orientation. The interplay between means and ends, the pursuit of

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<sup>380</sup> Sverker Sörlin and Nina Wormbs, ‘Environing Technologies: A Theory of Making Environment’, *History and Technology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 119.

<sup>381</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art (1935-36)’, in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young et al., trans. Julian Young (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56.

<sup>382</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 5.

<sup>383</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘On the Origin of the Work of Art: First Version’, in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Indiana University Press, 2009), 133.

<sup>384</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 28.

the latter giving rise to the former is the background out of which technology emerges. The interplay begins with the drive to technologise, which is to manipulate and order the world towards some end or other.

“The Question Concerning Technology” might be the most famous of Heidegger's later essays. Such seminal ideas as standing reserve achieve their fullness in this work.

Unsurprisingly, it is here that Heidegger develops the infamous critique of technology. It is an essay that has attracted considerable attention and achieved wide-reaching influence. It is not my intention here to revise the extensive literature on this essay. Rather, I want to pay attention to an overlooked remark of Heidegger's in this piece. The remark in question is *Ungeheuerlichkeit* monstrosity, used in the famous “hydroelectric plant” paragraph. I contend that this remark has implications for my own analysis of *Riesenhäufigkeit*. Indeed, it bestows an aesthetic valence to the technology analysis, under which, the technology analysis belongs to the critical aesthetic tradition. For clarity, I quote the paragraph in whole, but divide it into three with caesuras:

The hydroelectric plant is set into the current of the Rhine. It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch electricity.// In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command. The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station.// In order that we might remotely consider the monstrosity that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that speaks out of the two titles “The Rhine” as dammed up into the power works, and “The Rhine” as uttered out of the art work, in Hölderlin’s hymn by that name. But, it will be replied, the Rhine is still a river in the landscape, is it not? Perhaps. But how? In no other way than as an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 16. (all emphasis my own).



The use of "monstrousness" here is not an idle choice of Heidegger's. It is an explicit, if oblique reference to the analytic of the sublime, in Kant's third critique. It places this work in the Kantian aesthetic tradition. I have used this tradition, and my analysis of the gigantic to develop my response to Morton. It bridges my analysis of *Riesenhaftigkeit* in *Contributions* and my aesthetic concerns. Of the climate crisis, I've argued that our aesthetic relationship to the world is a problem. I've argued that the difficulties we face emerge in part due to the scale of the problem at hand. This scale demotivates effective action to mitigate or adapt to the climate crisis. I have highlighted the parallels between the crises of modernity and of climate. Reactionary conservative intellectuals emerged in response to the former. It's my case that progressive intellectuals must seize the initiative on the latter. This section makes explicit the aesthetics informing the reactionary response to modernity. I develop and clarify those aesthetics as regard the crisis of our time.

As a theme, "monstrousness" captures something of Heidegger's critique of technology. Technology exerts a deforming influence on the existentials. Misshapen, the existentials in turn produce malformed orientations towards death, self, and world. This said, Heidegger scholarship has overlooked the use of "monstrousness." In his seminal chapter on the essay, Dreyfus folds "monstrousness" into an ellipsis.<sup>386</sup> Translators of the essay devoted a lengthy note to Heidegger's precise use of *stellen* set, which appears throughout the first section of the paragraph quoted above. I am convinced that *stellen* was not a careless choice by Heidegger and I am similarly convinced that the same applies to *Ungeheuerlichkeit*.

In Kant's aesthetics, the monstrous is that which, "by its magnitude annihilates the end which its concept constitutes."<sup>387</sup> Kant did not develop the monstrous as an aesthetic category as he did the sublime. It falls short, in scalar terms, of the sublime. The monstrous does not direct thought towards the infinite. It describes an object of such a scale that it is unrecognisable as an object of the kind it is. The tool is monstrous when it is so heavy the worker cannot heave it. The symphony is monstrous when it is so loud it deafens its audience. The home is monstrous when it is so large it offers no shelter. The scale of each example nullifies the purpose that makes it what it, essentially, is. A tool not-for use, music not-for hearing, a home not-for living, the concept of each is determined through perception and organised according to category. Concepts act as rules that allow us to perceive the

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<sup>386</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 357.

<sup>387</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 136. (5:253).

relationships between representations. The monstrous thus undermines the concept in each case. Undermined, the concept cannot sustain the object's position as related among other representations.

The monstrous is distinct from the sublime, yet the one may wander into the domain of the other. Broadly construed, the monstrous disturbs the senses by deviating from expectation. This deviation provokes a negative aesthetic response: revulsion, shock, discomfort. It is not limited to concrete examples. Anything that in scale or degree challenges that for which it is construed is monstrous. Where the sublime is formless, we might begin to perceive this overlap. The dynamic sublime may encompass storms or other threatening phenomena. Such things are not, themselves, monstrous. Indeed, Kant is clear that "raw nature" can never be monstrous or magnificent.<sup>388</sup> Objects in nature with no telos, nor charm nor threat cannot be monstrous. The scale of such an object alone cannot confer monstrosity, so long as it can be bounded in thought. Insofar as a storm is threatening, it can indeed be monstrous. In order for it to prove threatening it must confer on the seer the impression of danger. The seer must perceive some threat or feel that something is at stake. Viewed from far-off, or from a place of safety, the storm cannot be monstrous (though it may yet be sublime.) Without threat, its scale cannot confer monstrosity.

What does Heidegger mean to do by connecting the analysis of technology to this aesthetic mode? In the paragraph I've quoted above, the first section (indicated by my use of caesurae) deals with setting. Here, the translator's attention to *stellen* is most valuable. Setting is setting upon "we were set upon by police the moment we arrived." It is a challenge, an engagement (as between armies). Each "set" in the paragraph is a challenge against the *beyng* of the river by the forces of technology. Set is also an act of domination, "I set the students to work," *stellen* conveys such meanings, and it forms the root of the *Gestell* standing reserve into which technology eventually enfolds everything.

Heidegger writes "The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River." Rather, the power station is "set upon and into" the river. The power station establishes a chain of "setting" where the essential river-ness of the Rhine is reduced to a series of functions. "Set upon" the Rhine, the power station is in essential opposition to the *beyng* of the river. It challenges and assails the river, all the while asserting technological domination over it. The river and the power station are in conflict, and it is precisely this conflict in which the river is

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<sup>388</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 136.

bound. The river cannot avoid this being set upon without ceasing to be a river. In order to maintain its river-ness, its flowing, it is set against the turbines of the power station.

The monstrosity of this setting upon is not in the scale of the power station. Rather, it is in the scale of technology's reach. The concept of the power station, its place among relations. Heidegger directs us towards Hölderlin's poem, *Der Rhine*. The lecture course Heidegger delivered on this poem came at the height of Heidegger's rectorship at Freiburg. Civic life in Germany was, at this time, in the grip of the national socialists. The extent of Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi Party, his subsequent attempts to distance himself from Nazi ideology, and the complicity of his literary executors in proliferating this deception is the subject of ongoing debate. I have treated Heidegger's political philosophy already, and so will not add anything here, other than to draw attention once again to the care with which these writings need to be handled.

Hölderlin plays a vital role as late-Heidegger's interlocutor, and the motifs of gods and demigods, of the historical moment, and of the need for a new beginning in philosophy all arise in Heidegger's conversation with the poet.<sup>389</sup> In the lecture course "Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'," <sup>390</sup> Heidegger sets forth his anti-metaphysical reading of the poet's work. This is a challenge to the model of poetics that conceive poetry as containing or detailing perceivable events in nature that can be grasped sensuously in the poem, but also grasped in non-sensuous, noetic ways. Namely, these representations of nature point to something "out there" as with a metaphor or symbol.<sup>391</sup> The artwork does not therefore exist for itself, but it is for the nonsensuous, the spirit of the poem, its message, etc.: that which we are directed towards. This destination, the telos of the representation is, in Heidegger's view, the "truth" of the work according to a metaphysical poetics and is wrongly constituted. This constitution is wedded to the Platonic beginning from which Heidegger would see Western thought released in the course of the new beginning. The river in the poem does not represent anything for Heidegger, it is simply a river. In Wittgensteinian tones he adds: any more than this, the poet cannot say.<sup>392</sup> And so, the river that is set upon is real, as is the powerplant that is set upon and against it. It is this setting-upon that is monstrous. Neither power plant nor river represent something monstrous, nor monstrousness itself. Further, we cannot say that

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<sup>389</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns 'Germania' and 'The Rhine'*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Indiana University Press, 2014), 224–26.

<sup>390</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>391</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, 16–18.

<sup>392</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, 18–19.

the setting-upon/monstrous relationship is metaphorical. As such we cannot deploy the metaphor elsewhere but only look for other instances of this relationship. As such, the monstrous emerges wherever the forces of technology are set-upon the world.

There is a strange loop here, a folding back in which the world that has been set-upon by us, itself sets-upon us. Through modernity, through technology, we set-upon the world. In so doing, we have created a power in the world, (the climate crisis) that is set-upon us. Where we build up the hydroelectric station, reducing the river to standing reserve in order to achieve our ends, we set-upon the world. Yet this is just part of the tapestry of technology that we have thrown over the world: tugging at one point distorts the others. When the river is polluted by our setting-upon it, it sets-upon us in that it is no longer fit for bathing, for drinking, etc. The monstrous is the drive to control and dominate which has produced (for the bomb has long since exploded) a world that sets-upon us in a way that is and must be more that we merely are.<sup>393</sup> The world's finitude contains our own, and it is monstrous to think that we can compass it ourselves, in our devices, our purposes. The scale of such a purpose nullifies the concept in which it is constituted, making it monstrous.

The setting-upon us of the world renders it unhomely, *unheimlich* uncanny. In his lectures on the *Der Ister* poem, Heidegger remarks on the turning of the river back towards its source, having passed through lands that are not its own. The extension of this poetic turning into the existential concerns of Dasein is that home is not a default position for Dasein. Indeed, arriving home is "that which is most difficult of all," and is tied to the "grasping" in spatial and temporal terms for a home which leads towards the domination of the world.<sup>394</sup> Yet for the Danube, the subject of Hölderlin's verse, travelling through foreign lands before turning homewards allows the homely to stand in contrast against the other.

Hölderlin's relationship towards the foreign, as with the ancients, is one of *Innigkeit* intimacy.<sup>395</sup> That which is foreign is known and recognised for and by its opposition to the home. It is in this opposition that the intimacy towards home is similarly discovered. The thorough sense of belonging that arises from the unity of opposing parts, "an attuned, knowing, standing within that sustains the essential conflicts of that which, in being opposed, possesses an original unity – the 'harmoniously opposed.'"<sup>396</sup> For Heidegger, the threat posed by modernity is in part the promise of globalisation: the imposition of a

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<sup>393</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, 42–44.

<sup>394</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, 48–50.

<sup>395</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns 'Germania' and 'The Rhine'*, 249.

<sup>396</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns 'Germania' and 'The Rhine'*, 106.

monoculture that annihilates the foreign by reducing more and more the distinction between that which is foreign and that which is not. When that distinction is whittled such that it stands without a difference, the possibility of self-knowledge through intimate understanding of the self in relation to the other is also lost. In Heidegger's lexicon, the Anglo-Saxon drive to "annihilate Europe"<sup>397</sup> is a destruction by erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of the foreign by the sameness of modernity. Under such an auspice, the mystery of the self is lost in the elision of homely and foreign. Modernity does not permit the historical dialogue between self and other that produces knowledge of the foreign and so permits the discovery of the self.

The monoculture towards which Heidegger's ire is directed may have, more-or-less, through various forms of Americanisation or McDonaldisation succeeded in eroding the distinctiveness between home and away. It has also engendered a change in the nature of both that has widened the stakes. The cultural differences between, say, Germany and Great Britain may have narrowed in the decades since Heidegger wrote (it would be naive to think they'd vanished altogether). Yet a new distinction has emerged between monoculture and world. This distinction lies in the monoculture's production of a world that sets-upon us. Setting the world upon us draws a new border between homely and foreign. On our side of the border is every flavour of cultural distinctiveness that Heidegger bemoans the loss of, and on the other is a world that is increasingly hostile to and uninhabitable by us. In such a world as this, the turning of the river towards us is no longer an opportunity for self-discovery through the comparison of home and foreign. It is an assault by a world made hostile, that brings with it the various expressions of the climate crisis: extreme weather, flooding, wildfires, and so on. It is against this churning, raging river, ready to burst its banks and sweep away lives and homes that the activity of self-discovery must now take place against. "Nature" no longer mediates between self and other but is revealed as wholly other in its antagonism towards us.

When it is revealed as wholly other, the world ceases to be homely. It is instead, unhomely, uncanny. Where caniness is a kind of knowing ("it's in his ken," *kennen* vs. *wissen*), the uncanny is that which cannot be known. The world is uncanny, and so it cannot be known. This is not to say knowledge about the world is impossible. It is instead to say that the kind of knowing described as intimate is not. I have already argued that an environmental aesthetic based in Kantian aesthetics, particularly the analytic of the sublime, is no longer

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<sup>397</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, 54.

tenable, owing to the loss of safety that we have produced in the climate crisis. The uncanniness of the world is not an aesthetic reaction of mistaken familiarity for the other. It is the discovery of a subtle belief that intimacy with the world may no longer be possible, and as such the creation of the self takes place from an impoverished and unstable position of opposition with the world.

In Morton's lexicon, this encounter with the otherness of the world is the so-called strange stranger.<sup>398</sup> The strangeness of this other is not mitigated by any form of cognitive aesthetics, and the paradox of its unknowability means that, the more we know (in cognitive terms) about the world, the less it is known to us. The strange stranger presents an abyss, bridged by the chiasmatic, intimate warping of perceiver and perceived.<sup>399</sup> While we may know ever more facts about the world in terms of its composition or the relationships between states of matter and energy, or any kind of causal relationships embedded in "the hard sciences," this does not help us ken the world. Indeed, knowledge of the former sort might obfuscate or intrude upon knowledge of the latter sort. When any aesthetic pleasure or displeasure derived from the environment is mediated through cognition, such a disjunction between knowing and kenning seems to appear. The loss of homeliness and the pre-eminence of the environmental uncanny creates a kenning towards which cognitive aesthetics does not offer any form of mediation. The monstrosity of the hydroelectric plant, as a totem of modernity, technology, and the changed relationship between human and nonhuman - defeats the riveriness of the river and elides that which makes it homely. As a thing for making power, reduced to standing reserve, the river is no longer able to mediate between self and other in the way that homely things do. In this regard, it is uncanny.

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<sup>398</sup> Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 18.

<sup>399</sup> Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, 69.

## 2.4. The sublime

Neglected until somewhat recently in contemporary aesthetics, the Kantian sublime retains the wounds of the criticism of its overtly-moralising, humanistic, and anthropocentric character.<sup>400</sup> Recent scholarship has seen a renaissance of sorts of the sublime in nature.<sup>401</sup> It remains valuable, I argue, as a means by which negative environmental-aesthetic experiences can be mined for ethical motivation, particularly under the obtaining mode of the climate crisis. In this chapter, I draw a red-thread through the Kantian sublime and its attendant modes of *Ungeheurligkeit* monstrousness and *Unheimlichkeit* uncanniness, drawing these concepts into the Heideggerian *Riesenhaftigkeit* gigantic-ness. I present a reading of the sublime in terms of the gigantic, in which the former sees the power of judgement compassing the infinite and leads thought into the domain of reason, while in the latter, judgement forms a limitation of thought which calls for the overcoming of metaphysics.

The sublime is a feeling of displeasure arising from our inability to imagine the magnitude of an encounter through reason alone, and an attendant pleasure that arises in the realisation that our supersensible faculties of reason can reach beyond the limits of our senses, satisfying a law to which we are held, to which we are meant to strive.<sup>402</sup>

### 2.4.1. The sublime in the Third Critique

Kant's aesthetic philosophy, including the analytic of the sublime forms the first part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, the third volume of Kant's critical project. In Kant's words, "That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses."<sup>403</sup> The sublime is articulated in two distinct modes: the mathematical and the dynamic. Both represent encounters in which human sensibility encounters a limit but differ in the nature of the confrontation and the faculties involved in overcoming it.

The mathematical sublime arises when the imagination is overwhelmed by the magnitude or vastness, the scale of an object - such as the seemingly infinite expanse of the night sky or the

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<sup>400</sup> Emily Brady, 'Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in the Kantian Sublime', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46, no. 1 (2012): 92.

