SCHOPENHAUER, RADICAL ENTANGLEMENT, AND FUTURAL ECOLOGY: TOWARDS A NATURAL LIMITATIONISM

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> If there is any science humankind really needs, it is the one I teach, of how to occupy properly that place in [the world] that is assigned to humankind, and how to learn from it what one must be in order to be human.[1]
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> The point before us is that this scientific field of thought is now, in the twentieth century, too narrow for the concrete facts which are before it for analysis …. Thus, in order to understand the difficulties of modern scientific thought and also its reactions on the modern world, we should have in our minds some conception of a wider field of abstraction, a more concrete analysis, which shall stand nearer to the complete concreteness of our intuitive experience.[2]

ABSTRACT: In this essay, we argue that Schopenhauer is an ecological thinker, and more specifically that Schopenhauer's ecological thought is future-oriented, without becoming fatalistic; it is dark in the sense of being reserved, without falling into despair; and it points towards an ecological attitude characterized by the full realization of our limits, without being quietist. Schopenhauer's philosophical ecology deals with the great unfolding of the cosmic household (*oikos*). It shows that ecology cannot be equated with nature conservation or a harmonious world-image, but with embracing a world-image that radically entangles us within it. This leads to the necessity of embracing our limits, without falling into nihilism, alarmism, solutionism, or quietism, yet remaining fully cognizant of our epistemic limitations and representational capacities. This attitude is natural limitationism. Conversely, longtermism thought flattens out this idea. It denies our radical entanglement with the world, proposing salvific technology as the solution to current ecological problems. We argue for adopting a humble and receptive attitude

[1] Kant, 2005: Ak 20: p. 45.

[2] Whitehead, 1960: p. 65.

of creative piety, coupled with the full existential realization of our radical entanglement with the biosphere, rendering longtermist thinking irrelevant. Schopenhauer's philosophical ecology provides a viable organicist alternative to address our current biospheric crises.

KEYWORDS: Schopenhauer; Metaphysics; the Will; Ecology; Futurism

1. INTRODUCTION

From its very inception, the project of modernity and the transformations it caused in the sciences, the arts, architecture, city planning, and industrialization were accompanied by anxieties of all sorts, many of which gave rise to the late 18th and 19th centuries' cultural and artistic tendencies.[3] The *Sturm und Drang* movement, the development of early Existentialism, the Romantic literary trope of the lost wanderer, the haunting poetry of Wordsworth, Nietzsche's searching diagnosis of nihilism and decadence, the budding criticism and artistic representation of the modern polis: they can all be understood as inevitable symptoms of having to cope with a new ordering of the world, reflected in artistic and literary expressions that sought to make sense of new ways of being-in-the-world.[4] This cultural predicament only intensified when what was to become "high modernism"[5] or later on "supermodernity" gradually took shape.[6]

We often accept that there is a cultural "road not taken," taking the *status quo* as point of departure, even while criticizing modernity. If we take one further step back to the first half of the 19th century, we encounter the "fork in the road." The 1830s and 1840s witnessed the birth of the philosophical current that would develop into Existentialism, notably in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, F.W.J. Schelling, and Arthur Schopenhauer.[7] Characterized by its deep appreciation of

[3] Hanna and Paans, 2020.

[4] Examples of this literature are Baudelaire's 1857 *Les fleurs du mal*, the poetry of William Blake and T S. Eliot, and fiction that makes sense of the new urban environment and the influence of technology, e.g., Alfred Döblin's 1929 *Berlin Alexanderplatz,* Erich Kästners 1931 *Fabian: The Story of a Moralist*, and Max Fritsch's 1957 *Homo faber*.

[5] Scott, 1998.

[6] Augé, 1996.

[7] Without going into much historical detail, it could be argued that the tendency towards subjectivism was already present in Romanticism, although more so in literature than in philosophy. The literary works of Byron, Wordsworth, Yeats, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schiller all feature such undercurrents. The same can be said of the classical music composed in this period, moving away from the classical models used by Haydn and Mozart towards the emotional, personal tone languages of Beethoven, Chopin, and Schubert. At any rate, Existentialism didn't appear out of nowhere, but can be interpreted as a (i) further development of

subjective, lived experience, it charted out a new path for philosophy that became obscured due to two World Wars in the 20th century and the subsequent hegemony of the mechanist worldview, nowadays exacerbated by the influence of digital technology.[8]

During the 19th century, we also witness a parallel philosophical development: the rise of *Naturphilosophie* in the German-speaking part of Europe. Continuing down a philosophical avenue opened up by the later Kant and by debates in biology and zoology alike, philosophers like G.W.F. Hegel, F.W.J Schelling, Karl Adam Eschenmayer, Carl Friedrich Kielmayer, Georg Ernst Stahl, and Heinrik Steffens turned their intellectual powers towards formulating all-encompassing systems of nature.[9] In doing so, they confronted questions of freedom and agency, but equally questions that pertain to what we would now call process philosophy, ontogeny, ecology, the nature of biological life, and systems thinking.

These two developments come together in the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).[10] His philosophy contains an alternative theoretical trajectory that could have easily led into another type of existentialism—an organicist existentialism that deeply resonates with our ecological predicament today, yet without the associated nihilism that the Existentialists so acutely diagnosed, yet often failed to escape.

Unlikely as it may seem, in Schopenhauer we find already the blueprint of what Sartre would label as "humanistic existentialism."[11] Yet, his organicist-inspired existentialism is definitely richer than the abstract and strangely denaturalized versions espoused by Camus, Sartre, and Tillich, as it situates us fully within the cosmic order. If anything, Schopenhauerian philosophy can be said to have "naturalized" existentialism. It integrated the emerging doctrines of *Naturphilosophie* within a post-Kantian framework, enriching it with a mystical

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Romanticism and (ii) a response to the oversystematizing tendencies of Hegelian philosophy and Neo-Kantianism.

[8] Hanna and Paans, 2020.

[9] For two in-depth overviews, see: Grant, 2008; Mensch, 2013.

[10] We cite Schopenhauer's works as follows, using the recent Cambridge University Press translation: WWR1 and WWR2 = the two books of *The World as Will and Representation*, cited by paragraph and page number; PP1 and PP2 = the two volumes of *Parerga and Paralipomena*; WiN = *On the Will in Nature*, cited by chapter. Bibliographical details are provided in the list of REFERENCES.

[11] Sartre, 2007.

component borrowed from Christianity and Indian metaphysics alike.

While a certain "unhomeliness" gradually took hold of the modern mind, Schopenhauer—like his contemporary Schelling—articulated a philosophical picture of nature that is strikingly prescient and process-based, and which presents itself with renewed relevance and insistence to us, especially against the background of global ecological degradation.[12]

Paraphrasing Nietzsche, this essay aims to regard "Schopenhauer as educator" once more, first-&-foremost by regarding him as an ecological philosopher, maybe even the first thinker in European thought to construct such an interconnected ontology. What makes Schopenhauer's ecological orientation appealing is that it allows us to steer clear from regarding nature as an essential harmonious, Gaia-like entity, but also avoids the more tendentious excesses of what is called "weird realism."[13]

The existential dimension in Schopenhauer lies not just in his wry observation that human beings are perched perilously on the pendulum between pain and boredom; neither does it lie in the fact that he postulates a ceaseless, blind Will; and neither does it lie in the fact that he revels in depicting gruesome scenes of suffering in order to illustrate his main points.

While all these aspects tie into Schopenhauer's dimly colored worldview, they are also interconnected on a still deeper level. What Schopenhauer's philosophical project accomplishes is subtly to maneuver the truly uncanny character of *environmental agency* to the center of attention:

> 1. Probably more than any thinker before him, Schopenhauer imbues the world as such with agency. However, he does so without relapsing into some kind of naive

12 For a discussion of Schelling's version, see Gare, 2013. For a comparison, see Eschmann, 2022.

13 See: Graham, 2012; Rothman, 2015. Our reservation about weird realism is that it invented a philosophical vocabulary that intrigues and that seems to deal with our mundane perception of the world. However, it falls short as a philosophical doctrine or theory and seems content in postulating withdrawn objects. Consider the following citation by Timothy Morton: "Yeah, there's an extraordinary moment where you get to see somebody drinking a glass of orange juice. I never thought about the uncanniness of that. The funny thing is that just yesterday, I found myself drinking a rather large glass of orange juice and it was from the bottom of the carton so it was ever so slightly funky because it was past the use-by date. It was very thick and goopy and I found myself thinking, "'This is sort of like being in the Black Lodge in Twin Peaks you've poured the orange juice and it's become this kind of viscous substance"' (Hageman, Morton, and Vandermeer, 2016). Our worry is that this descriptive, observing approach takes alienation as its point of departure, but appears not to go beyond it.

animism or a new-age version of the Gaia hypothesis, insofar as he provides a remarkably apophatic and menacing image of the processual nature of the world. This is a significant philosophical achievement by itself, as he combined the conceptual frameworks of Western and Eastern religion and post-Kantian thought with the latest advances in the natural sciences to formulate a proto-ecological worldview that significantly exceeded the scope of his philosophical sources.

2. This new distribution of agency leads into a interrelated ontology, a fact that is not lost on environmental ethics and ecocriticism. In universalizing the Will, Schopenhauer rejected the classical ontology based on the "great chain of Being," or the Enlightenment notion that human beings somehow stood outside nature. Instead, all kinds of phenomena, ranging from crystals forming to bacteria dividing, waterfalls thundering down the mountains, and animals procreating are regarded as manifestations of a single Will that permeates the whole of nature. In a sense, Schopenhauer alluded to and revised the notion of a world-soul or *anima mundi*, yet without the religious, or esoteric overtones of that term. Like the Transcendentalist's notion of the Oversoul, Schopenhauer's Will function as a kind of impulsion distributed throughout nature.

3. In a time in which the mechanistic worldview and its attendant logicism and conceptualism reign supreme; in which societies become focused on products, thought-shaping scripts and digital procedures in favor of human interaction; in which this digital space deeply orients and inflects our sociocultural space; and in which anything that does not fit this mechanistic-digitized picture is systematically disregarded, Schopenhauer's thought once more directs attention to the non-conceptual, processual, striving and fluid character of reality, subverting the positivist, mechanistic "root metaphor" for understanding the universe in favor of an unabashedly organicist alternative.

4. The ensuing "radically entangled" vision of the world points towards a refined natural limitationism that demarcates a new moral action space. It is, however, not a longtermist, technocratic posthumanism in which humanity is gradually replaced by technology, cyborg-like body modifications or artificial intelligence, but a creative-pious awareness of limits in which humanity must fully embrace its finitude and even its evolutionary development. In doing so, one learns "the place one must occupy in the world to become human."

