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## **Cosmological Persons: Bringing Healing Down to Earth**

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Almost all who write on the climate emergency are rightly critical of the hubris that has led our species to become a particularly parasitic guest to the earth, our host. But the answer to human hubris cannot simply be to emphasize that our species is no different from any other. This too easily becomes an excuse to perpetuate the harms that we are already inflicting. *We are* different. We are uniquely responsible for the climate emergency, and to clean up the mess we have made. That mess, I contend, is a *personal* mess. That emergency is a personal emergency. As such, ecological healing would require addressing directly three all-too-human tendencies that have been exacerbated in the modern period.

As persons we are irreducibly unique subjects, existing essentially in relation to one another. But largely obscured in the more recent history of western thought is the *cosmological dimension* of our personhood: our existence in relation not just to other humans, but also to other animals, plants, and ecosystems. This is the sense in which we, as persons, exist as part of the larger cosmos, conceived as a meaningful whole. To reconnect to this dimension of our personhood we must learn to resist the anesthetizing, alienating, and anonymizing tendencies that have characterized the recent history of our species.

In what follows I propose three remedies to these three kinds of sickness. We need to re-cultivate sensitivity toward, to get back in touch with, and to speak out on behalf of the wild plants, animals, and ecosystems that have been forced to the periphery of human society. Yet the aim of our critique cannot be mere disdain for techno-scientific control and the domination of anonymous market forces.<sup>1</sup> Our goal must be twofold: to regain touch with our animality by embracing the earth that hosts us, thus becoming more gracious guests, and to become more fully human by becoming better hosts to the multitude of earth’s creatures, whose lives hang in the balance.

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<sup>1</sup> “A *technē* which would set humans free from the bondage of drudgery, to be the stewards rather than the desperate despoilers of nature, should surely not be despised” (Kohák 1987, x). In *Thinking Nature*, Sean McGrath has argued persuasively that we must strive to cultivate *contemplative critique, contemplative control, and contemplative calculation* (McGrath 2019, 11; 134-135).

## *Anesthetization*

*Anesthetization* is the state of having become insensitive to pain or suffering, and more broadly to that which stimulates the senses. It includes reference also to a cultural crisis in aesthetics, or to the modern victory of *scientific* knowing—and the objectification of all that is not mind—over *embodied* ways of knowing. The latter are in fact integral components of a largely absent complement to scientific objectification: tactful philosophical knowing. Reintegration of the latter would require a healthy dose of aesthetic sensibility, or in other words *aestheticization*.<sup>2</sup>

We have become anesthetized to the living world that beckons to us from beyond our societal constructs. From the onset our embodied responses are solicited through the heightening of our senses, but the affective primacy of touch has been gradually eclipsed by the abstract blessedness of sight (Kearney 2021, 33f; Treanor 2023, 19f; Fitzpatrick 2023, 35). An aesthetic way of being, in which a subject connects meaningfully to its surrounding world, has been displaced by the objectivizing gaze: “Aesthetics is a way of being, a stance toward the world; an aesthetic experience requires a relationship between a seeking subject and a responsive world. But scenery is a stockpile of usable commodities” (Evernden 1999, 54). One byproduct of the shift toward objectivistic knowing is that plants, animals, and their surrounding biotic environments now blend into a scene to be viewed from above and outside. Earth’s wild places become spectacles to be viewed on occasion, rather than a living theater inviting us to participation (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxii).

Aristotle does carefully attend to touch, by contrast with Plato. But like Plato, he also famously argues, at the opening of his *Metaphysics*, that sight is the most blessed of the senses. Sight takes in the scene all at once, as touch struggles to grasp the whole. But while blessed rationality strives, perhaps inevitably, toward an ultimate perspective on things, our human limitations prevent us from ever wholly attaining to the God’s-eye-view. The great danger has been that when we come close to such a blessed standpoint, our own animality becomes utterly neglected or repressed; or perhaps falsely claimed to have been overcome. The wonders of touch, in its tactful attention to detail, and particularity, are overlooked (cf. Kearney 2021, 36).