<sup>401</sup> See, e.g., Malcolm Budd, 'Aesthetics of Nature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2003)., Sandra Shapshay, 'Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Neglect of the Sublime', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53, no. 2 (2013): 181–98., Brendan Mahoney, 'Engaging the Sublime without Distance', *Environmental Ethics* 38, no. 4 (2016): 463–81., Chad Córdova, 'From the Dialectic of Power to the Posthumanist Sublime', *Environmental Philosophy* 20, no. 2 (2023): 215–36.

<sup>402</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 141.

<sup>403</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 134.

abyss of time experienced staring at the strata or rock of a valley. The imagination attempts to comprehend the object as a whole but fails due to the limitations of sensory intuition. However, this failure gives rise to a recognition of the superiority of reason, which can conceive ideas such as infinity and totality beyond empirical experience. The sublime thus emerges not in the object itself, but in the mind's realization of its capacity to think the supersensible, elevating the subject through the invocation of the ideas of reason.

[...] being able to think of it as a whole indicates a faculty of mind which surpasses every standard of sense. For this would require a comprehension that yielded as a measure a unit that has a determinate relation to the infinite, expressible in numbers, which is impossible. But even to be able to think the given infinite without contradiction requires a faculty in the human mind that is itself supersensible.<sup>404</sup>

The dynamic sublime is encountered in the presence of nature's overwhelming power: manifest in storms, oceans, or earthquakes, that could physically annihilate the observer. Here, the imagination is not defeated by magnitude, but by might. Despite this, the subject does not feel fear in a direct sense, because they are not in actual danger; rather, they experience a sense of moral elevation. The sublime occurs when the subject becomes aware of their independence from nature, grounded in their rational will. This mode affirms the superiority of moral reason and the autonomy of the rational subject in the face of natural determinism. "Thus nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature."<sup>405</sup>

In both cases, the sublime is not a property of the natural phenomena themselves but a reflective aesthetic judgment that reveals the human capacity for reason and moral autonomy beyond empirical limitation. In either mode, the object of the sublime experience does violence against us, humbling and humiliating us before the magnitude or power of the nonhuman world, "nature threatens the vital senses, our sensible, embodied self."<sup>406</sup>

#### 2.4.2. Sublime to gigantic

The dynamic sublime, as Kant articulates it, depends upon an aesthetic experience of danger perceived from a position of safety—such as a volcanic eruption witnessed from afar or a lightning storm observed from shelter, "[it] becomes all the more attractive the more fearful

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<sup>404</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 138.

<sup>405</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 145.

<sup>406</sup> Brady, 'Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in the Kantian Sublime', 101.



it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime..."<sup>407</sup>

This safety, often afforded by physical distance, is crucial to the subject's ability to confront natural power without being overwhelmed by actual threat. When Kant recalls Saussure's wistful memoir of his Alpine travel in which from a secure place the solitude and sadness of the place offers a moment of sublimity (appreciated as it is from a secure vantage point), he exemplifies this structure. In the context of contemporary technological mediation, this dynamic undergoes a transformation. Modern technologies: screens, social media, news platforms, etc. create the illusion of distance and detachment while simultaneously collapsing the very spatial and temporal boundaries that once secured the subject's safety. Through real-time broadcasts, doomscrolling, and the incessant exposure to catastrophe across the globe, the screen becomes not a barrier but a conduit for the collapse of security. This mode of mediation no longer enables the Kantian subject to experience the sublime from a position of remove; instead, it generates a pervasive uncanniness, wherein the world is perceived as both overly familiar and radically estranged. The technological mediation of disaster contributes not to a sublime affirmation of moral autonomy, but to a disoriented subjectivity unable to distinguish between the immediacy of threat and the simulated distance of the screen. Thus, the very conditions that once made the dynamical sublime possible are subverted by the technologies that now mediate our experience of the world and the obtaining ecological crisis.

The dynamic sublime, as theorized by Kant, presupposes a position of safety from which the overwhelming force of nature can be contemplated without fear for one's immediate survival. This conceptual distance enables the subject to affirm their rational autonomy over natural determinism. However, under the conditions of the climate crisis, this necessary separation between observer and catastrophe collapses. The contemporary ecological condition exemplified by phenomena such as wildfires consuming UK moorlands and urban centres like Los Angeles renders untenable the idea of a secure vantage point. There are no longer spaces that can reliably be considered safe or homely, from which the subject might perceive nature's power as other or external. In this sense, the climate crisis reconfigures the affective structure of the uncanny, as explored by both Kant and Heidegger: it is no longer that one feels alienated from a stable home, but that there is no home from which alienation could begin. The world itself becomes fundamentally inhospitable. This loss of existential

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<sup>407</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 144.

shelter undermines the coherence of the dynamical sublime, since its aesthetic and moral significance depends upon the very distance and security that the climate crisis obliterates.

The concept of the mathematical sublime, as it emerges in contemporary continental philosophy, particularly in the works of Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, can be seen as a significant extension of Kantian aesthetics. Meillassoux's notion of ancestrality gestures toward the infinite by invoking temporal scales that radically exceed human cognition. Deep geological or cosmic time functions here not merely as a chronological measure, but as a confrontation with a non-anthropocentric temporal order. This temporal vastness induces a sense of the infinite that destabilizes subjective experience, paralleling Kant's account of the sublime where reason asserts itself in the face of sensuous inadequacy.

The dynamical sublime, by contrast, takes scale as an overwhelming force that disorients perception. Here, the object's magnitude does not simply exceed our senses but compels them toward an encounter with infinity: a confrontation in which the faculties of imagination and understanding falter. Yet this failure is not without resolution: it is precisely through this breakdown that reason asserts its capacity to conceptually "contain" the infinite, transforming the initial displeasure of perceptual inadequacy into an aesthetic experience of pleasure. This process underscores the peculiar structure of the sublime: the affective response to overwhelming magnitude is transfigured into rational affirmation.

Finally, the notion of the gigantic introduces a shift from the quantitative to the qualitative: the "infinite stars in the sky" are no longer merely innumerable but are reconceived as a unified aesthetic object "infinite-stars in the sky." In this shift, quantity takes on a qualitative dimension, becoming a singular aesthetic presence rather than a mere aggregation. Unlike Kant's sublime, the gigantic is not an aesthetic category, nor does Heidegger offer a reconciliatory moment in which human reason asserts its mastery. Rather, it signals an ontological condition in which the very horizon of measure is redefined by the totalising logic of technological disclosure.

This transformation can be seen through the lens of climate discourse. The abstract statistical data surrounding climate change: rising temperatures, atmospheric carbon concentrations, melting ice volumes, constitute an overwhelming information landscape. These figures resist intuitive grasp; their scale and abstraction render them nearly imperceptible to human cognition. Moreover, the seemingly marginal shifts in global temperature, though scientifically significant, are experienced as devoid of immediate perceptual impact. Thus,

they risk appearing meaningless, contributing to a broader affective and epistemological paralysis that stands in the way of effective action towards mitigation or adaptation.

In this context, the gigantic lies in tension with the sublime. The sublime exposes the limits of sensibility and gestures toward the infinite, while the gigantic reframes quantity as quality. This shift, where magnitude is no longer merely large but takes on a unified aesthetic character, produces the illusion of technological or epistemic mastery over nature. When large-scale phenomena are reduced to manipulable quantities, they appear controllable. However, once these quantities are reconstituted as qualitative effects, no longer tractable data points but vast, amorphous conditions, they elude instrumental reason and tip into a nihilistic register. In this slippage, human agency is destabilized, and the promise of control dissolves into a confrontation with meaninglessness. The parallel is clear: in both cases, the human confronts that which exceeds ordinary measure, an encounter that destabilises the familiar coordinates of perception and understanding. Yet equally decisive is the distinction: Kant resolves the confrontation in the register of moral reason, securing a kind of transcendental victory over the limits of sensibility.<sup>408</sup> Heidegger, by contrast, regards the gigantic not as a spur to moral self-affirmation but as a symptom of a historical transformation in the essence of Being, one that leaves no room for a triumphant rational subject. In the context of climate data, which, for Kant, might occasion a sublime realisation of reason's capacity to order the unorderable, but in terms of the gigantic, would exemplify the drive to bring all beings into calculable availability.

#### 2.4.3. *Gelassenheit*

*Gelassenheit* is a term Heidegger borrows from the medieval mystic and apophatic theologian Meister Eckhart, for whom Heidegger had some admiration.<sup>409</sup> The past participle of *lassen* to allow, to permit, to let, *Gelassenheit* suggests a state of having let go or yielded. In Eckhardt's writing it appears in Middle High German, and suggests a calm receptiveness, neither passive resignation nor active intervention to which we are called. There are thematic overlaps with the Chinese Daoist principle 無為 *wuwei*, non-action, an attitude of disinterested permissiveness and stoic acceptance of the world's changing states of affairs.<sup>410</sup> For Eckhardt and German Christian movements that follow him, the Pietist Pennsylvania

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<sup>408</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 145–46.

<sup>409</sup> Ian Alexander Moore, *Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement* (State University of New York Press, 2019). Xiv.

<sup>410</sup> Steven Burik, 'Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*, Daoist *Wuwei* 無為, and Non-Willing', *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 2024, 2. Eric Sean Nelson, 'Responding to Heaven and Earth: Daoism, Heidegger, and Ecology', *Environmental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2004): 66.

Lutherans and Amish, for example, *Gelassenheit* entails submission to God's *Ordnung*, the concealed will of God, and one's place in it; a giving over of the self to the strictures of the community and ministry.<sup>411</sup> For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* is a "releasement toward things and openness to mystery,"<sup>412</sup> a disposition of allowing beings to be as they are, neither exploiting and reducing them to standing reserve, nor retreating into pure detachment. It is a disposition of non-willing, where thought becomes meditative rather than calculative, and the human being steps back from mastery to dwell more authentically in the world. For Heidegger, this letting-be does not mean a rejection of technology, but a transformed relation to it, one in which technology is no longer the absolute horizon of human understanding and action. *Gelassenheit*, then, is a quiet but radical stance that resists the will-to-power and opens a space for another kind of thinking: one grounded in patience, restraint, and receptivity.

For much of *Contributions*, Heidegger's language is conditioned by a resistance to machination and the attendant mode of technology, a "reticence," with a *Loslassung*, unleashing into the vagaries of machination, circulating aimlessly within the confines of *Machenschaft*.<sup>413</sup> Against this resistance, *Gelassenheit* emerges as a passive stillness against the thrashing of *Loslassung*. We can characterise *Gelassenheit* in the following terms:

1. Letting-be: Allowing beings to appear and exist on their own terms, without imposing human will or categories on them.
2. Releasement: A kind of spiritual or existential detachment, not indifference, but freedom from domination.
3. Openness: A space for the mystery of being to show itself, beyond what is graspable by reason or science.
4. Thinking that is non-willing: In contrast to the will-to-power or will-to-knowledge, *Gelassenheit* fosters a contemplative, poetic mode of thought.

In both *Contributions* and his essays on technology, Heidegger turns toward art, poetry (especially Hölderlin), and *Gelassenheit* as alternative modes of revealing. While he does not explicitly present these as a "cure" for the gigantic, they operate, as a counterweight to the totalising tendencies of technological enframing. I do not follow this prescription. My

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<sup>411</sup> Donald Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). 50.

<sup>412</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Klett-Cotta, 2008), 26.

<sup>413</sup> Daniela Vallega-Neu, 'Heidegger's Reticence: From "Contributions" to "Das Ereignis" and toward "Gelassenheit"', *Research in Phenomenology* 45, no. 1 (2015): 11–13.

reasons are both critical and methodological. Historically, Heidegger's appeal to poetry emerges from a specific cultural and political horizon that is no longer adequate to the complexities of contemporary technological life under the obtaining conditions of the climate crisis. Practically, the present cultural economy threatens to reabsorb artistic and poetic practices into the very circuits of technological enframing they are meant to resist.<sup>414</sup>

A fuller sense of what is at stake emerges from Heidegger's 1939 lecture "On the Nature of Physis in Aristotle's Physics."<sup>415</sup> There, his account of the interplay between *physis*, *morphe*, *hyle*, and *techne* as related modes of disclosure.<sup>416</sup> While this is not his only sustained treatment of these terms,<sup>417</sup> it provides a particularly clear example of how historical ontology grounds his later account of technology. I accept his claim that *techne* names an originary form of bringing-forth irreducible to modern enframing, but I reject the necessity of turning to poetic or artistic disclosure as the primary counterbalance. My aim is to keep the analysis within the technological field itself, seeking ways to inhabit and think the gigantic without recourse to a nostalgic flight from it. This combined reading of Kant and Heidegger, and my refusal of Heidegger's poetic retreat, sets the stage for what I will later call an *aesthetics of scale*: a mode of environmental perception that navigates between the contraction of the local and the domination of the global, refusing both quietist retreat and positivist mastery.

In this way, the Kantian mathematical sublime provides a phenomenological template for understanding the subjective structure of encountering the gigantic, even as Heidegger's account sharpens the historical and ontological stakes of that encounter. My refusal of his aesthetic-poetic turn is not a dismissal of broader modes of revealing, but a methodological choice to remain with, and within, the technological horizon, where the challenges of scale, excess, and disclosure narrow, but must ultimately be met. The broadening of disclosure can't take place in an outright rejection of the technological horizon into which art and poetry are already gathered, but from within.

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<sup>414</sup> Cf. §2.3.5.

<sup>415</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'On the Being and Conception of Φύσις in Aristotle's Physics B, 1', *Man and World* 9 (1976): 219–70.

<sup>416</sup> Heidegger, 'On the Being and Conception of Φύσις in Aristotle's Physics B, 1', 251–54.

<sup>417</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Indiana University Press, 2009); Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*.

#### 2.4.4. Beyond *Gelassenheit*

Though *Gelassenheit* is the terminus of Heidegger's thinking on technology, derived from his extended meditation through *Contributions*, "Age of the World Picture," "The Origin of the Work of Art," and *Gelassenheit* from the late 1930s through to the 1950s, the obtaining conditions of modernity have, in my view, changed in light of the climate crisis. Our orientation towards the totalising power of machination and technology needs a new ecological valence, one that grounds us as ethical agents thrown into an uncanny world in which safe spaces are all but lost. Below I sketch out several possible orientations towards the climate crisis, starting where Heidegger ends, with *Gelassenheit*. A reimagining of *Gelassenheit* under the conditions of the climate crisis could be one way to move forward from Heidegger's thinking of technology. As *Gelassenheit* involves cultivating a free and open relationship towards technology and the world, neither rejecting it outright nor embracing it (as a mode of thinking), this would likely involve a resistance to applying mechanistic, technological thinking to the climate crisis. In these terms, the climate crisis cannot be treated as either one, or several discrete technical challenges, the kind of thinking that I've argued hyperobjects, etc. encourages, and that leads along a winding road to various forms of environmental extremism. Rather, with humility, it would involve creating space to reflect on the expansiveness of the climate crisis, its extent (or limits), the likely impact both near and immediate, and a radical taking on of the non-technological dimensions of the climate crisis: social justice, intergenerational ethics, indigenous knowledge, for example.

One way of moving forward from *Gelassenheit* could be a form of technological minimalism, not a rejection of technology per se, but a critical engagement with technological solutions and a willingness to challenge the use of technological solutions as a default. It could emphasise the importance of small-scale, low-impact technologies deployed as needed at a local scale. This could involve traditional or heritage wisdom, the use of time-tested solutions and deep adaptation to the changing climate. It would likely employ technology in developing resilience to climate events and sustainability. Rather than global systems of extraction, manipulation, and control, a turn to some iteration of Ivan Illich's convivial tools seems possible.<sup>418</sup> In short, a turn to technologies that develop local autonomy, community, and promote reciprocity with the environment.

Perhaps, inspired by queer, feminist, and ecological ethics, an attitude of care and maintenance could be cultivated. Here, the focus of our orientation towards technology

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<sup>418</sup> Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (Marion Boyars, 2006), 6.

would not be innovation or research, the demand for constant novelty, but rather repair and stewardship of existing systems, be they ecological, social, or other forms of infrastructure (physical, theoretical, and systems). Here, then is a challenge to the disposability of contemporary culture, from fast food and fashion to designed obsolescence of personal devices like mobile phones.

A post- or more-than-human approach could reconsider the human as one actor among many in a web of ecological relations. It might question the anthropocentric uses of technology and instead design and deploy technology with the well-being of non-human life in mind. Examples might include biomimicry, permaculture technologies, or AI systems designed to monitor and support biodiversity rather than serve narrow human interests.

