

Planet Earth: Crumbling Metaphysical Illusion*

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) characterized philosophy as “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language” (section 109). In an earlier essay (Stolorow & Atwood, 2017), George Atwood and I employed Wittgenstein’s conception of such bewitchment to give an account of the genesis of various forms of metaphysical illusion. In place of a word a picture is projected, which is then imagined as a thing-in-itself, an everlasting entity. Such metaphysical illusion, mediated by words and reified pictures, replaces the tragic finitude and transience of existence with a permanent and eternally changeless reality. As was recognized precociously by Wilhelm Dilthey (1910/2002), this illusory metaphysicalization of experience is pervasive in human life.

An entity central to our everyday well-being is planet earth itself. The earth, both literally and ontologically, gives us the ground we stand on. It grounds our way of being.

Martin Heidegger, in his later work, is said to have moved away from phenomenology and toward a metaphysical realism. It is probably more accurate to say that he moved toward a complex amalgam of the two. This characterization certainly holds for his lecture “Building dwelling thinking” (1951), which gives important glimpses into the ontological significance of the earth. Indeed, Heidegger claims in this essay that the fundamental character of the human kind of being (existence) is *dwelling*. Such dwelling requires a space, a location, a home; and that home is the earth. In this vision, the earth provides grounding for the human kind of being. For humans, to be is to dwell on earth, and to dwell requires that they safeguard and preserve the earth that grounds them. Characteristically, such protectedness is sought in metaphysical illusion—the transfor-

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mation of this vulnerable planet into an invincible everlasting entity. This age-old metaphysical illusion is not faring well in the face of the perils of climate change.

Heidegger uses several interrelated phrases to characterize the comportment of dwelling on earth: To dwell there is to cherish, to protect, to preserve, to care for, to nourish, to nurture, to nurse, to keep safe, to spare, to save. “Mortals dwell in that they save the earth” (Heidegger, 1951, p. 148). What is most noteworthy to me is that all of these manifestations of dwelling entail recognition of and responsiveness to earth’s vulnerability, rather than an evasive turning away. They entail, in other words, renunciation of comforting metaphysical illusions of earth’s everlasting invincibility.

A personal vignette (Stolorow, 2018) alludes to the enormous impact of having earth’s permanence and changelessness thrown open to question:

More than three decades ago I took my young son to a planetarium show at the New York Museum of Natural History. During that show it was predicted that a billion years from now the sun will become a ‘red giant’ that will engulf and destroy our entire solar system. This prospect filled me with intense horror [...] [T]he sun’s becoming an engulfing red giant represents not just the destruction of individual human beings but of human civilization itself [...] I want to call the horror that announces such a possibility *apocalyptic anxiety*. (p. 12)

It also announces, I now add, the shattering of metaphysical illusions of earth’s permanence and indestructability. The human way of being cannot survive the impending homelessness with which climate change threatens us, a prospect so horrifying that people turn away from it altogether, thereby evading the threat and abandoning the search for solutions.¹

What can help us face up to the horrors with which climate change threatens us? I suggest a form of dwelling with one another that I call *emotional dwelling* (Stolorow & Atwood, 2018), an active, engaged, participatory comportment that I have recommended for the therapeutic approach to emotional

trauma. In dwelling, one leans into the other's emotional pain and participates in it. The language that one uses to address another's experience of trauma meets the trauma head-on, articulating the unbearable and the unendurable, saying the unsayable, unmitigated by any efforts to soothe, comfort, encourage, or reassure—such efforts invariably being experienced by the other as a turning away from the experience of trauma. In order to tackle the overwhelming perils of climate change, we must include in our dwelling on earth an emotional dwelling with one another that renders shared apocalyptic anxiety more tolerable.

Notes

1. Such apocalyptic homelessness is foreshadowed concretely in the destruction of individual homes and other buildings by massive storms, floods, wildfires, and other manifestations of global warming.

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