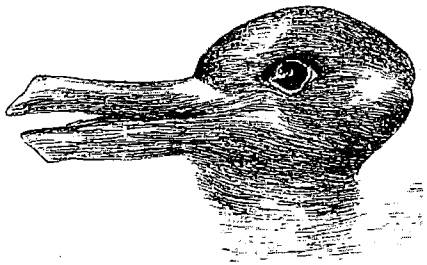

Ecology after Capitalism

Timothy Morton

Ecology without Nature and 'Rights'

The trouble with ecological invocations of Nature is that they're like calling for a medieval tool, perhaps a portcullis or an arrow slit, to fix a modern problem. Invoking Nature always measures the distance we have yet to travel to achieve real progress on environmental issues. This is because Nature is an ideological construct. It's not genuinely old like a portcullis—as a matter of fact, medieval conceptions of Nature tended to regard it as a domain of evil. It's more like an eighteenth-century "antiqued" tool.[1] Nature was developed to resist the onslaughts of capitalism, but it's really not a very good defense—rather like resisting a steamroller with a Christmas tree ornament.

This isn't to say that Nature doesn't still have some gas mileage in it. You can probably stop Sarah Palin from drilling in the Arctic if you invoke Nature loudly enough. But every time you use it, you should remember that you're using a regressive tool, a fantasy of some reified thing that's always "over there" in the wild blue yonder, to fix something that is most decidedly here, something—namely capitalism—that even abolishes concepts of "here" and "there" in its globalizing permanent revolution. Aesthetic experiences are powerful, to be sure, and probably inescapable, but Nature will not remain effective for very long.

This is not just because of capitalism, but because as we enter an ecological age we are realizing that absolutely everything is absolutely connected to absolutely everything else. And if absolutely everything is absolutely connected with absolutely everything else, we have an interesting situation. First, there's weirdly less of everything than we thought. For example, there's much less to my identity as a person, on various levels. I'm made of various parts that I share with other organisms, and my DNA is basically the same as practically everyone else's—I share 35% of it with daffodils, for instance (Wordsworth, eat

your heart out). And my DNA itself isn't very DNA-ish. It's a loose hybrid of codons, some of which are viral code insertions that can't strictly be demarcated from the non-viral ones.[2] No codon is more "authentic" than any other. This is symbiosis, one of the other implications of interconnectedness—of course we know that we share our bodies with bacterial symbionts, some of which are hiding in our cells in refuge from one of the first global environmental catastrophes, the one called oxygen.[3] These are mitochondria, which supply us with energy. But in your DNA there's also a retrovirus called ERV-3 that may well code for immunosuppressive properties of the placental barrier. You are reading this because a virus in your mom's DNA made her body not allergic to you. Since there's less of me, what counts as "my" rights in particular? What counts as anyone's rights? Does DNA have rights?

The biosphere is much less self-identical than we like to think—much less "natural" as a matter of fact. There isn't a little picture of me in my DNA; my DNA can be told to produce viruses—that's how viruses replicate. Genomics is now able to use a virus to tell bacterial DNA to make plastic rather than bacteria. This openness and ungroundedness has another side, which is intimacy. Symbiosis means that we've got others, and others have got us, literally under our skin. I think it would be better to base an ecological ethics and politics on these facts rather than on a construct such as Nature. For example, we could fashion a Levinasian or simply Kantian ethics of responsibility in the face of the other.[4] One might then be able to argue that we are responsible for global warming simply because we exist, no other reason required. Or maybe we are fully responsible because we are sentient, though official ideology (from religion to science) seems to set the bar for sentience too high. This is a remainder of teleological thinking that Darwinism profoundly undermines—which is why Karl Marx wrote him a fan letter.[5]