Influenced by degrowth and slow-tech movements, an attitude of deceleration and sufficiency could challenge the assumption that technological progress must be fast, expansive, and global. It might promote the slowing down of technological development to allow for careful ethical evaluation, local adaptation, and cultural meaning-making. This approach might provide a response to the “slippery slope” arguments against technological research by embedding prolonged ethical analysis into the development of new technologies, likely responding to questions of necessity as they arise. It may also mean embracing a sufficiency principle creating and using “enough” rather than maximizing production or consumption in pursuit of narrow, technological aims like profit.

## 2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I've offered a reading of the gigantic in Heidegger's late work, particularly in *Contributions*. Though the term appears throughout the *Gesamtausgabe*, it is in *Contributions*, and to a lesser extent "The Age of the World Picture" in which the term is thematised and developed out of Heidegger's critiques of modernity, technology, machination, and calculation. Each of these objects of critique serves as a thoughtless system of domination of the world, and taken wholesale lead, in Heidegger's thought inevitably, to the diminution and ultimate subsumption of being into an essentially nihilistic matrix of world.

I've also detailed my concerns about the use of Heidegger's later thought, and the problematic potential intersections between the post-turn Heidegger and contemporary far-right actors. While I do not mean to suggest that such actors, in every case knowingly deploy Heidegger's critique of modernity in the development of their political ideology and praxis, I do insist that this is, at times, explicitly so.

My concern for the gigantic, however, concerns the question of scale, and in particular the various, arguably aesthetic interactions we have with very large *things* in the world as obtains under the climate crisis. Scale, I think, is a crucial dimension of the crisis that provokes the numerous epistemic and value-laden difficulties with which we are forced to grapple. While it's certainly true that questions and problems that point to extremes of scale are not new to us (questions of the absolute or divine, cosmological questions, etc. come to mind) other questions lack in some way the immediacy of the climate crisis, which on top of being globally distributed and temporally extended is also "in the room."

I need now to tie together my study of the gigantic and the wider concerns of my project. Having tracked Heidegger's use of the gigantic through his later work, I can point to some thematic connections between them and begin to trace out the relationship between the gigantic, the aesthetics of scale, and the climate crisis. First, and most simply, the gigantic is what appears when the quantitative becomes a separate quality of any given thing. What I want to say is that the climate crisis forces this shift to the gigantic when we encounter things in the world; quantity becomes this kind of quality whenever we engage with the world that obtains under climate breakdown. The scale of the climate crisis is such that we always encounter it in terms of quantity. We encounter extreme weather as temperature, or windspeed, or ml of rainfall, often plotted on a chart or framed as data comparative to "less bad" years. We encounter environmental disasters like wildfires or floods in terms of the number of homes destroyed, or hectares lost, or even the cost or economic loss that follows



any such event. We encounter the incremental effects of the climate crisis as quantitative data, in the form of graphs that chart average temperatures over time or that connect human activity with the developing symptoms of environmental degradation.

In each case, the encounter unfolds at a conceptual, and often literal distance. When the flood is rushing towards us, threatening quite literally to sweep one away, there's an immediacy that cannot be mediated. Yet the climate crisis is not just in such encounters. One aspect of the crisis that Morton captures in *Hyperobjects* is the infiltration of the climate crisis into everyday encounters in a way that unsettles the everyday.

As I've intimated, the analysis of the roots of European fascism in the critique of modernity alive in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century antebellum mirrors the experience of the climate crisis a century later. Junger's interpretation of the "great event" of the First World War, and by extension the interpretation of modernity as a sublime event best understood in aesthetic terms. We can go further and say that events like this (the Great War) cannot be read in anything but aesthetic terms. Moral or political judgements will ultimately fail to account for the momentary occurrence of events unfolding between myth and history on the one side, and on the other, some abyss of quite unknowable time. The transition we find ourselves in is characterised by the scale of modernity expressed at every level. In that vein, Junger's writing can be understood not merely as description of the horrors of war, but as something speculative directed towards that abyss.

## Part III: Aesthetics of scale

Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only *they*, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, *to wit*, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?<sup>419</sup>

The final part of this thesis is my attempt to unite the critical threads started in earlier sections. To summarise, these are: i) the problems of speculative realism, especially hyperobjects, with regard to their application to the climate crisis, ii) the thorny relationships between global and local, modern and anti-modern, and the role these relationships have in political orientations towards the climate crisis, iii) the problem of scale as enunciated by Heidegger's later writing on the gigantic. I do not intend to offer anything in terms of a positive theory of the aesthetics of scale, or any liberatory theory of environmental ethics or aesthetics. Instead, I offer an ethically inflected exploration of the clearing I hope to have established and acknowledge the paths that lead out from it. I choose "out" as the direction that these paths lead, as I do not want to go so far as to suggest any path might lead "forwards" and so suggest some *telos* or other. Such paths lead where they will and may fork and branch and take one to further clearings or leave one lost in the thicket.

The preceding discussion of Kant's mathematical sublime and Heidegger's gigantic makes possible an account of what I will call an aesthetics of scale. This conception begins with the Kantian insight that magnitude, when it exceeds the grasp of the senses, need not result in paralysis; it can instead prompt an expansion in the horizon of thought. From Heidegger, it inherits the sense that scale is never neutral — that the conditions in which the vast becomes visible, calculable, or experienceable are historically and ontologically shaped, and in the modern age, bound to the logic of technological enframing. Taken together, these readings yield a position that neither retreats from scale nor naively celebrates it as an index of progress.

This aesthetics of scale is articulated against two opposed dangers. The first is the quietism or localism that can emerge from Heidegger's preference for the proximate, the artisanal,

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<sup>419</sup> Romans 8: 21-24. KJV

and the poetic. While such orientations preserve the richness of the particular, they risk evading the planetary interdependencies that characterise our present. The second danger is the positivist appropriation of scale: the reduction of magnitude to what can be measured, mapped, and managed. Such an approach remains entangled with a metaphysics of domination, in which the nonhuman is rendered an object for human control, and with anthropocentrism, in which human measure becomes the unquestioned norm.

Recognising these dangers enables a more precise engagement with contemporary political pathologies of scale, particularly those addressed in my earlier critique of ecofascism. In its nativist variant, ecofascism disregards the global, fetishising the local as a site of purity and rootedness. In its biopolitical variant, it deploys a domineering managerial power over populations and ecologies in the name of environmental preservation. Both are failures of scale: the first contracts it to an exclusionary smallness, the second inflates it into a totalising apparatus of control. An aesthetics of scale resists both, insisting on ways of apprehending magnitude that neither collapse into insular particularism nor perpetuate domination.

Finally, this conception of scale reframes the relation between environmental aesthetics and both artistic depictions of nature and the category of beauty as applied to landscapes. Traditional aesthetics of beauty in nature often privileges harmony, proportion, and the picturesque, qualities that render nature pleasing through containment. By contrast, an aesthetics of scale does not require the subsumption of the vast into a stabilising frame. It allows for tension, incompleteness, and the unsettling recognition of human and nonhuman scales incommensurably co-present. In this way, it opens environmental aesthetics to modes of disclosure, whether in visual art, literature, or other cultural forms, that neither diminish nor domesticate the vastness of the more-than-human world.

### 3.1. Polemics and the ethics of environmental projects

#### 3.1.1. The role of philosophers

We are faced with a problem when, in cases of environmental substance, the ethical choices available to us are so often both immediately obvious on almost any formal grounding, and yet also so unpalatable, or at least so contrary to the conveniences of life in a large, developed economy, that positive action may *seem* to be impossible. Those choices, at a glance, appear to be: 1) business as usual, 2) some effort at mitigation or adaptation, 3) radical effort towards averting climate collapse. Option one, represents a future in which soundbites like “sustainability” ring hollow as year upon year fossil fuel consumption continues to grow as corporates and governments are allowed to greenwash and reframe their consumptive, destructive drive to extract profit from the planet. The second, seems close to the future that good-faith actors engaged in processes like COP seek: a world in which carbon emissions are slowly cut and energy production replaced with a combination of nuclear energy and other forms of renewable energy. In this option, economic degrowth is not prioritised, and indeed, the dream of infinite economic development is not sacrificed. Non-existent technologies are invoked, their safety and the viability of their rollout assumed, and any contingent problems or future disasters are deferred for future peoples. Finally, the third option would be something like a radical degrowth agenda, with massive state interventions alongside coordinated community activity and solidarity between communities in the total reconfiguration of the global economic-political structures of the 21st Century. Governments would cease such polluting activities as international military interventions and legislate to break up big polluters. Though the third option may seem like a naive, radical pipedream, I have already touched upon two examples of the kind of radical change required that have played out in the course of writing this thesis: the COVID-19 pandemic and the mobilisation of Russia (and to a different extent Ukraine) as a total-war economy.

Faced with the scale required for a viable execution of the third choice, we might say that the options available to us as individuals, be they positive actions or omissions, seem insufficient to the task of averting or seriously mitigating the crisis into which our lives extend. One might go so far as to say that there are so many things one *might* do to lessen one’s own impact on the crisis that a sort of paralysis creeps in and one cannot do a thing. Moreover, with every passing moment: week, year, decade of inaction we are faced more clearly with the fact that there are few choices available that could reasonably be described as “win-

win”.<sup>420</sup> The choices that lie before us seem to offer only variations on the theme of environmental collapse, variations in which such illusions as “sustainability” cannot be maintained. What is left are choices instead about the kind of world we want to create for ourselves and for future generations of humans: what it is that we want to take with us, and what we can well do with leaving behind. With that in mind and accepting the ethical demands that I think are incumbent on philosophers, I argue that projects in environmental philosophy ought to also fulfil a polemical function: it is our job as philosophers to clear the thicket and cry loudly “look over here.” During a talk in June 2024, Morton spoke about the need for an empowering, uplifting form of environmentalism, “a Martin Luther King of environmental philosophy.”<sup>421</sup> For one thing, Morton observed, King did not berate his many opponents in the hope that they would desist from racist behaviours. Instead, he offered a stoic model of “cool” that stood in contrast to the abuses he endured in the public forum.

I want first to consider: 1) what is the role of the environmental philosopher, and 2) is that role sufficient to the task identified? Chislenko offers a useful precis to which we can refer in answering 1), above.<sup>422</sup> There are, he says, three roles that philosophers can take vis-a-vis the climate crisis: the ordinary citizen role, the theoretical progress role, and the skills role. The ordinary citizen role considers the value that philosophers contribute as ordinary (perhaps even model) citizens, “through lifestyle changes and political activity, rather than as philosophers.”<sup>423</sup> Being properly apprised of the ethical stakes of climate inaction as a function of the philosopher’s trade, philosophers are well positioned to act in a way that all ordinary citizens ought. We can take a range of actions to reduce our resource consumption and polluting activities, make informed decisions at election times, write to our elected representatives, etc. This stands in contrast to the theoretical progress role, in which Chislenko describes philosophers’ activities as incrementally examining the ethical and epistemological problems that the climate crisis poses and through rigorous scrutiny of the theoretical foundations that gave rise to the crisis, make progress towards undoing it. These positions combine into a hybrid view, which perhaps well describes the environmental

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<sup>420</sup> John Foster, ‘Where Can We Find Hope’, in *Facing Up to Climate Reality: Honesty, Disaster and Hope*, ed. John Foster (Green House Publishing, 2019), 188.

<sup>421</sup> Timothy Morton, ‘Hell: In Search of A Christian Ecology’, Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich, 12 June 2024.

<sup>422</sup> Eugene Chislenko, ‘The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8, no. 4 (2022): 780–98.

<sup>423</sup> Chislenko, ‘The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change’. 789.

philosopher whose research deals with some aspect of environmental philosophy, and who also undertakes the kind of lifestyle changes described briefly above.

By the skills role, Chislenko argues that philosophers have certain skills, developed through our careers as researchers and teachers, that we can and should offer in service to combatting the climate crisis. These skills might include: analysing arguments, gathering evidence from a range of sources, synthesising and defending new arguments, public speaking, facilitating discussions, fostering intergenerational relationships, etc. We may also work for large institutions and fulfil administrative or managerial functions there. Where these skills include philosophical writing and research, they overlap with the theoretical progress view but extend also to include the research-adjacent skills that philosophers develop. Chislenko then describes five ways philosophers can apply these skills in a productive way towards combating the climate crisis. These are: integrate climate crisis into teaching and research, lead events related to the climate crisis in the community, support climate crisis organisations, advocate within our organisations for more sustainable practices, and to collect and share relevant resources.<sup>424</sup> These approaches are to some extent based in the roles academics undertook during the Civil Rights Movement and later used by feminist philosopher-activists, queer theorists, and only recently, environmental philosophers. In his argument, this third role is the most valuable for philosophers with regard to the climate crisis.

First, then, is to question what polemical function a work in environmental philosophy can perform. When the role of a philosophical project is not to pursue a positive theory, but to elucidate and liberate philosopher and reader alike from the illusions of language and thought, then this polemic seems to bear some relation to the clarificatory activity of dissolving philosophical problems. In dissolving such problems and producing avenues for productive thought (and through thought, action), the role of the polemical in environmental philosophy is to consider those newly opened avenues and attempt at an understanding of the consequences of pursuing any one over another. By understanding and then making clear for others the consequences of those choices, the polemic is as much a justification by the philosopher for taking any such choice over another. The metaphilosophy regarding the roles philosophers can play in the unfolding climate crisis is foregrounded here. Whether in terms of “theoretical progress,” as “ordinary citizens” or in terms of specific philosophical skills, there is good reason to think that by virtue of our activities *as* philosophers, we can

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<sup>424</sup> Chislenko, ‘The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change’, 792–94.

(and should) view ourselves as capable of leading action in terms of mitigation of or adaptation towards the climate crisis.<sup>425</sup> I regard the areas of the skills role most closely tied to the work of forming and prosecuting coherent arguments through extended writing and verbal presentation most useful in explaining what philosophers can do. This question “what can philosophers do?” is itself the kind of question open to the clarificatory activity I’ve described. When the options are clearly laid out, the ethics inherent in philosophising produce better and worse choices for the attendant question “what should philosophers do?”

I take no issue with the roles Chislenko describes, though I would argue there is something missing. If 1) philosophical activity is inherently an ethical activity and, 2) the theoretical progress model and the skills model are wholly or partly philosophical activities, then, 3) both are wholly or partly ethical activities. If such is the case, it’s possible to perform both roles in either fulsome, specious, or vapid ways. In other words, philosophers can err in their work, ethically speaking, vis-a-vis the climate crisis. It seems to me that this error can take the form either of omission: philosophers neglect to address the climate crisis in their work either deliberately, incontinently, or out of a mistaken belief that their work does not apply to or has no bearing on the climate crisis. To say that this belief is mistaken is to say that all philosophical work has a bearing of some kind on the climate crisis, and I think this is the case. This is not so much a claim about the specifics of various philosophical disciplines, though I believe it can be. Political philosophy, moral philosophy and ethics, aesthetics and existential philosophies lend themselves obviously, in terms of subject matter to addressing the climate crisis. Areas of the philosophies of science (epistemologies of the climate, the role of uncertainty, scientific communication), language (framing of climate discussion, conceptual clarifications), and logic (counterfactual analysis, prediction models) all appear to have overlaps with the climate crisis. Moreover, philosophy is dependent on the presence of engaged philosophers, whose existence, and the tangential requirements for philosophical activity are precarious. It might seem hyperbolic to point out that without humans, there is no philosophical activity, but we do not need to go so far.

Philosophy, rooted as it is in human activity, is itself at risk due to the climate crisis. The continuance and advancement of philosophy depends on the survival and intellectual engagement of humans, itself conditioned in the vagaries and complications of life, necessitating the preservation in some form of these conditions for ongoing philosophical discourse. Where philosophical investigations are rooted in human experience, autonomy,

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<sup>425</sup> Chislenko, ‘The Role of Philosophers in Climate Change’, 787–89.

and existentials, the loss of a stable context for human existence renders such philosophical explorations untenable. Moreover, the climate crisis presents numerous existential risks to humanity, including: ecological degradation (severe weather, declining biodiversity, collapsing ecosystems) which may undermine the essential conditions for human survival; socioeconomic disruption (food and water shortages, mass migration, resource conflicts) engendering social unrest, threatening the social fabric into which philosophical inquiry is woven; health consequences (zoonotic pandemics, heat stress, declining mental health) can compromise individual well-being and cognitive capacities, affecting philosophical engagement.

The existential threat posed by the climate crisis create new relevance for existential philosophy's attention to mortality, freedom, and meaning, anticipating the need for a re-evaluation of human priorities and values in the face of a changed world. The urgency of the climate crisis calls for expanding moral consideration to nonhuman entities and ecosystems, thus broadening traditional human-centred ethical frameworks. The climate crisis invites philosophical scrutiny of technology's role in both exacerbating and potentially mitigating the issue, urging a reassessment of our relationship with technological advancements and their ethical implications. Addressing the climate crisis necessitates a philosophical transformation capable of adapting to new realities while preserving philosophy's intellectual legacy.