Modern science in particular hypostatizes sight over and against touch, and prizes objectification over value-laden knowing. But perhaps this situation presents in part a necessary predicament. The phenomenologist Max Scheler, in *On the Eternal in Man*, maintains that scientific knowing is contingent upon the following moral precondition: “*self-mastery must be achieved*: in this way it is possible to objectify the instinctual impulses of life, which are ‘given’ and experienced as ‘of the flesh’ and which must needs exert a constant influence on natural sensory perception” (Scheler

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<sup>2</sup> See especially Kearney 2023, 238ff; and also the “sacramental aesthetic” at Kearney 2011, 133; cf. Bradley 2023, 96f. In fact, one should consider the sections of the present chapter against the background of Bradley’s insightful analysis of the metaphor of “depth” in Kearney’s work, in relation to distinctive but overlapping periods of his thought: *moral imagination*, *carnal hermeneutics*, and a *theo-poetics of creation* (Bradley 2023). The three sections to follow (“Anesthetization,” “Alienation,” and “Attestation”) may very well correspond to these three themes in Kearney’s thought. I have been deeply influenced by Kearney’s thinking, and Ricoeur’s, both directly and, in a much larger part, indirectly—especially through close friends and mentors like Treanor and Bradley. The last theme, a theo-poetics of creation, is being developed currently, including in the present book project, and especially in dialogue with recent work, cited below, by Treanor, Bradley, Fitzpatrick, and Gschwandtner (Gschwandtner 2023).

2010, 93).<sup>3</sup> Scheler suggests that one's scientific knowledge will be more or less adequate in proportion to the extent of one's mastery over instinctual impulses and desires; that objective knowledge of things will correspond to the degree to which the scientist has been able to suspend subjective desires and intentions. But after centuries of practice, those modes of subjectivity have been effectively buried under what the ecophenomenologist Erazim Kohák calls a "heavy layer of forgetting" (Kohák 1987, x). In the face of significant disagreement about values—whether amidst the cultural upheavals of the seventeenth century, or in the context of increasing globalization, and techno-democratic assertions toward individual authority, in the twenty-first—scientific objectivity has taken absolute epistemic precedence, thus overriding the meaning-laden dimension of more subject-dependent insights concerning value, empathy, and virtue.

If self-mastery can be defined as "the domination of the instinctual impulses by the rational will," then in acts of scientific knowing the possibility of instrumentalization is already implicit: the possibility of manipulating and controlling the entity or entities in question for the sake of some desired end (Scheler 2010, 96). Without further moral qualification, the scientific knower is especially tempted toward the manipulation of the objects of his knowledge "by means of a rational will which is itself guided, but also *bound*, by possible anthropocentric aims and values" (*ibid.*, 96-97).<sup>4</sup> Scheler contrasts scientific knowing with its missing counterpart, philosophical knowing:

[I]t is not by chance but in the nature of things that even the scientist's basic *moral* attitude to the world and his task in it is, and should be, totally different from that of the philosopher. In positive research the scientist's will to know is primarily inspired by a will to *master* and, thence arising, a will to *order* the whole of nature: it is for that very reason that 'laws,' in *obedience* to which nature lets herself be governed, represent the highest goal of his endeavour. What interests him is not *what* the world is, but how it may be considered as *constructed*, so that, within the scope of this highest goal, it may be regarded as practically *modifiable*. (*ibid.*, 97)

Scientific knowing must be counterbalanced by the wisdom of the more holistic approach offered by philosophical knowing, which occurs also only on the condition of the kind of moral self-mastery described above.<sup>5</sup> Tempering the will to control and modify, however, are two additional moral preconditions. First, in philosophical knowing "the whole spiritual person must love absolute value and being." Second, "the natural self and ego must be humbled" (Scheler 2010, 95; emphasis removed). It is by way of these two requirements, love of absolute value and being and humbling of the natural self or ego, that the philosopher's way of knowing can moderate the unbridled and exalted techno-scientific will to mastery.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Jeffrey Bloechl for directing me to the passages that follow, from Scheler's text.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley concludes: "Unmoored instrumental reason sooner or later always becomes a terror, and we seem even less well-positioned now than thirty years ago to escape instrumentalism. The great and enduring promise of environmental philosophy lies in continually reminding us that the more-than-human world has more than instrumental value—and that this is nowhere clearer than when its existence is threatened" (Bradley 2019, 211).

