Timothy Morton, Being Ecological, Chapter 4, 136--

Chapter 4 A Brief History of Ecological Thought

Imagine you are in a record store—assuming they still exist; even better, imagine you are on iTunes or Spotify or some other online purveyor of music. There is a bewildering number of genres for you to choose, and the concept of genre is itself bewildering. Consider only one relatively narrow generic range. What on earth distinguishes electronica from electronic, techno from EDM? What does the iTunes category “90s music” actually mean? If it means “any music recorded in the 1990s,” it doesn’t mean very much. What happens to music published in December 1989, or January 2000? What happens to music written in 2010 that derives from or alludes to music written in 1995? Is that “90s music”? Why not? There are many ways to make this chapter tedious and inaccurate. First among these is what I shall be calling the record store approach. The record store approach is plagued with unexamined philosophical assumptions. It’s difficult to read history sometimes, because it’s always informed by implicit concepts that are often left unexplored. That’s the main reason why we’re not going to be using it in this chapter. Familiar demarcations are all too familiar. Sometimes we need to shake them up with thinking. The record store approach consists of a bunch of preformatted labels that we simply employ without examination. What we would be dealing with in that case would be someone else’s (or quite possibly a group of someones’) way of thinking about ecological thought, without the merit of examining that someone. We simply inherit her or his categories without question. Then the categories get circulated, and become more legitimate. Then it becomes difficult to think outside the boxes of the categories we are retweeting.我们像接受别人的唱片排序那样地接受　别人的生态思想，其实需要被清理的。 Which in turn means that there are well-worn pitfalls and wells in the thought terrain—all kinds of fake paradoxes and problems, for example. Consider the clichéd discussion of

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“nature versus nurture” 自然与文化养这个分割，可能就是不对的！that often takes place in popular media. It gets in the way far more than it helps. I shall be organizing this chapter in a unique way. This mostly means that I shall not be organizing it according to the record store approach. Instead, let’s return to and take seriously the horizon part of the idea that a genre is a horizon of expectation. Being bounded by a horizon implies that you are located somewhere. You are coordinating that line of trees, that mountainous ridge, those clouds with your body, your position. Being in a horizon like that implies having a certain stance, which is a metaphor for having a certain attitude. This seems like a much more precise, and also more toothsome, way of proceeding. Ideas come bundled with attitudes, remember. So rather than narrating a story, we will be exploring different styles of thinking, different ways of holding ideas. The beauty of the approach is that this way, we can allow for what happens in real life, namely that people hold a variety of overlapping and contradicting attitudes. This is the reason why, in this chapter, we’re going to be ignoring the self-labeling. We are going to be ignoring the sacred cows. Don’t take their word for it. Otherwise you say the same thing over and over and the same guys get namechecked. What we have in that case is undigested history making its way through some preformatted digestive system, a history of ideas or worldviews or what have you. And this, however many footnotes it contains, would be just like Homer Simpson’s account of Jefferson Starship. No grand tours, then, just like no information dumps, and in a way for the same reason. Those kinds of things are problematically unaware of the all-important modes in which they are telling us stuff, really important stuff. What we’re going to be doing instead, rather than looking at ideas “in” time like marbles “in” a prefabricated box, is looking