As a minimum we should be able to identify omissions or blind spots of philosophers across disciplines and challenge bad ideas about the climate crisis where we see them. Recently Morton has spoken, and written about, a “flipped Gnosticism” in which humans are not conceived as spiritual beings trapped in earthy, carnal prisons, but rather beings of flesh trapped in a world of bad ideas.<sup>426</sup> For the gnostic, escape from the Demiurge and its devices is achieved in the fleeting, momentary knowledge of the true God beyond the veil of flesh. In this inverted Gnosticism, the tools of escape lie in the flesh itself, not some supposed transcendental. The embrace of our physicality and the overlap between ourselves and other physical beings, as embodied, phenomenal seers engaged in the reciprocity of flesh *qua* flesh of the world is the key to emancipation.<sup>427</sup> By Morton's reckoning here thought is flesh and flesh is the world. Thought produces the bars of the Demiurge's prison, thought dependent on subject-object distinctions and binaries like us/them, inside/outside, nature/culture, human/animal, etc. If the distinction between inside/outside “me” is dissolved, then I bleed

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<sup>426</sup> Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*, 192.

<sup>427</sup> Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*, 44–45. 82.



into the world around me and my freedom is achieved, or in Morton's parlance "the biosphere is the body of Christ."<sup>428</sup> Flesh, then, is to be treated with kindness and mercy, but ideas are to be treated mercilessly, drawn into the harsh light of a liberatory philosophical praxis.

If we describe the practice of philosophy as a methodology for scrutinising dogmatic assumptions, platitudinous soundbites, and folk sentiments, we can avoid the congratulatory rhetoric that often and confusingly accompanies much mainstream environmental discourse. By this I mean suggestions such as "world leaders will surely agree to take action at the next climate summit," or "carbon-capture technology will help us to avert the worst of the crisis," the sentiment of which, if not the precise wording, is very familiar. Though these soundbites are examples of the "big thinking" that I've criticised as creating space for reactionary philosophemes, "small thinking" soundbites work just as well, "we all need to just get back to basics," "things would be different if we all grew our own food." It is one thing to remain hopeful that such sentiments will prove to be well-founded, and another to step forward under the assumption that they will be. Our environmental polemic should avoid the unfounded optimism latent in such constructions, while remaining hopeful about the possibility of serious concrete action on mitigation and, more importantly, adaptation. Hope seems laudable; while optimism is altogether an ill fit for the circumstances in which we find ourselves, attending closely to that which we will relinquish and that which we must restore as we engage in adaptation towards living in an uncanny, hostile world.<sup>429</sup>

If optimism, the assumption that things will work out well, arrests the changes that need to be seen now (concrete action on adaptation), or otherwise leads us from the precautionary principle, it should be resisted and rejected without further scrutiny. I certainly *hope* that efforts to reduce the impact of the climate crisis will be successful, but it would be naïve of me to believe they will be. It is more consistent with the precautionary principle to prepare for the failure of such efforts: *si vis pacem, para bellum*. We should instead seek a form for our polemic which uplifts and empowers others to make demands about the preservation of the environmental systems that sustain life on this planet, while questioning what, exactly, beyond the bare preservation of a system capable of supporting life, we would seek to carry with us into the future. At the same time, it behoves us to seek to empower others to make the demands necessary for the continuation of the manner of life and of civilisation they

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<sup>428</sup> Morton, 'Hell: In Search of A Christian Ecology'.

<sup>429</sup> Jem Bendell, 'Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy', *IFLAS*, 2020, <https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>. 21-23.

wish to see carried into the future.<sup>430</sup> What we might also seek to establish in others is an awareness that the demands they make on others are also incumbent upon them, and demanded by a chorus of similar, related demanding agents.

### 3.1.2. Philosophising over technology

Any speculation about future people and the manner of civilisation we might hope they inherit should start, I think, with people who are alive *now*. This is, in my view, a simple riposte to the iterations of the non-identity problem<sup>431</sup> that speculate on the wellbeing of future people: the overlap between currently existing and future existing people. A sizable number of the people alive now will also be alive in any immediate future, with a diminishing number of currently existing people surviving at increasingly distant future times. By attending to the wellbeing of currently existing people with a view to their long-term wellbeing, we can alleviate to an extent the burden of concern for future people. The currently existing people with the longest-term stake in the future are the youngest.

“We cannot predict the future, but [we] want to make sure some doors remain open.”<sup>432</sup>

There are steps that can be taken by interested parties to ensure the preservation of resources for future generations. Once a finite resource is depleted, it cannot be regenerated. The destruction of any specific environmental feature, such as an ancient hedgerow or a grove of old-growth trees, is permanent and irreversible. By conserving these resources, we can prevent their immediate destruction and create opportunities for future generations to continue their protection. For example, if an ancient hedgerow is saved from being destroyed now, it may survive for another ten years. While the potential destruction of such a resource in the future is not ideal, it is still a better outcome than its certain destruction in the present. “So, this is my dream [...] each day there is new life on this planet [...] and fewer toxins [...] it’s time for each of us to say, ‘not on my watch.’”<sup>433</sup>

According to the doctrine of technology, knowledge over a subject is a route to controlling it. Acting under the auspices of knowledge guarantees some outcome, which is determined by the force of calculation in advance. Knowledge that fails to provide control or demonstrate

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<sup>430</sup> Here I assume, perhaps boldly, anecdotally, that for many, the model of society that they would see carried over into a post-adaptation future is one as similar to the incumbent as is possible, with such conveniences and luxuries as can be maintained, along with no radical departure from the private-ownership, representative democracy of Britain in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I, and I think many others, would not choose to transpose the currently obtaining state of affairs into the future without radical revisions, but I will proceed on the basis of what I consider the majority view.

<sup>431</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. 431.

<sup>432</sup> John Osborn, cited in Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 251.

<sup>433</sup> Jensen, *The Myth of Human Supremacy*, 251.

the path to attaining the best outcome is deemed inadequate. The idea underlying this belief is straightforward: providing individuals with all the necessary information enables them to act. This principle forms the basis of the Green Movement, particularly its more anarchistic elements. Advocates believe that by revealing the scale and causes of environmental damage, the consequences for civilisation, and the misery inflicted, people will awaken and resist; "if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian."<sup>434</sup> One could point to increased recycling, emissions regulations, the proliferation of electric cars, etc. as evidence of the effectiveness of this approach. One might go so far as to hope that "just one more" information campaign, or revelation of horror of environmental collapse will cause people to rise up at last and save the Earth, dismantling the architecture of environmental destruction in turn. Though I don't think we should condemn individuals for their daily routines as the environmental crisis intensifies, they are not entirely exculpated either. Leftists aim to empower "the people" while simultaneously blaming a minority that the people could easily overcome if they merely wanted to. This contradiction suggests that people might not be the rational actors that modern activism assumes; they simply wish to manage their daily lives without confronting the complexity of the problem. Could it be that concern for the future is not universal, and that even those striving for a better future for their children have only a vague and incomplete vision of what that future might entail?

Under a barrage of headlines and statistics "the hottest year since records began," could it be the case that people are fatigued not only at the state of affairs that they are informed obtains about them, but also about their supposed complicity in the disaster. This is one way in which headlines about environmental collapse differ from ones about rioting, recession, or wars in "far-off" places: environmental collapse requires the participation of large numbers of people, and we are confronted daily with evidence that the lives we lead are destroying the world. Yet rather than the proliferation of this information empowering us, as it should under the technological doctrine, it robs us of agency as we face up to the magnitude of the task at hand,

People are numb, [bad news] just rolls off them now. Human beings used to be equipped to handle lots of personal crises: injuries, animal maulings, lack of food [...]  
Our hardware is equipped for that sort of tragedy: it hurts but we can pull through it.  
But the death of a planet, of entire species, regions of the Earth, and potentially

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<sup>434</sup> Paul McCartney, 'If Slaughterhouses Had Glass Walls, Everyone Would Be Vegetarian.', *Paul McCartney*, 5 August 2010, <https://www.paulmccartney.com/news/if-slaughterhouses-had-glass-walls-everyone-would-be-vegetarian>.

billions of people? That's preternatural, that's the Kantian sublime. That's above our pay grade, for the wages of humanity is ultimately personal death.<sup>435</sup>

As I've already set out, this is not right. The scale of the crisis unfolding around is *like* the Kantian sublime, it alludes to the sublime, it may even seem sublime, though it cannot truly be sublime. Information about the climate crisis is more and more water poured into the overfull teacup. There is a somewhat prophetic, revelatory quality to news that delivers yet another horrible statistic X.<sup>436</sup> The scale of the crisis is overwhelming and induces a feeling of powerlessness in individuals, leading to a collective inaction. Calling to mind the "banality of evil,"<sup>437</sup> it might be hard to locate a more banal activity than climate inaction: business as usual. We know that failure to act to adapt to the climate crisis is harmful, and yet, on account of its scale, we face again the problem that, in our average everydayness, we accept to varying degrees the status quo.<sup>438</sup> This paralysis is not born of malice, but rather from the pervasive feeling of insignificance in the face of a global threat. As with Arendt's observations on the bureaucratization of evil, the climate crisis demonstrates how ordinary people can become complicit in destructive systems simply by following the path of least resistance. The challenge lies in overcoming this sense of powerlessness and recognizing that collective action, however small it may seem, is crucial in combating the existential threat posed by climate change. Adaptation is not a zero-sum game, and ethical responsibility does not vanish under adverse obtaining conditions or with the imposition of personal risk.<sup>439</sup>

Allowing inaction to be perceived as evil cedes moral ground to those advocating for extremism, such as anarcho-primitivists, ecofascists, and the various forms of environmental extremist I've already sketched out. Such actors can lay claim to virtue on account of their acting, regardless of the direct and indirect ethics of their proposed "solutions." The false dichotomy between inaction and radical action, all or nothing, creates a dangerous narrative that overlooks the importance of measured, ethical responses to the climate crisis. By framing the issue in such stark terms, it becomes easier for extremist ideologies to gain traction, as they position themselves as the only viable alternative to perceived complacency. This oversimplification ignores the complexity of the climate crisis and the need for

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<sup>435</sup> Cabrera Abe, 'The Catalog of Horror', *Black Seed* 5 (2017), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/various-authors-black-seed-issue-5#toc15>.

<sup>436</sup> Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology*, 71.

<sup>437</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin, 2006).

<sup>438</sup> Yi Qie, "'The Banality of Evil' and Modern Education', *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 32 (2024): 185–89.

<sup>439</sup> Ville Suuronen, 'Carl Schmitt's Confrontation with the Work of Hannah Arendt: A Debate on Totalitarianism, Power, and Banality of Evil', *Global Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2022): 270–305. 290.

nuanced, collaborative approaches that balance environmental concerns with social justice. Equating inaction with evil polarises environmental discourse and potentially legitimises harmful ideologies.<sup>440</sup>

For far-right actors, the often-unwavering internal certainty of belief structures, including radical reactionary environmentalism can be compelling to those seeking clear answers in the face of complex global challenges. To steal an idea rooted in Christian fundamentalism, “the ends justify the means, *and* Jesus loves me regardless of who I have to hurt.”<sup>441</sup>

Returning to the search for a Martin Luther King of the environmental movement, it does not do to berate or belittle even the most extreme bad-faith environmental actors. Nor is there any solution to this parlous chiasm in the production of more data. Indeed, attacking under such circumstances might only exacerbate the perception of persecution for nativist or majoritarian ideologies, increasing the isolation and entrenchment of those who may simply be stuck with an ill-chosen<sup>442</sup> political identity.<sup>443</sup>

A compelling alternative to extreme ideologies lies rooted in the loss of intimacy I’ve already explored. Overcome the belief that intimacy is not possible, address the phobic aversion to intimacy and reframe scale as a matter of interpersonal relationships including with nonhumans. “If being ‘environmental’ only extends phobias of psychic, sexual and social intimacy, current conditions such as global warming will persist. Instead of insisting on being part of something bigger, we should be working with intimacy.”<sup>444</sup>

### 3.1.3. Reclaiming intimacy

The masculinism surrounding the reactionary ideologies I’ve described is, perhaps unsurprisingly, resistant to notions of intimacy, which may give rise to accusations of weakness, or that otherwise call into question ideas about masculine identity that are now widely seen as toxic. The overlap between toxic masculinity and idealisation of the sigma-male archetype is the space into which the masculinist aesthetic is thrown. *Into the Wild*<sup>445</sup> offers a masculinist archetype similar in ways to that evinced by Thoreau or Kaczynski:

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<sup>440</sup> Martin Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>441</sup> Morton, ‘Hell: In Search of A Christian Ecology’.

<sup>442</sup> Joshua Citarella, ‘From Techno-Libertarianism to Eco-Fascism: The Slow Transformation of Internet Subcultures’, *Joshua Citarella’s Newsletter* 2023 (2023), <https://joshuacitarella.substack.com/p/from-techno-libertarianism-to-eco>.

<sup>443</sup> Ben Lee, *Siege Culture and Accelerationism in the UK* (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2022), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/siege-culture-and-accelerationism-in-the-uk/>.

<sup>444</sup> Morton, ‘Guest Column: Queer Ecology’, 278.

<sup>445</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Pan Main Market Edition, 2007).

successful, intelligent young man abandons life of privilege to endure an authentic life of hardship alone in the wilderness. It's a model of privation close to that which Jünger described as reforging the soul in response to the onset of total mobilisation,<sup>446</sup> and becomes a playing out of the technologizing drive's most destructive impulses: "They fantasise control and order: 'I can make it my own.' The return to 'Nature' acts out the myth of the self-made man, editing out love, warmth, vulnerability, and ambiguity."<sup>447</sup>

When we look closely at the reported experiences of those who do slough off, if even for a time, the strictures of society to go "back to" "nature," the conviction that vulnerability, love, ambiguity, etc. are necessarily edited out seems shaky, and buttresses the toxic masculinist trope that men do not have inner lives or are unable to process emotions. "You are wrong if you think joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living."<sup>448</sup>

The idea that turning from conventional ways of life opens up new possibilities in terms of aesthetic encounter, even when such encounters might require vulnerability or courage. Encounters with nonhumans may likewise take new dimensions or allow humans to more easily participate in the interplay of relationships that constitute ecological value.<sup>449</sup> Moreover, such active participation may be conditioned on a partial rejection of societal norms by any human seer that seeks to participate, not merely those who attempt to live in secluded cabins. The rejection of such norms and values offers on the one hand a freedom to explore the aesthetic relations between humans and nonhumans, and indeed, between nonhumans and nonhumans, and also opens up the site of encounter for quite radical exploration. John Jacobi, a contemporary self-identified eco-extremist and former interlocutor with Kaczynski put it in these terms, "I think the homeless are a better model than ecologically minded university students, they're already living outside of the structures of society."<sup>450</sup> On the other hand, it also seems to impart a responsibility to tend towards a

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<sup>446</sup> Ernst Jünger, *On Pain*, trans. Durst, David C. (Telos Press, 2008), 21–22.

<sup>447</sup> Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', 280.

<sup>448</sup> Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, 45.

<sup>449</sup> Greaves and Read, 'Where Value Resides: Making Ecological Value Possible'. 326-327.

<sup>450</sup> John Jacobi, quoted in Richardson, 'Children Of Ted'.

form of authenticity predicated in risk and uncertainty, a precariousness in which one might come to know oneself in an existential way.<sup>451</sup>

Bringing the question of intimacy back to the analysis of the uncanny,<sup>452</sup> reclaiming intimacy becomes a matter of rediscovering the difference between the self and the other in a way that I think the knowing rejection of societal norms in search of an ecologically authentic self is inherently helpful. Where the distinction between “home” and “foreign” is eroded by the forces of modernity, and a new oppositional relationship emerges between self and world, the reflexive discovery of the self in the form of the Danube’s turn towards home. In this case, the foreign into which the self wanders is the uncanny world set as oppositional to the conditions for Dasein’s flourishing as a result of its uncanniness. Traversing into the foreign is not a matter of cultural distinctiveness revealed in opposition to difference, but a matter of human being-towards a world that is increasingly hostile. If we allow for the possibility that the retreat “into the wild” may not be predicated on solely negative masculinist tropes, then I wonder if we can close off a path from which extreme ideas about environmental activism spring. I worry that the critique from queer ecology has, in coming from below, repositioned itself above in a way that furthers the narrative that majority positions are under attack, however specious those concerns might, in fact, be.

