On the Mesh, the Strange Stranger, and Hyperobjects: Morton's Ecological Ontology

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In Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought*, the terminological pillars for most of the book are "the mesh" and "the strange stranger." A third key term, "hyperobjects," dominates the final pages of the book. In his forthcoming work *Realist Magic*, Morton offers the following comparison between his terminology and my own: "In Harman's terms... mesh is a sensual object. The real objects are the strange strangers." The difference between real and sensual objects is certainly just as fundamental for me as that between the mesh and the strange stranger is for Morton. Thus, his comparison between the two pairs of terms is worth examining, especially since Morton has recently been one of my closest colleagues in object-oriented philosophy circles. If there is a difference between the pair mesh/strange stranger and sensual/real, in what does it consist? And why have we failed to notice it so far? If there is no difference between them, do they at least have different effects, given the different subject matters tackled by me and Morton respectively? Let's consider these questions as they arise in Morton's *The Ecological Thought*, which he describes as the "prequel" to his perhaps even better known 2009 book *Ecology Without Nature*.

1. Connection without Holism

Morton defines his ecological thought in the first two sentences of the book: "The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy—for some, strangely or frighteningly easy—to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought." At first glance it might seem that Morton is asserting a holistic world-view, an ontology dominated by an all-encompassing universal whole. No one will be surprised to hear that "the ecological crisis makes us aware of how interdependent everything is." We read further: "The modern age compels us to think big... Any thinking that avoids this "totality" is part of the problem. So we have to face it." Instead of some sort of 1960's privileging of the local over the global, we need to think big. This wholeness is so vast that it seems to extend infinitely in both directions, since "scale is infinite in both directions: infinite in size and infinite in detail." Nor does Morton cheerfully celebrate this situation. Instead, he seems to view it in a spirit of friendly, informal grimness: "Yes, everything is interconnected. And it sucks." But before we rush to conclusions about the meaning of the ecological thought, we should note that there are two possible readings of the thesis that everything is interconnected. We could read it in the sense of a strong connectivity: everything is completely determined by its interactions with everything else; nothing is independent, autonomous thing outside its relations. This strong connectivity is the standpoint of holism and of relational ontologies more generally. We find it in Alfred North Whitehead's view that an actual entity can be analyzed into its prehensions (relations), as well as in Bruno Latour's dictum that an entity is nothing over and above whatever it transforms, modifies, perturbs, or creates. But the phrase "everything is connected" might also be read in the less extreme sense of weak connectivity. Here it would simply mean that all objects belong to a single network, with no dualistic separation between mind and matter, spiritual and corporeal, or anything else of the sort. Weak connectivity would amount to nothing more than what Manuel DeLanda calls a flat ontology, "one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status." The philosophy of Latour (at its less holistic moments) also has this element of weak connectivity, as is clear from his implosion of the natural-culture distinction throughout *We Have Never Been Modern*.

1. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010. All parenthetical citations in this article are to *The Ecological Thought*; references to other books and journals are included in the form of footnotes.

If we try to determine whether Morton adheres to strong connectivity (holism), or simply weak connectivity (flat ontology), the answer soon becomes obvious - Morton is a flat ontologist rather than a holist. Consider the following passage: "The ecological thought isn't about a superorganism. Holism maintains that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 'Nature' tends to be holistic. Unlike Nature, what the ecological thought is thinking isn't more than the sum of its parts." As early as the introduction, Morton had announced that "we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as nonexistent. The idea of Nature as a holistic, healthy, real thing avoids this challenge." What he emphasizes is not holism but symbiosis as-sym, and if trees exist in symbiosis with lichens, this implies that some links are symbiotic and others are not. After all, these trees do not melt into a holistic, gelatinous lump that also includes sardines, farmers, and black holes.

The meaning of "everything is connected" is not holistic, but democratic. For Morton no less than for DeLanda, entities may differ in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status. "The ecological thought doesn’t just occur ‘in the mind.’ It’s a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings — animal, vegetable, or mineral." Morton continues: "Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy. What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be — can we even imagine it?" Humans must descend from their modern philosophical throne: "There is no being in the ‘middle’ — what would ‘middle’ mean anyway? The most important? How can one being be more important than another?" This does not mean that humans are deemed "worthless," as is often asserted by lazy critics of object-oriented philosophy. Instead, humans simply become one object among many, as the trillions of others, though they remain an exceptionally interesting one for us. "To believe in a self is actually to believe in an object, although it may seem a subtler kind of object than a brick or a chair." Deep ecology is committed to a pristine nature untouched by human artifice, the breakdown of the human/world dualism leads Morton to proclaim a "dark ecology."

We will soon learn that the darkness comes from what Morton calls "the strange stranger."