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at something like different orientations. We are going to study styles of being ecological in thought mode. One style thinks the world is going to end really soon. Another style thinks humans are unimportant. These orientations can overlap, because unlike worldviews they don’t imply a shrink-wrapped, rigid system in which everything is a symptom of some explosive holistic整体论 whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Ways of being ecological summon certain kinds of words, certain kinds of arguments: in one philosophical view (Lacan, Althusser) they are called subject positions. In this case, far from being impressionistic or “subjective,” the phenomenological approach is more accurate: exploring the question, “What is it like in heavy metal world?” might give you a lot more to chew on about heavy metal than an exhaustive account of all the types of metal according to the lingo that’s evolved (black, death, speed, doom, grind … ). And thus it has come to pass that this chapter contains no details about ecological ideas. If you think about it, how people self-describe, especially if they are trying to fit their product into a record store, is never accurate. This is because of what we know about what phenomenology calls “style” or what neurology now calls “the adaptive unconscious.” You never see all of yourself all at once. This is how comedy works. Comedy is funny because the comic character can’t see all of herself by definition. In trying not to be herself, she ends up manifesting herself, despite herself. So we’re not going to have any “deep” or “shallow” or “bright green” or “ecoterrorist” or “postcolonial” anything. Those are just record store labels. But this chapter does contain ideas about ecological ideas. What do I mean? Let’s have a look. While you look, realize that you can find these styles everywhere: in magazines, online, in

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what people say, in art, music, and architecture, in patterns of behavior and public policy … What I’ve done here is to isolate the active ingredients of each style, no matter where they manifest. We call this approach phenomenological reduction, which means exactly bracketing off everything except the color, flavor, and momentum (metaphorically speaking) of style as such.

The Immersive Style

Take, for example, the very basic idea of being in environment at all. Perhaps it would surprise you that this idea has a lineage and inculcates certain ways of thinking and feeling, ways that are not necessarily that great for actually existing lifeforms. Would it surprise you to learn, for example, that this idea can be traced back directly to the earlier days of agricultural society? Doesn’t that make perfect sense? There you are, settled in a city. Your ancestors were hunters and gatherers and nomads, but some time ago your more recent lineage joined the rest of the crew and settled down. You are looking out at things from your house. You are surrounded by things. You imagine these surroundings as something that swirls around your house every year, a sort of dynamic circle. You call it the periechon, which means literally the thing that is going around.2 There are lots of words that determine what we think an environment is to the feeling of being settled in a city. But in fact the environment is environ-ing, it’s veering around. Another dynamic swirl. Take the word ambience. Ambo is Latin for on both sides and again, the ­ence suffix alerts us to something dynamic, something with a certain style. Ambience is the thing happening on either side of us, which makes sense if you’re living in a house.

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The very word ecology comes from the Greek oikos, which means house, so in a sense people think ecology means the rules of the house or how the house works or the truth about the house or something like that. It’s a funny house though: the walls are thick and spongy and retain all kinds of things we might not want in there; the roof is perforated, and other houses seem to be overlapping with ours. In a way, the house image, and the image of something circling around us (as long as it’s not veering), is exactly the wrong way of imagining ecological coexistence. (As I hope this book has been demonstrating.) One thing this type of ecological thinking seems to want to do is convey or express or explore some sense of immersion in something-or-other. What this something-or-other is precisely has changed over the years, but the basic style has coordinates that we can map. When you think about DNA expression, what effects genes produce in the world, you start to realize that it doesn’t stop at the tip of a lifeform, but continues some way out from there. For instance, a spider’s DNA expression (the spider’s phenotype) doesn’t stop at the tips of its legs: the spider phenotype stops (at least) at the tip of the spider’s web. Spiders build webs because spider genes enable web-building. So a spider’s genes don’t just determine the shape of its body. A beaver’s phenotype goes all the way up to the edge of its dam.3 The human phenotype基因表型 seems at present to cover a large swath of Earth’s surface, down quite a way into its crust as well at this point, which is why we call our current geological era the Anthropocene. So when we think about the environment now, something interesting happens. When you look for the environment above and beyond lifeforms, you don’t find it. Even the rocks and even the air you are breathing are part of some lifeform’s phenotype.

