



Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013, pp. 229 RRP: \$24.95 paperback.

Timothy Morton is Rita Shea Guffey Chair in English at Rice University. He is the author of over ten books and numerous essays on a wide range of topics, from philosophy, ecology, and literature, to food and music.

Uttering the phrase, “funny weather today!” in contemporary conversation is apt to make the listener feel uneasy, all thanks to the phenomenon of global warming. As Timothy Morton explains in his newest book, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, how we chat about the weather has long been influenced by an illusion of distance which humans have created between themselves and ‘nature’. Whether or not global warming is mentioned or disputed, its looming, unreal presence thwarts our fantasy of the weather “as a neutral screen that enables us to have a human drama in the foreground” (p. 99). This is a relatively mild example of how global warming and other immeasurable spatio-temporal ‘things’ Morton terms ‘hyperobjects’, have overwhelmed our traditional illusion of distance from nature. Global warming literally engulfs us: it enters our thoughts (and conversations), increases our risk of skin cancer and redirects our focus from nature as an aestheticised background phenomenon to the vulnerability of our bodies and brains to harmful effects from environmental degradation. *Hyperobjects* begins from where Morton left off in *The Ecological Thought* (2010), with the introduction of the term ‘hyperobjects’ to refer to things that are “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans”. The book is split into two parts, Part I. What Are Hyperobjects? and Part II. The Time of Hyperobjects. In Part I, Morton describes the general characteristics of hyperobjects, examples of which include black holes, socio-economic classes, the biosphere and what he calls “the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism”. Part II discusses their cultural causes and effects and Morton places his focus on man-made or pollution-causing substances such as the sums of all polystyrene and unearthed plutonium. However, the hyperobject that is consistently explored throughout the volume is global warming.

What does it mean to consider global warming as a hyperobject? Consider the perceptive powers of an ant; it may be familiar with dog hair, dog smells, dog saliva and so on, but never with the whole dog. Unlike the ant, we are able to extrapolate

from our experience over time to identify and chart global warming in probabilistic terms. We are never sure, however, if a hot day in Perth, monsoon in Rajasthan, or other specific local event is a direct effect or manifestation of global warming. We are uncertain of global warming's whereabouts because, like the ant, we cannot picture it in full. Morton attributes this to 'non-locality', and 'phasing', two generic traits demonstrated by hyperobjects (the others are 'viscosity', 'temporal undulation', and 'interobjectivity'). These traits are elaborated, each in a chapter of its own, in terms of quantum wave collapse, world tubes, Lorenz attractors and other theoretical constructs which Morton's treatment does not boil down sufficiently for readers other than physics enthusiasts. For example, in his discussion of 'phasing' Morton states that "a high enough dimensional being would see global warming itself as a static object. What horrifyingly complex tentacles would such an entity have, the high dimensional object we call global warming?" (p.71). While it invites fanciful impressions of scary tentacles, this description exceeds the limits of what we can mentally picture. While the conventional analogy of the 'greenhouse' process may be more informative, the idea of global warming as a higher dimensional 'static object' pushes our imaginative abilities to failure, and this directs our attention to it being a thing in mind-independent reality.

Morton's concern for mind-independent objects reflects his adherence to the object-oriented ontology (OOO) which Graham Harman first formulated in *Tool-being* (2002).¹ Taking his departure from Heidegger's tool-analysis in *Being and Time*, Harman extends some of Dasein's crucial attributes to all non-human animals and inanimate objects.² The upshot of this is that Harman makes no categorical distinction between the causal influence one object exerts on another and the way it is perceived by a human or other subject. For Harman, an object is not merely a phenomenon for a subject, but is the source of a different phenomenon for every object within its causal reach, while its essence remains withdrawn. It is a curious feature of Harman's 'flat ontology' that cups of tea, smart phones, dogs, and other familiar everyday items are counted as real objects, along with innumerable others, neither reducible 'down' to basic particles, 'up' to larger wholes, nor 'in front' to their causal effects.³ Due to their massiveness, Morton's hyperobjects defy human imagination to reduce them in these ways. Morton's frequent references to Heidegger, which concur with Harman's interpretation, are overly abstruse and assume the reader's prior familiarity with *Being and Time*. Suffice it to say that hyperobjects highlight the 'rift' between phenomenon and thing, a rift that goes unnoticed in medium-sized objects.

¹ G. Harman, *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Open Court, Chicago, 2002.

² In *Being and Time*, Heidegger distinguishes Dasein's primordial involvement with ready-to-hand equipment from its capacity to step back and take in discrete objects over and against him or herself as a subject. Harman extended this second-order receptivity to present-at-hand objects to the objects themselves.

