

ON TIMOTHY MORTON'S *DARK ECOLOGY: FOR A LOGIC OF FUTURE COEXISTENCE*

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TIMOTHY MORTON'S 2016 book of ecocriticism, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, destroys the notion of foregone conclusions and challenges its reader to rethink existence in the age of the Anthropocene.¹ As evidence of Morton's desire to confuse and disrupt, the book appears neither to end nor begin at any definable point. Its first section, fittingly titled "Beginning After the End," introduces Morton's methodology as one that twists, binds, and loops a series of concepts together to provide commentary on the dangerous state of affairs that has led to our climate crisis in the twenty-first century. Morton's book challenges its reader to reexamine humanity's relationship within nature, urging them to question the traditions and institutions that have facilitated the ongoing destruction of natural environments for millennia. Apropos this strategy of inversion, the final section of the book expresses its argument in the following terms: "*Dark Ecology* shall argue that there are layers of attunement to ecological reality more accurate than what is habitual in the media, in the academy, and in society at large" (160). Morton aims to subvert the way we discuss and understand human agency and responsibility for, the natural environment by describing alternative methods

1. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). All subsequent references will appear in the text of this review and refer to this edition.

of communicating with (and about) nature. At its core, *Dark Ecology* is a work of discourse theory that critiques the language and reasoning that have led to belligerent forms of environmental consciousness—the modes of discourse that have led to the planet’s ailing state and ecological decline at the global level.

Starting with the very concept of the Anthropocene, Morton asks his readers to question their basic level of understanding about human beings and the way in which they function with regard to the natural environment. From the outset, Morton disputes the modern conception of the Anthropocene as naming “two levels we usually think are distinct: geology and humanity” (7). The fundamental premise of *Dark Ecology* is precisely the idea that this distinction is merely the continuation of a culture of distancing between the human being and their natural environment. As a result, by establishing the flawed mentality of this dualism, Morton aims to illustrate the reciprocal structure of the “natural” and “human” elements in broader narratives of the planet. To this end, Morton reframes the term Anthropocene to signify an attitude that states, “I am a person [but] I’m also part of an entity that is now a *geophysical force on a planetary scale*” (9; emphasis in original). For Morton, human beings are at once culpable for destroying the planet and the witnesses to its destruction; and, as such, the causes and effects of climate disaster are, in his thesis, intrinsically linked.

Published as the fourth book in Morton’s ecological series, *Dark Ecology* follows Morton’s 2014 Wellek Lectures at the University of California, and establishes a half-serious directive of play in the pursuit of a new ecological politics. As Morton contends, it is only by loosening the bonds of institutional control, which shape the rules and regulations designed to maintain human “progress” at all costs, that we can hope to reshape structures in society as more ecopositive. Formulated in response to an approach to environmental disaster termed “dark

ecology”—a deeply intimate confrontation with the impending doom of ecological collapse—Morton’s emphasis on play brings a much-needed sense of levity to ecocriticism. Morton cites the need for a “playful” resolution to what he terms the “objectified depression” of our current political approach to climate change (113). He calls for a “politics that includes what appears least political—laughter, the playful, even the silly”—to reestablish ties to nonhuman beings that connect humans (113). He urges the creation of “toylike” political systems “that connect humans and nonhumans with one another” (113); and play is proposed as a means of revising the multiple approaches to and interactions with social structures that currently form and restrict our relationship with nature. Morton advises we treat political formations and economic structures as toys in order to confront their controls over daily life. Institutions cannot be seen as all governing and determining forces; they must be made tangible and in turn become malleable to the needs of the planet. Only engagement at the level of this playful interaction, he suggests, can unbalance the dangerous structures that beleaguer our present environmental approaches to biodiversity.

This approach is possible within Morton’s framework, which conceives of an object-orientated ontology (OOO) as a positive philosophical movement for ecological scholarship and culture. First proposed by Graham Harman, OOO may be used, Morton suggests, to reinterpret modern Kantian correlationism whereby things exist only as directly mediated by one’s own experience.² OOO is thus presented as a means of initiating a metaphorical engagement with the aesthetics of environmental experience. Morton argues that it is precisely because objects outside of one’s immediate experience are unknowable, yet do actually have an effect on other objects, that a revised understanding of subjectivity is required to improve our ecological future—one in which

2. See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002).

subjectivity is central to all beings on this planet. By opening up correlationism so that it encompasses a reciprocal understanding of objects as “beings in the world,” Morton introduces his central claim: “OOO believes that reality is *mysterious* and *magical*, because beings withdraw and because beings influence each other aesthetically, which is to say at a distance” (17). Morton’s emphasis on the perception of distance between things is presented as an opportunity to let go of human assumptions about power and supremacy. The notion that nature is outside of us also means that nature is beyond our control, and this sense of the tangible otherness of nature is in fact at the heart of what Morton means by the terms “mysterious and magical,” which underline the importance of humility as well as the joys of a quasi-noncognitive metaphysical engagement with environmental aesthetics.³

