



## Book review: *Being Ecological* by Timothy Morton

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From its opening page, *Being Ecological* (MIT Press, 2018; all page references to this edition) seems to situate itself as an ecological text of an unusual kind, stating that it does not aim to guilt its readers into ecological *angst* with weighty factoids and the information-dump approach, or “ecological information delivery mode” (p. 7), so often adopted by other authors. Timothy Morton, notorious for his ability to invert commonly held beliefs and understandings within the humanities, presents *Being Ecological* as his attempt to arrive at a more authentic and productive understanding of what he has called elsewhere the ecological thought and how to live with it (Morton 2012), rather than trying to guilt-trip us into ecology.

Rather than employing the information-dump approach, Morton opts to investigate the way we understand ecology and our interconnected relationships with nonhuman beings. His goal is to arrive at a lived and embodied ecology, rather than the information- and fact-based one that dominates the existing ecological literature. To arrive at this, most of the book is dedicated to a staunch critique of anthropocentrism. This reveals the illusory nature of human-exclusive correlationism, that is, the world is not simply the correlation between the human mind and external objects. This demonstrates, even to the most ecologically apathetic or ignorant reader, that the human interconnectedness with nonhumans and the biosphere is intrinsically deep, uncanny, and necessarily inseparable.

A feature of Morton’s earlier corpus is his concept that humanity remains trapped within the confines of a Neolithic agricultural logistics program that has artificially severed the human from the nonhuman. This separation that he elsewhere calls “The Severing” (Morton 2017, 89) is ultimately the product of the Neolithic program and does not authentically map on to the more complex reality of our world: an enmeshment and interconnectedness of all things. The idea of nature is, itself, a human fabrication that resulted from this mental separation and is no more than an anthropocentric way of construing existence.

Morton argues that we need an historical understanding of this anthropocentric style of thought in order to penetrate the “massive firewall” (*Being Ecological*, p. 128) raised during the Neolithic, and to reconnect with a more accurate understanding of what actually exists in our world, and how. For Morton, such an ontological inquiry is a critical step in living with ecological knowledge and provides a more intuitive and successful way of addressing the current ecological crisis than more common approaches in the established literature.

The strength of Morton's account lies in its explosiveness, the ease with which it can dismantle the anthropocentric conceptions that Morton sees as the cause of our ecological crisis. However, just as quickly, the book leans toward theoretical obscurantism. More often than not, the author plays fast and loose with his theoretical constructs and deconstructions, offering to fill the vacuum left behind with only an ambiguous praxis. What are the applied ethics of this living ecology? How are we supposed to take these concepts, actually employ them in our daily lives, and avert the crisis that they are evidently intended to address? Morton seems to want to answer these questions, but he mostly dodges them throughout the text; accordingly, there is, to say the least, something left wanting in *Being Ecological*. What, exactly, are we supposed to *do* with these ideas?

To be fair, Morton never claims to provide practical guidelines for how his theories are to be applied. He merely offers them up – perhaps they are a matter of the author's self-actualization. His other, denser texts on these subjects play a similar tune in their emphasis on pure theory rather than practice. Nonetheless, a way to actually *live* ecology would be useful in showing its actual power to avert catastrophe.

At its heart, this book is a masterful dance that draws on art, religion, death, temporality, and beauty. This is not a surprise from Morton, given his repertoire of philosophical contributions that deal with all these topics while playfully, as a staple of his writing, approaching metaphor and allusion. Where *Being Ecological* differs is its accessibility: his other works may prove to be too obscure for readers not steeped in literature, theology, continental philosophy, and art criticism. Here, by contrast, Morton tills new ground by making his unique ecophilosophy approachable by any audience. *Being Ecological* serves, therefore, as a tempering text for those brave enough to pick up one of its author's more narrow works. All in all, this book is a work of unprecedented catharsis that provides the era of information overload with a novel approach to addressing the sixth mass extinction.

## References

Morton, Timothy. 2012. *The ecological thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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