If everything is interconnected—interconnected in time, too, as evolution tells us—then there's no "over yonder" and therefore no Nature. Nature is a function of a certain aesthetic distance.[6] If ecology is in your face—if it is, in fact, your face as such—then ecology is without Nature. We have to imagine ecological ethics and politics without Nature. For example: you are sitting or standing on the Earth, which is made of life forms a long way down into the Earth's crust. I drive around using crushed dinosaur parts. Iron is mostly a by-product of bacterial metabolism. So is oxygen. You could argue, as some biologists do, that the entire biosphere is the phenotypical expression of various life forms' genomes: a phenotype is an expression of DNA, the genotype. Where does the beaver's DNA stop? At the ends of its whiskers? Or at the end of its dam? What about a spider's web? What about this desk I'm sitting at? Or this computer? In a sense it's just as much part of my DNA's "extended phenotype" as my reddish facial hair. Rights language doesn't quite work here, because it's not entirely obvious where to draw a boundary line around a life form, either in space or in evolutionary time, and say "this is where you are, this is you"—which seems like a minimal condition for ascribing rights to something or someone. So we're not even in a position to start the conversation about subjectivity and property and sentience and all the other things that are involved in rights discourse. Ecological ethics must proceed in the knowledge that rights discourse is only a patch.

The notion of the "extended phenotype" makes things a whole lot worse for environmentalism. It means that there's no environment as such. To some extent, life forms are each other's environments—the background to each other's foreground, if you like—but even this Gestalt language doesn't really hold up, if only because one life form's background is another life form's foreground, and also because, if everything is interconnected, there is no background and therefore no foreground. This is how global warming, to take just one contemporary phenomenon, erodes our ideas of "world."[7] "Weather" and "Nature" are vanishing as discrete phenomena, as climate and ecology are emerging. If everything is everything else's environment, then there's not much use in the word any more. Moreover, you might argue that all life forms are DNA's environment, and a pretty permeable one at that. For instance, do you sneeze because you are trying to get rid of a rhinovirus, or does rhinoviral DNA code directly for sneezing in order to propagate itself?[8] In DNA's case, the environment is also its phenotype, its expression. In this sense the medium is explicitly part of the message. It's as if a poem not only organized the space on the page around it—like a lot of modern poems do, in fact—but as if the poem were somehow capable of assembling the paper as such. This actually isn't a bad description of what DNA and ribosomes do. DNA is matter that is also information.

So "the environment" is starting to look like merely an upgrade, and not a very good one, of Nature—Nature version 2.0 if you like.[9] It's a kind of "new and improved" Nature, and I use this phrase deliberately because I think environmentalism is a product of capitalist ideology. I'm going to include under the umbrella of environmentalism an awful lot that passes for an upgraded philosophy of Nature, such as Spinozan pantheism, or Deleuzoguattarian worlds of interlocking machines, or anything else that seems like a hip new substitute for Nature; from a certain perspective, all these views are cut from the same reified cloth. For a moment, let's imagine a time at which "environmental-ism" looks as strange and essentialist as "racism" or "heterosexism." So for the rest of this essay, I shall use the word "environmentalism" in this sense, and use "ecology" and "ecological politics" to denote what I see as the way forward.

Nature is reactive to capitalism, and environmentalism is a mere upgrade of Nature-discourse, so in the end it is not very effective. Capitalism itself, of course, is highly reactive—and ecological ethics must be proactive. Let us consider some paradoxical and urgent examples. Might, for instance, the very language of touchy-feely embeddedness, the aestheticized language of experience, be actually impeding a truly ecological politics?[10] Isn't it the case that if you have to feel "right" before you do anything, you are just wasting time? And doesn't this mean that the language of powerful experiences (say, sublime feelings about Nature) are on a par with the global warming denial that insists on more tests, more data? Say you see a small child about to be hit by a car in the street. Do you wait until you have more data, or until you feel right about saving her life—or do you just save her? And isn't rights discourse caught in this same dilemma? Won't we be waiting for a long time to do anything if a condition of our action is that we must know for sure that what we're helping has rights? And for the reasons given above, finding out that what we're helping does have rights would be highly dubious—if the environment as such doesn't exist, wouldn't it be a waste of time to find out whether it has rights or not?

Doesn't this mean, in the end, that figuring out whether the environment has

rights sounds like a progressive move—the constitution of Ecuador ratified in 2008, for example, specifies certain environmental rights—but is actually a symptom of a reactive political economy that appears, ideologically, to just "work all by itself"? We just have to sit back and wait for "the market" to figure out what to do. Such forms of "wait and see" language are very much what we can't be using right now. There has to be another way of inspiring people to act.