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You are breathing because of an environmental catastrophe called oxygen. The Oxygenation Catastrophe occurred because oxygen is bacterial excrement, if you like—it’s an unintended consequence of their success that anaerobic bacteria actually made their own environment poisonous long, long before humans did the same. (That’s not the same thing as saying that humans should destroy their environment because they’re successful or that destruction is inevitable.) So they eventually evolved to hide in other singlecelled organisms, and these became the mitochondria, the animal energy cells, and the chloroplasts, the plant energy cells (and are the reason why plants are green). That’s interesting in itself, isn’t it? In a way, the fact that you are breathing is also a bacterial phenotype. And how green everything looks, in our idyllic picture of Edenic ecological utopia, is a bacterial phenotype. It’s so amazing that you might accidentally hit your head on an iron railing while thinking about it, and since iron is another bacterial phenotype显型, you still wouldn’t be free of our friends and enemies, our hosts and parasites, the bacteria.

从这里开始讲：我们搞生态时的主要套路：

The Style of Authenticity

Then we have countless ways of writing about ecology, by which we might loosely mean representing or otherwise exploring in sound, with paint, with words, and so on. No prizes for guessing what the favorite mode has been in the USA: it’s the first-person narrative. There’s a whole style of ecological thinking that goes along with this genre, and it’s worth exploring, mainly to figure out how to avoid it—and why. You find it perhaps most vividly in what has sometimes been called “nature writing,” a quintessentially American ecological style. Others (of course) also employ it, but the Puritan resonances of an uncorrupted,

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providential “wilderness” are definitely sourced in that country’s first white settlers. I’m going to call this one the style of authenticity. That’s because, according to this style, the most important thing is to be genuinely authentically ecological—and so you need to say that you are, first to yourself and then to others. This style is associated with representation: it’s about authoring yourself, so it’s often about being an author (of writing). Now the wonderful thing about first-person narratives is (take it from someone with a literature PhD) that they are intrinsically unreliable. “Intrinsically” means structurally, which means (my paraphrase) “no matter what you think about it and no matter how the author tries to wiggle out of it.” There is never a way to prove that the I who is doing the narrating totally overlaps the I that is being narrated. This basic feature of the first-person narrative comes in very handy all the time, otherwise you’d be stuck being exactly what you just said you were and exactly how people view what you say about yourself. You and your selfie would be exactly the same, and that would not be great. If reality coincided with its image, nothing could happen. Luckily you can say, “I am bored,” then you can say “I am interested.” At an extreme you can even say, “I am lying,” and because of the irreducible separation between the speaking I and the spoken I, you will not implode. Something funny also happens because of this, when you try to authenticate your first-person narrative. You think that if you add more and more details, people will believe you. But the more details you add, the stranger your description becomes, or the more desperate you look, and your tactic fails. It also fails in the case of nature writing because as you try to describe an authentic nature (as well as an authentic you, double trouble)

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you end up with more and more and more words, your shtick is that you’re the kind of person, you insist, who doesn’t like sitting around in some darkened room with a laptop; no, you’re the kind of person who likes to be out there, roughing it in the desert or wherever. So you resort to some kind of journal style with date stamps, whether they are highly detailed and explicit or just implicit in the time sequence. The speaking I and the spoken I are structurally different. You can’t collapse the one into the other—well, you can, but this involves something called Romantic irony, which I will describe in a moment. But this is just the kind of feature, so wonderful and so essential to enjoying a good memoir or narrated movie, which is exactly what environmentalist prose tries—and repeatedly fails, because it’s inherent to the first-person form—to edit out. It’s a bit like trying to saw yourself off the branch you are sitting on; literary richness sitting on exactly this branch. It makes no literary sense, and actually it makes no ecological sense, because an artificially flattened, trying-to-be-sincere (and therefore being unintentionally funny) first-person eco-narrative (think of the earnest nature-writing journal or travelogue) is how you make the world into your candy bar or packet of tortilla chips, and everyone gets to watch you sit on your couch (which you pretend is called wilderness) and eat them. The poets of the British Romantic period knew how suspect the first person was, which is exactly why they used it. It’s just not correct to think of them as naive nature writers, as we too often do, even though they did tell stories about encountering mountains or hearing the terrifying yet invigorating sound of the surf. In fact, they were trying to get past all that pretty nature stuff, which was old by the time they started. The age before the Romantics was called the Age of Sensibility, a moment at