Essentially, the Schopenhauerian worldview radically situates the individual within the disorienting infinity of the cosmos, the silent expanse which—as Pascal remarked—terrified him. By charting out this new philosophical pathway, he developed a new perspective of humanity's involuntary immersion in the world that contributed in no small degree to his alleged pessimism, and that ironically

enough made him decidedly unpopular with the *Lebensphilosophen* who were crucially dependent on the philosophical space he carved out.[14]

We claim that Schopenhauer's ecological thought is future-oriented, without becoming fatalistic; it is dark in the sense of being reserved, without falling into despair; and it points towards an ecological attitude characterized by the full realization of our limits, without being quietist.

As such, it avoids both breathless climate alarmism and passive resignation, yet it critically highlights our environmental agency, putting our space of actions into sharper relief and forcing us to take our responsibility in dealing with the forces of nature and life more generally. Even more importantly, this ecological thought is an effective antidote to recent versions of longtermism, i.e., the doctrine that we ought to care primarily for the long-term interests of humanity. Yes, true ecological thought requires us to think on long timescales, taking future generations into account. But likewise, our problems need solutions in the foreseeable future. As has been argued repeatedly, longtermism has hijacked the need for thinking on appropriately long timescales, trying to narrow the debate about the future until it fits in the confines of a truly dystopian, technocratic, and ultimately mechanistic vision of nature.[15]

Contrary to this narrow conception, ecological thought provides a powerful and inspirational theoretical framework to conceive of an organicist-inspired "natural limitationism" or "ecological mindset" that integrates long-term thinking without relapsing into the illusion of technological control. Schopenhauer's seemingly dark and forbidding thought challenges us to confront a thoroughly non-hierarchical and networked ontology, inviting us to assume a viewpoint beyond anthropocentrism or posthumanism, thereby re-situating us in a cosmic order to be approached with *natural piety*.[16] In effect, Schopenhauer's insight that we are inescapably situated in the world contains an invitation not to despair, but to fully accept the limits imposed on us by radical entanglement and to assume these limits as point of departure for thinking about moral action. Yet,

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[14] See Beiser, 2023: p. 55. Consider for instance the following citation: "In his great work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Schopenhauer maintained—explicitly and emphatically—that life is not worth living. He is perfectly clear that non-existence is better than existence."

[15] Read, 2022.

[16] Alexander, 1939: pp. 299, 310–311, 306.

to see how Schopenhauer situates humanity in the cosmic order, we first need to consider the sense of *displacement* that permeates his thought.

2. THE PHILOSOPHER OF DISPLACEMENT

When he finished the second volume of his *magnus opus The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer—as self-consciously a Kantian—was well aware of the transcendental limits of his philosophy. In the concluding entry, titled *Epiphilosophy,* he notes that the Will is not a transcendent limit placed on his philosophy, but that it is in fact immanent throughout it.[17] The statement is characteristic of the Schopenhauerian philosophical project: its deepest assumptions cause inconsistencies that threaten the structure of the entire edifice.[18] Whereas the Will was originally intended to replace the Kantian thing-in-itself, and therefore would be entirely noumenal, it seems that near the end of his life, Schopenhauer reconceptualized the position of the Will somewhat, although never fully admitted to this change and consequently never developed a fully matured account of it.[19]

We can find multiple instances in his works stating that the Will's noumenal character strictly separates it from the world of phenomena.[20] Simultaneously, Schopenhauer argues that it is immediately experienced in the individual in the form of desires and volitions, and—mediated by the Platonic forms—in the aesthetic contemplation of art and in the practice of everyday asceticism.[21]

Schopenhauer's approach allowed him to perform a philosophical move that was unavailable to Kant. The latter had held that the thing-in-itself could not be

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[17] Schopenhauer, 2018: pp. 657, 659 (WWR2: ch. 50).

[18] Cartwright, 2010: pp. 382–383 on the reviews of *The World as Will and Representation* by Johann Friedrich Herbart and Eduard Beneke. In effect, J.F. Herbart argued that, despite his claims to the contrary, Schopenhauer had—like Fichte, Schelling and Hegel—posited a kind of Absolute, unconditioned or self-positing entity that cannot be empirically perceived or derived from objects. In doing so, Herbart drew Schopenhauer into the camp of speculative idealism, something the latter had hoped to avoid. Certainly, Schopenhauer was well aware of the criticisms towards his metaphysics and kept on revising his notion of the Will until his final years.

[19] See Schopenhauer, 2015: pp. 84–91 (PP2: ch. 4), 241–254 (PP2: ch. 10), and 255–261 (PP2: ch. 11). In all these chapters, Schopenhauer elaborates on the character of the Will, although he approaches it from different thematic angles.

[20] Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 40 (WWR1: §6), and 135 (WWR1: §22)

[21] This theme is extensively discussed in the fourth book of WWR1. See Vandenabeele, 2015 for a discussion.

known because it was not located in either space or time, and therefore outside the reach of the *Anschauungsformen*.[22] Logically speaking, this prevented it from exerting any causal influence in the world of appearances, a point that was mercilessly exposed by Kant's critics.[23] Consequently, Kant was saddled with the thorny problem of explaining why a thing-in-itself was actually needed, if it could not exert any causal consequence whatsoever. For philosophers working directly after Kant, the issue of the thing-in-itself became a central preoccupation.

Within the Neo-Kantian tradition, the responses to dealing with the thing-in-itself varied from trying to provide a theory that allowed some intuitive access to it to tactically ignoring it altogether.[24] For Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, it became a matter of trying to eliminate the thing-in-itself from the world of appearances while still emphasizing the limits of our cognition.[25]

Schopenhauer adopted a different strategy: he *universalized* the thing-in-itself—as he explains in his *Epiphilosophy*—arguing that it is immanent throughout the manifestly real world. This move has two remarkable consequences.

> **First**, it avoids what Eugene Thacker has aptly called the "ontology of generosity."[26] That is, the idea that Life itself always flows forth from the living, even in cases where an individual is dying, for instance. In such an ontology, Life is a kind of vital force that permeates everything. Had Schopenhauer held this position, he would have been a vitalist of the classical kind.[27] Schopenhauer's position has some vitalist overtones, but he does not posit a kind of "life force."

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22 See Kant, 1998: p. 112 (Bxx). See Hanna, 2017: pp. 49–52 for an analysis of Kant's concept of things-in-themselves.

23 Notably, the 1782 Feder-Garve review, which called Kant's system a "phenomenalism," because they mistakenly imputed broadly Berkeleyan views to him.

24 Beiser, 2014: p. 88 correctly points out that Jakob Friedrich Fries's affective approach relegated the access to the thing-in-itself to the realm of feeling or approximation (*Ahndung*). Likewise, Friedrich Albert Lange's broadly materialist conception held that things-in-themselves formed a kind of "common denominator" that grounds cognition (Beiser, 2014: p. 380). By contrast, Alois Riehl's realist conception stressed that things-in-themselves are dual-aspect entities that appear partially to the perceiving subject, but that can also be considered apart from their form of appearance (Beiser, 2014: p. 565).

25 See: Beiser, 2002: esp. pp. 558–559, for a discussion. Thacker summarizes: "The Idealist operation is, in a sense, to subtract the noumenal from the Kantian split, leaving only a continuum that stretches without demarcations between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself" (Thacker, 2011: p. 15).

26 Thacker, 2011: pp. 15–16.

27 The main difference is that classical vitalism, as espoused for instance by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Louis Pasteur, or Hans Driesch says that Schopenhauer's Will is a pure drive without cognition. It is not

Second, in making the Will immanent, Schopenhauer negativizes it in a double sense: (i) the Will is a noumenon, and therefore logically unknowable; this aspect ties into what Kant called a *nihil privatum*, or nothingness-through-negation,[28] (ii) simultaneously, it frames the Will as an invisible permeation that is everywhere, but cannot be grasped as an object, and is therefore "nothing." This corresponds to what Kant called *nihil negativum* or Absolute Nothingness.[29] Whether or not the inspiration for this philosophical tactic stems from Schopenhauer's encounter with Indian philosophy—which inspired him to postulate the "Veil of Māyā" idea—or not remains speculative.[30]

In making this move, Schopenhauer secured his place in a lineage of thinkers who "dethroned" humanity from its central (and apparently God-given) position within the cosmos. Copernicus and Galileo undermined the idea of the geocentric universe. The rise of the natural sciences during the 17th century suggested a clockwork cosmos of immutable laws, thereby shaking the foundations of the idea of free will. Darwin traced the origins of species back to an evolutionary process instead of a unique act of God.[31] After Schopenhauer, Nietzsche declared the death of God or ultimate divine meaning, while Freud explained some of humanity's most basic instincts as blind drives, and pre-Nietzschean and pre-Freudian Pascal and post-Nietzschean and post-Freudian Sartre both postulated an inherently arbitrary, silent universe.[32] Moreover, the later 19th century witnessed theories about the impending heat-death of the universe, relativizing the entire meaning of biological existence.[33]

"alive" in the biological sense of that word, nor is it a physical force like gravity. That being said, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's notion of *Bildungstrieb* might have influenced Schopenhauer's thinking on the concept of objectivation.

28 A close correlate is Spinoza's *determinatio est negatio*, or that fact that all determining judgement proceeds by negation. By saying what an object is, one implies simultaneously what it is not.

29 Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 436–437 (WWR1: §71); Kant, 1998: pp. 382–383 (A291–292; B347–349).

30 For discussions on Schopenhauer's philosophy and its relation to Indian though, see: Cooper, 2012; Cross, 2013: App, 2020; Raj Singh, 2020; Ryan, 2020.

31 Nevertheless, Schopenhauer was highly critical of Darwin's theory of evolution. See Lovejoy, 1911 and Baptista *et al.*, 2019 for discussions of the convergencies between their theories.

32 Nowadays, we can see that this process of decentering still continues, with the notion of a stable, universal metalanguage being replaced by the notions of language games and *différance*, leading ultimately into relativist nihilism, while humanity as a whole hangs perilously in a rapidly more unstable ecological balance, leading to the destabilization of the biosphere as such. See Paans, 2023 for a discussion of this theme.

33 Roszak, 1993

This series of increasingly dramatic displacements, exacerbated by two devastating world wars and the ensuing Cold War, left humanity bereft of an anchor-point in the universe, culminating in a deep sense of alienation and unhomeliness. While some of the most radical displacements actually took place after Schopenhauer died, his thought pre-empts their appearance. Rüdiger Safranski noted that Schopenhauer's thought gained momentum only due to a change in the *Zeitgeist* during the latter half of the 19th century: his works were increasingly read when he already reached an advanced age, as the importance of his thought matched the pessimist and stagnant cultural outlook of the day.[34] The displacement of humanity was increasingly felt during the latter half of the 19th century, reflected in a series of modern works that conceptualize this anxiety.