There's a deeper problem here, which has to do with time. Various forms of consequentialism, such as hedonism—it makes you feel good, for example, to plant a tree—just don't work at this point.[11] This is because the effects of our actions must be measured in terms and on time scales far vaster than we have previously imagined. Most self-interest theories, even modified ones that take into account my immediate family or even my society (or my species, or my biome), aren't sufficient when it comes to thinking about what to do with numerous modern products such as radioactive waste and Styrofoam. Styrofoam cups will greatly, greatly, outlast most of the people whose ancestor I might reasonably claim to be.[12]

Even if this were not the case, it would be a colossal waste of time to sit around waiting for the right reasons to stop polluting. We just have to stop doing it. And we should set the bar very low for why. I suggest setting it at the mere fact of our existence; perhaps one should prefer setting it at the fact that you can understand this sentence, but it doesn't appear that we have much time to go any higher.

This is, of course, far from claiming that since there is no environment as such, there's no need to act. We must act, and paradoxically ideas of Nature and the environment are on the side of impeding most of our best actions. In this, they are a feature of capitalist ideology, which has always based itself on some idea of naturalness—"things just work that way." The recent financial crisis, for example, was enabled by Ayn Rand, whose work Alan Greenspan devoured to the point at which he was confident that markets are self-correcting. Nature, like the market, is a set of algorithmic processes that just seem to work by themselves. This kind of mystification edits out anything like human agency. I'm dead set against arguing that Nature has rights, because that would mean that it's some kind of autonomous being, and we've had enough of that sort of language, thank you very much. One problem, of course, is that capitalism is not a stable, self-correcting algorithmic process, but a strange loop that makes more of itself all over the place (Marx's famous M–C–M' model, in which money begets more money). The point of having money, for a capitalist, is to make more of it. Thus capitalism is inherently unstable, and the latest financial crisis is just a symptom of its deep structural imbalance. In this, at any rate, it's much more like ecology without Nature than Nature per se, because ecology without Nature means that the biosphere is basically an archaeological record of one catastrophe after another. Ecology without Nature might, then, be at least one small step towards getting ecological politics up to speed with advanced capitalism.

Capitalism is reactive, but ecological politics must be proactive. This means that we can't keep coming up with good reasons to act based on current conditions. We have to swallow hard and stop treating "the environment" as a thing "over yonder" that we have to preserve or save. That only puts it up on a pedestal, rather like the figure of Woman in patriarchy, the better to sadistically admire and exploit it.[13] Say

you want to create hydrogen fuel cells. The only way to do this right now without wasting a lot of energy is to use (gulp) nuclear power. No corporation is going to be able to sign up for this alone. So the government has to help build a nuclear power station that will power a hydrogen fuel cell factory. Then what do you do with the radioactive waste? You can't just bury it under the Yucca Mountain carpet and hope nobody notices. You know too much; we live in Ulrich Beck's risk society, in which an increasing knowledge of risk evens out recalcitrant social hierarchies, and democracy becomes the search for an even distribution of risk.[14] So you have to store the radioactive waste, ideally above ground in monitored retrievable storage, for thousands of years; this is the concept of Nuclear Guardianship proposed by Joanna Macy and others.[15] This means that a whole culture will build up around nuclear waste storage, perhaps resembling some kind of religion. Nuclear materials become the new taboo, the new sacred Thing. I'm serious—we have to think that big. So the takeaway line from this essay should be "consciousness sucks." The more you are aware of ecology, the more you lose the very "world" you were trying to save, and the more things you didn't know or didn't want to know come to the front of your mind. The room for acting out shrinks to nothing. But it also means that there is an ecological life after capitalism. Capitalism does not exhaust every potential of ecological politics and ethics.

I'm not alone in thinking that consequentialism and hedonism won't do. In a recent issue of *The Ecologist,* John Vucetich and Michael Nelson argue that hoping for a better future is precisely what's getting in the way of acting ecologically.[16] Vucetich and Nelson agree that we should abandon hope (the title of their essay), if only because it's too easily hamstrung by that other environmentalist meme, the threat of imminent doom. We should act ecologically out of a modified Kantian duty that doesn't depend on a powerful aesthetic experience such as the sublime to ground it—or if it has to, perhaps it should be a downgraded version of aesthetic experience that includes various experiences that Kant wants to edit out of the aesthetic, such as disgust—because the life forms we've got under our skin are not something we can spit out.[17] (I've argued elsewhere that the trouble with the aesthetic dimension is that you can't just exit from it, rather like Alice trying to leave the Looking Glass House. Any post-environmentalist ecological view must include the aesthetic.)[18] Perhaps not, then, "We can because we must," but rather "We must because we are."