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which European scientists discovered the nervous system and developed all kinds of theories about how meaning arose in an unmediated way from the sensations. Nature meant something you feel spontaneously, something that doesn’t require any hesitation or reflection to grasp, something that underlies the necessarily false artifice of society and what the Age of Sensibility often called “custom.” Consider Rousseau, for example, who argues that humans are naturally free, but society causes them to be enchained. The slippery nature of the first-person narrative is exactly what these poets and prose writers fully folded into their work, with the narrators sometimes even alerting their readers to the fact that they had been lying to them, or luring them in and then proving that they were not to be trusted. Romanticism doesn’t mean having your head in the clouds: this approach suggests a less anthropocentric attitude, and one that was in fact more in line with scientific curiosity; they were laying bare how their stance changed what they were seeing. Think of the difference between viewing a cliff from afar, seeing it as a distant object that incites a sense of awe, compared with getting up close to a rock face with a magnifying glass, looking at it in detail and deconstructing its mighty mass. The eighteenth-century equivalent of the iPhone camera and the selfie stick—in the sense that people would take it around when they traveled—was called the Claude Glass. The Claude Glass was a hemisphere of sepia-colored glass; you got into a special position for looking at the landscape in a prescribed way, and then you looked into the glass. Upside-down, you saw reflected the landscape you were beholding, as if painted in sepia ink. Unlike the Claude Glass the magnifying glass makes the rock face look very strange, because it is no longer fulfilling

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our anthropocentric requirements as a nice background (totally unlike our selfie). Similarly, the Romantic poet gets up close and personal with her or his own experience, which in a way is the inner equivalent of the rock face. Experience never has a “This is a [insert your name here] experience” running through it like a barcode or a copyright mark or one of those phrases you see in a stick of rock at the British seaside. It lacks this barcode especially when the experience is really intimate. Imagine being in a car crash. It’s so vivid: it’s a trauma. Precisely because of this, there is a feeling of unreality. The feeling of unreality goes hand in hand with the less you-scaled, more ego-shattering event, which becomes part of you (scars you for life, perhaps) and one of your most vivid, even treasured (perhaps in a bad way) memories. So the gyrations of nature writers can be massive regressions from a style we should have all learned from by now—the powerful ambiguities of a William Wordsworth, the haunting multiple voices of a Charlotte Turner Smith, the weirdly ecological ennui of a Charles Baudelaire. And for exactly the same reasons they don’t add up to being ecological, which is the supposed point. Because being ecological includes a sense of my weird inclusion in what I’m experiencing; it isn’t an unmediated, direct experience at all.

The Religious Style

If even the concept of environment is a Neolithic product and thus part of the problem and not part of the solution, perhaps we should spend our ecological time bemoaning the horror of so-called civilization? A certain style arises that I am going to call

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the religious style. This mode becomes more and more popular every day and its modus operandi becomes increasingly rabid. Social media, for instance, has become a place of ever-increasing judgmental differentiation. The religious style has a long heritage. Consider, for example, that popular literary genre, the pastoral. In this genre, a couple of shepherd-type people—they have a nomadic quality to them, so perhaps this is why they are used—go up a hill and look down on the awful corrupt things happening in the town below, lamenting the general badness of civilization. Usually the ecological way of being religious takes the form of some kind of misanthropy, which is still anthropocentrism: humans are evil because they have caused ecological destruction. This idea is hardwired into accounts of what Judeo-Christian religions call the Fall, but also other agricultural-age religious accounts of the move toward agricultural society, such as Hinduism. In a way, perhaps all anthropocentrism is misanthropic, because it ultimately does a disservice to humans too. Perhaps we should be calling it misanthropocentrism. Hegel has a vivid way of describing this religious style: he calls it the beautiful soul.4 For Hegel, knowing comes in all kinds of flavors, and this means that ideas and their flavors are always a bit out of balance, like a slinky perched on a step. How-tothink the idea and the ideas as such are necessarily different. This imbalance causes the idea-plus-flavor manifold to flop over itself, like said slinky. The basic imbalance that characterizes the style of the beautiful soul is something like an ultra-religious person, someone you might call “religiose.” This kind of person sees the world as evil, or, better, regards evil as a thing that she or he can get rid of. Evil isn’t part of me, it’s something lodged in me that I can dispose of. Can you see what the imbalance is? The style is out of balance because the gaze that sees evil as a

