

Humankind: solidarity with nonhuman people

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BOOK REVIEW

Humankind: solidarity with nonhuman people, by Timothy Morton, Verso, London, 2017, 224 pp., \$26.40. ISBN - 13: 978-1786631329, CAD (Hardcover), \$13.99 CAD (Ebook).

This book by Timothy Morton is a poetic tour de force that is both academically and philosophically rigorous. It may prove to be a manifesto of 'ecocommunism'. As is typical of Morton's work, the prose is elegant, weaving metaphor and allusion into a narrative that cannot be described as anything less than a masterpiece of ecological politics. It is a project into the applied political ethics that emerge between speculative realism and Marxism; and it, therefore, reworks Marxist theory, giving it a place on the cutting edge of continental philosophy. It builds on the object-oriented ontology (OOO)¹ that Morton has espoused in previous volumes, however, with a greater emphasis on normative politics. The book's core methodology is to outline the various neologisms that Morton employs; and to use these speculative realist terms to retool Marxism.

Things are always bigger on the inside, the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, and Marxism can be tweaked to include nonhumans. These are some of the central theses found in Timothy Morton's newest book, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. 'Marxism holds out more promise of ways to include nonhumans than capitalist theory' (6). This is Morton's aim, which is developed by the object-oriented philosopher-poet in *Humankind*. Therefore, the anthropocentrism that is traditionally found in Marxist theory is not something that is theoretically foundational; instead, it is a 'bug' that can be removed. In successfully doing so, a political philosophy of solidarity with nonhumans can be formed.

Humankind is divided into five chapters, with a comprehensive introduction that lays out the goal for the text. Much of the theoretical basis of Morton's work can be credited to the existent literature of the speculative realist thinkers, in particular to his philosophical colleague Graham Harman. Similarly, Morton's knack for neologisms is founded within the continental tradition of philosophy, from which OOO sprung. *Humankind* levies the precepts of OOO to rework Marxism to escape the destructive consequences of the anthropocentric system theories of neoliberalism, capitalism, and the 'sustainability' dialogues that are pushing the earth through its 'sixth mass extinction' event.

In working towards an ecological-realist perspective on Marxist theory and politics, Morton engages with the underlying historical, psychological, and material discussions that hold back revolutionary ethical and political suggests, such as those he proposes in *Humankind*. As is typical with OOO philosophers, a thorough discussion of correlationism is undertaken to draw attention to the anthropocentric history and psychology behind the current ecological destruction. Morton argues that the destructiveness of correlationism stems from its reinforcement of the notion that objects are blank slates, screens for our anthropocentric projections. As such, this is particularly egregious when we consider the effects this has on nonhumans. Similarly, he argues that by repressing the correlationist conceit we further consent to it, thus strengthening its grasp and its devastating effects.

Furthermore, he argues that the interconnectedness of all things – the *mesh* as he calls it elsewhere (Morton, 2012) – makes correlationism nothing other than a destructive illusion which encourages the questionable idea that there is a gap between beings. Instead of this gap, Morton sees interrelatedness: beings that are deeply reliant on each other. For him, correlationalism is therefore ecologically destructive (2). This correlationist gap, that forbids solidarity with nonhumans, is what Morton calls 'the Severing': a very Game-of-Thrones-like

neologism. Current conceptions of solidarity are predicated on the systemic undercurrents of the agricultural logistics programme (what he calls agrilogistics) which ultimately hasten the march towards mass extinction, and create a feeling of alienation. Alienation is the result of the Severing, between what he calls 'reality' (the world that is correlated by humans) and 'the real' which is the ecological symbioses of the human–nonhuman biosphere.

By bringing our attention to the insincere anthropocentric conceptions of solidarity, Morton aims to show why Marxism holds the key, with a bit of tweaking, to achieving true solidarity and closing the gap. Production becomes an integral and inescapable constituent of attaining solidarity, as does the concept of amplifying the *symbiotic real* (entity relations are asymmetric and non-total) in Marxism. The ecological awareness that nonhumans are correlators like us, not blank projected slates, is a necessary psychology for coexistence. We must regain a sense of 'hauntedness' and 'spectrality' to come to terms with our intimate interconnectedness. The capitalist substance ontology of 'fixed' and 'normal' essences is replaced by a 'bigger on the inside', enmeshed ecopolitics.

Morton's re-tooling of Marxism does not pull any punches. He is bold and direct in his criticism of left-wing thinkers whose cynicism of neoliberalism has resigned them to the belief of the inevitability of the earth in capitalist ruins. But even these individuals, he argues, are not innocent in the Anthropocene: every person is guilty of making imperfect choices, saying that 'we can never achieve cynical escape velocity. We are caught in hypocrisy. We can't get compassion right. Being nice to bunny rabbits means not being nice to bunny rabbit predators. Giving up in sophisticated boredom is also an oppressive option' (69).

