



Being Ecological Timothy Morton

And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction

Exactly what is the current state of play, ecologically speaking? Let's explore this first. When I've told some people about the title of this essay, they have accused me of being weak. That's right: this essay is really lame. Some people wanted me to say 'You ARE Living in an Age of Mass Extinction,' as if the 'You may' was the same as 'You are not'. [...] We live in an indicative age, an active one indeed, where a wordprocessing program is prone to punish you with a little wavy green line for using the passive voice; heaven forbid we use the subjunctive, as in 'you might'.

Not being to be in the middle is a big problem for ecological thinking.

But not being able to be in the subjunctive is also a big problem for ecological thinking. Not being able to be in 'may' mode. It's all so black and white. And it edits something vital to our experience of ecology, something we can't actually get rid of: the hesitation quality, feelings of unreality or of distorted or of altered reality, feelings of the uncanny: feeling *weird*.

The feeling of not-quite-reality is exactly the feeling of being in a catastrophe. If you've ever been in a car crash, or in that minor catastrophe called jet lag, you probably know what I mean.

[...] Heidegger argues that there are no such things as truth and untruth, rigidly distinguished like black and white. [...] Things are always a bit fumbly and stumbly. We are feeling our way around. [...] And you may find yourself living in an age of mass extinction.

The Anthropocene is the name given to a geological period in which human-made stuff has created a layer in Earth's crust: all kinds of plastics, concretes and nucleotides, for example, have formed a discrete and obvious stratum. The Anthropocene has now officially been dated as starting in 1945. This is an astounding fact. Can you think of another geological period that has such a specific start date? And can you think of anything more uncanny than realizing you are in a whole new geological period, one marked by humans becoming a geophysical force on a planetary scale?

There have been five mass extinctions in the history of life on Earth. The most recent one, the one that wiped out the dinosaurs, was caused by an asteroid. The one before that, the End Permian Extinction, was caused by global warming, and it wiped out all but a few lifeforms. Extinctions look like points on a time line when you look them up on Wikipedia – but they are actually spread out over time, so that while they are happening it would be very hard to discern them. They are like invisible nuclear explosions that last for thousands of years. It's our turn to be the asteroid, because the global warming that we cause is now bringing about the Sixth Mass Extinction. [...]

Now it may sound strange, but something about the vagueness of kinda sorta finding yourself in the Anthropocene, which is the reason why the Sixth Mass Extinction event on planet Earth is now ongoing – something about that vagueness is in fact *essential* and *intrinsic* to the fact of being in such an age. This is like saying that jet lag tells you something true about how things are. [...]

I adhere to a philosophical view known as *object-oriented ontology* (OOO), first formulated by an American philosopher, Graham Harman. OOO argues that nothing can be grasped, or accessed, all at once in its entirety. OOO also argues that thought is not the only access mode, and that thought is by no means the top access mode – indeed, *there is no top access mode*. What these two insights give us is a world in which anthropocentrism is impossible, because thought has been extremely closely correlated with being human for so long, and because human beings have mostly been the only ones allowed to access other things in a meaningful way. OOO offers us a marvellous world in which being a badger, nosing past whatever it is that you, a human being, are looking at thoughtfully, is just as validly accessing that thing as you are. This might be useful in an era during which we have come to know much more about ecology, and need at least to recognize the importance of other lifeforms. [...] Opposing anthropocentrism doesn't mean that we hate humans and want ourselves to go extinct. What it means is seeing how we humans are included in the biosphere as one being among others. [...] Ecological awareness is shaking our faith in the anthropocentric idea that there is one scale to rule them all – the human one. [...] We could talk about our current historical phase in many ways: entering an ecological era, learning how to cope with global warming, and so on. But what all these labels have in common is *transitioning to caring about nonhumans in a more conscious way*. [...] Deleting the hesitation by reducing [one thing to another] is what is called violence.

Morton, Timothy. *All Art is Ecological*. London: Penguin Random House, 2018, pp.1-81.

Read the excerpt from Timothy Morton's book about ecology.

How does the author justify the use of 'may' in his title? Summarize his argumentation in 100 words.

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