Currently, the deadly complex consisting of climate change, ecological degradation, and resource depletion, confronts us with a new displacement—one that Schopenhauer already touches on: humanity starts to experience itself as the plaything of forces that are too immense for it to comprehend, some of which it even unleashed itself. From the Schopenhauerian perspective, this makes little difference: we find ourselves involuntarily stranded in a world while our control is strictly limited. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck named this phenomenon *reflexive modernization*: the changes set in motion by the very process of modernization affect its ongoing progress.[35] Taken to its extremes, it gives rise to what Beck called the *metamorphosis of the world*.[36] Unlike transformation, metamorphosis almost invisibly shifts the boundaries of what is deemed normal or usual. It unfolds gradually and affects not everyone in the same way or to the same degree. Climate change is the obvious example: its impacts are tangible, but also affect various populations asymmetrically. Yet, everyone is at risk to some degree, and it is this shared, subterranean feeling of apprehension, instability, and dread that the notion of the Will captures exceedingly well—in Schopenhauer's time as well as in ours.

Our instruments for conceptualizing this shift are few and far between. As

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[34] See Safranski's account of the reception of Schopenhauer's philosophy during his last years in Safranski, 1990: pp. 327–349; Beiser, 2016: p. 2 points out that the cultural pessimism of the day could also be attributed to political unrest, i.e., to the failed revolution of 1848 as well as the great economic depression of 1873.

[35] Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1996.

[36] Beck, 2016.

Theodore Roszak has perceptively noted, the scientific revolution claimed with breathtaking confidence that the universe was mechanical in nature, a view for which at the time was no empirical evidence. In doing so, the natural order was "denatured," by reducing it to a mathematical order.[37] Yet, despite the tremendous successes of mechanistic science based on this paradigm, it also saddled us with a blind spot about our position in the cosmic order. If nature is but a blind conglomerate of mathematically describable functions, where are consciousness and values located? And how does one make sense of the intimate connections that our bodies establish with the environments in which they are entangled? The mechanistic worldview introduced a critical blind spot in the human psyche—a void that Existentialism correctly diagnosed but ultimately failed to escape. Yet, Schopenhauer's thought offers an alternative. Not by escaping, but by situating ourselves even more firmly into the cosmic order. One must as it were "work through nature."

3. THE CONFLICTED NOTION OF THE WILL

If we examine the premises of Schopenhauer's philosophical project closely, we witness him defending Kantian transcendental idealism by insisting on the primacy of representation. However, he does so without denying that an external world exists.[38] In this, Schopenhauer deviates from the anti-realist tendencies that have been widely, if not correctly, attributed to Berkeley's subjective idealism, as well as the idealist philosophies of Fichte and Hegel.[39]

Still, one could come away with the impression that Schopenhauer regards the world just as a mirage of images, covered forever by the "Veil of Māyā."[40] Indeed, he revels in painting ghastly pictures of life's meaninglessness and the ephemerality of existence. Still, this dark imagery should not detract us from the fact that he held that individual experiences provide us with reasons to interpret the world as minimally meaningful. Yet, considered on the level of Life itself, the

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[37] Roszak, 1992: p. 64

[38] Schopenhauer, 2010: p. 109 (WWR1: §15); Atwell, 1999: p. 59.

[39] Janaway, 1989: pp. 53–55; Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 109 (WWR1: §15) and 461 (WWR1: Appendix); Schopenhauer, 2018: p. 7 (WWR2: ch. 1); Berkeley, 2009: pp. 26–27 (§§6-8).

[40] Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 28 (WWR1: §3), 280 (WWR1: §51), 378, 379 (WWR1: §63), and 392 (WWR1: §65); Schopenhauer, 2018: p. 334 (WWR2: ch. 25).

whole enterprise seems like a "bad dream."[41]

But this bad dream is inherently relational.[42] Schopenhauer's thinking is predicated on the decidedly organicist premise that "everything is dependent on everything else for its existence."[43] This thought is worked out in the "etiology of concepts" in the realm of phenomena in the first book of *The World as Will and Representation*.[44] In the realm of noumena, everything is suffused with the immanent Will. A new problem appears here:

> Just as every particular representation exists only in relation to some other representation, and just as the entire series of representations exists only in relation to the knowing subject (which in turn exists only in relation to representations), so the world as representation construed now as the whole subject-object correlation exists only in relation to something nonrelational, i.e., to the thing in itself.[45]

Schopenhauer utilizes this occasion to introduce the Will as the universalized thing-in-itself but assumed that the entire subject-object correlation had to be related to a further ground, which is itself non-relational. So, we can reasonably propose that Schopenhauer should have avoided talking about things-in-themselves altogether.[46]

Another problem appears here, and it concerns the precise character of the Will itself. The term "Will" was a bad terminological choice to begin with.[47] If Schopenhauer could have avoided, in addition to placing too much emphasis on

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41 Schopenhauer, 2015b: pp. 410–418.

42 Schopenhauer, 2015a: pp. 44–45 (§20).

43 Schopenhauer, 2015a: pp. 44–45 (§20).

44 Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 62–74 (WWR1: §9) and 164 (WWR1: §27).

45 Atwell, 1995: p. 72.

46 Atwell, 1995: p. 74.

47 See Magee, 1997: p. 144. Schopenhauer spelled out his reasons for this terminology in the following passage: "But the word Will, which is supposed to unlock the innermost essence of all things in nature for us like a magic spell –this word does not have the slightest connotation of an unknown quantity or the result of an inference; rather, it refers to something of which we have immediate cognition, something so thoroughly familiar that we know and understand what Will is much better than anything else, whatever it may be. — Until now people have subsumed the concept of Will under the concept of force: I will do precisely the opposite, and let every force in nature be known as will. Do not think that this is just a quibble over terms or a matter of indifference: it is in fact a matter of the greatest significance and importance. This is because intuitive cognition of the objective world, i.e. appearance, representation, is at the root of the concept of force – just as it is at the root of all other concepts – and the concept of force is created from such cognition" (Schopenhauer, 2010: p. 136 [WWR1: §22], translation modified slightly).

the thing-in-itself, something else, it would be the use of a term that invokes so much involuntary psychological connotations. The character of the Will remains forever out of focus, a perpetually ambiguous point in a philosophical oeuvre that is otherwise admirable for its clarity and economy of expression.[48] Initially, it is easy to think of the Will as a kind of natural force, like gravity or electromagnetism.[49] But that invites a new question: if the Will is a natural force, then we are certainly justified to inquire why it should be called a *force* at all, as natural forces would be amenable to scientific inquiry.[50] Yet, Schopenhauer is adamant that the Will is metaphysical and lies therefore beyond scientific examination.[51] Curiously, he was well aware that natural science could not define a first cause that caused all natural forces.[52] While the sciences could trace the *changes* caused by forces, they could never determine the nature of force itself, but had to contend themselves with posing "force" as a final explanation:

> Yet force itself, Schopenhauer contends, cannot be determined by a particular cause and effect, as if one could establish through the particular cause of a particular effect which force had caused the cause. For this reason, he traces force back to a principle which does not appear in the causal chain itself.[53]

This move prompted Schopenhauer to assert that only philosophy could provide an answer to the vexed question of what underlies the forces themselves or to provide an insight in what these forces are. Yet, the question—as his contemporary J.F. Herbart had already noted—remains unanswered, even despite Schopenhauer's attempts to subtly revise and refine the notion over the

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[48] At least part of Schopenhauer's difficulty in conceptualizing the Will stems from the fact that he held on to two divergent and even incommensurable agendas: on the one hand, to provide empirical support for his metaphysics, while on the other hand at the same time insisting that the Will lies beyond all representation and thus empirical investigation. That he realized this to some degree, can be deduced from the fact that he alludes to apophatic theology in this discussion the Will. Instead of trying to come up with positive attributes of a deity, negative theology proceeded by saying what God was not, leaving an evocative blank spot in the middle of the conceptual map.

[49] Carus, 2020.

[50] See Schopenhauer, 2015a: pp. 397–399 (WiN, ch. 4).

[51] And yet, this point is significantly undercut by Schopenhauer himself. When he asserts that we are conscious of the Will in our own bodies and would therefore infer it as the universal striving behind the universe if we were as intimately familiar with other phenomena, he comes dangerously close to inserting the noumenal Will into the world of phenomena.

[52] Carus, 2020.

[53] Carus, 2020.

years.

Despite these revisions, the Will remains as a blank spot at the center of Being. Yet, that is not *all* what it is. To think so would be once more to criticize only the metaphysical consistency of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Although that could be justified on grounds of logic and consistency alone, such an approach overlooks the additional existential insight that this "blank spot" determines not just our form of Life, but *all* forms of Life, and ultimately the structure of the cosmos.

The blank spot at the heart of Being can be characterized as follows: everything screams for prolonged existence or an "entrance into Being."[54] But the ceaseless Will never grants it. The universe is shot through with "nothingness" or lingering finitude –a theme that the 20th century Kyoto School forcefully developed. Put in broadly Sartrean terms: "nothingness lies curled in the heart of Being."[55] It represents the tacit presence of finitude, the loss of the subjective viewpoint upon death, and even the loss of the transcendental viewpoint that structures human access to the world.

Still, we must raise this question: if we exchange the term "X" for the word "Will" in Schopenhauer's philosophy, what—other than a psychologizing connotation—do we lose? We might even say that Schopenhauer is a metaphysical minimalist. The Will represents a small concession to an unknown "X" that activates the causal networks within the universe, but the nature of which we cannot know, since it belongs to the realm of noumena. So that leaves Schopenhauer in the end in a position similar to but not exactly the same as Kant's.[56]

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[54] Schopenhauer, 2015b: pp. 252–254 (PP2).

[55] Sartre, 2003: p. 45.

[56] Janaway, 1990: pp. 193–196 raises the valid point that Schopenhauer asserts two incommensurable claims: (i) knowing the Will (i.e. thing-in-itself) amounts to possessing metaphysical knowledge, while also (ii) he uses a variety of empirical proofs to support his claims. The issue is that Schopenhauer conflates two types of knowledge: metaphysical and empirical. However, his argument is that we know the Will through our own bodies in a privileged manner, distinct from all other objects in the world. The upshot of the Schopenhauerian argument seems to be that *if* we knew all other objects in the same, intimate manner as we experience our own bodies, *then* we would recognize the same will or propulsive force in it. At any rate, Schopenhauer's account of the Will evolved during his lifetime, so that between publishing the first and second volumes of *The World as Will and Representation*, in 1818 and 1844 respectively, he introduced some subtle changes in his conception. Moreover, the book went through three major editions, in which further material was added and in which existing material was edited.

4. FROM WILL TO POWER: AGENCY EVERYWHERE

Let's momentarily step away from the issue of the logical consistency of Schopenhauer's argumentation and focus on the expressive character of his philosophy. We lose much of the distinctive power of Schopenhauer's philosophy if we removed the Will altogether. If anything, it seems more like the essence of change or becoming. This probably prompted Schopenhauer to describe it as a "driving force." The Will is a conception of the ceaselessly unfolding dynamic system of the natural universe.[57] Well before the 20th century "philosophies of difference" emerged in the wake of Henri Bergson's work on *elán vital* in philosophy, as well as the organicist and emergentist philosophies of the 1920s and 1930s, Schopenhauer destabilized the very category of Being.[58] In the words of Eugene Thacker:

> This continuum [of phenomena and noumena] is neither a transcendent, static category of Being, nor is it simply an affirmation of an unbounded, immanent multiplicity of beings; it attempts to play the role of both an inaccessible noumena "outside" us, and a manifest field of phenomena that constitutes us from within. It is for this reason that Idealism turns to the concept of life-in-itself. For post-Kantian Idealism, the concept of life-in-itself establishes a continuum between phenomena and noumena, but without reducing itself to either biology or theology.59

Schopenhauer introduces a strange new playing field: one recognizes the Will as a universal volition, but in its most familiar form it appears inside our own

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[57] Thacker, 2011.