<sup>5</sup> This counterbalancing will require, at least in part, our getting in touch with bodily ways of knowing. Cf. Treanor: "My suggestion is that if we hope to get closer to empathy with our non-human kin, we must bracket or suspend, as much as possible, our all-too-human linguistic engagement with the world" (Treanor 2023, 21).

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger included at least one of these two—although Eckhart's original use almost certainly contains reference to both—within the scope of *Gelassenheit*, or letting be, as a response to the techno-scientific mastery: "Heidegger adopted the term to describe twisting free from thinking-as-willing and from the technological worldview that defines the modern epoch, reducing all beings to 'standing-reserve' (*Bestand*), a mere well of resources from which to draw for human wants. He claims in his later works that this voluntarism, reaching an apotheosis of sorts in Nietzsche, is a driving force in the descent of the Western tradition into nihilism" (Treanor 2021, 87). On those points one should

An aestheticized love of wisdom which remains faithful to the earth, in the words of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, will resist the otherworldly drive currently fueling civilizational pursuits toward endless excess (Nietzsche 2005, 12). Renewed aesthetic sensibility can help to introduce a healthy dose of humility into our cultural projects, with an eye to reversing the markedly noxious results of our more recent tenure as parasitic guests of the earth.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Alienation***

*Alienation* is a state of estrangement from the earth, from animality, and from what is most deeply human. Our age of excarnation is marked by increasing individualism, and the loss of deep and meaningful relations: to one another, but even more dramatically to the earth, and especially to earth's wild places. As persons we are irreducibly unique and essentially relational; consumptive individualism and excessive objectivism have exaggerated the former while eroding the latter. *Anacarnation* presents an important response to this predicament: a return to the joys of embodied life, purged of sentimentalism, without rejecting the technological advances that authentically enhance what is best in and around us.

Looking on as an outsider at the modern alliance of state power and techno-scientific progress, Nietzsche asks in his third *Untimely Meditation*: "Now, how does the philosopher view the culture of our time?" (Nietzsche 1997, 148). The philosopher steps back, and questions: "When he thinks of the haste and hurry now universal, of the increasing velocity of life, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, he almost thinks that what he is seeing are the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture" (ibid.). The waters of religion are receding, he goes on to note, and the nations are preparing to destroy each another. Scientific inquiry is pursued without restraint and at any cost, its findings undermining firmly held beliefs. Educated persons are swept along in the currents of "a hugely contemptible money economy" (ibid.). The greed of the money-makers and the greed of the state have co-opted the counterbalancing force of culture to their own ends, so that now education is geared on the one hand toward "making money as easily as possible" and on the other hand toward the state's "advantage in its competition with other states" (ibid., 164 and 165).

"Nowadays the crudest and most evil forces, the egoism of the money-makers and the military despots, hold sway over almost everything on earth" (Nietzsche 1997, 150). While capitalist consumerism exalts the individual's private wants and desires above the common good of the collective, the greed of the state sacrifices the true flourishing of its members, as part of a larger body, to the competitive advantage of the state-ego. Today we are seeing a synthesis of the twentieth-century extremes of capitalist individualism and communist or totalitarian collectivism in the modern, military-driven nation-state: fueled by the individualized self-interest that drives its