2. The Mesh and the Strange Stranger

We now turn to the mesh: "a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise..." Despite the phrase "radical intimacy," we have already seen that Morton is no radical holist. His mesh simply flattens the world into "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things." (The term "mesh" was chosen, after much reflection by Morton, instead of such related terms as "network" and "web.") And "the mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity on the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is really itself." It cannot be described as beautiful or sublime, since it inhabits "a subaesthetic level of being, beyond the cute and the awesome." Much like Latourian networks, the mesh links together all objects that exist. But unlike those networks, the mesh does not reduce things to their interactions or intimacy with their neighbors. No total intimacy is possible, for although everything in the mesh is intimate with everything else, it is also true that "strange strangers are right next to us."

Morton puts it wonderfully in one of the most important passages of the book: "Interconnection implies separateness and difference. There would be no mesh if there were no strange strangers. The mesh isn’t a background against which the strange stranger appears. It is the entanglement of all strangers."

The key difficulty in interpreting Morton’s strange stranger is that, despite Morton’s tactic call for a flat ontology, this concept seems to describe only living organisms. For instance, Morton at one point promises "to provide extra shading to the idea of strange strangers, the life forms to which we are connected." And further, "even if biology knew all the species on earth, we would still encounter them as strange strangers, because of the inner logic of knowledge. The more you know about something, the stranger it grows." At another point he asks, "If all conscious beings are machines, do they still have strange strangers?" As if machines in the usual sense (windmills, dryers) were not strange strangers in the ontologically special manner of conscious creatures. This might seem to undercut Morton’s flat ontology, in which all types of entities are on the same democratic footing. Even his wonderful short litany of strangers from Wordsworth consists entirely of humans: "Wordsworth... confronts us with strange strangers — discharged soldiers, blind beggars, grief-stricken mothers." In another suggestive passage, he tells us it is "the fact of consciousness, which forever puts me in a paradoxical relationship with other beings — there is always going to be an ironic gap between strange strangers." And finally, Morton says rather unequivocally that "instead of 'animal,' I use strange stranger," which seems to more or less settle the question. The danger here is that Morton’s ostensibly flat ontology is not flat at all, and the mesh is prevented from fusing into a holistic network by those local black holes known as sentient organisms. Even when Morton tells us that "the strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being," in the context strongly suggests that by "being" he means living beings, not beings in the sense of entities in general.
3. Hyperobjects

The third key concept in *The Ecological Thought* is hyperobjects: "products such as Styrofoam and plutonium that exist on almost unthinkable timescales." While hyperobjects receive relatively minimal treatment in the book in comparison with the mesh and the strange stranger, it is hardly less interesting than these two star concepts of the book, and we might imagine an entire future book by Morton on the hyperobject theme. The reader can only bask in morbid fascination as Morton reminds us that many of the disposable junk objects we contemptuously use will far outlive us: "Materials from humble Styrofoam to terrifying plutonium will far outlast current social and biological forms." Stated differently, "hyperobjects do not rot in our lifetimes. They do not burn without themselves burning (releasing radiation, dioxins, and so on). Living tissue is usually far more stable than chemical compounds. But hyperobjects outlast us all." And even more poetically: "There is a joke about wanting to be reborn as a Styrofoam cup – they last forever. Hyperobjects don’t just burn a hole in the world; they burn a hole in your mind. Plutonium is truly astonishing to contemplate. We think of light as neutral or benign. Radiation is poisoned light." Indeed, the vast temporal dimensions of hyperobjects gives them an almost holy quality: "Hyperobjects are the true taboos, the demonic inversion of the sacred substances of religion... Future humans’ treatment of hyperobjects may seem like reverence to our eyes." With the role of strange stranger apparently reserved for animals, inanimate things take the stage in Morton’s book primarily in the form of hyperobjects, with their vast temporal scale.

This is not to suggest that Morton lacks all sense of spatial vastness. Far from it. Throughout the book he implores us to reject the false sublimity of the infinite and confront, instead, the more threatening fact of colossal finite quantities: "imagine infinity might be easier, and more gratifying, than imagining very large quantities such as 10^84 cm – the volume of the Universe (according to Manfred Eigen)." Morton cites the archangel Raphael from *Paradise Lost* as calling attention to the possible countless planets inhabited by countless beings with Milton channeling the then-recent ideas of the executed Giordano Bruno. Yet Morton resists his true cosmological admiration for the people of Tibet: "Should we wish to send astronauts to Mars, we could do worse than train Tibetans and other Indigenous peoples for the ride. They would only have to learn to push a few buttons." He reports on a two-week camping trip to Tibet as follows:

Above me, the Milky Way never looked so big. Imagine a really wide carpet runner. Now multiply that by about three. Fill it with thousands of points of dustlike stars. Add about thirty new stars to the Big Dipper. Imagine shooting stars so frequent you don’t have to look for more than half an hour to see about ten. Some of them make a sound as they burn up in the atmosphere.