Regardless of whether such behaviours seem irrational or contrary, it is a matter for the critic rather than the person engaged in the kind of “return to the wild” activity under criticism. The point of turning away from the kind of society in which eco-critics are produced is itself an empowering act of critique in which any ridicule or cries of irrationality ought to vanish into the noise from which the retreating activist has turned. The kind of transformative quest for autonomy and authenticity might seem like an immature and uncritical trope born out of hero’s quest-style narratives, but inasmuch as it allows a genuine reorientation of the self towards the world, built on vulnerability and intimacy, such criticism seems irrelevant.<sup>453</sup> We cannot ask everyone to turn away from society and live in secluded hills, foraging and hunting for subsistence, but by reminding people that it’s possible, a space is cleared between the extremes of primitivist living and the status quo. The dichotomy of whether such actors are behaving rationally or not, whether they’ve missed the critique or not doesn’t seem to

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<sup>451</sup> Fatima Chesti, ‘The Tragedy of Freedom: A Hypothesis of Existentialism in Jon Krakauer’s “Into the Wild”’, *Journal of Philology and Educational Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2023): 45–53. 51–52.

<sup>452</sup> Cf. §2.3.7.

<sup>453</sup> John Jacobi, ‘Taking Rewilding Seriously’, *The Dark Mountain Project*, July 2017, <https://dark-mountain.net/taking-rewilding-seriously/>.

matter if they help in some way to bring about an incremental change in the way people live.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>454</sup> Liviu Măntescu, 'Ecoporn, Irrationalities and Radical Environmentalism' (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2016), <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/3786/3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. 30.



## 3.2. Topographies of scale

### 3.2.1. Hyper, gigantic, global?

Beginning with Morton's hyperobjects, I sought to establish a topography of scale proceeding from the "hyper" of speculative realist, through the Kantian sublime and Heideggerian gigantic, to consider now the global and local as positions on an aesthetic scale: "take care of the local, and the global will take care of itself." Rather than engage in a heuristic reification of the climate crisis or be tempted to accept its destruction in the case of the gigantic, a global aesthetic should seek, it seems, to provide answers to certain problems that tend to pull thought back into the bushes. If anything is truly global, it is surely climate.

Returning, then, to the matter of the scale of the climate crisis, it seems right of Morton to point to this immensity as a problem for thought for beings like us, beings evolved to avoid smilodons and locate edible roots, rather than fathom millennia-spanning crises. Yet where Morton falls short in *Hyperobjects* is in failing to notice that the project on which he is embarked is precisely the sort of mental shortcut such small-world creatures as humans are wont to employ to simplify difficult cognitive manoeuvres. I take Morton to have fallen short of the aims set out in both *The Ecological Thought* and *Hyperobjects*, namely establishing a way of thinking about the environment and its attendant crises that is holistic and capable of parsing the immensity of the climate crisis. The relationship between local and global extends beyond a mere relationship between part and whole. While there is merit in focusing on the local, global problems necessitate global solutions, which aligns with Morton's perspective.

Furthermore, any resource calculus must acknowledge that while the transportation of food across the planet may appear detrimental compared to consuming it at the source, the resources required for transportation are often less than those needed for a localist approach. This principle extends beyond food production. It necessitates individuals to adopt a local lifestyle, not only in terms of reduced global movement but also in terms of access to technology that contributes to environmental degradation (e.g., the CO<sub>2</sub> output of an email with numerous attachments). There is a distinction between solutions, mitigations, and adaptations. Solutions address specific post-collapse problems such as food distribution, mitigations limit the effects of past failures to resolve problems, and adaptations are means of coping (or similar strategies).

Object-oriented ontologists appear to present some compelling arguments: anti-anthropocentrism, ontological humility, and aesthetics as first philosophy, among others.

The foundation of this philosophy rests on uncertain conceptual grounds, largely based on Meillassoux's critiques of correlationism, which remain contentious, as well as Harman's problematic interpretation of Heidegger. Furthermore, the concept of Hyperobjects presents the climate crisis in questionable ontological terms. The hyperobject aesthetic necessitates an epistemology-at-scale to comprehend the hyperobject itself (which, due to withdrawal, can never be fully comprehended) and to activate the ecological thought. This implies that effectively addressing the climate crisis, whether through mitigation, minimization, or adaptation, requires thought on a macroscopic scale. Consequently, this approach appears to lead towards climate "solutions" that, rather than belonging to the ambiguous, viscous domain of dark ecology, reflect the scale of thought applied to the problem. The ecological thought thus necessitates a globalism in terms of solutions management that not only requires the existing apparatus of authoritarian capitalism but also a substantial expansion of that same authoritarian technic.

Governments may either invest in extensive infrastructure projects of unprecedented scale, potentially creating numerous skilled and unskilled employment opportunities (the so-called green industrial revolution), which would necessitate a reorganization of production, distribution, construction, and oversight under (most likely) new departments of state or branches of the executive. Alternatively, corporations may need to make equivalent investments, likely indemnified against risk by taxpayers, with a somewhat more fragmented distribution of production, distribution, etc., but nevertheless relying on the same infrastructure, and with the additional requirement to generate value and extract capital from such projects. Deregulation by central governments will be a fundamental prerequisite for corporations to pursue decarbonization in the most capital-efficient manner. This arrangement necessitates that such organizations be effectively immune to scrutiny, censure, or challenge: the task assigned to them is too significant to be allowed to fail, and acquiescence to their demands will need to be met.

The kinds of intervention that hyper or global-scale thinking points towards include various forms of geoengineering, carbon-capture technology, the massive rollout of nuclear power akin to a global Messmer Plan, etc. Generating nuclear energy is extremely safe, despite several high-profile disasters. By a considerable margin, nuclear power is among the safest means of energy production, using sheer number of deaths per unit of energy production as a harm-minimising utilitarian ethic, with fossil fuels (especially coal) causing thousands more

deaths per unit of energy production than nuclear.<sup>455</sup> Of course, we might want to say that the harm caused by nuclear energy production hasn't yet reached full-count, or that its deleterious impacts are yet to weigh on the statistics, or more simply: more people in the future will die than we know of now. The simple reply to this is, "yes, certainly, but do you really think we've seen the last death caused by fossil fuels?" Even if we were to immediately transition all global energy production to nuclear, untold people will continue to live with the effects of fossil-fuel poisoning until their lives are finally cut short by ailments brought on by a lifetime of inhaling car-exhaust fumes.

### 3.2.2. Scales of intervention

I worry that the appeal to the ecological thought, which is borne out in work like *Dark Ecology*, risks nudging us from big thoughts to big deeds. The climate crisis represents a huge problem, and the solutions to this problem, in terms of mitigation or adaptation require thinking at a commensurate scale. A tension arising here is the worry that "thinking big" may be a way of saying "wishful thinking," optimism of the kind previously discussed. This wishful thinking amounts to notions like "some new technology will save us," while offering nothing that we can work with now. More useful would be thinking that looks at the existing options in terms of technologies that can be deployed or scaled. There is an attendant risk such that where a solution doesn't yet exist, any drive to produce it, research it, deploy it, etc. amounts to a kind of accelerationism that risks exacerbating the problem (namely research, testing, production, etc. of new technologies is time and resource intensive) and offers nothing in terms of an actual solution. There's no guarantee that, even if it were desirable, geoengineering might not actually work or be developed and implemented in time to do anything at all. Furthermore, the effort and energy required to develop, test, and deploy such speculative technologies would require a level of global coordination and collaboration that was unprecedented before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>456</sup>

Hyperobjects and "big thinking" pushes us towards accelerationism of this kind which needs to be treated extremely cautiously because of its innate nihilism and its attraction to extremists. We also need to step back from the degrowth, hyper-local, austerity ecology that points us towards the anarcho-primitivist and ecofascistic positions discussed earlier. In

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<sup>455</sup> Anil Markandya and Paul Wilkinson, 'Electricity Generation and Health', *Lancet* 15, no. 370 (2007): 979–90.

<sup>456</sup> Stephen M. Gardiner, 'Is "Arming the Future" with Geoengineering Really the Lesser Evil?', in *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, ed. Stephen M. Gardiner et al. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 290–91.

applying a class analysis to the question, we ought to look for the pre-existing conditions of natural resource abundance and view any sort of ecological solution through the lens of equity and fair distribution and allocation of resources. There is material abundance enough for almost all peoples to enjoy a high standard of living, but unequal distribution of wealth, energy consumption and emissions capacity means that under capitalism, equitable distribution isn't possible. Any kind of accelerationism that doesn't take this class analysis into account and attempt to avoid the nihilism of merely making the wealthy wealthier and instead enable an equitable redistribution of wealth and emissions capacity to the majority of the population for whom wealth acquisition has been historically denied must be seen as problematic.

Extending a similar analysis to any degrowth movement is similarly problematic. If reducing economic growth and the concomitant growth of emissions and environmental degradation erodes only the wealth of the very wealthy, then this is something we can probably accept. If, however, austerity is directed towards the already immiserated, driving already vulnerable peoples into ever deeper recesses of penury to protect the abundance enjoyed by the tiny minority, we ought well to reject degrowth too. We also need to consider things like access to suitable "hyper-localities" recognising that there are millions of people living in for whom commitment to, or prescriptive reliance on the "hyper local" is suicide. How can the population of Hong Kong be expected to maintain food and energy security, for example? Either some hitherto unknown invention of the kind that casts away this degrowth mode altogether, the maintenance of certain global structures that would have the same effect, or darker alternative: are these people to remove themselves from their environments? If so, who, how? Though this is the sort of conversation that is properly the domain of the ecofascists, there is nevertheless a question hanging over it: what happens if there is no effort at adaptation, which might include a massive reduction in populations in large urban centres? Is it kinder to allow such conversations and be honest, or to proceed blindly into a world in which much of a city like Hong Kong is underwater,<sup>457</sup> and the available "options" may seem far less palatable, or the rising tide forces involuntary evacuations.

Something less problematic might be a deepening of the range or scope of existing solutions - a kind of maximalism around say how global supply chains work, an approach that demands such solutions be made as efficient in terms of energy use and general ethical deployment as possible, freed from the inefficiencies of the drive to extract capital from the

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<sup>457</sup> W. T. Wong et al., 'Long Term Sea Level Change in Hong Kong', *Hong Kong Meteorological Society Bulletin* 13 (2003): 24-40.

system of exploitation, and from the overall global systems that, e.g. incentivise corporate misbehaviour through subsidies, etc. The myth of capitalist efficiency is broken open - efficiency in extracting capital is not the same as the kind of ethical efficiency that the climate crisis requires e.g. in reducing emissions or deaths or harms caused by the supply chain, or in terms of environmental damage and long-termism. What OOO, hyperobjects, and dark ecology do is allow for a way of looking at the climate crisis in a way that foregrounds its scale.

### 3.3. Framing encounters with non-objects

#### 3.3.1. Crisis framed as individual responsibility

There was a widely known campaign instigated by the British wartime government in the early stages of the Second World War. The “Salvage Campaign” encouraged householders to surrender their aluminium and iron goods (cooking pots and pans) so that these could be repurposed for the war effort. The folklore around this campaign says that most of these donated goods were worthless as scrap. Certainly, some aluminium goods may have been repurposed, but large cast iron products like railings could not be reformed into anything useful. Nevertheless, the story goes, the act of participating in the war effort, by ordinary families whose loved ones may have been fighting improved the morale of the populace. Regardless of the actual efficacy of the surrender of pots and pans, people were able to make a sacrifice towards the war effort and feel as though they were, in some small way, involved in the same struggle as the soldiery. Environmental policies like recycling or such concepts as personal carbon allowances act in a similar way. In both cases, participation creates the illusion that individual effort has some meaningful effect on the outcome of some massive event, be it a war or the much more complex climate crisis. The problem in each case is so large, so complex, that the efforts of individuals are largely (though not completely) futile. Any kind of individuated activity must happen at a communal scale that approaches the scale of the issue at hand. Grassroots, system-wide changes to habits and behaviours can make some difference, perhaps, but more interesting is not, for example, grassroot demand for better recycling facilities or the banishment of plastic straws, but demand for corporate and political action commensurate with the scale of the task.

As an example, the Second World War saw the USA spend up to 37% of its GDP on defence, representing almost 90% of all federal spending in 1945.<sup>458</sup> By comparison, at the time of writing, the USA’s GDP is \$25.44 trillion. According to White House press releases, the USA has increased funding for global climate interventions sixfold since 2021, to \$11 billion.<sup>459</sup> As a percentage of the USA’s GDP in summer 2024, \$11 billion is 0.0432%, or

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<sup>458</sup> Christopher J. Tassava, *The American Economy during World War II* (Economic History Association, 2008), <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-american-economy-during-world-war-ii/>.

<sup>459</sup> *FACT SHEET: The President’s Budget Creates Good-Paying Clean Jobs, Cuts Energy Costs, and Delivers on the President’s Ambitious Climate Agenda* (The White House, 2024), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2024/03/11/fact-sheet-the-presidents-budget-creates-good-paying-clean-jobs-cuts-energy-costs-and-delivers-on-the-presidents-ambitious-climate-agenda/#:~:text=The%20Budget%20builds%20on%20historic,near%2Dsixfold%20increase%20from%202021.>

0.196% of federal spending.<sup>460</sup> First, these numbers are bafflingly huge, a symptom of the gigantic, but furthermore, they represent a very different prioritisation between US government spending on a past war, compared to a newly presented, but equally existential threat. The point I make here is twofold. First, the elected government of the world's largest economy does not appear to treat the threat of the climate crisis in a particularly robust way. Secondly, the point is not that the USA ought to be spending 40% of its GDP on climate mitigation or adaptation. Moreover, the point is that under a doctrine of infinite economic growth, the conditions that give rise to the climate crisis can never be undone. So long as major polluting economies continue to grow, genuine, deep adaptation is a pipedream, and the contributions of individuals in terms of plastic recycling or fewer holidays appears almost moot. We should not be asking the USA to spend a greater percentage of its resources on adaptation and mitigation, but we should ask for an acceptance that the largest global economies must shrink to bring about the kind of transformative change needed to truly adapt to the future of a changed world. We must also do so with the explicit acknowledgement that there are peoples in the world today who are better equipped to deal with a descaling of global economies, and those who are not, and work to reduce the impact of degrowth on those most likely to be negatively affected by it.

The complexity of problems at such scale as to be considered "gigantic," "monstrous," or "hyper," presents a challenge to the concept of encounter itself. The encounter with hyperobjects, as described by Morton, extends beyond modern notions such as the environment. Mystical thinkers from diverse traditions provide an historical exemplar of attempts to comprehend the absolute, using highly specialised vocabularies to do so.<sup>461</sup> The question arises as to whether the issue lies in both the limited knowledge and use of the specialised cognitive operations employed by mystical thinkers among the polis, thus restricting the capacity for clear thinking on matters of scale. An attendant concern is how the lack of distribution of this cognitive method contributes to a reliance on heuristic and other simplifications. Drawing parallels to Heidegger's distinction between scientific and humanistic rigour, I suggest that there is another form of thinking that enables a clear

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<sup>460</sup> 'How Much Has the U.S. Government Spent This Year?', Fiscal Data, [https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/federal-spending/#:~:text=How%20much%20has%20the%20U.S.,people%20of%20the%20United%20State s.&text=Fiscal%20year%2Dto%2Ddate%20\(,Treasury%20Statement%20\(MTS\)%20dataset.](https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/federal-spending/#:~:text=How%20much%20has%20the%20U.S.,people%20of%20the%20United%20State s.&text=Fiscal%20year%2Dto%2Ddate%20(,Treasury%20Statement%20(MTS)%20dataset.)

<sup>461</sup> Hyperobjects do not present issues around ineffability or the limits to language that a true mystical encounter might. The point is that even if hyperobjects or other concepts of a scale that suggests the infinite (deep time, the vastness of space, or the mystical experience) we cannot argue that certain things are beyond language.

understanding of such problems, which could be referred to as an environmental aesthetic. Morton or others might reply "the ecological thought performs this function," but as I've suggested, the ecological thought 1) may not adequately address the issues of scale, and 2) this mode of thinking points thought towards a mode of technological control and domination, which too easily slides into nihilistic accelerationism.