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consult Bryan Bannon's aptly titled *From Mystery to Mastery*, on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Bannon 2014). In what follows I cite approvingly the early Nietzsche's criticisms of the excesses of his time, in his *Untimely Meditations*. For more critical engagement with Nietzsche's mature thought, in dialogue with Treanor's *Melancholic Joy*, see especially Rogers 2021b.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Scheler in relation to these topics, see especially McCune 2014. Kearney makes an aesthetic connection to *Attestation*, to be discussed further in the final section, below, in citing Richard Rohr: "Until we can experience each thing in its specific 'thisness' as artists often do, we will not easily experience the joy and freedom of divine presence..." (Kearney 2023, 253n23).

consumer economy, and steered by the egoism of belligerent pilots. There is no unifying, substantive vision of *the good* to guide, and all meaningful connections to the larger cosmos have been eroded.<sup>8</sup> The theater in which these theatrics play out, the earth, and the atmospheric conditions that have made human civilization possible, are devastated in the process. This is to our own peril, and to the peril of the species, individuals, and poorer nations that shoulder the unwelcome effects of our combined actions.

“Who is there then, amid these dangers of our era, to guard and champion *humanity*”? (Nietzsche 1997, 150). In our modified sense: who is there to challenge the status quo, and to champion *human responsibility*? It is ours alone to become more gracious guests of the earth, and better hosts to the creatures whose fates now more than ever rest in our collective hands. We must become more attentive to the needs and struggles of the poorest among us, out of sight and out of mind.<sup>9</sup>

We are more connected now than ever, socially, and convenience is literally at our fingertips for the first time in history. We can contact anyone at any time, and within hours nearly anything can be delivered at the doorstep. Yet it would seem that we are more isolated and less satisfied now than ever before in our recorded history. Our callousness begins in childhood: “In terms of the world as we understand it today, embedded in the age of excarnation, capitalism—fueled by competition—and the speed at which we need to move to keep up makes us callous early on. We are less attentive to what is beyond ourselves, less stifled by the pain of the other, less empathetic altogether” (Fitzpatrick 2023, 42). The price of rapid techno-scientific advancement is hyper-individualism, exacerbating the unquestioned byproducts of unrestrained capitalist consumer-culture. The things and systems we have built around ourselves, by and large, have not been constructed with the fullness of our humanity in view. These instead are largely the result of national quests for military expansion, serving a lust for power; and unregulated market forces, serving to meet the unruly demands of unchecked appetites and desires.

In addition to *aestheticization*, as a sensitizing response to the modern problem of anesthetization, we do well to embrace *anacarnation* as a tactful response to the predicament of postmodern or perhaps posthumanist excarnation. Anacarnation is a secondary return to the primary wonders of embodiment, having passed through the night of excarnation (Kearney 2023, 234; 2021, 113ff).<sup>10</sup> It is a recovery of the joys of incarnation without jettisoning the best our technologies have to offer (Treanor and Taylor 2023; cf. also Treanor 2021). It means calling into question the

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche’s prophecy is coming true at both levels: “The revolution is absolutely unavoidable, and it will be the atomistic revolution: but what are the smallest indivisible basic constituents of human society?” (Nietzsche 1997, 150).

<sup>9</sup> If haste and hurry, thoughtlessness in the pursuit of excess, exaggerated trust in scientific knowing, the alliance of techno-scientific innovation and military funding, and negligent avarice were all clear symptoms of cultural sickness in Nietzsche’s day, what might we, a century and a half later, say in response to the excesses of our own time? To our sixty-hour workweeks and worship of the celebrities who entertain us, to Instagram influencers and snapshot projections of happiness, to Tiktok and Snapchat addictions, to billboard seductions and reality television? To a McDonalds on every street corner, and the billionaire competition to fund private space exploration for the ultra-wealthy? To nuclear proliferation and ultra-polarization, and to the unprincipled and unregulated race to develop the latest AI technology?

<sup>10</sup> “In various wisdom traditions, atheism expresses itself as pantheism—God in all things but not God as all things (...). Such invocations are consonant with the pantheism of Celtic mystics like Eriugena and Pelagius who wrote that God is present in all that has life, meaning not just fellow human but other-than-human life forms that surround us” (Kearney 2023, 253n23).

thoughtlessness with which so much of our technology has been constructed, along with the assumption that if we can build something, then we should, and if it can be mass-produced, then every consumer should have one.