³ In some cases, clusters of phenomena which we delineate as objects are merely 'sensual objects' with no veridical counterpart in mind-independent reality.

As well as Harman's Heidegger, Morton's argument draws upon Quentin Meillassoux's Kant, particularly Meillassoux's idea of 'correlationism', summarised in the introduction as "the notion that philosophy can only talk within a narrow bandwidth, restricted to the human-world correlate" (p. 9). To simplify, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant described mind-independent reality as the undifferentiated, unknowable *noumenon*: the source of featureless content which is processed into experience by quasi-mental categories that ensure the human subject experiences an ordered world of distinct spatiotemporal *phenomena*. In *After Finitude* (2006), Meillassoux claimed that by redefining the knowable world to comprise only mind-dependent phenomena, Kant instigated a "Ptolemaic Counter-revolution" against the 'decentering' impact of the mathematized approach to nature taken by scientists since Copernicus and Galileo.⁴ The latter approach had revealed an indifferent universe which precedes and outlasts human thought, but Kant's legacy was to numb modern continental philosophers against that 'glacial world' of things-in-themselves. For Meillassoux, this loosened grip on reality is a problem because it constrained the speculations of metaphysicians. However, for Morton it is an ethical problem because "humans must learn to care for fatal substances that will outlast them and their descendants beyond any meaningful limit of self-interest" (p. 124). At the very least, Morton argues philosophy should not hinder the imaginative change of thinking that is required, for instance, to negotiate the disposal of Plutonium-239, with its more than 24,000 year half-life.

Morton approves of the Nuclear Guardianship non-government organisation's suggestion that Plutonium be encased in gold and kept and contemplated in clear sight because "there is no *away* into which we can meaningfully sweep the radioactive dust" (p. 120). Yet the notion of just such an *away*, an amorphous, infinite background, is congenial to the economic view of nature as a pool of raw materials from which products and value are generated. This picture bears resemblance, which Morton claims is more than coincidental, to Kant's bifurcated view of the raw *noumenal* and processed *phenomenal* worlds (p. 113). Morton's arguments connecting capitalism and transcendental idealism omit evidence for causal influence in either direction, besides anecdotal examples of 'applied' *correlationism*. The response of the CEO of British Petroleum, Tony Hayward, to the Deepwater Horizon oil pipe explosion in 2010, that "the Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean" implies the ocean could easily absorb the damage, and is diagnosed by Morton as "capitalist essentialism" (p. 115). Morton identifies the latter with a quasi-Kantian formula, in which "the essence of reality is capital and Nature. Both exist in an ethereal beyond. Over here, where we live, is an oil spill. But don't worry. The beyond will take care of it" (p. 115). However, it is clear that oil spills and other industrial disasters have far-reaching impacts in the 'glacial' world

⁴ Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, (trans. R. Brassier), Continuum Publishing, London and New York, 2008.

beyond human economic activity.

Morton rejects the ontological privilege which correlationism accords to human subjectivity. Building on his thesis in *Ecology without Nature* (2007), that the modern environmental movement is undermined by the discursive influence of Romanticism, Morton describes how transcendental idealism carried across to art as a 'cynical distance'. Offering examples from various artistic forms and genres, he accuses the Romantics of having evoked the beauty and sublimity of the natural landscape to reflect their own non-mechanical inner depths. The cynicism lay in the fact that they put the inadequacy of the reflection down to the disproportionately profound depth of human subjectivity relative to the mere stuff of nature, and referred to this through undertones in the art itself. Morton offers an illuminating and accessible breakdown of Hegel's idea that "Romantic art must talk about its own failure to embody the inner space in outer things. Yet by failing in this way, art ironically *succeeds* to talk about the inner space...the job of art is to fail better, or rather, more sublimely" (p. 162). Although he does not share Hegel's approval of Romantic art thus construed, he considers the construal to hold generally true of modern art since Romanticism.

