

Damaging thinking: A review of Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological*

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About the author

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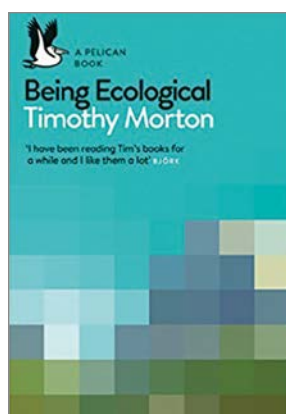
About the book

Author: **Morton T**

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“Why is everything we think we know about ecology wrong?” the back cover of this book announces portentously. It is, we are told, written by no less a personage than the “philosopher prophet of the Anthropocene.” Turning to the front cover we see that the designers have thought fit to emboss there a vacuous testimonial from the Icelandic popstar Björk, who tells us “I have been reading Tim’s books for a while and I like them a lot.”

‘Tim’ is Timothy Morton, a professor of English at Rice University in Houston, Texas, USA, and author of a number of books in ‘eco’ inflected aesthetics and critique (including Morton [2010] and Morton [2016]). Once upon a time, ‘Tim’ was a fine analyst of romantic poetry, but then *something happened* – ‘Tim’ became a celebrity academic. This book is both an expression and a result of that unfortunate metamorphosis.

I will begin with the most obvious feature of this book: it does not really contain any arguments or reasoning at all; instead, it consists of “a series of riffs.”¹ These riffs combine name-dropping of high theory and philosophical terms of art, mixed in a jocular way with preposterous verbal sophistries, pop-cultural references and contemporary idioms. It is hard to communicate the full flavour of Morton’s style in a short space, but the book is full of sentences like this: “time is an irreducible property of things, part of the liquid that jets out of a thing, undulating” (p 170). Or this: “Things are connected but in a kinda sorta subjunctive way. There’s room for stuff to happen” (p 54). Or this: “the full-on, twelve-inch remix of Husserl is full-on object-oriented ontology” (p 83).

Or this: “Karl Marx thinks of capitalism proper emerging from the collective whirr of enough machines. When enough of them are connected and whirring away, pop! Out comes industrial capitalism” (p 93). To get his profundity on the cheap, Morton is also fond of insisting that straightforwardly comprehensible claims are in fact ‘mysterious’ or ‘uncanny’ or ‘paradoxical’ – for example: “Evolution presents us with a continuum: humans and fish are related, so that if you go back far enough, you’ll find that one of your very, very distant grandmothers was a fish. Yet you are not a fish. Wherever we slice the continuum, we will find paradoxes [*sic*] like that” (pp 182–3).

The book, in other words, does not position its readers as rational beings, and seek to persuade them via argument and evidence. Instead, the reader is positioned as a witness to a *performance* – the performance of Tim Morton being Tim Morton. What we have here is something all too familiar in the age of Instagram, ‘personal branding’ and the selfie stick: for all its greenwashed surface, this is the authoring of celebrity.

This explains the insistent reflexivity of the prose. While the book claims to be about the ‘uncanny paradoxical mystery’ (*etc., etc.*) of the other-than-human, it is in fact about Morton – so much so that it should really have been titled *Being Tim Morton*. Talking constantly about himself (often – disconcertingly, and rather like Kanye West – in the third person), we hear about Morton’s struggles with jet lag as he flies to speak at prestigious universities across the world; about his friendships with Yoko Ono and musicians with only one name; about the expensive art that hangs on the walls of his rich

friends' expensive houses; about his "ginger reddish" facial hair, and so on and so forth. This is a tale told from the comfortable, cosmopolitan life of the celebrity theorist – a tale told with that expectation (constitutive of celebrity) that the reader will be fascinated by such details.

Can anything of interest be extracted from this commodified simulacrum of philosophy? If we attempt to read through the clouds of dust raised by Morton's barrage of mock-profundities, then the following would, I think, be a fair summary of this book's main thesis. Why is everything we think we know about ecology wrong? It is because our very ways of talking and thinking about ecology are mired in anthropocentrism. We do not, Morton claims, need knowledge of more facts, and we do not need more sermons demanding we change our lives. Instead, Morton suggests, what we need to learn is "how to *live* ecological knowledge" (p 11). We will learn this via a non-anthropocentric awareness of the profound ways we are enmeshed in ecosystems – of our interrelations with the other-than-human. This awareness cannot take the form of knowledge, because that necessarily entails fitting other-than-human things within human conceptual frameworks – it is, for Morton, a kind of Procrustean coercion of the other-than-human. For a genuinely non-anthropocentric awareness of the other-than-human, what is needed is thus a *non-conceptual* awareness. Morton finds a model for this awareness in Immanuel Kant's aesthetics, and its account of our experience of beauty – a judgment that (according to Kant) is both 'disinterested' (non-instrumental) and non-conceptual. Hence, Morton writes, "when I experience beauty, I am coexisting with at least one thing that isn't me, and doesn't have to be conscious or alive, in a non-coercive way [...] We coexist; we are in solidarity" (p 131). For Morton, then, our experience of art is a glimpse of a non-anthropocentric awareness of, or openness to, the other-than-human, and thereby provides a

model for a genuinely ecological ethics and politics.

So far we have a sketch of an outline of a shadow of a skeleton of a possible position – but this is as far as the book goes. All of the important questions raised by this view are ignored. Most crucially, the book has *nothing* to say about *what* ethics and politics might follow from this non-anthropocentric awareness. Morton is systematically evasive when it comes to saying something about ethical principles or resolving ethical problems – let alone addressing questions about political strategy, concrete actions, policies, organizational structures and so forth. Put another way: this book has nothing to say to us in our current predicament, other than to preach a pretentiously greenwashed version of the doctrine of the inward light. Its publication in the Pelican imprint (which, in the past, has published significant works by such figures as Freud, Virginia Woolf, George Bernard Shaw, Erving Goffman and Lewis Mumford) is a morbid symptom of the commodified state of our intellectual life in 21st century capitalism – the capitalism that is destroying the Earth, and which is deeply inscribed in the very form of this work. ■

Notes

- 1 The phrase is Nathan Brown's, from his devastating review (2013: 64) of Morton's work in the context of the broader metaphysical framework of 'object oriented ontology'. An assessment of the latter is beyond the scope of this review, but for a systematic (and genuinely witty) demolition of its pretensions, see Wolfendale (2014).

References

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