[58] We've discussed this movement in detail in Hanna and Paans, 2020. But summarily, the key works are: Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* in 1896, *Creative Evolution* in 1907, Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time, and Deity* in 1920, John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* in 1925, and especially Whitehead's "philosophy of organism" in *Process and Reality* in 1929; C. Lloyd Morgan's *Emergent Evolution* in 1923, and Erwin Schrödinger's *What is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell* in 1944. Schrödinger's break-through book initiated *non-equilibrium thermodynamics* and *complex systems dynamics*, as developed by Ilya Prigogine and his associates in G. Nicolis and I. Prigogine 1977 *Self-Organization in Nonequilibrium Systems*. Prigogine's and Stengers' 1984 *Order Out of Chaos*; and I. Prigogine's 1997 *The End of Certainty*. Alongside and inspired by this work, it also primed *the autopoietic approach to organismic biology* worked out by Francisco Varela and his associates during the 1970s. In France, Bergson's philosophy was further developed by Gilbert Simondon, especially in his concepts of ontogenesis and individuation, and was later taken up in Gilles Deleuze's 1968 *Difference and Repetition*. In a slightly different vein, the notion of difference was worked out by Jacques Derrida in the philosophy of language and literature, most notably in his 1976 books *Voice and Phenomenon* and *Writing and Difference.*

[59] Thacker, 2011: pp. 14–15.

bodies, where we have an immediate, privileged, direct acquaintance with it.[60] This direct acquaintance bypasses the (conceptual) principle of sufficient reason, and therefore also the forms of representation that we habitually use to navigate the realm of phenomena. Therefore, formal or natural science cannot tell us much about the Will, since the sciences operate *within* the confines of sufficient reason. So, Schopenhauer opens the space for conceiving a form of direct, non-conceptual, affect-driven, embodied, experiential access to the world.[61] Even more poignantly, this embodied form of direct access is fundamental to our understanding as such. However, if we try to examine it in more detail, we fall back into forms of representation that belong within the domain of sufficient reason, and therefore fail to grasp it accurately.

Conceived like this, the Will is more than an unrepresentable metaphysical leftover. Instead, it can be directly and essentially non-conceptually experienced as an almost-animistic volition. Since it is not a force, science cannot help us any further in understanding it. This saddles Schopenhauer with a dualism in which observer and observed seem to exist separately, yet merge within the embodied being. Due to this unresolved tension, the suggestion implies a kind of awareness that we might properly term as "apprehensive."[62] Apprehension ventures out of the realm of conceptual representational thought, extending into the realm of aesthetic experience and affect.[63] It resides in the twilight zone expanding beyond the reach of the formal sciences and discursive reason more generally. This thought is itself through-&-through Romantic: 19th century art and philosophy teem with a fascination with the dark, macabre, the occult, and the inexplicable, as if it sought shapes for this awareness. Yet, in the Buddhist-inflected thought of the Kyoto School, as very similar thought appears. To put it in Keiji Nishitani's words: apprehension senses the "field of emptiness," where neither theoretical reason nor sensibility rule supreme, but where we encounter objects in their

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[60] Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 25 (WWR 1: §2), 40–42 (WWR 1: §6), and 124 (WWR 1: §18); Schopenhauer, 2015b (PP2: ch. 10). In this passage, Schopenhauer anticipates what is nowadays known as the metaphysical theory of *essential embodiment*—see, e.g., Hanna and Maiese, 2009.

[61] Schopenhauer 2010: pp. 25 (WWR 1: §2), 41 (WWR1: §6), and 124 (WWR: §18).

[62] Paans, 2020.

[63] Morton, 2013: p. 22.

suchness, and often with a shocking directness.[64] This unsettling quality is a factor to be reckoned with, especially when subjectively experiencing existential fragility. That this convergency between Schopenhauer and Buddhist thought occurs is not surprising, for a great deal of the former's inspiration derived from his exploration of Eastern philosophies.

Why is there such "suchness" at all, one is moved to ask. If we put it in Schopenhauer's terminology, the reason is straightforward: essentially embodied, experiential access apprehends objects before the principle of sufficient reason intervenes, presenting us with a raw affects and perceptual impressions inaccessible to reason. The Will is the affective vehicle responsible for this thoroughly non-conceptual range of experience.

Schopenhauer locates this essentially non-conceptual, apprehensive mode of experience partially in experiences of the sublime.[65] Following the line of Burke and Kant, he *aestheticizes* sensible impressions imprinted by the sublime, even to the degree that representations in the usual sense bypass our customary cognitive apparatus.[66] Kant already involved our emotions in his treatment of the sublime. We cannot cognitively grasp the sublime, but require the imagination to construct it fully, and even if we do so, there is a certain shock or rift involved.[67] The sublime impacts our feelings, leaving us in awe, only to allow us to recover from the initial shock and to relive it with heightened intensity.[68] The feeling of terror that Burke ascribed to the sublime, as well as the shock that Kant describes, derives in Schopenhauer from the full-on confrontation with the world which transcends our cognitive capacities, leaving room for affective impressions. This is nowhere else more visible than in Schopenhauer's concept of *objectivation*.[69]

Since Life itself is neither some kind of "vital force," nor a God-given ensoulment or divine spark, then Schopenhauer frames it as a unsettling, ceaseless push towards *objectivation*: the propensity to assume the form of objects

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[64] Nishitani, 1983; Paans, 2023.

[65] Schopenhauer, 2010: pp. 228–229 (WWR1: §39).

[66] Burke, 2015: pp. 59–60; Kant, 2002: pp. 129 (Ak 5: 246) and 131 (Ak 5: 248).

[67] Merritt, 2018: p. 56.

[68] Kant, 2002: pp. 128–129 (Ak 5: p. 245).

[69] Schopenhauer, 2010: p. 153 (WWR1: 25).

that we grasp from within the confines of sufficient reason.[70] This formative process permeates the entire cosmos, all the way from crystallization processes, bacteria dividing, genes mutating and plants proliferating to animals hunting each other for survival:

> Junghuhn describes seeing in Java an immense field completely covered with skeletons, which he took to be a battlefield: but these were only skeletons of tortoises, huge ones, five feet long, three feet wide, and equally tall, which follow this path from the ocean to lay their eggs, and then are attacked by wild dogs (*Canis rutilans*) which work together to lay them on their backs so they can tear off the bottom breast-plate, the small shield on the stomach, and devour them alive. But a tiger will frequently fall on the dogs. The whole misery has repeated itself thousands upon thousands of times, year in, year out. This is what these tortoises are born to. What have they done wrong to deserve this torture? What is the point of this whole scene of abomination? The only answer is: this is how the will to life objectifies itself.[71]

Michel Houllebecq recommended this very passage for "consideration by ecologists" in his fine commentary on *The World as Will and Representation*.[72] And it is easy to see why he did so: the connectivity of nature is on full display, encompassing cycles of life, procreation, survival, sufferin, and death. Essentially, Schopenhauer introduces the Kantian *Anschauungsformen* (space and time) in this passage but dramatizes them, much in the same way that his contemporary Caspar David Friedrich would dramatize the dynamics of the natural environment in his paintings. **First**, he *spatializes* ecological processes by indicating the scale of such massacres. The immensity of the event is made dramatically visible by depicting the slaughter of an entire population that has travelled to a particular location on Java. And **second**, the idea of *time* is introduced though the epicyclical return of suffering, as this process continues

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[70] Thacker, 2011 rightly notices that the third path of Schopenhauer steers clear from the ontologies formulated by conceiving Life-as-Genesis (Bergson, Simondon, Deleuze) and Life-as-Given (Husserl, Henry, Marion).

[71] Schopenhauer, 2018: pp. 369–370 (WWR2: ch. 28). The full name of the explorer recording this example was Dutch-German Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn (1809–1864), who reports it in his 1845 *Topographische und Naturwissenschaftliche Reisen durch Java*. The document is available online at URL = https://archive.org/details/topographischeunoojunguoft/page/36/mode/2up. Schopenhauer adds a similar example in a footnote to this passage, acerbically noting that examples of this kind provide a sufficient reason for pessimism. See also Schopenhauer, 2015a: pp. 368–369 (WiN, ch. 2).

[72] Houllebecq, 2020.

year after year.

This connectedness in space, time, and processes, combined with Schopenhauer's observation that everything strives for existence, makes him one of the most ecologically minded thinkers imaginable, already anticipating ecological concerns that took shape during the 20th century.[73] He adumbrates a position that radically situates individuals within an extensive relational system that cannot be grasped by representational thinking alone. Like the Will itself, the natural cosmic order within which we are entangled eludes our rational grasp and far surpasses our conceptual representational capabilities, yet we are strangely familiar with it—even if large parts of it make themselves only apprehensively felt. All this ties into the feelings of unhomeliness and apprehension that marked 19th century modernity, as well as the growing unease that accompanies our current ecological predicament.

5. RADICAL ENTANGLEMENT: ENCOUNTERING THE FUTURE

Unlike the classical, aesthetic, and spectator-based conception of the sublime introduced by Burke and Kant, the Schopenhauerian sublime is no longer the insurmountable chasm that appears *between* subject and object, but instead the very fact that the observer is inevitably and even tragically situated in an ecological expanse that operates in a blind yet non-mechanistic manner.

So, the entire universe is suffused with an *anima mundi* that is definitely not a relapse into primitive animism or a naive Gaia-hypothesis. The dramatic description of waterfalls and the propensity of seeds to germinate even after hundreds of years underlines how the Will acts as a *vitalizing impulsion*—indeed,

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[73] Schopenhauer was hardly unique in holding this view. Compare Beiser's description: "Fichte's solution to this dilemma is his concept of striving (*Streben*), which he expounds in the third section of his 1794 *Grundlage*. This concept is the very heart of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*, which Fichte even called "a philosophy of striving" (*Strebensphilosophie*)" (Beiser, 2005: p. 30). Also consider Schopenhauer's own description: "The will is of course still wholly devoid of cognition, a dark, driving force, even in the vegetative aspect of animal appearance, in the creation and development of every animal and in the maintenance of its inner economy, where its appearance is still necessarily determined by nothing more than mere stimuli" (Schopenhauer, 2010: p. 174 [WWR1: §27]). As Dunham *et al.* 2014: p. 139 emphasize, F.W.J. Schelling had in 1809 already equated will with primal being. The full passage in Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* reads: "Will is primal Being [*Ursein*] to which alone all predicates of Being apply: groundlessness, eternality, independence from time, self-affirmation. All of philosophy strives only to find this highest expression" (Schelling, 2006: p. 21). Reading this, it is hard *not* to think of Schopenhauer.

that the cosmos cannot be understood in a different way.[74] Schopenhauer was hardly alone in holding such organicist views. Blumenbach, Goethe, Von Humboldt, Schelling, Hegel, and Coleridge all held broadly similar views.