Along with this hyper-geography of the Tibetans, there is a spiritual life more than worthy of it:

Tibetans live very close to outer space, so it’s not surprising that they include it in their culture. When asked where he came from, the first Bön king (Bön is the indigenous culture) pointed up to the sky. No, I’m not saying that Tibetans came from outer space. The tantric teachings say there are 640,000 Tantras of Dzogchen (texts of a form of Tibetan Buddhism). On earth we have seventeen. Up there, in the highly visible night sky, perhaps in other universes, there exist the remaining 6,399,983. Up there, someone is meditating.

Six million Tantras of Dzogchen in the sky might seem to have little in common with Styrofoam cups in a dump, or plutonium buried in the dust of Nagasaki. Yet all of these things inhabit vast spatial or temporal scales that trouble the easy intimacy of the mesh. In this respect, hyperobjects (time) and what we might call tibetojects (space) are no less disturbing than the strange stranger known as the living organism.

4. Morton and Object-Oriented Philosophy

We recall Morton’s still unpublished words from *Realist Magic*, cited near the top of this article: "In Harman’s terms... mesh is a sensual object. The real objects are the strange strangers." In my own philosophy, sensual objects are those that exist only in the experience of another object – such as mental images of cats and trees in distinction from these objects themselves. Meanwhile, real objects are those that not only exist whether I look at them or not, but which are incommensurable with any part of them I might see. Real objects are like Kantian things-in-themselves, except that whereas for Kant the Ding an sich only withdraws from direct human access, real objects withdraw from each other as well. Billiard balls, just like people, only make contact with phenomenal versions of each other, while the balls-in-themselves lie beyond all possibility of causal contact.

When the terms are described in this way, it becomes clear that there are definite points of similarity between Morton’s model and my own. Like Morton, I hold that all things are interconnected in the “weak” sense that they...
all belong to the same plane of reality, though not in the "strong" holistic sense of everything being entirely in contact with everything else. The mesh links all human and nonhuman things, but they do not make contact with one another in their full depths — or at least this is true of strange strangers. In this sense, Morton is correct that the mesh is a gridwork of sensual objects rather than real ones. The real objects of the world must always remain partly outside the mesh in which everything is linked. As for the strange strangers, Morton is again correct that their manner of troubling all sleek connections with an untamed inner surplus is enough to make them resemble the real objects found in my philosophy. There is, however, the one incompatibility we have already stressed. The Morton of 2010, at least, seems to restrict the title of strange stranger to living organisms, and in this way he turns an ontological distinction (relational vs. non-relational) into a taxonomical one (non-living vs. living).

We find several other passages in The Ecological Thought that seem to clash with the spirit of my own work. Whereas the objects of my object-oriented philosophy are characterized by identity, Morton (perhaps influenced on this point by Derrida) tells us that "knowledge itself... asserts that nothing has intrinsic identity." On this day, Morton remains the strongest opponent of speculative realist circles of the law of non-contradiction, as seen in his strong attraction to the work of "dialectic" philosopher Graham Priest. In a similar spirit, Morton defends the notion that "the mesh is always made of negative difference, which means it doesn’t contain positive, really existing (independent, solid) things." On this notion returns a bit later in the book: "We can’t say for sure that there are specific entities out there." And whereas object-oriented philosophy strongly defends the emergence of new objects at all possible scales of reality, Morton at one point seems to defend the central role of consciousness in generating individuals, when he critiques in passing "the popular systems theory idea of ‘emergence,’ that systems can organize themselves without much (or any) conscious input." This seems to put him directly at odds with DeLanda, who responds to two interviewers as follows:

It is absurd to think that complex self-organizing structures need a "brain" to generate them. The coupled system atmosphere-hydrosphere is continuously generating structures (thunderstorms, hurricanes, coherent wind currents) not only without a brain but without any organs whatsoever. The ancient chemistry of the prebiotic soup also generated such coherent structures (auto-catalytic loops) without which the genetic code could not have emerged. And bacteria in the first two billion years of the history of the biosphere discovered all major means to tap into energy sources (fermentation, photosynthesis, respiration). To think that a "brain" is needed goes beyond Cartesian dualism and fades into Creationism: matter is an inert receptacle for forms that come from the outside imposed by an exterior psychic agency: "Let there be light!"

From all these considerations, a rich portrait emerges of Morton’s relation to other object-oriented philosophies, including my own. On some points Morton may have modified his position since 2010. On other points, such as his suspicious attitude towards the law of non-contradiction, Morton maintains to this day a highly individual stance on the object-oriented landscape. How these differences will develop over time remains an open question. But with his basic commitment to a flat ontology of human and nonhuman beings, Morton is entirely in accord with the spirit of most object-oriented thinkers. All agree in working towards an ecology without nature.


10 "Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds!" Interview with Manuel DeLanda in New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies, ed. I. van der Tuin & S. Stajich, Ann Arbor: MIT Open Humanities Press, forthcoming 2012.