Dark Ecology is fundamentally concerned with responsibility, and seeks to impose on the reader a sense that the consequences of their actions spread further than just their immediate field of reference. In “The First Thread,” Morton introduces what he calls “hyperobjects,” which he defines as those concepts that must be thought of at the scale of Earth rather than of the individual. Morton seeks to show how human actions have planetary implications and how computational power has opened our frame of reference to include “the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic” (25). Examples of hyperobjects include databergs, which are overwhelmingly large computations of data and statistics, solar winds, which “interact with Earth’s magnetic shield and produce auroras,” as well as “the mass of terrestrial weather events” (24). All of these hyperobjects are beyond our perceptibility and require figurative illustration to be made comprehensible. As a consequence, ecological culture and politics cannot remain merely at the level of the human but must advance towards species at Earth’s magnitude. Human beings

3. For a succinct account of the various approaches to the field of environmental aesthetics, see Allen Carson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

are at once the collective perpetrators of their own demise and individuals grappling with a desire to understand the rapid rates of rise and decline in all aspects of their daily lives. There is an overwhelming sense of expansion throughout Morton's book, as though he asks his reader to pass through immense chasms in space and time to reevaluate their existence in the present moment. This is a formidable request, which often results in multiple unresolved or unexplained associations. Arguably, Morton's metaphysical approach to ecocriticism renders it too ephemeral to lead to any objective and universal results, much less to work as an effective call to action.

Another metaphor of human destruction appears in the first section when Morton introduces the term "agrilogistics" to give a face to the type of age we live in and how it may be responsible for the scale of global catastrophe we face. Morton uses this term throughout the remainder of the book as evidence of where humanity has failed. Agrilogistics is defined a series of processes that emerged at the end of the last massive climate shift in the Ice Age—a period that saw a move away from hunter-gather traditions and towards the establishment of agricultural farming, which could ensure the continued availability of food. Although the looping methodology of *Dark Ecology* does not lend itself to rendering clear genesis narratives, Morton places a great deal of weight on the agricultural program humans have developed over the last twelve thousand years. For Morton, agrilogistics looms as the largest evil in this tale of ecocatastrophe; it is one that, he writes, was "toxic from the beginning to humans and other lifeforms," operating "blindly like a computer program" (42). It is arguable that all of Morton's "playful" strategies are merely foils for the necessary disruption of that very vector that has made human survival possible for the last twelve thousand years. Thus, blaming agrilogistics for the current plight of Earth is akin to criticising humanity's need for survival.

Although Morton does much to emphasise the complexity of the network of interrelations and unobservable consequences relating to this historical shift towards subsistence farming, Morton's attribution of blame to agrilogistics for causing the present state of affairs is often too simplistic to be entirely satisfying.

The next two threads of Morton's book are concerned with how to remove ourselves from this catastrophe of human agency (agrilogistics)—that is, “to avoid the consequences of the last global warming, humans devised a logistics that has resulted in global warming” (54). This statement is paradigmatic of Morton's tendency towards loop-like metaphors: in order to exit a contemporaneous catastrophe—the Ice Age—we created a system that shaped the very system of consequences we now wish to exit—global warming. True to form, Morton does not advocate an exit from this loop but merely for a cognition or understanding of this loop as grounding our existence. This looping reciprocity forms the heart of what Morton calls “ecognosis,” and helps to establish his claim that we need to reevaluate approaches to the nonhuman environment. For, as he goes on to write, “contemporary science allows us to think species not as absolutely non-existent, but as floating, spectral entities that are not directly, constantly present” (18). As such, our existence as part of a species necessitates a relational understanding of our existence in the age of the Anthropocene. This awareness brings with it a type of metaphysical questioning that forms much of the discussion in “Thread Two” and “Thread Three” of Morton's text. The problem—how we as humans may initiate a discursive shift in our approach to the natural world—is not so much resolved as reproblematised in the final chapters. Humans must learn to think of themselves *as humans*—not as removed cognitive beings that have control over all natural environments. In the end, ecognosis is a process of thinking of ourselves as a species; and it is, Morton asserts, the necessary discursive shift that will force humanity to take account of its actions, which occur within a web of interconnected natures.

If there is one key message to be gleaned from *Deep Ecology* it is that “a human is made up of nonhuman components and is directly related to nonhumans” (18). Humans need to reposition the idea of themselves as central to the natural landscape, and to think about the world from an ecological rather than anthropocentric perspective. The natural world is not merely the condition of our existence but, as Morton notes,

a mess of lungs and bacterial microbiomes and nonhuman ancestors and so on—along with their agents such as cows and factories and thoughts, agents that can't be reduced to their merely human use or exchange value. (21)

Morton's book poses a challenge in which humanity as it currently exists must remove itself from the equation to ensure the continuation of a healthy planet. The world is made up of so much more than can be imagined by our human minds, and a deeper understanding of its mystery may lead to a more positive engagement with that world.