

## **When Earth Juts Through World**

A contribution to “The Situation Facing the Moderns After the Intrusion of Gaïa: A Philosophical Simulation”, the final evaluation conference of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME)*

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With the arrival of the Anthropocene we must now be suspicious of all ideas developed in the last 10,000 years. That includes James Lovelock’s notion of Gaia which, it turns out, is a child of the Holocene. In his recent book, *On Gaia*, Toby Tyrrell shows that since Lovelock put his idea into the world some 30 years ago our understanding of the Earth system has changed dramatically.

As Earth scientists have found means of taking a more fine-grained view of Earth history, especially through the analysis of ice-cores, the trajectory of Earth appears much more wild and unpredictable. There is no built-in stabiliser; life does not bring the planet back into equilibrium. Gaia is based on old science.

The Anthropocene is a reversion to the unruly and chaotic conditions before the Holocene’s 10-millennium epoch of calm, an interval that suggested some kind of automatic stabiliser at work. But no longer.

Heidegger hinted at something like this in his distinction between Earth and world. Unruly, primordial Earth “juts through” the ordered worlds humans create. Earth intrudes, destabilizes and upsets our plans. When Earth juts through the Moderns attempt to suppress it with technology, which is how we should understand geoengineering. It’s getting too hot? We’ll use technology to reduce solar radiation. The oceans are acidifying? We will add calcium. Not one but a suite of geoengineering interventions is now being mooted.

Yet in the Anthropocene the agitated Earth will keep jutting through. Suppressed in one place it will push up in another. In the fairground game of Whack-a-mole we

whack one mole on the head and another pops up elsewhere. The faster we whack them, the faster they pop up.

Martin Heidegger and Whack-a-mole are not obvious bed-fellows, but the game is the perfect symbol of the irrepressibility of the Earth. And chthonic (mole-like) impulses abound in Heidegger. The game also represents the archetypal nightmare in which things keep going wrong and we lose control. Our attempts to re-establish order are frustrated at every turn; chaos takes over until we are reduced to a frantic wreck.

So it is to the philosophers of darkness rather than those of Enlightenment that we will turn for understanding of the new situation. Although now known as a place for the rich and powerful to go to pose in front of each other, in 1929 Davos was the stage for a famous philosophical debate between the Kantian Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. Cassirer defended an enlightened humanism while Heidegger argued for a darker vision of humans thrown into a destiny inscribed in Being itself. The dispute revolved around the question of whether the human being is limited by its existence in a finite world or whether it can break free of those constraints and create its own world. One thing is now clear; the perfectibility of humankind is a failed project.

If humanism is the ‘triumph of consciousness over its surroundings’, in Peter Gordon’s phrase,<sup>1</sup> we now witness the triumph of surroundings over consciousness. In the absence of self-delusion (admittedly a heroic condition to impose), a hard confrontation with the scientific warnings inevitably erodes the essential optimistic mood of late modernity, and replaces it with a kind of existential dread. What form does this hard confrontation take?

In German, *Erlebnis* can simply mean an event, occurrence or experience in the course of life, the type of personal life experience that was the hallmark of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romanticism.<sup>2</sup> But it can also refer to an intense experience that disrupts a life, making an indelible impression and permanently changing a life course. They are the types of experience not so much integrated into a life but which relegate the old life to the past and inaugurate a new sensibility. ‘What we call an *Erlebnis* in this emphatic

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon, Peter 2010. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*, Harvard University Press

<sup>2</sup> See John Arthos, ‘To Be Alive When Something Happens’, retrieving Dilthey’s *Erlibnis*, [www.janushead.org/3-1/jarthos.cfm](http://www.janushead.org/3-1/jarthos.cfm)

sense’, wrote Gadamer, ‘thus means something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination’.

Such a realisation is not merely a powerful emotional event but one saturated with meaning. The subject often has the inexplicable feeling that the *Erlebnis* has some purpose that asks to be understood. It is as if some force has intervened, creating a rupture that has meaning beyond the personal, indeed beyond all categories of structure and agency.

The indifference of most to the Earth system’s disturbance may be attributed to a failure of reason or psychological weaknesses; but these seem inadequate to explain why we find ourselves on the edge of the abyss. How can we understand the miserable failure of contemporary thinking to come to grips with what now confronts us?

A few years after the second atomic bomb was dropped, Kazuo Ishiguro wrote a novel about the people of Nagasaki, a novel in which the bomb is never mentioned yet whose shadow fell over everyone. The Anthropocene’s shadow too falls over all of us. Yet the bookshops are regularly replenished with tomes from our leading intellectuals about world futures in which the ecological crisis is never mentioned. They write about economic realignments, technological singularities and clashing civilizations, composed and put forward as if climate scientists do not exist. The Niall Fergusons and Steven Pinkers prognosticate about a future from which the dominant facts have been expunged, futurologists trapped in an obsolete past, the Holocene.

At a dinner party one of Europe’s most eminent psychoanalysts held forth ardently on every topic but fell silent when climate change was raised. He had nothing to say. For most of the intelligentsia, it is as if the projections of Earth scientists are so preposterous they can safely be ignored. Perhaps the intellectual surrender is so complete because the forces we hoped would make the world a more civilized place—personal freedoms, democracy, material advance, technological power—are in truth leading to its destruction. The forces we most trusted have betrayed us; that which we believed would save us now threatens to devour us.

For some, the tension is resolved by rejecting the evidence, which is to say, discarding the Enlightenment. For others, the response is to denigrate calls to heed the danger as

a loss of faith in humanity, as if caring for the Earth for its own sake were a romantic illusion or superstitious regression. Yet the Earth scientists continue to haunt us, following us around like wailing apparitions while we hurry on with our lives, turning around occasionally with irritation to hold up the crucifix of Progress (a holy object whose power is waning by the day).

This conference testifies that the terms of the ecological debate have been rewritten. Previously it was about techno-industrialism's destruction of Nature *versus* the imperative to protect some parts of it for its aesthetic, spiritual or intrinsic values (or, for the eco-Moderns, for its economic values via calculation of 'ecosystem services').

Now in the Anthropocene, the era of Gaia's awakening, we can no longer think of the Earth as a patchwork of the natural and the unnatural, but only as a total system under attack. But more than merely seeing a totality, Earth system science tells us that the totality is not an object but a flux, a confluence, an assembly of jostling forces in constant transition – and now in a new mode of mobilization. It is a 'mode of existence' in which no thing exists.

The new understanding leaves stuck in the past the argument between traditional conservationists and Moderns (including eco-Moderns). The quarrel over where to draw the boundaries between the natural and the spoiled is a Holocene one.

And the new dispensation demands a rethinking – or better, a re-experiencing – of the human-Nature relation. Beyond the personal, it calls for a rethinking of history, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has urged upon us. What kind of being makes history? It can no longer be the human of humanist history. A hundred years ago, Benedetto Croce noticed that 'historians of purely historical temperament [which means virtually all historians today] ... have an instinctive repugnance for natural history and hold themselves carefully aloof from it'.<sup>3</sup>

Humanist philosophers (which means virtually all philosophers today) also have an instinctive repugnance for nature. Perhaps not in their hobbies, but in their philosophies, because to get close to nature would sully, soil the purity of the

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<sup>3</sup> Benedetto Croce, *On History* (trans Douglas Ainslie), George G. Harrap & Co., Kingsway, 1921, p. 128

concepts that constitute philosophical reasoning. Yet isn't that precisely what the Anthropocene demands, that philosophy be soiled by nature and provide a new thinking that can help us do what we must – find a way to marry world and Earth, to give up playing Whack-a-mole and make a union in which we can live.