Anacarnation would not require simply leaving the city, never to return again, but rather getting in touch with the biotic life already thriving within the city. It would require that *cultivation*, in both built environments and biotic environments, take place more thoughtfully. It would mean developing technologies that assist in securing what we *actually* need, as embodied human persons of a species with a long biological history, arising from deepened understanding of ourselves as contemplative human animals (Kearney 2021, 129ff; McGrath 2019). We need, therefore, to consult the wisdom of those most in touch with the earth, its animals, and one another, counterbalancing our excess with the wisdom of indigenous, and also non-Western traditions. We need massive demands for change, and justice, on the part of holistically educated citizens. These conditions would require, in turn, supporting education that touches to the heart of who and what we are, as persons, by addressing both the interpersonal *and* cosmological dimensions of our personhood.

### ***Anonymization***

*Anonymity* refers to a state in which lack of personal identification predominates. To anonymize, in our sense, is to render nameless. It is to speak of abstract universals like species or ecosystems without engaging in personal, embodied relations to actually existing individuals (cf. especially the Introduction in Dufourcq 2022). It corresponds to anesthetization, or scientific knowing, and to objectification in the absence of appreciation for the value of the being of other creatures, and in the absence of humbled human acknowledgment of our unique responsibility to care. It coincides with alienation, or the perverse coercion of culture by the state-led alliance of consumptive greed and the lust for power. Anonymization is actively resisted by the counterbalancing force of *attestation*.

The objectivistic gaze, a necessary component of scientific knowing, has been especially helpful, for instance, in the objective study of the body in medicine. But when technological advancement and the scientific quest for knowledge were finally wedded, in the early modern period, the hubristic project of becoming masters and possessors of nature soon became powered by a combustion engine. Industrialization, exploitation of expendable workers and nonhumans, and large-scale pollution became ideologically unacknowledged elements of that project.

Previously scientific investigation was reserved for those with the time for leisurely investigation, when the whole endeavor was known as natural philosophy. Technology was the domain of those dedicated to daily labor, typically by hand, where innovations served to facilitate the work. But in early modernity, in theory, and later in the modern period, in practice, technological advancement gradually allied itself with the new scientific enterprise:

[I]t was not until about four generations ago that Western Europe and North America arranged a marriage between science and technology, a union of the theoretical and the empirical approaches to our natural environment. The emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature can scarcely be dated before about 1850, save in the chemical industries, where it is anticipated in the 18th century. Its acceptance as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture (White Jr. 1967, 1203).

We can see the foundations for this wedding in Bacon's early modern scientific creed, to be sure, but of greater consequence for our purposes is the Cartesian marriage of *philosophical* with *scientific* knowing; namely Descartes' metaphysical physics, to cite the title of a relevant work (Garber 1992). Rather than counterbalancing the objectivistic pursuit of knowledge with grounded philosophical knowing, which keeps in close moral contact with both the love of value and being and the necessity of humbling the self or ego, Descartes subordinates—according to the definitions offered above—philosophical to scientific knowing.

All that is not *mind* is relegated to the status of *extension*, as that which can be objectified and measured. Extended things can then be manipulated, controlled, and dominated by the human will. Nonhuman animals bear the brunt of this theoretical shift. Like human bodies apart from the mind, they are now thought to operate mechanistically; so they can be cut open while still alive, tortured in the name of scientific knowing, and eventually industrially raised, in mass quantities, and consumed daily without second thought. The ecofeminist insights of Carol J. Adams are especially relevant here: the masculinist epistemic project of analysis through objectification, absent an attitude of care, leads to the inhumane exploitation of both women and animals (Adams 1990).<sup>11</sup>