However, Morton remains hopeful, injecting promise into his prose as a means by which we can start to heal the destructive divide of the Severing. Because of the Anthropocene itself, the presentness of the devastation that we have and are causing is right in our faces. We cannot ignore it any longer. As he says, 'one's garbage doesn't go "away" – it just goes somewhere else' this 'away' that Morton says is a capitalist construct is no longer tenable, because the Anthropocene has made it impossible to ignore (29).

Ultimately, Morton's prescription is to relinquish the anthropocentric conceit that thinking is the primary means of communication. Instead, he writes that 'Brushing against, licking or irradiating are also access modes as valid (or as invalid) as thinking' (11). His thesis of interdependence – what he terms 'implosive holism' – is thus predicated on stripping homo sapiens of their destructive misconception of privilege. In doing so, he reanalyses Marxist theory to make the inclusion of nonhumans possible. Although masterfully crafted – *Humankind* reads like a poetic manifesto – it nevertheless lacks substance as far as operationalization goes. Morton's thesis, although pertinent, current, and powerful, requires further discussion regarding how it can be implemented on a large scale. In particular, the anarchist injection into his ecocommunist framework seems oddly juxtaposed to his concluding thesis on passivity. His musings on Buddhism are followed by a theory of action that he calls 'rocking'. He writes that this new theory is

a queer one that is neither active nor passive nor a compromised amalgam of both, to help us slip out from underneath physically massive beings such as global warming and neoliberalism, to find some wiggle room down there so we can wriggle our way out of the hyperobjects. (188)

Rocking thus involves our ability to be aware of the enmeshment of all things. Because we are so used to projecting our correlationist conceits on objects, a rock seems inert, passive and lacking agency. However, if we permit ourselves to see the interconnectedness of all things we can notice that rock 'rocks'.

However, readers should take heart: all is not lost because of the absence of practical applicability. The purpose of Morton's text is not to provide a manual for political or social revolution,

but to act as the stepping stones for a new revolution of consciousness, one that gives ontological equality to objects and their place within the Anthropocene, and perhaps, to begin to provide the ideas that can help to heal a damaged planet.

Finally, a note on the prose that Morton employs. The text, as has become a signature of Morton's mastery of language and literature, is perfused with metaphor, allusions, and reference to other works. As such, others have argued that his style is 'effusive, strenuously goofy' as a means to compensate for a privation in philosophical accuracy (Brown, 2013). However, his employment of metaphor and literary connections permits a semiosis that allows for a greater clarity of concepts that is not possible to attain with ordinary language. Although this can oftentimes be misconstrued as literary arrogance, as is often the case with authors who employ the use of Latin *sans* translation, one can hardly levy such arguments against Morton's colourful texts. This is not only because of the area of study that this text falls in (critical theory, art, science and technology studies, continental philosophy, etc.); but also because the subject matter itself warrants a less-than-lucid prose to come to a more-than-lucid understanding. More often than not, Morton's sentences read like this:

What we encounter in the case of correlationism surprise mode is the specter of paranormal action. Distilled into its most basic form, what is haunting communism is the specter of spectrality itself. Why? Because spectrality is the flavor of the symbiotic real, where everything is what it is, yet nothing coincides exactly with itself. (54)

If those sentences do not faze you, then the text may turn out to be a quick and easy read. In fairness, I expect that, with some concentration, those with a background in literary criticism, continental philosophy and similar disciplines should be able to follow his prose; and it will be a worthwhile investment of time.

Morton continues his 'ecological thought' project through the more politically oriented analysis in *Humankind*. Whilst his ideas are perhaps hard to grasp, thus limiting his audience, he still provides an excellent opportunity for revolutionizing public thought at the edge of our self-induced mass extinction event. Morton provides us with a theoretical groundwork that could be applied to further research projects and advocacy. Such engagement would give us a better sense of whether his framework can lead to actions that avert catastrophe.

As a bottom line: *Humankind's* subject matter is both fascinating and timely, and Morton's coverage has much to endorse it. His book is not only worth reading but warrants re-reading, to grasp its potentiality better: it is undeniably a scholarly rollercoaster and the result of much effort. Its style, however, although praised by many, including the reader, is nonetheless a barrier for general consumption. This is disappointing because it is the general public that needs to curate ecological awareness if we are to avoid extinction.

Note

1. Editor's note: object-oriented ontology arguably has some similarities to, as well as differences from, critical realism. In terms of similarities, its 'correlationalism' is perhaps reminiscent of the critical realist 'epistemic fallacy'; and its ideas that 'things are bigger on the inside' and that 'the sum of the parts is greater than the whole' are perhaps similar to the critical realist ideas of intra-position and superposition emergence.

Reference

Brown, Nathan. 2013. "The Nadir of OOO: From Graham Harman's Tool-Being to Timothy Morton's Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality (Open Humanities Press, 2013)." *Parrhesia* 17: 62–71.

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