Schopenhauer's thinking comes here very close to classical Indian philosophy as well as Daoist and Buddhist notions of the cosmos, in which the universe is viewed as an interconnected entity, while individuals are viewed as "moments of consciousness." They are subjective viewpoints that flicker in and out of existence. The Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term "interbeing" to describe this anti-reductionist and post-subjectivist viewpoint.[75] The upshot of Hạnh's holistic vision is less harmonious than it sounds: if the universe is in a certain sense holographic, and everything is contained in everything else, divisions like *here* and *there*, *me* and *others*, or *now* and *then* lose their meaning. There is no longer a position of safe distance to regard the universe from a "God's eye" perspective. High Modernism and its dreams of the neutral observer were doomed from their very inception. An interconnected universe entails immersion and as a consequence, fully distancing oneself is no longer possible.

So, the feature that gives Schopenhauer's philosophy its existential and ecological sting is *not* its organicism. Rather, it is the fact that the Will represents an agency that can only be dimly apprehended, suffusing all inorganic and organic processes, connecting the entire cosmos, ranging from subatomic particles to forests and solar systems. It is a revival of the notion of *anima mundi*, yet without any animist, mystical or religious overtones; and neither is it

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[74] The *Introduction* to the Cambridge translation *of The World as Will and Representation* asserts that "Schopenhauer's view of the natural world falls into the vitalist camp—there is a life force that can never be reduced to any form of mechanistic process—but, for him, the life force is just one manifestation of a universal unconscious end-seeking or striving that is present in all the forces of nature" (Schopenhauer, 2010: p. xxvi). Therefore, to ascribe to Schopenhauer a vitalist orientation is somewhat misleading, insofar as it suggests the idea that there is some mysterious life force flowing through the universe. Schopenhauer does not subscribe to classical vitalism, but radicalizes this thought, making organic, generative properties basic in the entire universe. He described it as follows: "Once we have seen all this it will not take any great stretch of the imagination to recognize … the very same thing that in us pursues its goal illuminated by cognition while here, in the weakest of its appearances, it is blind, dull, one-sided and unalterable in its striving. Nonetheless, because it is everywhere one and the same, – just as the first light of dawn shares the name sunlight with the bright rays of noon, —it must be called Will here as well as there, a name signifying the being in itself of every thing in the world and the sole kernel of every appearance" (Schopenhauer, 2010: 143; WWR [§23], translation modified slightly).

[75] Hạnh, 2020.

completely vitalist, as the Will is not merely a "life force." The idea of an animating principle or impulsion can be fully scientific yet elude the mechanistic order of explanation.[76]

However, it is also "blind" in the sense that striving itself is its very nature, without any further qualifications. This "absence of reason" or subjective interest leads to an unwelcome thought: we cannot reason with it, nevetheless we are still delivered over to its workings. This observation forms the truly dark side of the Schopenhauerian worldview. There is a fully natural, yet inescapable mindlessness that manifests itself in a merciless cycle of life and death. While for the Buddhist, this insight represents salvation, for Schopenhauer it represents an existential abyss that can be escaped only by denying the Will. It implies a wretched existence, unless it is represented by art and/or tranquilly contemplated.[77]

The fact that our conceptual representational capacities cannot help us in grasping the totality of the cosmic cycle makes Schopenhauer's universe decidedly uncanny. We are "thrown" into it, but have very limited control over what happens. This unsettling feature of Schopenhauer's philosophy was carried on the currents of the late 19th century *Zeitgeist*. The great urbanization of the Western world was just underway, fueled by the Industrial Revolution and mechanized production processes. When Anthony Vidler published his work *The Architectural Uncanny* in 1992 to describe the modern feelings of unhomeliness, but he merely worked out in detail what Schopenhauer had grasped more than a century before. The following passages have a decidedly Schopenhauerian ring:

> Estrangement, in these terms, seemed a natural consequence of a conception of history, of the implacable impulsion of time that, while sweeping away the past in favor of the future, was necessarily uncertain only about the present. The remedies to such uncertainty, which ranged from revolution to restoration, from reform to utopia, were equally caught in the dilemmas of temporality, tied to the inhospitable context of the here-and-now at the same time as imagining a there-and-then.[78]
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> Thus historicized, the uncanny might be understood as a significant

[76] For a philosophical theory focused on this principle, see Paans, 2025 and Schopenhauer 2015a: 332-333 (WiN, ch. 1).

[77] Schopenhauer, 2010: p. 221 (WWR1: §38).

[78] Vidler, 1992: p. 5.

> psychoanalytical and aesthetic response to the real shock of the modern, a trauma that, compounded by its unthinkable repetition on an even more terrible scale during World War II, has not been exorcised from the contemporary imaginary. Estrangement and unhomeliness have emerged as the intellectual watchwords of our century, given periodic material and political force by the resurgence of homelessness itself, a homelessness generated sometimes by war, sometimes by the unequal distribution of wealth.[79]

The idea that modernity seems to metamorphose the reality around us gives rise to an uncertain present. But whereas High Modernism promised an eternal, technocratic Utopia at the end of the road, our ecological predicament contains no such promise. The "unhomely" is now experienced on a planetary scale. Its chilling effects have not been tempered, but instead exacerbated by modernity itself. This shock undermines the forward progress of modernity, undermining its inherent technological optimism.

And so, the future itself is under attack, it seems, not so much in the sense that there is no future, but in the sense that it is present like a specter floating just beyond the reach of representational thought, only to be apprehended dimly. The "there-and-then" hovers in the air like a dark cloud.

This disturbing thought has been thematically developed in Timothy Morton's work on *hyperobjects*.[80] Like the Schopenhauerian Will, some phenomena are so massively distributed in time and space that we can grasp them only piecemeal, and often very incompletely. We become aware of them merely indirectly. Nevertheless, they stick to everything that they touch, infiltrating our experience of the present.

Moreover, there is a certain *futurality* in the hyperobjects we encounter:

> Thus, like the strange stranger, there is a *future future*. There is a time that is beyond predictability, timing, or any ethical or political calculation. There is an elsewhere elsewhere. There is a place that is "nowhere" and yet real: not a Neoplatonic beyond, but a real entity in the real universe. We should then entertain the possibility that hyperobjects allow us to see that there is something futural about objects as such.[81]

This unwelcome thought turns the High Modernist idea of an expanse of

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[79] Vidler, 1992: p. 9

[80] Morton, 2013.

[81] Morton, 2013: p. 67.

possibility or an untrammeled road of progress upside down. Suddenly, the theoretical futures implied by the climate catastrophe, resource depletion, ecological collapse, and the withering of biological life—let alone the civilizations we built—become more-real-than-real. They are not just hypothetical scenarios or possible worlds that appear in practical heuristics, scientific models, or modal logic. They acquire an all-too-real existence that's too close for comfort. The idea of a vast array of possibilities that are only a hair's breadth removed from us, but that could become a reality by some seemingly insignificant contingency, radically entangles us in the workings of the Will.

For good reason, Edmund Burke touched upon the idea of vastness when examining the feelings of terror that accompany the experience of the sublime.[82] Truly, vastness is something that stupefies human cognition. Like an existential version of Hạnh's interbeing, a new type of ecological vastness that we just are discovering is too large and unsettling for us to comprehend. What Kevin McLaughlin has described as "poetic force" comes fully to the fore here:

> The ability to communicate the feeling of reason transcending cognitive experience also brings with it internally a "withdrawal" of communicability. The language of the poets expresses the capacity and the incapacity to communicate the feeling of the divisive finitude of reason as a force and an unforce.[83]

Poetic force is the affective, penetrating power of images, environments, and phenomena to touch us in ways that supersede representational thought. As such, they are image-based, just like what we call *thought-shapers*.[84] Pre-reflectively, they inflect and direct our thinking, the better part of which remains below the level of conscious thought. Yet, our processes of conceptualization are decidedly influenced by it. The concepts we invent, the affects they set in motion, and the unconscious from which they emerge, are not separate entities: they reciprocally affect each other. This process has been described accurately by Alphonso Lingis:

> When we grasp things and fix their natures in concepts, these concepts offer the succession of things to our powers and connect up with other concepts in a dialectic. Yet when we set out to grasp things in rigorous and lucid concepts, we find those very concepts engendering images that are not images of their referents.

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[82] Burke, 2015: pp. 59–60.

[83] McLaughlin, 2014: p. xiii.

[84] Hanna and Paans, 2021.

> Allusions, equivocations, evocations, evasions, insinuations refract off their crystal shapes and bewitch the very mind that cut those shapes.[85]

Simultaneously, the limitation of representational capacity opens up a dialectical process of interpretation: it reveals the limits of sense and reason. Yet, beyond these limits, we sense a larger cosmic order that resists representation. What this expressive lack reveals is not just a gap in our representational capacities, but a moment in which the very reality we aim to represent seems to lose coherency, thereby baffling and bewitching us. At exactly this moment, Schopenhauer opted for pessimism and ethical resignation. Yet, he thereby also opened up the philosophical doorway to a more ecological worldview.

The seemingly airtight control that science, statistics, climate models, and digital heuristics have afforded us in the face of a rapidly changing future is toppled by the direct essentially non-conceptual impact of a single thought: *the future has arrived*. The ominous there-and-then is already seeping into the here-&-now:

> Futurality is reinscribed into the present, ending the metaphysics of presence: not through some neat philosophical footwork, but because the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexist with a strange future, a future "without us."[86]

> An attractor does not pull things toward it through time. In this sense, attractor is a misleading term. Rather, the attractor radiates temporality from the future into the present. An attractor is the future future of a hyperobject, in the terms outlined in the section on undulating temporality. The future future lies ontologically "underneath" the past![87]

> I think we're both dealing with trying to access internal things that are very hard to put into words. That feeling that I was talking about earlier, it's really to do with a sort of futural orientation. Something's coming, but I can't quite point to it, and I don't know what it is.[88]

As Schopenhauer implied, the Will is an unfathomable and unstoppable striving force. No one is fully in control of the direction that the Will takes, subverting the High Modernist idea of control and human order. Highlighted by

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[85] Sparrow, 2018: p. 72.

[86] Morton, 2013: p. 94.

[87] Morton, 2013: p. 91.

[88] Hageman, Morton, and Vandermeer, 2016.

ecological collapse, we realize that the objectivation of the Will has reached such a staggering intensity that representational thought is stupefied. Calculations, measurements, numbers, and statistics can help us, but in the end, they emphasize only the impotence of representational thought for conceptualizing how radically we are entangled. It is not infinity that frightens us, but instead a very large finitude, especially when we cannot disentangle ourselves from it.