Don't Just Do Something, Sit There!

Let's consider how ecological praxis might depart from ecological ideology (which for brevity's sake I call environmentalism). It isn't hard to notice the distortions caused by the phenomenon of global warming, so let us take that as a case in point. There's a pretty obvious reason why Republicans are in such denial about global warming. Accepting the truth of global warming would mean that reality isn't wired for libertarianism or individualism or rigid hierarchies, or almost any of the other right-wing sacred cows.

On the global warming and global warming denial sites I visit very regularly, there seem to be two major genres of statement. One is an injunction: "Global warming is happening, but just let Nature/evolution take its course." Thus we have no

responsibility for, nor should we feel any guilt about, suffering beings and changing ecosystems. It also implies that somehow there's an automated process going on (called Nature) that we should not interfere with—an invisible hand, if you will, hardwired into reality "over there" beyond our intentions, beyond society (which is itself of course modeled as a social contract between freely agreeing individuals). The other genre of statement is a denial of totality: "It snowed in Boise, Idaho, last week, so it's not warming up where I am, so global warming is a crock."

You will first observe that these two genres suffer from Freud's borrowed kettle syndrome: there are too many reasons to deny global warming, reasons that contradict each other.[19] Global warming is happening, and we should just let Nature take its course; global warming isn't happening, so stop whining about it. There's a third statement genre, too, something like: "Okay, it's happening, but there's no proof that we caused it" (the reactionaries' favorite word is "anthropogenic global warming," which makes it sound technical and scary and geeky). This genre falls somewhere in between denial and acceptance.

What can we learn from these genres of global warming denial? Perhaps the first is that the perceived threat is (channeling Oscar Wilde) far more than merely real—it's also a fantasmatic threat, that is, a threat to reactionary fantasy as such. To accept global warming is to give up your fantasy that we are individuals who have just agreed on a level playing field to have a social contract, that capitalism is an automated process that must continue without intervention of even a mildly social-democratic kind (note the "Tea Parties" against Obama's resetting of the tax code to Clinton-era specifications). These two halves of reactionary sentiment are of course already intrinsically at odds with one another—one is about agreements freely chosen, another is about an automated process you have to leave alone. The global warming view, from the reactionary standpoint, involves inverting both halves of the sentiment. Society is not an agreement between pre-social individuals but an already existing totality for which we are directly responsible.

The social-ideological and scientific answers to the "snow in Boise, Idaho" meme are one and the same. Weather is not climate. Climate is a derivative of weather. You can't see it, you can't point to it. It's a stunningly complex derivative that requires terabytes of RAM to model (so you have to rely on external information processing machines, another problem for individualism). Just like momentum or inertia, derivatives of velocity, you can't really point to it, but it exists. It doesn't matter if it snowed in Boise, Idaho—it doesn't matter at all, just as it doesn't matter if a truck that's about to run you down is slowing down or speeding up. If it has enough momentum to kill you, it's going to kill you unless you get out of the way. As stated earlier, if you're watching a little girl in front of that moving truck, you are obliged to rescue her, for the simple reason that you can see her (note that this is very different from an aesthetic argument about how compelling, or not, this particular image is). At the risk of repeating myself, simply because we are sentient—and again let's set the bar very low to make sure that even snails and the snailiest of us are also responsible—we are obliged to work on global warming. No proof is required that we caused it—of course it's clear that looking for absolute proof will inhibit our response.