In our age the philosopher must be called to think carefully about the unquestioned values and overweening hubris behind so many of our inventions, expansions, and acquisitions: to question the presumptions of the Holocene and to push forward toward a new Symbiocene epoch (Kearney 2021, 111). This would require seeking out the advice of those for whom “the whole spiritual person” has come to “love absolute value and being” and for whom “the natural self and ego” has been radically humbled (Scheler 2010, 95).<sup>12</sup> I add that these together should lead toward an attitude of reverence; toward recognition of, and *attestation to the haecceitas* or thisness of each living creature.<sup>13</sup> This would entail both becoming animal *and* becoming more fully human at one and the same time. It would mean first attending to, then attesting to—especially through aesthetic media, in preparation for actual contact—the subjecthood of those who been anonymized in our age, not least of all our depersonalized and exploited animal kin.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> As Fitzpatrick puts it, citing the early modern philosopher Jacques Rousseau and the Harvard psychologist Melanie Joy, for most of us the default attitude toward animals and toward one another “is that we prefer to do no harm.” She continues, “But, as Rousseau argues, a certain form of thinking—specifically, competitive calculation and consumption—can desensitize us from our carnal revulsion to suffering, and, as a result, lead us to disregard our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others” (Fitzpatrick 2023, 41).

<sup>12</sup> “Loving, however, is not a preference or a rejection of value, but a movement toward something as bearer of value, a movement that first allows that value to flash forth in and of itself...” (Steinbock 2021, 61).

<sup>13</sup> Kearney cites a lesson taught by Breton, with reference to Hopkins: “Each person, Breton taught me, is everyone. The particular is the universal. The concrete is the cosmic. The infinitesimal is the infinite. Epiphanies are ordinary, everyday things. God is a god of little things – the last and least. The strangeness of every stranger” (Kearney 2018, 41). Without taking anything away from the privileged position occupied by human faces, as sites for theophany, with Fitzpatrick and Treanor we can talk about extending such insights to nonhuman animals (cf., in addition, Mizzoni 2008 and 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Treanor 2023, 22; and Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021, 55.

## *Conclusion*

At the heart of the climate emergency is a loss of awareness of the cosmological dimension of our existence as persons. Driven by insatiable desire, and condemned to construct without any real vision of ecological harmony to guide our development, for five centuries the human animal has been exalting itself to its own destruction. With our material constructions we first isolated ourselves from wildness, danger, and surprise; with our immaterial constructions we have further isolated ourselves from each other, from both human and nonhuman animality, and from the earth that hosts our pursuits.

There have been, of course, unquestionable gains with each techno-scientific advance. But in the age of excarnation we have alienated ourselves from the meaning-saturated world that exists beyond our objectivistic ways of knowing, and which subsists beneath or behind our societal constructions. Only once *we* find healing, and accept our unique, creaturely responsibility, can we offer healing to the animals whose general wellbeing is now more than ever in our hands, to the plants and the ecosystems that sustain our relations to all living things, and to one another, as members of one human family.

Ecological degradation is a personal problem, rooted in human desires and (lack of) self-understanding. It demands a personal response. Becoming faithful to the earth would require active cultivation of the remedies we have discussed, namely *aestheticization*, *anacarnation*, and *attestation*. We diminish our own dignity as persons when we instrumentalize the lives of nonhuman creatures, and when we treat with callous indifference the earth that hosts us.<sup>15</sup> We become more fully human when we acknowledge that we are simultaneously guests of earth and hosts to all of the living: when we accept our unique vocation first to humble ourselves, and our egoism, and then to cultivate, care for, and protect earth's diverse creatures and wild places.

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<sup>15</sup> “It is, as [Pope] Francis puts it, ‘an act of love that expresses our dignity.’ Thus, by acting for the sake of the other that is nature, we further develop ourselves in terms of our human dignity (or species-being in Marxian terms)” (Weidel 2019, 35-36). Cf. also Jeannot: “...Only a humanism that recognizes the full reality of the person, identifies the ‘person as [the] key to reality,’ and takes ‘personal living’ as philosophical ‘starting point,’ can be a fully adequate, integral humanism—and thus provide the philosophical basis for an adequate response to our environmental crisis” (Jeannot 2019, 171).



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