To imagine infinity is to exercise one's abstract reasoning ability. It is easy to imagine a thousand, ten thousand, a million, a billion, one hundred billion, and so-on. But fully to grasp a very large finitude, such as a massive extinction event, the surface of rainforest that disappears every second, the global destabilization of natural resilience, or the size of our annual plastic waste production, has a direct, essentially non-conceptual, affective impact. Such encounters parallel the direct experience of our own bodies and bypass the principle of sufficient reason. They unsettle and touch our emotions in a way that rational conceptual reasoning cannot accomplish, especially so because we are radically entangled in the situation we attempt to conceptualize. We experience the cosmic body and its pains and pleasures in tandem with our own. Not coincidentally, we deploy all the strategies that those afflicted by trauma use for not coming to terms with the grim reality that caused the trauma, ranging from outright denial to indignation and even depression.[89]

In this intimate experience of one's physical environment lies a direct link to David Hume's concept of *sympathy*. Hume held that certain representations cause feelings of kinship or desire.[90] In holding this view, he was certainly more Romantic than his Enlightenment colleagues. If we extend this concept to environmental thinking, we arrive at a close correlate of what Jane Bennett has called *onto-sympathy:* a thoroughgoing feeling of kinship and connectedness to the material world, natural or otherwise.[91] But even this intimate kinship is rife with ambiguities, inconsistencies, and tensions. For many of the lifeforms on this Earth, we are not their friends or kin. They are indifferent to us, or at least take little notice. Worse, we may even appear as their tormentors. One stage further

[89] Macy, 1995.

[90] Hume, 1738: p. 318.

[91] Bennett, 2004, 2010, 2017.

removed from us, inorganic materials like plastics or chemicals have no interests, even while we may develop a rudimentary onto-sympathy towards them. But the relationship is definitely asymmetrical. If we look at world, we may experience it as looking back at us, but that look need not be friendly. The onto-sympathy that we feel when considering very large finitudes causes disorientation, as it carries a poetic force that we can only describe as sublime.

We now have an answer as to why the Will plays such a pivotal, expressive role in the Schopenhauerian worldview, and why it not just a metaphysical leftover. If we removed the Will, we would end up with a purely scientific description of the world, divorced from a metaphysical, "hyperobjective" dimension that cannot be grasped by scientific insight or representational thought. The unique feature of Schopenhauer's Will is that it indicates a *propensity*, almost a habitual pattern, that's operative throughout the cosmos.[92] It suggests a cosmic order that is not mechanical, but instead organic, developing and continuously adapting.

We find this feature forcefully articulated in Schopenhauer's metaphysics. It is as if he lays out a map of the dynamics of the natural universe, including its demise. In a sense, fully internalizing Schopenhauer's philosophy means also to look *beyond* the end. It means not just to witness death and decay, but also to consider the very large finitudes in which we are situated. As Morton and Lingis pointed out, these large finitudes affect us via their "zones" or spheres of effect.[93] Their effects are essentially non-conceptual and therefore not conceptually or theoretically articulated, but they are not blanks. They appear as those parts of the world where intellectual prowess holds no sway.

The great trope of modernity—the idea of "unfettered possibility" symbolized by scientific progress, the rationalization of agriculture, the sanitizing of urban areas, and clean concrete highways stretching to the vanishing point at the horizon—is unexpectedly subverted by the futurality of hyperobjects.

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[92] Rupert Sheldrake worked out an alternative theory of science in which the idea of "law" is replaced by "habit." Although much could be said about the specifics of his theory, its main thrust is not very far removed from emergentist philosophy, process philosophy, and indeed Indian philosophy (Sheldrake, 2009). François Jullien has elaborated a similar thought in his work on classical Chinese cosmological thinking, highlighting the concept of "propensity" (Jullien, 1999).

[93] Morton, 2013; Lingis, 2001.

Suddenly, the multitude of possible futures are not merely theoretical options any longer. Like the categorical yet not always salient difference between infinity and a very large finitude, the futural is eerily real. So real, in fact, that it slowly becomes an integral part of our existential outlook. Schopenhauer's idea of a blind, striving Will encapsulates this unnerving thought. The Will represents pure possibility; but the uncanny thing is that our sciences and representational thought cannot grasp it and cannot even begin to situate it on the conceptual map.

This "beyond-predictability" of any type of calculation emits an eerie feeling: it represents the totality of all possibilities, even those we don't fathom yet. The futurality of Schopenhauer's ecological thought resides precisely in this feature. It seems like hyperobjects project causality from the future back into the present. But that present is the ever-shifting world we inhabit, and it is continuously modified and unsettled from unfamiliar directions.

What Schopenhauer captured in those passages where he paints the enormous timescale on which the Will operates, is the spatiotemporal interdependency—or interbeing—of things, as well as our inevitable necessary connection with them. There is no outside to the biosphere, and we are trapped in a complex of hyperobjects that we cannot grasp with our conceptual and theoretical representational capacities. This realization radicalizes Ulrich Beck's notion of *metamorphosis:* it is not just that our understanding is changed through careful ratiocination, but instead it's changed through an immediate acquaintance or existential encounter.[94] The materiality of the universe, in all its strangeness, confronts us via a sense of apprehension.

Even uncannier, however, is the thought that in some spectral way, the future is already here. We are already witnessing the end, as the ecological crisis shows the nothingness with which everything is shot through. A certain sense of destabilization permeates the world, and ecological consciousness does not stave off that fact, but intensifies it. In both German and Dutch, the idea of future suggests movement: it is either *zukunft* or *toekomst*. Literally translated, it means "that which comes towards us." It implies a moment of collision, as if certain future events engage in backward causation.

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[94] Beck, 2016.

This *toekomst* is constituted by the non-objectifiable, non-graspable hyperobjects that permeate the present and flow into our lives from the future. The zones that they inhabit are already here and now—we simply find ourselves *in* them, noticing their effects on us, and also noticing that they are deeply processual. The trouble for us as self-conscious agents is that we understand just enough of the agency of hyperobjects to see that we cannot conceptually and theoretically grasp them, let alone control them. Our grip is insufficient to frame their half-hidden presence in terms that comfort us. Just as Nietzsche declared the death of God and the reassuring, divine order that guaranteed meaning, so too undercut hyperobjects the High Modernist self-image of scientific, quantitative comprehension. The idea of a meek and submissive ecological order to be controlled by technology is replaced with the uncontrollable order of distributed natural agency. It is a new conception of *anima mundi*: the world has a life of its own, and our role in it is essentially uncertain.

If we take the translation of *toekomst* literally, we end up with a simple, yet ominous matter-of-fact statement: "you will get what is coming towards you." In just the same way that someone trapped in a tunnel realizes that the light coming towards him is an approaching train, so too do we experience climate change and ecological degradation. A home that is curiously unhomely is rushing towards us, and we propel ourselves even towards it. It is not fully there yet, but it exists and acts already in our (collective) imagination. Spurred on by scenario-thinking, modelling and predicting, climate sciences bombard us with the futural—specters of possible futures, some of which are coming partially true as we speak. Sociological phenomena like climate anxiety and *solastalgia* are the beginnings of a new, unfamiliar world in which we find ourselves.[95]

The new world is best described as "impure." We mean not just diluted or defiled, although the term "impure" does indeed carry these overtones. Rather, we use the term in a more specific sense. Ever since High Modernism took hold, the "pure" was regarded as the leading aesthetic category. The whitewashed sanatoria, the Protestant work ethic, the fear of germs, the geometric city plans, the mechanized production process devoid of superfluousness, the emphasis on hygiene, pure (i.e. non-figurative) abstract expression in art, the removal of

[95] Schmidt, 2023; Albrecht, 2009.

ornament in architecture, the purification of tectonics, and the "objective view" of the exact sciences were cornerstones of the High Modern worldview. But from its very inception, the impure was present as the repressed pole of the dialectic. The elective affinity between Schopenhauer's Will and the Freudian unconscious should not surprise us: both point in the direction of an inescapable truth that the mechanistic worldview sought to repress, and which erupted as the ecological crisis.

After all, the impure, as Lynn Margulis has consistently argued, underlies life as such.[96] The cell—the basic unit of biological life—is much more flexible and less static or isolated than we are used to believing. Unicellular organisms like bacteria exchange genes, sometimes even up to 15% of their genome in a single day. The freely combine and recombine, picking up and leaving traits as one leaves a jacket behind. Forget detailed taxonomies and neat zoological orders. Nature thrives, throngs and metamorphoses. Our own bodies happily engage in all kinds of transactions with the environment that invite the impure into our own lives—and it is a very good thing indeed that they do. Evolution as such is driven by this element of superabundance, of life itself developing new byroads.[97] Indeed, it is typical that this relentless creativity of evolutionary development is so contentious. When the German geneticist Richard Goldschmidt proposed halfway the 20th century that nature purposely experimented with genotypes to explore the farthest reaches of its possibilities, his theories flew in the face of Darwinian orthodoxy. His so-called "hopeful monsters"—nature's naturally occurring experiments to enhance survival value—are not aberrations. They are outcomes of a process that is unfolding itself as we speak. The silent universe of Pascal and Sartre is not silent after all—it is instead cacophonous and very much alive. If it appears as silent to us, it might well be because we have stopped listening.

As Isabelle Stengers has pointed out, when we think of symbiosis, or about the symbiotic relationships between organism and environment, we speak about the interests of the partners involved in such relationships.[98] But *interesse* is always

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[96] Margulis, 2010; Lent, 2021: pp. 134–136. Margulis's theories have been expounded in *The Symbiotic Planet* (1998), *What is Life?* (2000), and *Acquiring Genomes* (2002).

[97] Dietrich, 2003; Kleiner, 1996.

[98] Stengers, 2010: pp. 17-18.

already *inter esse* – it is the in-between realm of partial essences, characterized by traits and properties that are exchanged, modified and which are inherently unstable.[99] This "impurity" of life itself is the very antithesis of the modern idea of a mechanistic, neat, orderly, and taxonomically describable world. It is the processual Will at work at such fundamental levels of reality that its presence becomes unavoidable. What our ecological predicament inflicts upon us is the intensification of this unsettling notion. Not only is the impure present on a cellular level, but the entire ecosystemic integrity of the Earth is suffused with it. The idea of a hyperobject represents this destabilization of spatial and temporal relationships. Time and space, it seems, are leaky. The new oozes into our world, as new species evolve under our noses and even within us. Animal and vegetal adaption occurs at breathtaking speeds. And so does change at the level of the biosphere.

The future makes itself felt in the present, as gradually worsening ecological crises provide snapshots into the world-to-come. For instance, silence is settling over nature. It is just a snapshot of what awaits in the near future, but in its half-presence, it is already here. It is an abundance of futurality that inconveniently and depressingly enters and inflects the present.[100] The metamorphosis of the world unfolds slowly, but topples the entire static ontology built on it. Schopenhauer's Will also has this characteristic: it implies a metapattern that science and representational capacities cannot grasp.