This leads us to a deeper problem for our poor reactionaries, and for us in general. Pointing to the snow in Boise, Idaho suddenly becomes the mystifying, mystical, fetishistic operation, not pointing to global warming. Something seemingly real and cold and wet is less real, and pointing to it is less realistic, than pointing to something we cannot directly sense. Reality as such has been upgraded so that phenomena you can see and hear and palpate are suddenly less real than ones you can't. Reality seems to have a big hole in it, like suddenly realizing that you're floating in outer space (which, of course, technically, we are). How long has the hole been there? Perhaps it was always there. This emerging realization has a horrifying effect on our sense of reality as such, which has depended traditionally on a background of some kind, whether we call it Nature or lifeworld or biology or whatever seems to lie outside of our ken or outside of our responsibility or outside of the social. When there's no background, there's no foreground. So this is a real problem, a big problem—we have about five minutes for Schadenfreude as we watch the right-wingers struggling with all this, then we realize we are also spinning in the void. When there is no world, there is no ontology. What the hell is going on?

So this essay is far from suggesting that we can nestle in our nice holistic burrow now that we've defeated the evil individualists. There's no burrow, therefore no nestling. So at the very same time as our world is really melting, our idea of what "really" and "real" mean also melts. The global warming crisis is also an opportunity to point that out, to notice that reality is a naked Emperor.

There *is* global warming, there *is* an ecological emergency; I'm not a nihilist. The big picture view undermines laissez-faire ideology, which is why some market fundamentalists are so afraid of it. Yet the melting world induces panic. This is a problem, philosophically and otherwise. Again, it's a paradox. While we absolutely have complete responsibility for global warming and must act now to curb emissions, we are also faced with various fantasies about "acting now," many of which are toxic to the kind of job I do. There's an ideological injunction to act *now*, yet the job of humanists is to slow down, to use our minds to find out what this all means, in Percy Shelley's wonderful words, to "imagine that which we know."[20] It's not hard to realize how out of phase we are with contemporary science. When I need remedial math and science just to understand relativity, let alone quantum theory, let alone the holographic principle, let alone what on Earth all this might mean, it's evident that we need to do an awful lot of imagining. When a year after the bicentenary of Darwin's birth I have arguments on a weekly basis with serious humanists who don't yet seem to have a clue about what evolution is or even vaguely to have accepted it—some proudly spurning it as if it were like an unappealing pair of socks (it's not just fundamentalists who have issues)—we have a problem.

Imagining what we know in the ecological sense would mean at the very least installing some kind of minimally functioning though ultimately flimsy ideological fantasy between us and the absolute void. Of course I want us to confront this void, but it would also be helpful if we could know why to get up in the morning, no? So what we do as humanists is not just about providing better P.R. for science. In fact, along with figuring out what implications science has for society and so on, we

should be in the business of asking scientists to do things for us. Humanists should start websites that list important experiments. My top suggestion would be about exploring the question, "Is consciousness intentional?" Negative results would provide a pretty good reason not to hurt life forms. If we could show that consciousness was not about "holding something in mind," it would be possible to demonstrate that consciousness is not some high-up bonus prize for being elaborately wired, but low-down, a kind of default mode that came bundled with the software, then worms are conscious in every meaningful sense. A worm could become a Buddha, as a worm.

Let's see how slowing down to imagine what we know works. For example, there's the meme that theory is the opposite of practice. I've been accused of not wanting to help Katrina victims because I'm so busy theorizing with my head in the clouds. "Your ideas are all very well for a lazy Sunday afternoon, but here in the real world, what are we actually going to do?" Yet one thing I want to do is break down the distinction between Sunday afternoon and every other day, and in the direction of putting a bit of Sunday afternoon into Monday morning, rather than making Sunday a workday. That's what humanists get paid to do.

The injunction to act *now* is ultimately based on the ethical drive to preserve a Nature that we are finding out never existed. So the injunction has real effects that may result in more genuine catastrophe as we tilt at the nonexistent windmills of Nature. I'm definitely not saying let's not look after animals because they're not really natural. I'm trying to construct a reason to look after all beings on this planet precisely because they're not natural. Actually, this isn't hard. When you think about ecology, your world becomes much larger and therefore more groundless. Yet it also, and for the same reasons, becomes much more intimate. We have legs and arms, just like lobsters. Those limbs contain cells, just like amoebae. Those cells contain bacterial symbionts (mitochondria), just like plants (chloroplasts). The symbionts contain DNA. DNA contains viral code insertions that are indistinguishable from authentic DNA. So it's not just that a rabbit by any other name would twitch its nose as sweetly. It's that, all the way down, there is no rabbit as such. Looking for the "real" rabbit is like Basil Fawlty looking for the duck in the episode of *Fawlty Towers* in which Basil takes the wrong dish away from his friend's kitchen. However much he pulls it open in exasperation and wonderment, it's always going to be a sherry trifle, not duck à l'orange. And speaking of rabbits and ducks, we can never be fully sure of who we're dealing with when it comes to other life forms.