Morton makes an exception of "a minor tradition within modernity" headed by Keats, who he credits as "the inventor of the object-oriented approach" (p. 181). According to Morton, Wordsworth led a "constructivist", subject-oriented approach to art, designed for "upgrading the mind of the viewer" by persuasively rendering the world in a new light (p. 179). Keats, by contrast, let objects speak for themselves, diminishing the significance of our own ephemeral impressions and notions compared with the beauty of things which persist beyond our uses for them (p. 190). Brenda Hillman's short poem "Styrofoam Cup" (2001), while it ironically plays on Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", to highlight the unlovely life of a disposable cup once it has become waste, is claimed by Morton to follow "the Keatsian, object-oriented strategy", in which irony is counter-balanced by sincere concern for the physical reality underlying appearances (p. 191). Despite this and several other intriguing references to Keats's "object-oriented approach", Morton neglects to offer detailed justification for attributing his own philosophical preferences to that particular Romantic. Morton's discussion of Romanticism clearly helps to show the reader, nevertheless, where Morton is coming from with some of his counterintuitive assertions about the environmental movement, for instance when he describes green activists' calls to 'Act now!' as maintaining a "cynical ideological distance" (p. 92). Ecological collapse is conjured up as a dramatic backdrop in which to highlight the zeal and vision of the activist, whose urgent plans of action tend to be either tokenistic or impracticable, yet ironically succeed as 'sublime failure'.

"The Age of Asymmetry", which is the name Morton gives to our current epoch and also to the last chapter of *Hyperobjects*, presents a conundrum: the more we understand the "massive objects that show up on our radar" and the effects of

industrial society on 'nature', the more we find that we are enmeshed with them and that our practical options are constrained (p. 160). We are 'inside' global warming; 'strafed' with radiation; bombarded by endocrine disruptors; fed on fossil fuels and so on. With characteristic theatricality, Morton tells us that "it is now the uncanny time of zombies after the end of the world, a time of hypocrisy where every decision is 'wrong'" (p. 160). While rescue from industrial contamination is already out of the question, the imperative remains to 'care' about humans and non-humans, including the hazardous objects we leave as our legacy. Yet having been modern, we cannot loosen our ironic grasp of the pretension, ineffectuality and ethically problematic status of environmental gestures we may make. While thus saddled with a sort of "hypocrisy", non-activists are nevertheless galvanised to action towards mutual aid with discrete things-in-themselves, negotiated on a more equal, "democratic" footing (p. 121). Morton is coy about giving details of what such action might entail, although he recommends some artists whose work apparently reflects the truer balance of power between humans and non-humans, particularly the drone pianist, La Monte Young (pp. 166-71), and Aboriginal painter, Yukulitji Napangati (pp. 74-75). He merely stipulates that urgent action must be balanced by reflection, and that self-valourising stances are untenable. Recalling Kierkegaard, Morton tells us it is edifying to discover that, "inside hyperobjects, we are always in the wrong" (p. 136).

Should readers be disappointed that Morton, so voluble on so many topics, from the Prisoners' Dilemma to *The Lord of the Rings*, has so little practical advice to offer? This question might be answered differently depending on what we consider the purpose of the book to be. Yes, probably, if the point of introducing the concept, 'hyperobject', is to help us better understand the global ecological crisis and its ramifications for individuals and society. No, if the purpose is simply to exhibit what object-oriented ontology (OOO) has to say about hyperobjects so as to elaborate more nuances of that metaphysical position. Such a narrow purpose, however, would be incommensurate with the weightiness of subject matter such as global warming. Morton simply states he has written the book because "hyperobjects require direct philosophical, historical, and cultural explication", as does their "human appropriation", an ambiguous reason that sounds more like the following of an order set out by the hyperobjects themselves (p. 3). But if hyperobjects really had the initiative that Morton accords to them throughout the book, if it is true that "hyperobjects have dragged humans kicking and screaming" from the sanctuary of transcendental subjectivity, for instance, surely we would already know about it without Morton's explanation?

This last puzzle stems from the broader problem of ambiguity throughout Morton's overstated prose. Elsewhere this has been suggested to be a rhetorical strategy, shared by Graham Harman, to compensate for a lack of rigour by employing such an "effusive, strenuously goofy" style that any critic becomes vulnerable to

accusations of taking themselves too seriously.⁵ Morton furthermore draws tenuous causal and theoretical connections, for instance between the invention of James Watt's all-purpose steam engine and the musical dominance of pianos tuned to even temperament (p. 164), or between Heidegger's notion of 'life-world' and the high sheep-to-human ratio in New Zealand (pp. 103-106). The sheer breadth of reading and sweep of imagination from which they are drawn, however, is likely to be stimulating for readers engaged in research in the humanities and social sciences, particularly those with interdisciplinary interests. As for the overall significance of Morton's colourful and densely packed observations, it is this reader's personal opinion that although these could well have been marshalled in support of a more modestly stated argument, in their present overstated form in *Hyperobjects* they are disappointingly 'all tip and no iceberg'.

Kieran Golby, The University of Western Australia

⁵ N. Brown, 'The Nadir of OOO: From Graham Harman's Tool Being to Timothy Morton's Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality', *Parrhesia*, Vol. 17, 2013, pp. 62-71.