What adds the sting here is the fact that Schopenhauerian Will operates fully outside of time and space. Driven on by its striving, the world will continue to exist even beyond its ending, even when nature turns silent. Like the eerie, echoing soundscapes of, for instance, Valentin Silvestrov's musical compositions, fossilized remains, or the radiation of radioactive materials, these remnants of this world inhabit a new constellation in which novel lifeforms assume the throne. What remains when our world vanishes is *not* nothing—it is a new form of being that is not necessarily recognizable from the vantage point of the current lifeforms. Once more, the word *toekomst* acquires an ominous ring: something

[99] Stengers plays here on the resemblance between the Latin term *inter esse* ("between essences") and the Dutch term *interesse* (interest).

[100] Weston, 2024.

comes towards us, but we can't recognize it. It falls experientially and cognitively outside our conceptual comprehension, and while we may apprehend it essentially non-conceptually, we cannot come to terms with it because we lack the conceptual and theoretical representational capacities for doing so.

How is this all ecology? Simply put, because it deals with the great unfolding of the cosmic household (*oikos*). Schopenhauer shows that ecology cannot be equated with nature conservation or a harmonious world-image, but instead with embracing a world-image or root metaphor that is irreducibly relational, radically entangling us within it.

6. CHARACTERIZING RADICAL ENTANGLEMENT

In an earlier essay, we investigated the nature of a range of experience that many people share, but that is often subverted by what we called "the mechanistic worldview" (Hanna and Paans, 2020). It's the moment of what we call *creative piet*y, or witnessing the world in all its objectivity, detached from the drives of the Ego (Hanna and Paans, 2021, 2022). We are not the only ones who have explored the significance of such experiences: the archetypical story of St. Paul on the road to Damascus deals with it, as does a voluminous Buddhist, Daoist, Catholic, and Eastern Christian literature.[101]

Not coincidentally, given Schopenhauer's cosmopolitan philosophical outlook, this moment also surfaces in the first part of the WWR, notably in the fourth book on ethics. The idea is that denying the striving Will and its insatiable cravings leads to a state of being that is free from want, enabling a cognitively objective view of the world. In the Buddhist literature, this is often framed as the moment of enlightenment or release from a state of dissatisfaction or *dukkha*. However, this moment does not merely liberate one from unduly and destructive cravings. It also causes a rift in the everyday experience of the world. Individuals who experienced it report feelings of a deep connectedness, but equally feelings of what Buddhists call "emptiness," or "suchness."[102] The "objectivity" of this viewpoint has nothing to do with scientific validity, but instead everything to do with experiencing reality in all its fullness, liberated from the hedonistic urges of

[101] For a discussion of selected classical sources, see Hanna and Paans, 2022.

[102] Paans, 2023; Nishitani, 1983: p. 8; Nowotny, 1996: p. 152; Wright, 2018: chs. 10 and 11.

aesthetic judgement and the functionalist dictates of instrumental reason. In a very real sense, to experience creative piety is temporarily to experience being "out of the cage" of our conceptual, theoretical, and often thought-shaped cognitive constitution.

What remains, however, is the full encounter with one's own subjectivity and agency, but this time without the apprehension that is so characteristic of the High Modern subject. One is given to oneself as radically entangled in the world, as is confirmed by reports of an overwhelming sense of oneness or unity.

Briefly summarizing, practicing creative piety involves taking *a critical, reflective standpoint on some or another determinate domain of content*, a standpoint that is at once:[103]

> (i) *higher-dimensional* or *higher-order*—for example, generating a "transcendental" third-dimensional point-of-view out of an array or spreadsheet of that content that's otherwise merely "flat" or two-dimensional,
>
> (ii) *synoptic* with respect to the entire determinate domain of content—for example, seeing a landscape as a dynamic three-dimensional contour map from the vantage point of an airplane flying over it, and
>
> (iii) fully critical cognizant of the inherent *boundaries* or *limits* of that determinate this domain of content, and then, uniting these three features, it provides
>
> (iv) direct affective-cognitive access to *a new, inexhaustible, and essentially richer—in structural and informational terms alike—domain of content* over and above the "old" content available in the "flat" or two-dimensional determinate domain of content.

The properly *creative* feature of creative piety, arising from the interplay of its four basic elements, is that even though, as per element (iii), it always involves a critical recognition of the inherent boundaries or limits of some determinate domain of content, nevertheless, in view of elements (i) and (ii), it also yields a new kind of *un*bounded or *un*limited cognition of that bounded or limited determinate domain, together with direct cognitive access to that Wittgenstein calls "the intuition of the world *sub specie aeterni*," or the "mystical."[104]

As element (iv) indicates, there is a pathway of direct cognitive access to "the mystical" in Wittgenstein's sense. Yet, this pathway is *simultaneously* a direct and essentially non-conceptual cognitive access to a new, inexhaustible, and

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[103] Adapted from Hanna and Paans, 2022.

[104] Wittgenstein, 1981: p. 187.

essentially richer domain of content. Entering this domain produces experiential effects in two directions:

In the *downward* direction, as in opening up into the essentially non-conceptual, apprehensive and the futural dimensions of everyday experience. Reality, and its constituent objects and events and events are experienced as deep, open-ended, resisting closure, ambiguous, shifting and even threatening. Just as one might harbor fears about deep bodies of water, so too may one harbor fears and anxieties about the open-endedness of reality. As discussed, the idea of possibility is turned around and appears as a confrontation with the ecological sublime. If we put in in Sartre's terms, *I am given to myself as a radically entangled subject in a natural order that is given to me as a series of fundamentally ambiguous hyperobjects.* This radical entanglement causes anguish, as it confronts us with a cosmos that seems permeated by an agency that we cannot conceptualize (and hence represent) and cannot control. In this experience, our finitude is hammered home, as is the inherent fragility of our lives and the limitations of our capacities for knowing and acting. More generally, radical entanglement is a direct counterpart of creative piety.

In the *upward* direction, as in opening out into a new, richer, more complex informational domain of cognition that contains within itself the possibility of growth, organic development, ecological restoration, neo-Utopian progress and organic dynamicism. Just as one might fell connected to the cosmos and see "eternity within a raindrop," so too may one experience the organicist structure of the cosmos, the dignity of Life, tapping as it were in the structure of the cosmos through the mind. Put differently: this is the ultimate upshot of Kant's transcendental idealism, whereby the perceived world conforms to the innate cognitive structure of our minds. This insight creates autonomy, epistemic humility, and the attitude of acting with a self-conscious awareness of our limits in mind. As noted above, we call this *creative piety.*

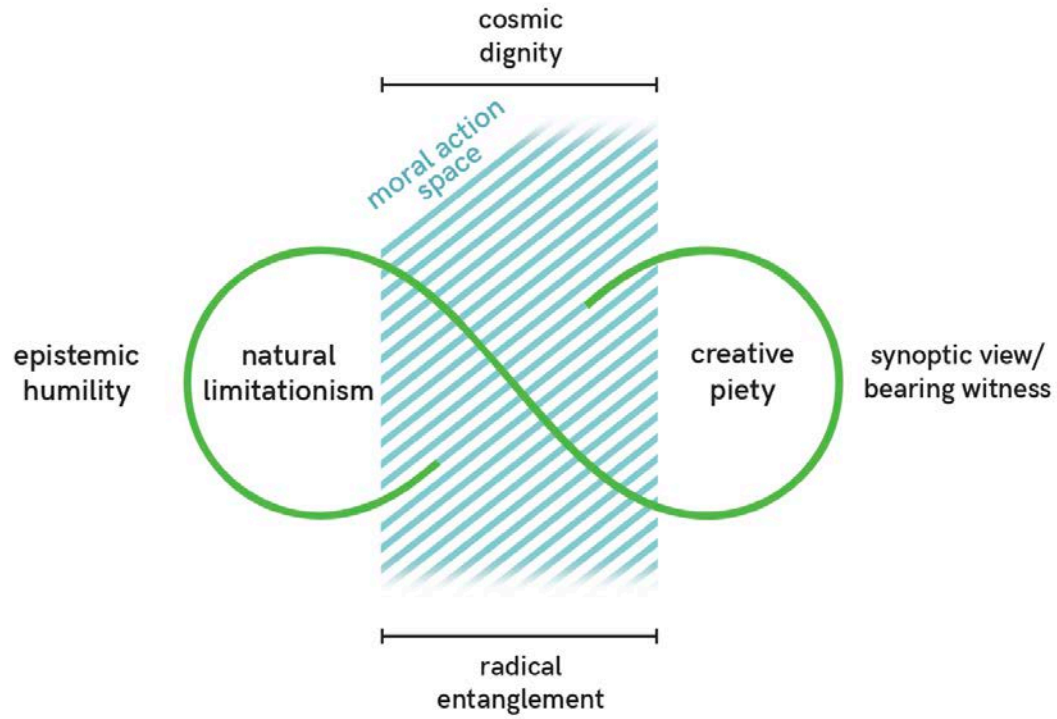

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the relation between natural limitationism and creative piety. The moral action space is demarcated by both attitudes, and marked by epistemic humility and bearing witness alike. Moreover, every moral action takes place in a context of radical entanglement and with respect for cosmic dignity.

Following Timothy Morton's evocative term "dark ecology," we characterize radical entanglement in Schopenhauerian terms, following up on the ideas of distributed agency throughout the natural environment, radical entanglement, the futurality of hyperobjects, and the presence of the impure. As Morton points out, the idea of darkness implies the presence of the unknown—a certain type of unease that is apprehended rather than known.[105] Ecology is by definition "dark" in this sense. It is the science of "everything, everywhere, all at once." Embracing this predicament is "dark" in the sense that it represents an "unflinching naturalism." This is certainly not the flat, materialist and ultimately mechanistic

[105] Morton, 2018: p. 9.

naturalism espoused by scientistic thinkers and reductionist physicalists alike, but instead a view in which the evolutionary origins of humanity are considered as unavoidable facts which cannot be papered over by reference either to pre-existing cosmic harmony or divine guarantees, or with high-modern delusions of total technological control.

The darkness suggested by both the Schopenhauerian concept of the Will and also the concept of the numinous represents the downside of unfettered possibility: nature is futural and open-ended, but many of the possible worlds will feature a humanity or a type of existence that is not necessarily pleasant or even fulfilling. Whereas the idea of possibility fuels creative piety, it is a reminder of our limitations whenever we consider radical entanglement. In turn, this leads to epistemic humility: given the fact that our knowledge is finite, the idea of total technological control appears as a baffling act of arrogance. Instead, natural limitationism emphasizes that truly more ways of acting and desiring need to be attuned to an ecological order which is larger than we can ever comprehend.