The mesh, my term for the coexistence of life forms, indicates both the strictly formal, non-squishy set of relationships we're in, and the fact that we're hopelessly entangled in them, enmeshed.[21] This mesh is very different from the web of life, and also from any poststructuralist or posthuman upgrades of web-of-life organicism. You can't squish the mesh. Yet it's real, more real than the snow in Boise, real like global warming is real.

This mesh consists of what I call *strange strangers*.[22] These beings are ineradicably, irreducibly strange, strange in their strangeness, strange all the way down, surprisingly surprising. I can't in good faith use the word *animal* anymore, and nonhumans won't cut it either—we are strange strangers too. "Life forms" sounds quite nice and Star Trekky, but some of these strangers aren't strictly alive. In order to have DNA,

you have to have RNA. In order to have RNA, you need ribosomes. And in order to have ribosomes, you need DNA—the circularity is obvious. So there must have been paradoxical forms of "pre-living life," such as Sol Spiegelman's RNA World, in which RNA type molecules coexist with a non-organic replicator, perhaps a certain silicate crystal—yes, maybe your great-times-*x*-grandmother really was a silicon chip. A virus is a macromolecular crystal that tells RNA in its vicinity to make copies of it. If a virus is alive, in any meaningful sense, then so is a computer virus. That's fine by me, but are you sure you want to go down that road—at the end of which is a kind of animism in which your thermostat is also alive in all the meaningful senses of that word?[23] The more we know about them, the stranger they become. Are they alive? What is life, indeed? Are they intelligent? What is intelligence? Are they people? Are we people?

Darwin comes into play here, because Darwinism decisively is deconstruction applied to life forms. Darwin shows utterly convincingly that distinguishing a species from its variants, even distinguishing one species from another, is strictly impossible. That's what evolution means. Adding to that the reason for evolution—randomly mutating DNA—one soon arrives at the idea that the environment is nothing other than the phenotypical expression of the genomes of various life forms, as discussed above. Thus there is no environment as such—it's all life forms all the way down. Life forms don't just shape the planet, they are the planet. And it's not that easy to draw the line between where their domain stops and the non-life domain takes over. Once life forms get going, they undermine all the spacetime boundaries you can think of. The edge of the biosphere is—where? The Earth's gravitational field? The Sun? The Solar System? (This is more than simply wondering whether organic macromolecules are extraterrestrial, which they very well might have been.)

As noted, the evolutionary principle of "satisficing" is the cheapest route to DNA replication, because if a phenotypical trait doesn't kill the vector of DNA (you and me), you can keep it. So life forms are queer all the way down. Sexual display is a major factor in evolution, not the so-called survival of the fittest. Strange strangers subvert our binary categories: between life and non-life, between each other, between utility and aesthetic display. The human race does not abstractly "want" to survive—only macromolecular replicators "want" to do that. You want to survive, no doubt, and so do I. But we can't base our environmentalism on "saving the human race"—nothing in our being, from DNA up, supports it. Meaningful talk of "race" and "species" as proper metaphysical categories is impossible after Darwin.

Nor, however, can we just sit back and relax and let evolution do its thing. In this respect Deep Ecology, which sees humans as a viral blip in the big Gaian picture, is nothing other than laissez-faire capitalism in a neo-fascist ideological form. We are responsible for the simple reason that we are sentient. So at the same time as we are compelled to act, we are losing our reasons to act. This, again, is the problem—how to, in the words of *Celebrity Death Match*, "get it on" in a world that is crumbling both without and within (in "reality" and in "thought").