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thing “over yonder” is exactly evil as such. Think about how al Qaeda saw America as the source of all evil on Earth, and conversely about how the US Bush Administration saw the same in al Qaeda. When you see evil as a thing apart from yourself “over there,” you can fly a plane into it or destroy it with a powerful bomb. You can justify murder. Evil is the gaze that sees evil as a thing apart from me. This is a typical and bad side effect of all kinds of environmentalist viewpoints. Think about the view from the edge of the Solar System that Carl Sagan called the “pale blue dot”: a picture of Earth reduced to just one pixel. It’s the last photograph of Earth taken by the Voyager space probe as it left the Solar System in 1990.5 Sagan does what some Enlightenment writers did, framing human events as tiny, petty things that take place against this vast, indifferent backdrop: the point being, we shouldn’t be so concerned with our human-centered business, we should be more peaceful and loving, and so on. But the attitude within which this supposedly hippie style is staged is precisely that of the evil gaze—isolating everything bad into a tiny dot, a single pixel in the gigantic picture of the universe, a position of infinite contempt and hostile judgment. The truly spiritual position is to realize that whatever evil is, it is an intrinsic aspect of oneself. This is equivalent to noticing that we are made of and surrounded and penetrated by all kinds of beings which, in the right combinations, might do us a great deal of harm. In other words, it’s equivalent to the uneasy hosting we discovered to be the essence of symbiosis. And this entails that many forms of environmentalism aren’t really very ecological at all. They try to find fault by isolating one particular entity—say a large corporation that makes toxic products, or a particular kind of consumer, or consumerism as such—without considering how

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the entity is caught in all kinds of networks and systems. Who is to blame for global warming, the Americans who invented air conditioning, or the Chinese and Indians eager to use it? This isn’t to say that some beings are not more to blame than others. Humans caused global warming, not sea turtles. It’s how we think this blame that is key.

The Efficient Style

Alternatively, you might not be concerned with good and evil, at least not directly. You might see the ecological realm as a domain that needs to be well maintained: your ethical or political spectrum runs from efficiency to inefficiency. Your approach is normative, like the religious style, but not as explicitly: you value a smoothly functioning biosphere optimized for human existence without too much damage to other lifeforms. This is going to be the longest account of ecological styles in this chapter. This is both because it’s a very popular style, and because it’s got a lot of moving parts. You don’t have to be keen on geoengineering to perform this style. Geoengineering, which since about 2000 has become a popular way of imagining how to solve the biggest ecological problems, means interfering with the biosphere at the largest possible, planetary scale. For example, technocrats might decide that the best solution to global warming is to put gigantic mirrors in space to reflect back the Sun’s heat, or to fill the ocean with iron filings to encourage the growth of phytoplankton such as photosynthesizing algae. The seduction of this approach is the sense of mastery it bestows. The trouble is that since any geoengineering action affects the whole of the biosphere, there can be no reverse gear. There is no way to check in advance

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exactly what will happen, and there is no way to undo it once it has happened, if by “undo” we mean “completely erase its effects.” Geoengineering is just one way in which someone might perform this ecological style. It’s instructive, because it brings to light the dominant way in which Western philosophy has imagined how reality works for the last two centuries, a form of thought named correlationism, which we’ve explored somewhat. Correlationism, the idea that the world isn’t real until some correlator (usually tied to a human being in some way) has “realized” it, can produce the fantasy that reality is a blank slate waiting for (human) projections to fill it in, like a movie screen waiting for a movie to be shown on it. The idea that the world is a blank canvas waiting for the correlator to paint on it is rather obviously ecologically violent: the world is not a blank screen, it’s a coral reef, it’s a high-altitude Alpine ecosystem, it’s a humpback whale. A less extreme version is the idea that it could be dangerous to imprint the world with (human) desire, as if it were a blank slate and as if we knew what was good for it. This version tries to minimize the impact of the correlator, to tread lightly, to be efficient, to minimize one’s carbon footprint. While admirable, and in many respects quite right, this style has its limitations. It’s a very popular way of being ecological. It’s attractive, because it’s based on the idea of attunement that we explored in the previous chapter. Like a boat floating with the movements of the ocean, this style of efficiency tries to minimize energy use by tacking close to what is already the case, like steering a ship without exerting too much effort. This style of efficiency is a dynamic dance that attends to how the momentum of the world is at any particular moment, and is inherently on the side of the

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status quo. It is prevalent in theories of social systems based on cybernetics—the Greek word kubernētēs, like the word “governor,” from which cybernetics comes, means pilot or steersman. Governing or mastering through tracking, tacking, adhering to … such concepts also evoke fantasies of mastery. The idea is that one could “get it right.” But if the system is dynamic, temporal, getting it right never stays still. The idea is close to the more open concept of attunement, which is like what happens when one is playing music with others: you figure out that music is first and foremost a kind of listening. But the difference is that the efficiency approach must always be based on some kind of pre-established parameters as to what counts as efficient. The idea is to eliminate mistakes, which boils down to the elimination of the difference between the pre-established past and the open future. Efficiency stifles creativity, which is a more basic way of thinking about attunement. Thus might be born a certain kind of ecological “lifestyle,” a way of constructing a certain kind of world that appears to function smoothly, based on a fantasy that something close to perfectly smooth functioning could ever be achieved. But this smoothness is only smooth from the point of view of a particular scale. My smoothness as I manage to park my car ever so nicely in a narrow spot is a horrible malfunction from the point of view of the snail whose shell my car wheel is crushing. The idea that there are multiple worlds because there are multiple lifeforms and that no one world or scale is the “right” one means that efficiency is only efficient from a particular standpoint. For example, the idea of sustainability implies that the system we now have is worth sustaining. It implies furthermore that “continuing for a longer time” is a hallmark of success, which in turn implies a model of existing having to do

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with persisting, going on, being constantly present. But we’ve established that things aren’t like that. So in the end the style of efficiency is going to be stifling and uncreative, not allowing for malfunctions and accidents, which are ironically much more like the way things actually are. It’s not the case that things are just functioning smoothly until they don’t. Smooth functioning is always a myth. Bataille gave a name to this smooth functioning myth: the restricted economy. A restricted economy is one in which the dominant theme is efficiency: minimum energy throughput. The Earth is finite, and economic flows must be restricted to its finite size and capacities. So much ecological ethics, politics, and aesthetics is based on the economy of restriction. Although it sounds very reasonable, something is drastically missing from the style of restricted economy, which means that in the end it’s at the very least spiritually unsatisfying for those who try to maintain it. Because malfunctioning is deeper than (smooth) functioning, there is an excessive intensity to the energy of things that just can’t be contained efficiently. There is a lack of attention to what is being efficiently sustained. And as the model of efficiency will always be a little bit behind the times (if only by a few moments—you can’t be radically proactive because you need to gather data about the current situation in order to work with it in an efficient way), it won’t ever accurately track the way things are, despite the promise that it could. Artists of all kinds and practitioners of esoteric spiritual traditions intuit this problem. In those traditions, the aim is not so much to get rid of or even to transform negative emotions, but to embrace them and discover the energies within them that transcend the ego: the ego is taken to be the big problem, not the perceptions or the kinds of phenomena that are arising, such as

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anger. Again, it’s not what you’re thinking, it’s how you’re thinking that causes suffering. Anger can happen, and if you don’t cling to it, it becomes just another color or flavor of energy. This isn’t about pushing away or denying one’s emotion, but rather about exploring it without too much clinging. If you do cling to it, it feels just awful; it’s “my” anger, how am I going to get rid of it … Something like this insight needs to be part of being ecological, otherwise the risk is that humans will create a control society (to use the technical term from Deleuze) so intense that, as I said earlier, the current one, already very hard to bear, will seem loosey-goosey by comparison. Moreover, the ultimate horizon of efficiency is petroculture: the fact that oil, a precious toxic resource, dictates how we conduct ourselves. In a world without oil, we shouldn’t be imagining ecological action in the key of oil. That would be behaving according to an energy economy that no longer exists. And this wouldn’t be fun at all. I think that ecological politics is about expanding, modifying, and developing new forms of pleasure, not restraining the meager pleasures we already experience because we are only thinking in ways that our current modes of doing things allows. What would pleasure look like beyond the oil economy? Last year I switched my house’s energy plan from one that relied on fossil fuels to one that relied only on wind (Texas has a surprisingly vast array of wind farms). For the first three days of being on this new plan, I felt incredibly smug and virtuous. I felt pure and efficient. I felt as if I understood finally what sustainability meant. And then … I realized that I could have a pumping disco in every single room of my house, and far, far fewer lifeforms would be harmed at all, compared with burning fossil fuels to power just the basics of my house. Solar and wind power would mean no

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carbon emissions, which would mean less or no global warming (depending on how many people used solar power), which would mean less or no extinction of lifeforms. And being dead is a terrible inconvenience if pleasure is your goal; just keeping lifeforms alive is allowing for some kind of pleasure (and don’t forget the pleasure of enjoying their existence, and the pleasure of doing less harm). And then I realized that this sort of feeling would be what living in an ecologically attuned society actually feels like. Instead of policing pleasure we would be inventing new ones. This means something almost unbelievable. (The question of why it’s unbelievable is itself interesting. We’ll get to it.) Brace for impact. An awful lot of ecological speech is actually oil economy speech. In fact, almost all ecological speech isn’t ecological speech at all. Ecological speech is deeply distorted by the oil economy we live in. All that language about efficiency and sustainability is about competing for scarce highly toxic resources. But if you think modern life is tight and restrictive and full of all kinds of police and policing, hold on to your hat. Imagine what an ecological society based on those principles of restriction and efficiency would feel like. I would like very much not to live on Earth if that is the direction in which we go.

Working with Paranoia

Ecological awareness presents us with a disturbing fact. In ecological awareness, “away” has disappeared, because we know, for example, that our toilet waste doesn’t go to some special different place called “away,” it just goes somewhere else. If there is no away, then there is no here. We have lost reality. The -ity part

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of that word is the most important part. And we can see exactly why, in the light of ecological awareness. It’s not that there is nothing at all. We have the real. But it doesn’t make any sense anymore. That’s the trouble with data dump mode, and it’s the explanation for it. Data dump mode is just enhancing the incapacity of things to mean anything anymore to us. Our awareness is no longer human-scaled, no longer keyed to anthropocentrism. This is potentially great, if we can “own” and explore it. But it will require all kinds of trauma work to go through. It would be like trying to figure out how to exist now that we have become totally paranoid. This might be very tricky, but not impossible— people recover from trauma all the time. We would need to learn to become playful about the lack of an obvious solid ground of meaning, one obvious scale on which to see and act. Again, this is hard, but not impossible. In wartime people learn how to handle their situation, as difficult as it is. You can learn how to navigate through a bad dream. It means stepping outside of our comfort zone, but then again, some of our human comfort zones have been extreme discomfort zones for other lifeforms, and in the long run for us.

The End of the World

So, double trouble. Sure, we can fix the planet. But why? Psychically it’s as if we are being crushed. And the modes we have to draw on that might restart things are part of the problem. Currently our ways of restarting reality tend to be based on severing our connections with nonhuman beings in every respect: social, psychic, and philosophical. So we have inadequate political, technical, and psychic tools at our disposal with which to fix things. But curling up in the fetal position in despair isn’t going to work

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either. Instead of imagining that everything is useless and that the apocalypse has come—so there’s no point anyway—and instead of thinking that we have to completely reimagine how to do things (we’ll never get going with those attitudes), it would be better to start where we are and use some of the inadequate and broken tools we have, and see how they get modified by working at scales and with lifeforms that are unfamiliar to us, for which the tools were not designed. In the process, the tools might undergo some changes. I am very against the fatalism of thinking that this is the end of the world, or that the end of the world is imminent. In a funny way, it’s as if the end of the world has already happened, if by world we mean a stable set of reference points that guide our actions. Like Nietzsche proclaiming that God is dead, maybe we should boldly proclaim that the world is dead. Now that there is a bewildering variety of scales on which to think and act— ecosystem scale, planet scale, biosphere scale, human scale, blue whale scale … —it’s already the end of the “world.” This is actually a relief. It means we don’t have to hold on to a fantasy for dear life, the fantasy of anthropocentrism, which is inaccurate and violent. It’s like those horror movies in which the hero finds out that she or he is already dead. If you’re already dead, there’s nothing to be afraid of, is there?

Inconclusive in Conclusion

Being ecological is like being a teacher. When you first start teaching, you try so hard to teach that it becomes excruciating. You want your students to like you. You want to like them. You don’t want to feel this excruciating feeling that you yourself are generating by trying so hard. You start to work with aggression (or you

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quit). You realize that you are a channel for your and your students’ negative as well as positive feelings, and your job is to hold those feelings for the students’ benefit. Then you wonder why you are trying so hard, and maybe you start to let go. You begin to trust. You begin to realize that you are a teacher, no matter what, because at least one other person knows you’re their teacher. You can relax into that. It’s the same when you’re a parent. You spend some time trying desperately to be a parent. And then once you realize that you just are a parent, you can relax. At least someone knows you’re their parent. You are a fully embodied being who has never been separated from other biological beings both inside and outside your body, not for one second. You are sensitively attuned to everything happening in your world, which is why you end up blocking some of it, because you are afraid the stimulation might be too intense. You have an idea that there is an inside and an outside of yourself, and perhaps this is the deepest way in which you start to think that being ecological involves some massive change. Snared in the urgency of ecological awareness and the horror of extinction and global warming, it’s so incredibly difficult to miss this key point. I can’t tell you how many environmentalist conferences I’ve been to where the ending atmosphere had to do with some kind of fist-clenching, jaw-clenching desperation to be or do something totally different. What a set-up—once you’ve established this totally different space, you are already separated from it by a gigantic chasm, and being right or smart in this kind of world means showing yourself and everyone how deep and wide this chasm is. You’ve just made sure that you are never going to be ecological. The one thing that could help gets

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drowned out by the fear of the intensity of our reactions to the data input (oceans acidifying! Climate warming! Species going extinct!). But you are already a symbiotic being entangled with other symbiotic beings. The problem with ecological awareness and action isn’t that it’s horribly difficult. It’s that it’s too easy. You are breathing air, your bacterial microbiome is humming away, evolution is silently unfolding in the background. Somewhere, a bird is singing and clouds pass overhead. You stop reading this book and look around you. You don’t have to be ecological. Because you are ecological.我们总是已活得很生态的了。