The potential for a thinking-through of the conditions of environmental collapse; a thinking-through of the issue of scale begins to emerge in the aesthetic encounter. Reflecting again on the roles played by philosophers in defence against the impacts of the climate crisis, the extended skills role includes not only the incremental progress made by academic research, but also the methods of reflection (and indeed, meditation) on particularly wicked problems philosophers routinely employ. This may open the door for an environmental, ecological aesthetic, but it is important to couch this cautiously. It is not productive to suggest that reading poetry or watching a movie can solve the climate crisis. Rather, the role of aesthetics is to facilitate this "thinking-through" of the crisis in a language that can bridge the gap between the scale of the crisis (which is gigantic) and the cognitive capacity of the seer. This process performs the kinds of operations that enable us to engage with a problem of such magnitude. Art, or an ecological aesthetic, may be able to offer a mediation between the microcosm and the macrocosm, allowing us to think about the crisis at both the level of heuristic tricks and the level of the larger world.

Facing problems of the kind described is difficult, and there's a role to be played by the heuristic devices we use. The role played by charismatic animals in fallacies of simplification bears discussion. From the memetic video of marine researchers removing a plastic straw from a Sea Turtle's Nostril,<sup>462</sup> to David Attenborough's narration of a whale struggling to eat a plastic bucket in BBC's 2017 *Blue Planet*.<sup>463</sup> The photographic and documentary projects of artist Chris Jordan, the Midway Project, and *Albatross*<sup>464</sup> also serve as valuable examples. In his 2009 project, Jordan travelled to the Midway Atoll in the Pacific Ocean, c. 4100 miles east of Tokyo. Midway serves as a colony and mating ground for the Laysan albatross. Jordan's haunting photographs of the decomposing remains of albatross chicks, their bodies open to the elements, reveal in each dead bird dozens of pieces of colourful plastic, from

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<sup>462</sup> *Sea Turtle with Straw up Its Nostril – 'No' to Plastic Straws*, directed by Christine Figgenger, YouTube, 20AD, <https://youtu.be/4wH878t78bw>.

<sup>463</sup> *Blue Planet II*, episode 4, 'Big Blue', produced by John Ruthven, aired 2017, on BBC.

<sup>464</sup> *ALBATROSS*, directed by Chris Jordan, 2018, <https://www.albatrossthefilm.com/>.



tangles of fishing line to bottle-caps, toothbrushes, and cigarette lighters. The images are ghastly and deeply moving.



FIGURE 4 CHRIS JORDAN, ALBATROSS.<sup>465</sup>

The effect of seeing a direct consequence of the crisis of plastic pollution repeated through Jordan's photography is unsettling and confronting. It's difficult not to imagine the disposable toothbrushes one has used in life and wonder how many have become lodged in the bodies of animals, or what otherwise has become of them, because almost certainly, they are still around. The affective power of these images is in their provoking of guilt and shame for the lifestyle lived across the world that has brought about the deaths of these most vulnerable animals that live almost as far from humanity as is possible on our crowded planet. Such images provide a simple object toward which an affective response is possible. Quite unlike the problem, "the distribution of plastic pollution", an image of a dead bird offers a far simpler object, the kind towards which it appears humans have a cognitive bias. Though equally as real as the problem of plastic pollution, the latter is the kind of thing Morton would describe as a hyperobject, or a diffuse object in Hutchinson's & Read's vernacular.<sup>466</sup> I don't want to downplay what I think is the importance of the affective power

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<sup>465</sup> ALBATROSS.

<sup>466</sup> Hutchinson and Read, 'Practising Pragmatist-Wittgensteinianism', 178.

of these images. One would go too far to say that exposure to such images directly influences the consumptive behaviours that ultimately produce them,<sup>467</sup> but the mainstreaming of the dramatically affecting consequences of such behaviour and the increased accessibility of environmental science most likely has a positive effect in terms of a cognitivist model of practising pragmatism, which is to say by adding weight to the existing factors that allow for the formation of evaluative beliefs.<sup>468</sup>

I feel inclined to argue that despite any possible positive impact on belief formation, the heuristic function played by pathos-inducing images of charismatic animals in distress causes further problems, namely, that the reduction of global-scale problems to the level of personal affect serves a role in the framing of the climate crisis as matter resolvable by atomic individuals exercising personal agency. The issue appears to be one of the immediately visualisable occluding those things that are not so. An image of a dead albatross chick might well occlude a more abstract object of consideration like the damage to marine environments caused by ocean acidification. Nevertheless, the visualisable opens into the occluded. The *Albatross* images may confront the viewer with their private legacy of plastic waste yet point also to vagaries of the global fishing industry. The seer may feel revulsion or shame at their own contribution to the colourful consumer plastics in the dead animals' guts, and yet also empowered by the choices such an image opens. One can choose which consumptive or polluting behaviours to change, and a direct choice between, say, a wooden or a plastic toothbrush *is* a positive choice.

This is an empowering possibility that leads to the next choice: as a consumer and participant in the polluted world, what can one do about the seemingly impossible, on account of its scale, issue of discarded fishing lines? On the surface, nothing. One does not directly consume or dispose of such objects, and yet they exist as a consequence of one's decisions, or the decisions of the collective "one." The decision to consume only line-caught fish, or to avoid fish altogether represent positive and empowering actions that one *can* take, as an ordinary citizen, to impact in some way the continued propagation of discarded fishing lines.

It's tempting to dismiss such reductions as unconvincing on the grounds that individual activity appears inadequate to the task of any serious efforts of mitigation or adaptation. And

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<sup>467</sup> Matilda ve Dunn et al., 'Evaluating the Impact of the Documentary Series Blue Planet II on Viewers' Plastic Consumption Behaviours', *Conservation Science and Practice* 2, no. 10 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.280>.

<sup>468</sup> Hutchinson and Read, 'Practising Pragmatist-Wittgensteinianism', 180.

yet this is not a zero-sum game. In between “no activity to mitigate the climate crisis” and “adequate activity to avert the worst consequences of the climate crisis,” there are a range of positions, and any one of them is better than “no activity to mitigate the climate crisis.” It is a tapestry of choices by individual moral agents, though the division of choices between moral agents is not equally distributed. Those who consume and pollute the most have more moral decisions to make, but those with fewer decisions available ought still to make some. There are of course important questions around the just and equitable distribution of these decisions; each one demands an alteration in lifestyle in perhaps non-trivial ways. A family living on the breadline does not have to decide about how many holidays to take in a year if their access to resources does not allow them to take even one. A comfortable middle-class family accustomed to multiple international holidays each year has decisions to make that the impoverished family does not. It would seem perverse to make equal demands of these people when 1) their access to environmentally sound ethical decisions is limited by their access to resources and 2) their access to resources is not equal.

The framing of the climate crisis in terms of individual agency explicitly serves certain interests. It’s through a cynical series of linguistic manoeuvres that the term “climate change” gained preference in environmental discourse over “global warming,” or any number of other configurations, serving discrete ends. First, the use of such an anodyne term serves to partially abrogate responsibility for environmental degradation from the world’s most polluting economies, be they nation-states or non-state entities like corporations, militaries, etc.<sup>469</sup> Secondly, the term served to mollify the voting public, initially in the USA, which may have harboured concerns about the lack of action on environmental decline by their government.<sup>470</sup> The framing of any question involving the term “climate change” is altered by certain assumptions tied up in service to the ends just outlined. A memorandum authored for the Bush presidency in 2002 “The Environment” explains that “‘climate change sounds’ like travelling from Pittsburgh to Fort Lauderdale, whereas ‘global warming’ sounds threatening ‘climate change’ suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge.”<sup>471</sup> While recent years have seen a shift from these more benign configurations of terminology, there remains an anodyne note even to formulations like “global warming,” “global heating,” “global overheat,” “climate crisis,” etc.

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<sup>469</sup> Steven Poole, *Unspeak* (Little Brown, 2006), 43–49., 43–49.

<sup>470</sup> Frank Luntz, *The Environment: A Cleaner, Safer, Healthier America* (Luntz Research Companies, 2002), 142.

<sup>471</sup> Luntz, *The Environment: A Cleaner, Safer, Healthier America*, 140.

Mollifications like “climate change” rob the individual of complicity, the climate has changed before and surely will again. Cast in terms of day-to-day processes, like “driving to Fort Lauderdale,” the only expectation that individuals can have that their own activities will have any impact (positive or negative) on the crisis is in terms of, perhaps omitting the allegorical drive. On the other hand, the framing of the crisis in terms of personal carbon footprints, places the individual in the driving seat again, whereby individuals are personally responsible for polluting, and therefore the consequences of pollution. It’s not simple enough to say either the individual is responsible or not. Indeed, individuals are both responsible and not responsible. At issue is a confrontation between self-enhancing values: what do people worry about vis-à-vis their own lives on a daily basis, and self-transcendent values: what can people do to make the world better for people other than themselves and their own families. Recasting positive environmental action as something self-enhancing in a way that might supplant such self-enhancing values as wealth acquisition is difficult,<sup>472</sup> but here, if anywhere, is the intersection with the kinds of “into the wild” self-searching that permits deep adaptation and a rejection of social mores precisely as self-enhancing.

I want to suggest that while the conservative framing of the climate crisis in terms of personal responsibility rather than a consequence of capitalistic structures that demand the extraction and destruction of natural resources, leaves us in a position of extreme vulnerability to the continued extractive practices of, for example, big oil, we can at least see this as an explicit and deliberate effect of the framing. Arguably, the presentation of the climate crisis as a hyperobject, an inert, distant force, amoral, vast, and discrete, presents different and perhaps more insidious problems, both in veiling the climate crisis’s rootedness in the forces of global capitalism, and by framing the crisis as an unknowable other. There is a problem in presenting the climate crisis as either something that an individual agent can directly influence by their actions as a participant in global capitalism, or on the other hand as something so vast as to be nigh unknowable, and in its unknowability is *effectively* immutable. While the efforts of individuals have *some* influence on the crisis, and the distinction between “some influence” and “no influence at all” is the nuance that demands attention, it’s easy to overstate the possible impact of this on an individual level. The power of the individual is rooted in the communal, without which the distinction between a tiny amount of influence and zero influence becomes extremely blurry. One cannot change the world by oneself, as the adage goes. There is an alternative mode of framing to the climate

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<sup>472</sup> Paul Wesley; Schultz and Lynnette Zelazny, ‘Reframing Environmental Messages to Be Congruent with American Values’, *Human Ecology Review* 10, no. 2 (2003): 126–36.

crisis, a middle path between these extremes that recognises i) the pragmatics involved in taking action to avert or mitigate the climate crisis and ii) the way in which we think about and engage with the climate crisis in everyday, ordinary life. The issue is, as I hope I have explored, is that this middle path is extremely precarious, and on either side of it are some extremely unpalatable positions.

If we take claims about the climate crisis, or aspects of it (global warming, plastic pollution, etc.), as ontologically discrete, vast, unknowable, etc., as the hyperobject framing would have, it'd be upon us to question precisely what the encounter between us and this thing would consist of. Are we to imagine a scene from Lovecraftian horror, in which the protagonists can do nothing but go mad when faced with the horrifying, ineffable immensity of the alien gods they have discovered? Or are we perhaps able to challenge the supposed immensity (and ignore any claims of ineffability) and see this titan in a different light and recognise it as something stitched together from the complexities of the lives we live. This recognition cannot lead to a conclusion of personal responsibility for the climate crisis or perpetuate the illusion that individual action can meaningfully mitigate the crisis; but should lead to the conclusion that such atomistic agency is only a factor inasmuch as it is a piece of the mosaic of collective responsibility for the organisation of society. It seems to matter very little if a well-intentioned agent, motivated by the speed and scale of environmental degradation opts not to take a transatlantic flight, while billionaires exist and pursue pet-space projects.

What does it matter that I opt not to eat meat on animal welfare or environmental grounds when there exists an organisation like the US military, which does not share my ethical qualms? An answer to such questions can begin to take shape, if carefully constructed, along the following lines: it matters, but the extent to which it does so is constrained by the sorts of framing that are tacitly placed around the picture in which any such activity takes place. The apparent futility of any such individual attempt at systemic change is undone by those exceptions, which come readily to mind: the refusal of Vasili Arkhipov to sanction the use of the nuclear warheads at his disposal in 1962, or the influence of a work such as *Silent Spring* (remarkably first published also in 1962) on global policy around the use of CFCs.<sup>473</sup> While difficult, it's not impossible to imagine that individual actions can indeed lead to systemic change on issues with an ecological valence, especially when the debate has moved from the

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<sup>473</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002).

prevention of catastrophic climate collapse to mitigation of its deleterious impacts and adaptation to a world post-collapse.

Our collective reliance on simplifying heuristics and pattern-seeking behaviour serves to augment the power that has already been ceded to the vested interests of global capitalism to set the terms of engagement across environmental discourse. The myth of personal (rather than systemic) responsibility, so enforced by the notion of personal carbon footprints or the overstated efficacy of domestic recycling risks disempowering the individual who, confronted with the scale of the task at hand, might rightly feel cowed before it. The ecological aesthetic offers a route towards empowered personal responsibility for ethical decisions that directly affect the easily visualisable yet also serve as windows towards ethical decisions that nudge the remote, vast, and abstract causes of the climate crisis.

### 3.3.2. Is a hyperobject better than no object?

Taking the presentation of the crisis in hyperobject terms as a heuristic device throws up further problems, in betraying the appreciation and wonder of and at the complexity and interconnectedness of ecological objects by confusing them for the device, rather than as merely described by it, following the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. Suppose Morton is correct, and there exists a hyperobject “global warming” as described in *Hyperobjects*, which comprises all the causes, known and unknown of global warming, and is manifest in the myriad phenomena that it produces, from flash floods and forest fires to shrinking ice caps and melting permafrost. Such a formulation of the crisis calls to mind the book containing a complete description of the world described in Wittgenstein’s “Lecture on Ethics,” which I will quote here in full:

Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book, then this book would contain the whole description of the world; [...] this book would contain nothing that we would call an ethical judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement. It would of course contain all relative judgments of value and all true scientific propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made. But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial.

[...]

I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world. Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water even if I were to pour out a gallon over it.<sup>474</sup>

Hyperobjects appear to fulfil a role not unlike the book of Wittgenstein's metaphor, containing (and comprising) a complete description of global warming, and yet providing no ethical judgements, nor any information that helps us respond either ethically or aesthetically to the problem. It makes no sense to even imagine such a book, and even if it could be imagined, we would not want it to exist. The same is true, I think, of such a device as the hyperobject. Such a device attempts to compress more water into the teacup than it will allow, and looks to call the teacup, water, saucer, and wet tablecloth all by the same name.

Though I've established, in Part I, why such a device is incorrect, there remains, I think, work to be done in explaining quite why it is *wrong*. Leaving aside the criticisms made earlier, why should the misapprehension of the climate crisis in terms of overt simplifications be of such interest? Investigating this, requires a recognition of the kinds of simplification at work and an understanding of the deficiencies of the modes of aesthetic engagement that give rise to them. When the tendency to simplify is recognised in terms of pattern-seeking or reification, a role hyperobjects perform regarding the climate crisis, we can come to understand the deficiencies of the modes of aesthetic engagement that give rise to them.

Engaging with *Hyperobjects* presents a tacit choice, to view hyperobjects as either explanatory or descriptive. As a descriptive framework, hyperobjects are rather benign, in the way that astrology is: harmless when it comes to a daily horoscope but misused if taken as a basis for major decisions or explaining, say, childhood trauma. If we misread hyperobjects as explanatory, or allow the blithe elision of description into explanation, many issues begin to appear. This can be said about most of speculative realism, OOO, and the "new materialisms" more generally. We can afford to be pluralistic if we read these philosophemes as eccentric but harmless metaphors for things, but if we allow them to confuse us into thinking their theories explain anything, we have erred, and this seems to be the aesthetic choice at the heart of the matter. Moreover, the climate crisis, being complicated and

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<sup>474</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 6.



divisible in character, is an ideal candidate for certain sorts of heuristic. Like the Lernaean Hydra, the many heads of the climate crisis multiply when analysed. From the distant body of this monster extend such heads as mass extinction, rising ocean temperatures, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Yet even these heads, the local manifestations of a larger series of processes offer problems too large to easily parse. A mean 1°C rise in Indian Ocean temperature is a temperature change that one would not notice in a bath, and the thought of warmer waters around Mauritius is not, for most, an issue that sits closely with the destruction of coral reef ecosystems.

It may be the case that hyperobjects provide an object (of the grammatical kind) that can be feared in the way that more abstract, conglomerate events and processes cannot. Writing on the objects of fear, C.S. Lewis drew a distinction between fear, dread, and awe, using a tiger, a ghost, and a “mighty spirit” respectively to illustrate these differences.<sup>475</sup> Fear is characterised by the threat of bodily harm, as a tiger might inflict. Dread is a consequence of the mere existence of the ghost. Awe arises from wonder and a sense of inadequacy on the part of the seer. The climate crisis offers no end of possible sources of fear. The uncanny transformation of the world into a place of no safety provides extreme weather events to replace Lewis’s tiger, but the higher order affects of dread and awe are somewhat less distinct. The mere fact of the ghost’s existence gives rise to dread, which seems related to anticipation, oppression, and atmosphere. The ghost need not threaten anyone with harm, but by its existence opens a discomfiting vista on the reliability of our commonsense, homely apprehensions about the world.

The aesthetic experience of these affects in art is different in character. The abstractions of fear and dread expressed in horror literature and film relies on the ephemeral suspension of disbelief in the audience to shock, scare, and horrify. There is never the suggestion that the audience is at risk of bodily harm at watching even the most transgressive horror-flick.<sup>476</sup> And yet, film, music, and other artistic experiences remain with us long after we’ve “finished” experiencing them. Each experience may be a discrete occasion, but certain films, pieces of music, and other artworks do not end when the credits roll, or the applause begins. On a personal level, there are pieces of art, music, literature, and film, that I continue to

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<sup>475</sup> Clive Staples Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Zondervan, 2001), 5–6.

<sup>476</sup> Though perhaps examples of audience members fainting or vomiting at screenings of extreme horror films is an exception to this rule, e.g., Merlin Alderslade, ‘A New Horror Film Is so Brutally Gory It Has Audiences “Fainting”, “Vomiting” and Getting Ambulances Called’, *Louder*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.loudersound.com/news/a-new-horror-film-is-so-brutally-gory-it-has-audiences-fainting-vomiting-and-getting-ambulances-called>.



experience outside the discrete moment in which I encountered them for the first time. There are, for example, paintings that have affected me in such a way that my experience of that painting is ongoing, and develops whenever, for example, I attempt a painting myself. In such instances it's not that I am emulating, copying, or even directly influenced by such pieces, but my experience of them is extended in time regardless of any proximity to the particular object. If hyperobjects work as a metaphor, then the aesthetic engagement with them seems like the sort of thing that could stay with one in the same sense as a particularly moving piece of art. Yet the problem remains that "global warming" isn't something I can experience, only "flooding," or "wildfires" are. An experience of a flood or a wildfire is certainly likely to be an aesthetic moment, most likely a traumatic, transformative one. There could remain justification for the continued use of hyperobjects as possible objects to which negative affects like fear and shame can attach, as Hutchinson and Read suggest. I think they are correct that such an object may be needed for the transformative project by which humanity might be adapt while hovering over the abyss of climate collapse.<sup>477</sup> For the reasons set out here and in Part I, however, I do not think a hyperobject can fulfil that role.

### 3.3.3. Objects and processes

The climate crisis, in its scale and order of magnitude, exists beyond almost all mundane concerns, dwarfed perhaps only by the cosmological. It seems perfectly to offer purchase for the types of pattern-seeking, or simplifying heuristic that I've argued Morton indulges with *Hyperobjects*. The tendency to look for patterns among data, particularly when those data are presented visually (as an aid to comprehension, for example), is well charted. Insofar as the visual presentation of the data is suggestive of a conclusion, even when the data do not in fact point to that conclusion, the pattern-seeking heuristic is activated, and even agents well equipped to correctly interpret the data (owing to professional or academic expertise, or even being "merely competent" agents) are prone, at least initially, to conclude in the manner suggested by the visual pattern in which the data are presented.<sup>478</sup>

The relationship between this heuristic and the ontological status of the climate crisis seems to bear here, and arguably, the mistaken application of this heuristic is rooted in a category-error on the part of participants, who take climate change as an object, or system of objects

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<sup>477</sup> Hutchinson and Read, 'Practising Pragmatist-Wittgensteinianism', 182.

<sup>478</sup> John D. Sterman and Linda Booth Sweeney, 'Cloudy Skies: Assessing Public Understanding of Global Warming', *System Dynamics Review* 18, no. 2 (2002): 207–40. 214.

rather than a process, certainly on Chen's account.<sup>479</sup> While I think Chen's instinct here is right, that the false reification of something like the climate crisis is mistaken, I also want to err away from referring to it "simply" as a process. Firstly, the account of objects as "ontologically speaking, [...] three-dimensional material occupants of space that endure for a time,"<sup>480</sup> fails to account for such basic categories as mental and intentional objects, mathematical objects, or Meinongian non-existent objects, etc. While I make no assertion that such things are of the same kind as the three-dimensional, temporally limited, space occupying, concrete objects of Chen's account, I don't think such an account can proceed far at all without addressing the existence (or nonexistence) of such things.

The temporality of objects and processes, in which the former is enduring, and the latter transient likewise seems incorrect. Even in a strictly materialistic sense, concrete objects do not endure in any meaningful sense. If such were the case, the problem of plastic pollution, for example, would be slightly easier to solve: a mere matter of fishing whole carrier bags and plastic toys out of the ocean, rather than the incalculable quantity of microplastics into which such objects have been degraded. The degradation of objects in terms of both the degradation of coherent wholes into constituent parts (plastic toy cars physically break down into wheels, axles, and chassis – no longer toy cars), and the destruction at the elemental level (the decay of carbon-14 into nitrogen-14, etc.). Objects of thought may not degrade in the same way that concrete objects might, though one can imagine something like the love felt for a particular piece of music degrading over time, likewise with, say, enmity towards a former spouse, or the confidence of youth. We might also want to say that such mental objects are in their particular cases contingent on material objects themselves subject to degradation and decay, human bodies and their brains, or in the case of say, a virtual world (such as the world of a computer game) the loss of server or storage functions. We might also want to say something about such objects being contingent on wider systems that can fail to endure, the belief that the rising sun is guaranteed by blood sacrifice did not survive the destruction of the Aztec civilisation, for example.

None of this enables us to escape the problem of the non-existent object, nor indeed, the pernicious non-identity problem. The belief B, "blood sacrifice guarantees the rising of the sun" does not exist in the sense that it is held sincerely by anyone alive today but in the simple sense that if B refers to something, then such a statement as "B does not exist," is

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<sup>479</sup> Xiang Chen, 'Why Do People Misunderstand Climate Change? Heuristics, Mental Models and Ontological Assumptions', *Climatic Change* 108 (2011): 33.

<sup>480</sup> Chen, 35.

false. We need not accept that “B used to exist” is the same as “B exists now,” but since it’s possible to discuss B in this manner, we are faced with B qua non-existent object. If we were again to take up the language of *Hyperobjects*, then B, the belief that the continued rising of the sun is only guaranteed by human sacrifice, would without doubt qualify as an historical hyperobject: a thing that penetrated pre-conquest Mesoamerican society and thought, in much the same way as capitalism penetrates, every thought and belief, right down to the very cells of our bodies.<sup>481</sup>

Non-existent objects and dead belief systems point to questions of adaptation primarily in terms of the distribution of the burden of mitigating disaster and adapting to climate change. At stake is the disparity between those primarily responsible for the climate crisis, and those that must bear the consequences of it. Which is to say, the responsibility for past and ongoing emissions lies with those who exist, or have existed, whereas the ongoing burden of the climate crisis and the harm it will inflict lies predominantly with the very young, but also with those who do not yet exist. I alluded earlier, briefly, to my attempt to ward away certain ideological positions, among them antinatalism, the belief according to which it is better to not bring new humans into existence on account of the hardship and suffering they must endure as a function of being alive in such a world as ours.<sup>482</sup> Such a position seems predicated on the possibility of attributing a positive quality to a non-existent being. Namely, it appears to rely of a model of harm based in conception, such that an event  $y$  occurring at a particular time  $t_1$  harms a person  $Q$  IFF  $y$  causes  $Q$  to be less well off at a subsequent time  $t_2$  than  $Q$  would have been had  $y$  not occurred.<sup>483</sup>

I harbour here, a worry that this conversation about the distinction between objects and processes is mere equivocation. I demonstrated in my analysis in 1.2.4. of the difficulties Morton encounters when assigning spatio-temporal conditions for his principal definition, and I don’t need to go further in discussing the problems of such a direct materialistic definition of objects. Nevertheless, it seems either the case that missing from this definition is the type of object described whether non-existent objects in the Meinongian sense, or verbal and mental objects. It might be an escape to argue as a hardline physicalist might that these kinds of objects are mere illusions created by processes which originate in the brain, but if

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<sup>481</sup> Given the distribution of microplastics or the mutation-catalysing power of atmospheric pollution, this is not mere hyperbole.

<sup>482</sup> David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>483</sup> Ori J. Herstein, ‘Why “Nonexistent People” Do Not Have Zero Wellbeing but No Wellbeing at All’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (2013): 137.

such is the case, I see no reason to exclude such concrete objects as brains themselves as the products of such processes as the gene selection theory of evolution or even as intermediary stages of a process like the carbon cycle.

If objects themselves are reducible in this way to processes, then the process to which all objects are subject, or of which objects are fleeting expressions, is entropy, and the closest thing to an enduring process, a process of processes, seems to be the ongoing, ever-unfolding degeneration of states of affairs. Not only are we faced with such phenomena as nuclear waste, the decay of which seems tailored toward a definition of impermanence, yet which remains, itself disturbingly resilient; why else would we have such difficulty dealing with it.

### 3.3.4. The ephemeral

Environmental aesthetics, then, carry a sense of ephemeral, fleeting impermanence. The encounter produces feelings of loss attached to the tacit recognition that objects, events, and processes alike fade from time in its fullness; but what is the loss in which this sensation arises? We might consider a deprivation account of climate crisis: we risk losing that which we would have had, but-for the crisis. We ignore this because it's a form of suffering. We don't want to experience pain or anxiety, so we strategically forget, "when we suffer deeply, there is a desire to forget what we have experienced. This desire is perhaps redoubled, if we didn't *really* experience it; for instance, if other people suffered it "for" us, or if we denied it."<sup>484</sup>

What then might we imagine are the consequences of a catastrophe that is happening *for* us, but not *to* us? There is a sense of temporal distortion that risks entangling us. The climate crisis has in some sense already happened, or at least we might say that it has begun: a slow, but accelerating trend towards extreme weather events, zoonotic contagions, extinctions, etc. And yet, the worst is yet to come, sea level changes that submerge whole nations or such tipping-point events as the thawing of permafrost that releases of billions of tons of stored carbon into the atmosphere, a feedback loop set to accelerate the thawing of yet more permafrost, *ad nauseam*. Those tragedies are yet to come, and will be, for the most part, experienced by others, experienced, "*for*" us.

*Hiroshima Mon Amour* frames the horror of the destruction of Hiroshima in terms of incomprehensibility, of the wide abyss between humanity and the possibility of understanding a trauma of such magnitude, a magnitude suggestive of the scales of

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<sup>484</sup> Rupert Read, *A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2019), 38.

sublimity, gigantism and monstrousness. This abyss calls to mind the disorienting, vertiginous effect of stepping out into the sunken pier that projects into the void of Richard Wilson's holographic work, *20:50*.<sup>485</sup> The world is inverted across its indelible blackness, such that one stands at the end of the walkway and finds oneself struck in the tension of the unbroken surface. Fathoming the scale of such an event as the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, *should* be disorienting. Facing the enormity of the horror of nuclear warfare involves stepping out into the abyss to find a place from which perspective is possible, and through such perspective begin to recognise the horror that was welcomed into being from the wings of Enola Gay.

To understand such magnitude seems to require first a genuine attempt to understand the enormity of “just” one death as the first step onto the walkway into the void.<sup>486</sup> If Resnais' film frames in such a way the horror of atomic war, a horror that can only be understood by the empathy of true comprehension in which the “madness” of atomic apocalypse is recognised for what it is, named as such and awoken from, what can we learn about the (re)framing of the ecological crises that blight our times? The role of Resnais' art here then, is in it, “suggests – and directly *facilitates* – an awakening to (and thus from) this madness.”<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Richard Wilson, *20:50*, Saatchi Gallery, 1987, Used Sump Oil, Steel.

<sup>486</sup> Read, *A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment*, 40.

<sup>487</sup> Read, *A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment*. 43–44.



FIGURE 5 RICHARD WILSON, 20:50<sup>488</sup>

The opening remarks of the fragmentary “Philosophy of Psychology,” (“Part II” of *Philosophical Investigations*), address, briefly, the grammar of grief, pointing to grief as a temporal, personal question. Grief is not something like pain, “For a second he felt violent pain.’ – Why does it sound odd to say: ‘For a second he felt deep grief?’”<sup>489</sup> Though grief may be a kind of pain, a pain that is extended in time, its character is such that an answer to the question “are you grieving now?” seems itself to misunderstand the structure of grief.<sup>490</sup> What can one say of the grief of just one loss, let alone the grief one must feel for an event like the destruction of Hiroshima? Grief is a wound in our world in which each loss is a hole torn out of one’s “lifeworld.”<sup>491</sup> Approaching an event of such tragic enormity as the annihilation of a whole city, then, confronts us with a lifeworld deformed, and utterly

<sup>488</sup> Wilson, 20:50.

<sup>489</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 185. 185.

<sup>490</sup> This misunderstanding of grief is similar to the earlier reflection on the extended nature of any aesthetic experience: such an experience brings about a possibly profound change in affective disposition in the seer that does not end with a discretely bounded aesthetic event: the end of a film, the silence at the end of a piece of music.

<sup>491</sup> Rupert Read, ‘Can There Be a Logic of Grief?’, in *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, ed. Oskari Kuusela et al. (Routledge, 2018), 177.

perforated by untellable loss. The problem that the climate crisis confronts us with is one of an ominous foreshadowing. The lifeworld is distorted, frayed, but not yet rent by the calamities we've permitted; and yet, despite knowing what is to come we are paralysed in the knowledge that in some real sense, the disaster has already happened. To use Heidegger's phrasing again, we do not see that which *has* long arrived, which *has* indeed happened. Of nuclear war, the explosion of the bomb is a final eruption of an event that arrived long before; just as we will surely have to regard the felling of the final tree that leads to irreversible dieback in the Amazon, or whichever other straw that breaks the camel's back of climate tipping points: "what is this helpless fear still waiting for, if the dreadful *has* already happened."<sup>492</sup>

The impending and already progressing loss of a world ravaged by climate catastrophe, and the unfolding distortion to our "lifeworld" seems to be of a different character to the instant finality of a world marred by even a single death. For one, those lost aren't yet among us, as must be the case of all future peoples; we cannot grieve for those whose loss has not happened, and which by its nature might never happen at all. Yet the certainty with which we can say, if not that future person X will die thanks to the climate catastrophe, that future peoples Y will suffer the deleterious effects of decisions made today. Looking more closely at this thought leaves the notion of certainty on unsteady ground. Might we be better to say, *I think I know* that this course of action will harm future peoples Y? "Certainty is as it were a tone of voice in which one declares how things are, but one does not infer from the tone of voice that one is justified."<sup>493</sup>

We take grief to be a temporally extended sensation, a process in time, and yet it seems easy to mistake death as an event that is singular, or spatio-temporally located in one distinct moment. This assumption is not to be made so readily, nor is the notion that a death is not also extended in time and space, and indeed, around such an event space and time may well seem to warp for those caught in its wake. Death too is a process that unfolds in time, and not *merely* as a single event in which a hole is punched through the fabric of life. Instead, by viewing death as an unravelling, grief and mourning are themselves transformed from mechanisms of coping and then into processes of gathering up what is left with a view to rearranging the lifeworld into a form that acknowledges the permanent loss while allowing life to continue. It's a procedure of coming to recognise that we carry the dead along with us,

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<sup>492</sup> Heidegger, 'Bremen Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is', 254.

<sup>493</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Denis Paul (Basil Blackwell, 1969). 6e.

and that death is not an event that strikes down only a single individual, but that strikes those who survive as well. It's this sharing of death between the deceased and her survivors that "makes death (the death of others) *cope-able* with."<sup>494</sup>

For each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than an end of the world. Not only one end among others, the end of someone or of something in the world, the end of a life or of a living being. Death puts an end neither to someone in the world nor to one world among others. Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which each opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any unique living being, be it human or not.<sup>495</sup>

In the event of the death of the other is in each case the end of the world and, "for a time, I find myself beyond the world, before the world, and without the world."<sup>496</sup> Imagine there is no world, Derrida suggests, and there is always a world, the world that I am beyond, before, or without. The death of the world in the individual closes the circle opened in Meillassoux's search for the great outdoors. The suggestion of a limitation or end only tempts the seer to look over the fence into the abyssal beyond, only to find a continuation of the world she strived to exceed. The world beyond, the world to come, the world that must follow this absolute end is warped, yes, and breaks with the known world, monstrous in that it exceeds its own end.<sup>497</sup>

So here we are faced with the task of trying to come to terms with a future tragedy, of living with the future dead in a way that is quite different in character from the modes of living-with in the present, "The 'to-come'—something like the 'difference horizon' of every event, a 'horizon' that opens rather than frames—can no more be understood in this vulgar way, than (my) death can be understood simply as one event among others."<sup>498</sup> The so-called non-identity problem is no longer an issue of the ethics of performing an act that may come to harm future peoples, but one of compassion towards non-existent peoples, a compassion born from learning to feel, truly, the weight of the tragedy that awaits them, and to feel it as

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<sup>494</sup> Read, 'Can There Be a Logic of Grief?', 186.

<sup>495</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue - Between Two Infinities, the Poem', in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (Fordham University Press, 2005), 140.

<sup>496</sup> Sean Gaston, 'Derrida and the End of the World', *New Literary History* 42, no. 3 (2011): 510.

<sup>497</sup> Gaston, 'Derrida and the End of the World', 503.

<sup>498</sup> David Wood, 'On Being Haunted by the Future', *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 295.



keenly as we feel the weight of past tragedies. The world non-existent people inhabit cannot be our world, for each tragedy that warps the future. The future itself is a vulnerable, threatened, traumatised thing that demands radical modes of compassion, expansive enough to include those who do not yet exist.

This radical compassion towards future people does not abrogate us of any responsibility towards currently existing people. Future people are ethically uncomplicated, making no demands of us.<sup>499</sup> Compared to currently existing people, whose plight challenges us to, for example, reconsider national border policies or to closely examine the structures on which our democratic and judicial processes are built. Future people, in their nonexistence, do not ask us to address our biases regarding sex, gender, and biological determinism. And when at last they enter existence, and gain the ability to make actual ethical demands, they are no longer future people at all, but present people, and as such are not the subjects of “non-identity” ethical tangles after all.<sup>500</sup> Overly concerning ourselves with future people cannot be an excuse for ignoring the actual ethical demands placed on us by present people. The climate crisis creates an opportunity to bridge the gap between present and future by radical attention to the fact that present people are also future people, along with the throng of currently non-existent future people. We can and should do things that benefit people now, in terms of developing climate resilience and embedding deep adaptation in the knowledge that future and present people alike benefit from such acts. Foreclosing the possibility of future peoples wholesale, by failing to act to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis is a far greater abrogation of our ethical duties to a greater range of people than merely non-existent people.<sup>501</sup>

By treating nonhumans as though they are centres of value offers a further route out this so-called problem. If we say that, for example, dumping nuclear waste in the sea is bad, we can say so either because acts of polluting are intrinsically wrong, or we can say that the sea, as a system of interwoven lives and as the medium into which those lives, both human and nonhuman extend is the sort of thing that can be harmed, and that harming such things is wrong. We can then get a root ethical position of something like “causing harm is bad,” while removing from our ethics that harm is transitive in needing some person to attach itself

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<sup>499</sup> Rivka Weinberg, ‘Identifying and Dissolving the Non-Identity Problem’, *Philosophical Studies* 137, no. 1 (2008): 3–18.

<sup>500</sup> Rivka Weinberg, ‘Existence: Who Needs It? The Non-Identity Problem and Merely Possible People’, *Bioethics* 27, no. 9 (2013): 471–84.

<sup>501</sup> Jeffrey Reiman, ‘Being Fair to Future People: The Non-Identity Problem in the Original Position’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2007): 69–92.

to. If we must, then we either widen personhood in such a way as rats, grasses, meadows, etc. all gain personhood, or a revision of the golden rule to include “is this the kind of thing that can be harmed?”

# Conclusion

## Summary

In the initial section of this thesis, I carried out an examination of speculative realism's position within "post-divide" continental thought. This investigation began with an exploration of two principal contributions in Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*: the critique of correlationism and the account of ancestrality. The critique of correlationism aims to demonstrate that philosophers engaged in the methodologies of the continental tradition, phenomenology, deconstruction, and related approaches, cannot separate thought from the correlate of thought. Consequently, Meillassoux argues, such philosophers cannot adequately address questions arising from the physical sciences in the account of ancestrality, which is to say, from a time preceding the possibility of givenness. These questions include: when did a particular star form? What occurred during the accretion of the Earth, or at the moment of the Big Bang? Meillassoux contends that such inquiries point to a time preceding the possibility of givenness, and as such, are the types of questions on which correlationist thinkers must necessarily remain silent. Instead, he proposes that philosophers should seek "the great outdoors" of a return to pre-Kantian philosophy, wherein such questions can be posed without appeal to the correlate, which he critiques.

My analysis addressed these two critiques by presenting, firstly, a challenge to the correlational circle, and secondly, an ecophenomenological account of time. Within the framework of the ecophenomenological account of time, Meillassoux's critiques become irrelevant. Furthermore, the aesthetic encounter with ancient objects such as the lithic, as well as with ancientness itself, perhaps in relation to the night sky, provides access to objects preceding the account of givenness. The act of observing the stars constitutes a retrospective view of ancient times, and if one engages in prolonged, deep observation of the darkness between the stars, a procedure that may necessitate the use of telescopes and similar instruments, one directly encounters objects that precede the possibility of givenness, such as the red shift phenomenon.

In 1.2. I continued my analysis of speculative realism with a close examination of one of the most influential expressions of the speculative realist, or Object-Oriented Ontology movement: Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*. While I look favourably on Morton's objectives in this work, that is first, "to establish the possibility of a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them," and second, "to establish what phenomenological 'experience' is in the absence of [a world,]" and indeed, these questions

have in large part motivated this inquiry. Hyperobjects is, despite its influence, a flawed work. The resulting hyperobject theory is unsustainable due to its incoherence. My argument presents the conclusion that "hyperobject" is too broad a category to have any substantive meaning without significant refinement. In its current form, virtually everything in the world, except for animals (including humans), can be classified as a hyperobject, rendering the term meaningless. Furthermore, I have consistently argued that not only is the concept of hyperobjects devoid of meaning, but if expanded upon, it potentially yields deleterious effects that make it undesirable, even if the theory could be salvaged. Most notably, by presenting the climate crisis at an almost ineffable scale, the concept of hyperobjects risks either making positive action on mitigation and adaptation appear nearly impossible, thereby potentially disrupting well-intentioned efforts to intervene. As a means of describing interactions with large-scale phenomena such as global warming, it can serve as a useful device; however, as a heuristic, it has the effect of shifting focus from large-scale thoughts to large-scale deeds, which expands my focus from speculative realism to the roots of phenomenology in the disenchantment of modernity.

In the second part of the thesis, I presented an analysis of the critiques of modernity and technology that have influenced reactionary intellectuals for more than a century. To some extent, the climate crisis has supplanted the problem of modernity in the contemporary discourse. Nevertheless, these critiques continue to influence contemporary reactionaries, and the rejection of modernity remains fundamental to fascist ideology. The incorporation of the climate crisis into the fascistic worldview not only creates opportunities for fascist ideas to permeate environmental movements but also presents a dilemma when the climate crisis is framed in terms of scale. On one hand, the scale of the crisis and its proposed solutions can be interpreted as radically local. This approach emphasizes the importance of local food production, local infrastructure, and a significant reduction in economic, extractive, and polluting activities. This path runs parallel to the anarcho-primitivist extreme, wherein ideologies that justify or promote extreme violence emerge, propagating ideas such as "civilization must be fought," "humans are the virus," and iterations of Malthusianism, such as "the problem is not that we are evil, it is that we love our children so much that we produced too many of them."

On the other hand, the trajectory that hyperobjects potentially indicates is a focus on the crisis at a global scale. In this context, hope and optimism become problematically intertwined with the invocation of non-existent technologies and concepts such as sustainability. Under this paradigm, the proposed solution to the climate crisis essentially

involves a substantial expansion of the authoritarian technic that maintains the global infrastructure necessary for implementing such solutions. This approach effectively represents a new total mobilisation model in which technology reaches its historical destiny. Such a perspective perpetuates illusions like sustainability while being reducible to a vision of accelerationist capitalistic nihilism. Moreover, this perspective aligns with the type of modernity against which reactionaries fundamentally oppose. Pursuing such a model engenders the individualism of "into the wild" adherents, creating an inherent antagonism in the framing itself. This constitutes the primary reason for considering hyperobjects undesirable as a theoretical framework. Consequently, the question of framing climate at scale appears to present a choice between two dystopian scenarios. While there may be potential for an alternative approach, a middle path, it is exceedingly precarious, and those who advocate for it must exercise extreme caution in their approach.

I posit that environmentally oriented individuals, including writers, academics, philosophers, critics, and activists, should be cognizant of these tensions and the potential progression from environmental-adjacent activities and introspection to far-right ideologies rooted in Malthusianism, identitarianism, and ethnopluralism. It is imperative that critiques originate from marginalised perspectives, rising from below, as when individuals or groups perceive themselves as embattled, ridiculed, or disparaged by an elitist intelligentsia, further alienation, isolation, and radicalisation may follow. Mere factual information regarding the negative or erroneous aspects of these ideologies is insufficient to prevent individuals from adopting far-right perspectives. Such ideologies offer a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which aesthetics, societal rejection, masculinist ideals, and violence coalesce into a tapestry of extreme ideas. It is crucial to protect vulnerable individuals from these ideologies, even if the predominantly educated, heterosexual, white, cisgender male demographic is not traditionally considered "below" others in the critical framework. When properly directed upwards, critique should reveal that the rejection of capitalistic nihilism activates both the ecologically minded left and right. Philosophers and critics have a role in recognizing and legitimizing the concerns of both groups in a manner that does not concede ground to extremist ideology from either perspective. Instead, attention should be given to, for example, the intimacy possible within classically construed "masculinist" accounts of the human relation to nature, acknowledging their meaningfulness and merit despite potential incongruence with queer or feminist ecocritical positions. While this approach may compromise ideological purity, it allows left-leaning environmental spaces to function as places of shelter, growth, and belonging, and a possible sanctuary for those vulnerable to extremist ideologies.

Heidegger's later philosophical works continue to resonate with reactionary thinkers and are appropriated, often indirectly, by far-right ideologues and activists operating under various guises such as ethnopluralism and identitarianism. Heidegger's own ideological commitments to Nazism, his political opportunism in securing the rectorship of Freiburg, his adherence to the national socialist vision of German destiny, his antisemitism, and particularly his own efforts (and those of his executors) to obfuscate the extent of the aforementioned and exculpate and rehabilitate his reputation following denazification are all rather damning. From the critique of technology to the rootlessness of non-Germans, the construal of an historic destiny of the German Volk, and the reframing of Dasein as communal being of a people all contribute to the tropes of the contemporary far-right just as they did to the Brownshirts of the Weimar Republic once the chancellery had been secured by the mythic leader-figure Heidegger so admired. Heidegger scholarship cannot avoid nor fail to attend to these aspects of his life and work as mere detail. Moreover, future scholarship needs to encompass the inheritors of Heidegger's work that do not fall in the Francophone side of the family tree. Indeed, the likes of Dugin need to be engaged with as potentially more faithful or legitimate (orthodox) interpreters of Heidegger.

This study presents a detailed analysis of the concept of the gigantic in Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, with particular focus on *Contributions*. The gigantic constitutes a mode of encounter that provides insights into our orientation towards the interaction with objects of considerable magnitude. According to Heidegger, the gigantic is a specific quality that emerges from the magnitude, scale, or quantity of an entity. In the context of the climate crisis, it has been posited that climate statistics and attempts to comprehend the enormity of the issue transform the quantity and scale of the crisis into a qualitative aspect. When considered as an aesthetic mode, it has been argued that this concept surpasses the sublime, and that the dynamic sublime is no longer a viable concept due to the absence of safety in a world altered by the climate crisis. In the world that exists under the climate crisis, there are no secure spaces. This connects to an often-overlooked section of the “the Question Concerning Technology” in which Heidegger relates technology and scale to monstrousness. This interpretation of “the Question Concerning Technology” has been expanded to include the lecture courses on Hölderlin's river poems *Der Rhein* and *Der Ister*. In these lectures, Heidegger describes the enormity of technology's dominion and the production of the uncanny through the dissolution of distinctions between home and foreign. A new distinction has instead emerged along which identities can be formed – the homely and the unhomely, human and world.

In the final part of the thesis, I considered the role of philosophers engaged in environmental projects and sought to establish that an inclusive aesthetic mode, attentive to the question of scale should be adopted. I argued that the question of technology still vexes ideologies on the left and the right. I called for a reclamation and expansion of intimacy as an orientation towards this mode that recognises the changed world that we inhabit on account of the climate crisis. In this world, the other should no longer be the “foreign” of Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin, but a more expansive changed, hostile, uncanny world against which we are now set. I argued that the scale of the climate crisis invites particular heuristics, and that particular framings, which may themselves serve ideological ends, benefit from the activation of different heuristic devices. Whether simple pattern seeking, affective reaction to animals in distress, or the direct consequences of individual behaviour, each one misses the mark of the climate crisis by, in part, misconstruing the scale at which the crisis operates. My objective here is not to argue for a particular course of action, but rather to attempt to clarify these vexations.

## Contribution

The main contributions of this thesis are, as identified, 1) the direct and sustained criticism of Morton’s *Hyperobjects*, 2) the analysis of the gigantic in Heidegger’s later work, 3) the development of aesthetics of scale.

While the other main contributors to the speculative realist corpus, especially Graham Harman, have had their work subjected to sustained philosophical scrutiny, Morton’s work, perhaps on account of its vacillating position between philosophy, critique, and literature has, until now, avoided such scrutiny. Morton’s output is prolific, and though he has turned from *Hyperobjects*, its eponymous idea permeates his oeuvre. The influence of *Hyperobjects* across the academy and beyond in such varied corners of culture as movie production, literature, music, etc. demanded a close, critical reading. As such, this thesis finds a position among critics of speculative realism, including Wolfendale, Rekret, Mulhall, Lovat, and others.

The gigantic and similar constructions appear in Heidegger’s later work and suggest the importance of scale to the orientation of Dasein towards the technological world. From “The Age of the World Picture,” through *Contributions*, and appearing throughout the post-turn writings, the reading of the gigantic is the only extended examination of Heidegger’s use of this term and its implication for his, and for future philosophical work. This analysis also

allowed me to bring an aesthetic reading to Heidegger's writing on technology in "The Question Concerning Technology," in a novel way.

Using recent approaches in Wittgensteinian philosophy, namely Read's liberatory approach, I have been able to adopt a post-divide approach to developing an aesthetic reading of the framing of the climate crisis and the role played by heuristic devices that are suggestive of scale. This is a novel approach to

## Future research

The criticism of *Hyperobjects* in this thesis is quite conclusive. Future work that relies on Morton would benefit from an analysis of what hyperobjects do in any proposed intellectual framework or theory, and whether they can be done without. I am confident that the answer to the latter point will almost always be, yes, we can make do without. I am confident that the output of others that relies on hyperobjects will continue. Such work can be criticised on its commitments to speculative realism and likely undermined on account of its resting on shaky foundations.

Work in the *Gesamtausgabe* must continue in full honesty and awareness not only of Heidegger's ideological commitments to National Socialism, but also his and his executors' dishonesty in their attempted rehabilitation of his character. Furthermore, even classic works of Heidegger scholarship can be read anew in light of their reliance on the illusions spun in order to make him more palatable after the war. There is work to be done on readings of Heidegger not based in the Franco-American branch of the genealogy. Some of the less comfortable readings of Heidegger's work, including those arising in the contemporary far-right or in the non-Anglophone academy like Alexander Dugin need to be examined. The threads that connect Dugin's political theory with his reading of Heidegger, and such contemporary phenomena as the rise in popularity in the USA of the Orthodox church could prove an interesting area of future research.<sup>502</sup>

The rise of far-right environmentalism and ecofascism likewise would benefit from close future study, in terms of both ideological and philosophical commitments, and perhaps a detailed online and offline ethnography. Unpicking the overlaps between such extreme ideologies as radical masculinism, environmental extremism, conspiracy-theorism, incel

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<sup>502</sup> Francis X. Rocca, 'Eastern Orthodoxy Gains New Followers in America', *The Wall Street Journal* (New York), 17 May 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/eastern-orthodoxy-gains-new-followers-in-america-b665414b>.



anti-feminism, identitarianism, etc. is likely to be a process that invites collaboration between anthropologists, political theorists, and philosophers.

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