So how to desire at a moment when that desire is compromised? I'm calling my answer *dark ecology* because it sounds moody and depressed and hopeless and weird, and I'm a moody depressed weird kind of a guy. Let's recall the previous section, tak-

ing its cue from sentience as ethical obligation: *we must because we are* (sentient). This means that we must base ecological action on ethics, not aesthetics. Ecological action will never feel good and the non-world will never seem elegant. This is because we are not embedded in a lifeworld and can thus never get our bearings sufficiently to achieve the appropriate aesthetic distance from which to experience that kind of refined pleasure. As argued above, hedonistic forms of consequentialism—the idea, however expressed, that ecological concern makes us or others feel better—don't work. Ideologically, then, ecological politics has been barking up the wrong tree, trying to make people feel or see something different. "If only we could see things differently" translates quickly into "I will not act unless suitably stimulated and soothed by a picture of reality built to my pre-existing specifications." This is now impossible, for reasons I've outlined. We can't con ourselves into a touchy-feely reason to act.

This is beginning to look much more like Kantian ethics than the authoritarian voice of aesthetic compulsion. Of course, there's a twist, the twist that Theodor Adorno explores in his brilliant analysis of Kierkegaard: in kicking the aesthetic in favor of the ethical, Kierkegaard's ethics remains ironically within the Kantian aesthetic mode.[24] Kantian duty gets its cue from a quasi-aesthetic experience that Kant calls sublimity, so in advocating sheer duty, we haven't totally edited the aesthetic out of the equation. We can't escape the experiential dimension of existence—wouldn't it be awful if we could? To use an animal metaphor, whaling on the aesthetic is aesthetically gratifying. There is no way to formulate a strictly Kantian ethics that doesn't rely on some kind of aesthetic experience. Yet dark ecology gets rid of Kantian aesthetics, too, if by that we mean being able to spit out disgusting things (the premise on which Kantian taste is built, as Derrida brilliantly showed).[25] We can't spit out the disgusting real of ecological enmeshment. It's just too close and too painful for comfort. So it's a weird, perverse aesthetics that includes the ugly and the horrifying, embracing the monster. Ultimately it means not swapping our dualism and our mechanism for something that seems nicer such as vitalism or monism. We have to make do with the nasty stuff that's been handed to us on our plate. That includes the fact of consciousness, which forever puts me in a paradoxical relationship with other beings—there's always going to be an ironic gap between strange strangers. This is good news, because it means one can be ecological without losing one's sense of irony. Irony is not a mere slogan on a cool T-shirt; it's the way coexistence feels. Don't just do something, sit there. But in the mean time, sitting there will upgrade your version of doing and of sitting. Ecological praxis may feel like Martin Sheen's character Willard in *Apocalypse Now* as he emerges, camouflaged, from the muddy water: "They were going to make me a Major for this, and I wasn't even in their army anymore."

Dark ecology is a paradoxical aesthetic that slips away from any kind of conceptual grasp. This openness serves as a kind of startup software for politics: it doesn't tell you what to do, exactly, but it opens your mind so you can think clearly about what to do. That we can actually use our minds to transcend our material conditions was the reason why the Kantian sublime is so utterly different from Edmund Burke's version.[26] Burke's sublime is solid and awesome and powerful—there's no arguing with it, you just have to capitulate to it. His models are monarchy and mountains.

There's way too much of this kind of sublime in ecological aesthetics. This is why I just can't trust touchy-feeliness to think through the ecological emergency. It's seductive to imagine that a force bigger than global capitalism will finally sweep it away—"the revenge of Gaia," as James Lovelock puts it, and so on.[27] But what if this thought were coming to us from within capitalism itself? What if capitalism itself relied on fantasies of apocalypse in order to keep reproducing and reinventing itself? What if, finally, Nature as such, the idea of a radical outside to the social system, was a capitalist fantasy, even precisely *the* capitalist fantasy?