Radical entanglement represents the negative outer limit that balances and sets moral norms to our creative capacities, yet without crossing over into nihilism, tech-obsessed solutionism, or longtermism. If we pose the question whether we should resort to technological means to alter the climate through cloud-seeding, cutting down forests to fuel biomass generators, influence animal migratory patterns, or reflecting sunlight back into space, the limits imposed by radical entanglement circumscribe the outer circumference of moral action.

As Hegel put it: radical entanglement represents the "labor of the negative," the necessary counterforce to delimit what constitutes a permissible action.[106] Lingis was completely right when he noted that the failure of representational thought sets off a dialectical process: a process that is uncanny like Schopenhauer's Will, and that balances between embracing possibility and being made uneasy by its futurality.

Above all, radical entanglement is inherently *ecological*, *futural*, and *relational*. It is the attitude that fully internalizes our existential limits, leading to an attitude of epistemic humility without becoming fatalistic. It fully recognizes the limits of our action space, emphasizing the fundamental interconnectedness, open-endedness,

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[106] Hegel, 1977: pp. 10, 51. For a recent discussion of the negative in Hegel, see Cauchi, 2016.

and futurality of our predicament. As an attitudinal disposition, it emphasizes our limits as the forces present in the cosmos are hyperobjectual—so massive and distributed that we have but a small influence on them and very little comprehension of them.

Last, radical entanglement embraces the dimension of the "impure." It reminds us that the comforting narratives like the "best of all possible worlds", classical theodicy, divine guarantees, the Cartesian God that does not deceive, the Enlightenment clockwork world, and the High Modernist "generic eternal" or an essentially harmonious mechanistic natural world, are ultimately fictions to repress what our representational thought cannot conceptually grasp, but merely essentially non-conceptually apprehends.[107]

Without the dialectical correlate of radical entanglement, the capacity for creative piety runs into its limits on two fronts: on the one hand, (i) it runs into the limit of uncritical world-improvement, alarmism, or positivism of all sorts, "activism" in the pejorative sense, inciting direct action in order to avoid reflection, [108] while on the other hand, (ii) it runs into the limit of quietism, and simply "letting the world burn," while one searches for personal salvation.[109]

The Schopenhauerian alternative is more subtle: it is a revaluation of experiencing our limits while also trying to act ecologically, but without trying to technologically improve the world. If modernity denaturalized the world, this attitude renaturalizes it. Yet, the attitude we end up with is not an uncritical Gaia-worship or quietist fatalism, but instead a modest, enduring re-calibration of our practices that recognizes how deep we are entangled in the ecological order.

7. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NATURAL LIMITATIONISM

> So presented, [Neo-Utopianism] might initially seem to be nothing but yet another quixotic project par excellence, a philosophical, moral, and sociopolitical aberration that combines the worst kind of 'utopian' thinking with an unfounded alarmism about the present world-situation…. It's certainly true that all-too-many revolutionary 'utopian' movements during the 20th century caused intense suffering, violence, murder, and massive sociopolitical and ecological damage, via

[107] Paans 2019; See Roszak 1993 for an extensive discussion of this thought.

[108] Hanna and Paans 2022.

[109] See for a discussion of quietism in the cultural sphere: Paans 2022; 2023.

> their high modernist, ultra-zealous, morally fanatical, and catastrophically unsuccessful attempts to bring about some or another "brave new world" by means of relentlessly implemented "schemes to improve the human condition."[110]

Let's summarize the argument so far, before adding one final step connecting Schopenhauer's radical entanglement, the core insights of futural ecology, and neo-utopianism, to natural limitationism.

As a purely metaphysical theory, Schopenhauer's notion of the Will falls short of achieving its goal. However, when viewed as an evocative description of the organicist, processual dynamic of the natural world, it is remarkably suggestive. The notion of the Will indicates that the biosphere features many forms of agency, ranging all the way from extreme climatic conditions to pandemics, genetic mutations, mass extinction events, and infectious diseases.

This threatening character is grasped and apprehended by Schopenhauerian philosophy. Just as our conceptual and theoretical representational capacities fall short in probing the depths of the natural world, they run into their limits when considering hyperobjects. Due to their massive size and distribution in time, hyperobjects short-circuit the customary experience of time, spilling over and as it were leaking the future into the present.

Consequently, our world slowly changes, providing ominous snapshots of the world-to-come. Literally, the *toekomst* (future) is what inevitably heads towards us, making the organic agency of the environment tangible. The organic unfolding of the world becomes visible not just through the ways in which present and future coincide and mingle, but also through a new, emerging dimension of the "impure" or the in-between domain that High Modernism cannot grasp, but which nevertheless starts to characterize our lived experience.

All this leads to the necessity of embracing our inherent limits, without either falling into nihilism, breathless climate alarmism, technological solutionism, or defeatist quietism, yet remaining fully cognizant of our epistemic limitations and the fact that our representational capacities are limited. This attitude is natural limitationism. It is marked by the double feature of "bearing witness" to the grandeur and ceaseless creativity of the universe, combined with epistemic humility and reverence for the limits of our knowledge.

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[110] Hanna and Paans 2022.

Especially against the background of climate change, ecological destruction and the looming global conflict for resources, should we not invert Kant's maxim that we "experience the starry heavens above us and the moral law within us"? The notion of radical entanglement entails that we have the starry heavens *inside* us—we are metaphysically continuous with the cosmos.[111] But the moral law now ominously hovers above us in the form of barely tangible hyperobjects and climatic phenomena.

Confronted with something that appears as numinous, we require a new morality which accepts that we are radically entangled to deal with its immensity. In this new morality, any reference to "the Great Chain of Being," the Leibnizian optimistic assertion that we inhabit "the best of all possible worlds," or the High Modernist "Space of Man," must be regarded as false narratives in order to avoid the reality of the ecological dead end we have manoeuvred ourselves into. The modern "Space of Man" convinced the average consumer-subject of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that consumption has no consequences, and that the cosmos is a stock of resources to be exploited. By forcing a distance between ourselves and the ecology of which we form an integral part, we created the "Myth of Disentanglement," treating *Homo sapiens* as the universal exception to the natural order.[112]

The idea of assuming a (broadly Kantian) rational responsibility stems from the very realization of finitude that our rational minds inflict upon us. We must take the self-conscious step to assume our proper place in the cosmic order. Yet, our human predicament entails that we are not unselfconsciously submerged in it. Rather, as Schopenhauer realized, we tragically and painfully experience our entanglement.

The mechanistic worldview, with its dreams of abstraction and its "generic eternal" catapults us directly in what Schopenhauer correctly diagnosed: an impersonal view of the cosmos, the very core of which we cannot touch, while a thoroughgoing scientism convinces us that we can tackle the current ecological crisis with technological means and our current, growth-driven mindset.[113] The

[111] Paans, 2022.

[112] Paans, 2023b.

[113] Paans, 2019.

many "schemes to improve the human condition" drive once more a wedge between collective and individual human behavior and the biosphere with which we are entangled.

This observation allows us to draw a sharp and insurmountable contrast between our Schopenhauer-inspired radical entanglement and its associated futural ecology as presented above, on the one hand, and longtermism on the other, which, in turn, is a core thesis of the contemporary moral and sociopolitical program called *Effective Altruism*:

> "Longtermism" is the view that positively influencing the long-term future is a key moral priority of our time. Three ideas come together to suggest this view. First, future people matter. Our lives surely matter just as much as those lived thousands of years ago—so why shouldn't the lives of people living thousands of years from now matter equally? Second, the future could be vast. Absent catastrophe, most people who will ever live have not yet been born. Third, our actions may predictably influence how well this long-term future goes. In sum, it may be our responsibility to ensure future generations get to survive and flourish. (Moorhouse, 2021; see also MacAskill, 2022)

More specifically, longtermism says (i) that the merely possible lives of far-off future people—i.e., abstract objects satisfying the conceptual description "human person"—matter just as much as the actual, concrete lives of currently living people, (ii) that the abstract, far-off, merely possible future of humankind or strong-artificial-intelligence (strong AI) duplicates of humankind is just as morally and sociopolitically important as the present situation and the immediate emerging future of actual, concrete humankind, and (iii) that our current choices and actions ought to be directed just as much to influencing the abstract, far-off future of humankind, or of strong AI duplicates of humankind, as they are to influencing the present situation and the immediate emerging future of actual, concrete humankind.

In our view, all three of these longtermist theses are *false*: on the contrary, (i*) the actual, concrete lives of currently living people *matter categorically more than* the merely possible, purely abstract lives of far-off future people, (ii*) the present situation, together with the immediately emerging near-future situation of actual, concrete humankind, are *categorically more morally and sociopolitically important than* the merely possible, abstract, far-off future of humankind or of strong AI duplicates of humankind, and (iii*) our current choices and actions *categorically*

ought to be primarily directed to influencing the present situation and the immediate emerging near-future situation of actual, concrete humankind, and *only secondarily directed* to influencing the merely possible, abstract, far-off future of humankind, but *not in any way directed* to influencing the merely possible, abstract, far-off future of strong-AI duplicates of humankind—simply because strong AI duplicates of humankind are in fact synthetic a priori *impossible.*[114]

There are other strong arguments against Effective Altruism—or, as we think of it, "defective altruism"[115]—but for the specific purposes of this essay, the crucial thing is the categorical difference between futural ecology and longtermism.

Again, and as we emphasized in the beginning of this essay, to think ecologically requires a mode of thinking that takes appropriately long timescales into account. But longtermism flattens out and narrows down this idea, postponing action in the present for a technological solution that is promised, but that might never come. Moreover, it denies our radical entanglement with the world. It favors an abstract, disembodied view of humanity, and salvific technology as the solution to current ecological problems. This feature is particularly visible in how for instance Nick Bostrom treats what he calls the "vulnerable world" hypothesis.[116] The idea is that humanity might one day devise a lethal invention that has the potential to be easily manufactured by everybody. In order to prevent this possibility, we should consent to invasive monitoring and surveillance. The problem is phrased in the most abstract of terms, presenting itself as informed philosophical argumentation. The main problem is that we have already invented devices and technologies that threaten our existence as a species. They do not have the dramatic, instantaneous impact of atomic bombs or chemical weapons, but are set off by means of slowly unfolding phenomena like climate change and ecological destruction. Bostrom's "theoretical possibility" is already a reality, but longtermist thinking conveniently overlooks this fact.

But if one adopts a posture of creative piety, coupled with the full existential realization of our radical entanglement with the biosphere, such thinking becomes blatantly irrelevant. Yes, future generations should play a role in our

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[114] Hanna, 2025.

[115] Hanna, 2024; see also Ackermann, 2022.

[116] Bostrom, 2019.

deliberations on how to act as responsible ecological agents. But this awareness cannot be replaced by resorting to the newest technology without changing our attitude towards the biosphere and the cosmos at large. To adopt such a position is hard work. One must, as Kant put it "occupy one's place in the world to become fully human." The Schopenhauerian inflection of this thought stipulates that only by embracing our limits and fully internalizing the fact "that there is no planet B," can we learn truly to cultivate and deploy our skills for treating the Earth as our communal global garden.

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