If ecology does away with Nature, then it is also not just the new mode in which we are going to be thinking capitalism in the foreseeable future (as nice as green companies might be, like the one that just installed my solar panels). In the long run, ecology and ecological thinking is not exhausted by capitalism. Postcapitalist ecology is entirely possible, because the mesh and the strange stranger make us think things that go beyond instrumental reason and commodification, and compel us to imagine ways of coexisting that go beyond a mere reaction to capitalism, such as communitarianism or the vaguer celebrations of "community" you find in much environmental writing. Ecological thinking means that we have to imagine not communities but collective ways of being. You don't choose a community, you just find yourself within it. A collective, on the other hand, is chosen, even though you never find yourself outside the Universe like one of the social contract people I was discussing earlier. Collectivity is a commitment to a constantly flowing group situation that is always open to the radical otherness of the strange stranger—a nonexclusive open-ended group. The mesh is the ultimate social networking tool. At least one demand of such a collective could not be packaged and sold back to it, namely, the demand to be a collective as such, which means being open to the possibility that our collective coexistence is as yet undecided and unfinished, and thus spills over the boundaries of our pre-defined social structure with its capitalist economic form. This probably means that chimps and cows can and should be members of unions, doesn't it? Yikes. It also means that capitalist ideology and instrumental technoscience don't exhaust what materiality means. In this respect, spiritual traditions hold in reserve as yet unknown dimensions of materiality that any progressive ecology should seriously investigate.

Dark ecology must rage against the kinds of compromise suggested by Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, and broad slogans like sustainability, perhaps even systems theory ideas like emergence, and so on. In announcing the death of environmentalism, Nordhaus and Schellenberger are ultimately doing a Fukuyama, that is, proclaiming that history is at an end and the capitalist form is its final destination.[28] While their argument superficially resembles mine, claiming, for instance, that a reified product called "the environment" is getting in the way of meaningful ecological politics, Nordhaus and Shellenberger rely on limiting our scope to a narrow chink in a pre-existing prison window, reducing ecological thinking to Realpolitik. The injunction to get on with it and deal with the social conditions we have can easily become another brick in the prison wall that inhibits the possibility of escape. To this end, the rhetoric of sustainability becomes a weapon in the hands

of global corporations that would like nothing better than to reproduce themselves in perpetuity. The current social situation becomes a thing of Nature, a tree that you are preserving—that is, a plastic object you must maintain on pain of death. This social situation is at the same time totally autonomous from you yourself, the actual you—it is an "emergent" feature like a wave that doesn't concern you as a mere droplet of water. We are back to our poor old Republican deniers and their contradictory mindset. This is why I protest against all possible upgrades of Nature, whether they come from systems theory or from related forms of postmodern philosophy. These upgrades reproduce the problem in a "new and improved" way whose only merit is being harder to dislike if you're a certain kind of sophisticate.

Ecological thinking should not stop forging ahead, thinking unthinkable things and demanding the impossible. It must hold open the possibility of a future radically different from the reality we appear to be stuck in. ▪

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1 See Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
2 See Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Long Reach of the Gene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 159, 200–23, 226.
3 Lynn Margulis, *Symbiosis in Cell Evolution* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1979).
4 The seminal text here is Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
5 See Gillian Beer, Introduction, in Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxvii–xviii.
6 Beauty as such is the calibration of this distance for Kant. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).
7 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 83–92, 94–101.
8 Dawkins, *Extended Phenotype*, 200–3, 226.
9 I borrow this phrase from Slavoj Žižek's excellent account of "Life 2.0" in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 440.
10 Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 2–3, 10–11.
11 The most profound explication of this problem is Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
12 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), chapter 3.
13 As described by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
14 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992).
15 See http://www.ratical.org/radiation/NGP/.
16 John Vucetich and Michael Nelson, "Abandon Hope: Live Sustainably Just Because It's the Right Thing to Do," *The Ecologist* 39.2 (March 2009): 32–35.
17 The foundational discovery that disgust is at the basis of taste, and that vomit is thus the fundamental aesthetic object (or better, abject), was made by Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11.2 (Summer, 1981): 2–25.
18 Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 140–3.
19 Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London and New York: Penguin, 2006), 131–1.

20 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2002), 530.
21 Timothy Morton, "Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, The Strange Stranger, and the Beautiful Soul," *Collapse* 6 (2010): 195–223.
22 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, chapter 1.
23 Daniel Dennett takes this view almost to the end. See "Cognitive Wheels: The Frame Problem of AI," in Boden, ed., *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence*, 147–170.
24 Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
25 Derrida, "Economimesis."
26 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J.T. Boulton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Robert Kaufman, "Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 682–724.
27 James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
28 Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, *The Death of Environmentalism* (http://www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf).