

Timothy Morton Subscendence

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It is believed that one cannot be more than man. Rather, one cannot be less!
– Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*

Idris: Are all people like this?
The Doctor: Like what?
Idris: So much bigger on the inside.
– *Doctor Who*

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This truism is one of the most profound inhibitors of world sharing. This kind of holism is a symptom of agricultural-age monotheism that we are still retweeting, even if we think we are atheists. Its belief format is evident in the way in which Gestalt psychology is misheard to be repeating it. Gestalt psychology argues that the whole is *different* than its parts, not *greater than*, yet this common misunderstanding persists among psychologists.¹ We must find some tools to dismantle it. Why not rewrite holism such that the whole is always *less* than the sum of its parts? Let’s call it “subscendence.” We’ll go about proving this by examining some features of object-oriented ontology.

We should see things such as humankind as wholes that are less than the sum of their parts. Tim Morton is so many more things than just “human.” A street full of people is much more than just a part of a greater whole called “city.” It’s hard to locate contemporary megacities because we keep looking for something that totally incorporates its parts. Towns, villages, and other formations are strung together in Java in such a way that only the volcanoes on that massive island prevent them from spreading everywhere. The only limit is a perceived threat to life. The string of dwellings isn’t even a megacity, it’s a *hypercity*, a city that is hardly a city at all. But precisely because of this less-than-a-city quality, a hypercity is beyond even the colossal size we associate with megacities such as Mexico City. Java’s hypercity and Mexico City are less than the sum of their parts. Parts of them – houses, regions of houses – keep on pouring out of them like ice cubes bursting through the paper bag they made wet.

Wholes *subscend* their parts, which means that parts are not just mechanical components of wholes, and that there can be genuine surprise and novelty in the world, that a different future is always possible. It is good to regard things such as capitalism as physical beings, not simply as fictions that would disappear if we just stopped believing in them. But what kind of physical being are they? If they are subscendent, it means that we can change them, if we want. What if some things could be physically huge, yet

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ontologically tiny? What if neoliberalism, which envelopes earth in misery, were actually quite small in another way, and thus strangely easy to subvert? Too easy for intellectuals, who want to make everything seem difficult so they can keep themselves in a job by explaining it, or outdo each other in competition for whose picture of the world is more depressing. "I am more intelligent than you because my picture of neoliberalism is far more terrifying and encompassing than yours. We are *truly* enslaved in my vision, with no hope of escape – therefore I am superior to you!" Isn't this a tragic consequence of what some call *cynical reason*, the dominant way of being right for the last two hundred years?

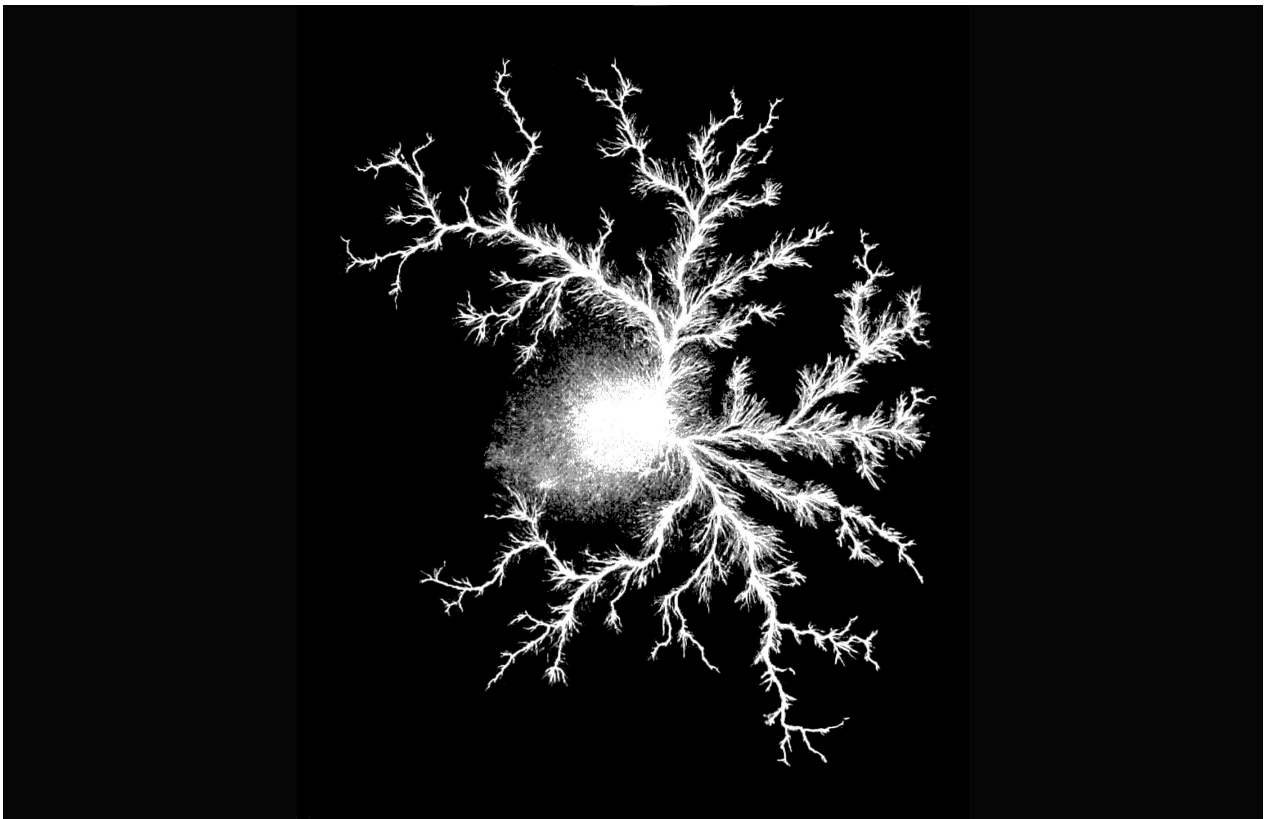
To prove subsistence is also childishly simple, which makes the resistance you will feel toward it all the more significant. To show that the whole is less than the sum of its parts, all you need to do is accept that a group of things can be a thing, which is a simple way of saying that if a thing exists, it exists *in the same way* as another thing. A sentence exists in the same way as a word-processing program. A tree exists in the same way as a forest. An idea exists in the same way as a quasar. This is very far from saying that things have the same *right* to exist.

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Claiming that the AIDS virus has as much right to exist as an AIDS patient is a conclusion you can draw within the logic of deep ecology, but it has nothing to do with actual ecological politics, and everything to do with a Gaia hypothesis or concept of a biosphere that is greater than the sum of its parts, in which every being is a replaceable component. This has to do with agricultural-age religion, the ideological support of the social, psychic, and philosophical machination that eventually generated mass extinction. Deep ecology is fighting fire with fire.

Very well, a tree exists in the same way as a forest. The forest is ontologically one. The trees are more than one. The parts of the forest (the trees – but there are so many more parts in fact) outnumber the whole. This doesn't mean they "are more important than the whole." This is the kind of anti-holist reductionism that neoliberalism promotes: "There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals." We need holism, but a special, weak holism that isn't theistic.

Climate is ontologically smaller than weather. Weather is a symptom of climate, but there is so much more to weather other than simply being a symptom of climate. A shower of rain is a bath for this bird. It's a spawning pond



A record of a positive discharge of electricity, also known as a Lichtenberg figure, in the text Walter E. Woobury, "Photographing Electrical Discharges" in *Popular Science Monthly*, Volume 49, (July 1896). Photo: Wikimedia Commons

for these toads. It's this soft delicate pattering on my arm. It's this thing I wrote some sentences about.

Humankind is ontologically smaller than the humans who make it up! There is so much more that humans do other than be parts of humankind. Humans modify their bodies to change their gender and add electronic and decorative prostheses. Humans form relationships with nonhumans. Humans contain nonhumans such as the bacterial microbiome in such a way that if the nonhumans left, the humans would die.

This means that the correct left concept of the human is of a *partial object* in a set of partial objects, such that it comprises an *implosive whole* that is less than the sum of its parts. This partiality extends in every dimension, including time. An event is a temporal partial object. An event is part of some set of events that comprises a whole, but this whole is always less than the sum of its parts. A battle in feudal Japan was not simply a matter of two lords fighting. Flies settled on the corpses. Five years later, delicate flowers bloomed. Evolution shuffled the decks in its eons-long game of cards.

To be a thing is to be a perforated bag full of water, in which are swimming countless little perforated bags full of water, in which are floating ... When you cut open a bag, so many more bags spill out than you probably bargained for. This is how an emotional label such as "anger" is *not* (quite evidently) a whole that intuitively contains gradations and subtleties all comprehensively summed up by that one term. We may find within it hesitation, a sense of humor, sexual passion, grief. This is equivalent to discovering that a physical line has a fractal dimensionality when you examine it more closely. A fractal is a *partial number* that goes wiggling around being just itself for a potential infinity of iterations. Beauty is slightly disgusting or weird or fascinating because the human-scaled bag full of water that is inducing the beauty experience inevitably contains and is part of bags full of water at all kinds of nonhuman scales. Kitsch is subscendent beauty. What Bataille calls "general economy" is a subscendent twelve-inch remix of restricted economy. And what this means is that all the nonhuman economic modes are in the mix too. Economics is really just about how you organize enjoyment. And ecological politics just means allowing and enhancing all kinds of enjoyment that aren't obviously to do with you. Well, not that they're nothing to do with you – that's too tight. It's just that you let yourself be perforated.

Spectrality means that a being is a symbiotic community consisting of itself and its

spectral halo. A being is less than the sum of its parts. Kitsch is other people's enjoyment. In an ecological age, where there is no one true and proper scale, beauty will be appreciated along with its halo of weirdness or disgust. This kind of beauty is X-beauty, just like a lifeform is always an X-lifeform. Marxism that includes nonhumans is a subscendent X-Marxism, less than the sum of Marxism and anarchism (and so on). Political space that includes nonhumans is X-space that subscends its parts.

Of Invisible Gods

Not everything can be empirically observed. There are some things that are thinkable and computable, yet we find it impossible to see them: the hyperobjects. Many are ecological phenomena such as global warming, evolution, and extinction, not to mention the human species and the biosphere.

We tend to think of these things as wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts, but let's see how they subscend their parts. The political task we face is to see physically gigantic and intellectually complex (hence invisible) things as ontologically tiny. Neoliberalism is physically vast, but ontologically small. We are able to dismantle it, by crawling out from underneath in solidarity with the other lifeforms it now threatens.

But if "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is true, it doesn't really matter if those parts get replaced. We will still have our lovable old whole intact. Say the whole is the biosphere and say the part, which we very much imagine as a component because of the holism, is a polar bear. Never mind. They will go extinct and another lifeform will simply have to evolve to take their place. This kind of thought might not be so good for ecological ethics and politics.

Adherents of OOO hold that an entity contains a potentially infinite regress of other entities. The entity is literally out-scaled by its parts. It is bigger on the inside, like Pandora's jar. Which means, logically, that it's smaller on the outside, so that, however absurd and amazing it sounds, we need to say "the whole is always smaller than the sum of its parts." The fact that hyperobjects subscend their parts is why you can't find them. Global warming and the biosphere are ontologically small, which means that they are fragile since they can be overwhelmed by their very components – even black holes evaporate after emitting too much Hawking radiation, and nothing at all other than themselves can destroy *them*. Married couples in the United States are taxed as one-and-a-half people. Ontologically, a married couple is smaller than two unmarried people. Married couples are famously fragile.

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Notice that the subsistence of the whole from the parts doesn't contradict the fact that there is an intrinsic excess in a thing whereby it's never exhausted by its appearances. Conversely, a thing is withdrawn *not* because it is a lump of dough *hiding behind* appearances, but because it *subscends* its appearances in a way that is not constantly present. There can be more appearances than things. Since causality happens in the realm of appearance, this gives us the reason why novelty can happen, and novelty is the crucial ingredient of revolution. The fact that we have trouble understanding these paradoxes is a symptom of how we have become habituated to going in the direction of *transcendence* toward a *more constant presence*.

All this means that what things are subscends how they appear, which is how appearance comes to be death. Even a hypothetical lonesome object all on its very own, such as a black hole, will end precisely because its essence subscends its appearance. A thing subscends its appearances. Isn't that the definition of dying? I become memories in you, pieces of crumpled paper in a wastebasket, a corpse, some loose change. These appearances exceed me and I'm distributed into a weird, intangible intimacy. Appearance never expresses the whole, or let alone anything greater than the whole. Hyperobjects disappear "downwards," not upwards, into something paradoxically *more* physical and thus more fragile than the beings that comprise them. This explains for instance the viscosity of hyperobjects, the fact that they stick to you phenomenologically wherever you are. Their hyperphysicality is what makes them so sticky, closer than breathing, nearer than hands and feet: the mercury in my cells, the radiation streaming through my DNA. The subsistence we discover in hyperobjects suggests we might already have passed across a limit confining thought (even atheist thought) to Axial Age religious dogma. An end to the idea of huge, overarching, tyrannical beings that are bigger than us tiny, insignificant flies they use for their sport.

Subsistence is not the same as individualism. Individualism means that individuals are *more real* than groups or wholes. Individualism in the political sphere is well expressed by neoliberal politicians: "There is no such thing as society" (Margaret Thatcher). According to subsistence, wholes and parts are just as real as one another. It is simply that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. We could build a logic square, in fact, to make this clear:

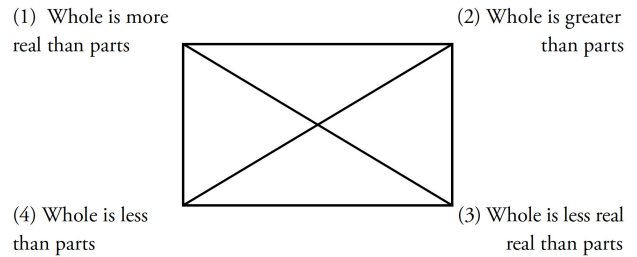


Diagram representing "Explosive and Implosive Holism."

"Greater than" must mean "having more qualities than." "More real than" must mean "having more essence than." The "magic of the marketplace" and the systems-theory fascination with emergence are definitely at position (2): the whole and the parts are as real as one another, but in such a way that the whole has more qualities than the sum of its parts. Yet the neoliberalism that proclaims this is at position (3): the whole is greater – but less real! This explains how (2) can be deployed as a disguised form of individualism. But now we can see how this individualism is based on a stunning paradox.

We are fascinated with it even if we are not free market ideologues. It provides a way of having one's individualist cake and eating it – subsuming it into the whole – at the same time. In addition, emergentism requires that the parts are less real (position 1). The parts in this sense are just replaceable components, when one strips away the charming foliage of Gaia theory.

The way (1) can slip into (2) alerts us to the religious origins of standard holism, which is based on the default agrilogistic ontology. According to this ontology, "having more qualities than" cannot be distinguished from "having more essence than" because to exist must mean to totally and definitely exist, as opposed to not exist. If something is more vivid than something else, it must be more existent. There is no room for quasi-existing, shadowy, spectral existing shot through with nothingness. "More real than" and "greater than" become impossible to distinguish.

In the case of subsistence, it is not the case that the whole is less real or more real. "Less than" becomes possible to distinguish from "less real than." Wholes cannot be machines in the sense that they are made of replaceable components. It's simply religious mystification to claim that the biosphere or the state transcends little me in the sense that I become a replaceable component of a larger machine. Likewise, the Enlightenment inversion, namely that the parts (the individuals) are more real than the whole, is also the same mystification, just upside down. In this sense,

Marx was exactly right to view Enlightenment philosophy as a form of mystification. But he was wrong to think of Enlightenment (capitalist) economic theory as *fetishism*, as indigenous belief living on in a disillusioned age – *made out of disillusion*, in fact, in a cynical twist of history. The theory of fetishism is different from First Peoples' cultures but identical to Axial Age religion, though in inverted form. Indeed, this is the view that is most like the idea that inanimate things are possessed with a soul. Yahweh breathes life into clay. The *res intellectus* sits inside the extensional body, in Descartes. The soul drives the chariot of the body, in Plato. The Jesuits used the Tibetan word for "zombie" to describe the resurrected Christ and the Tibetans were understandably revolted.

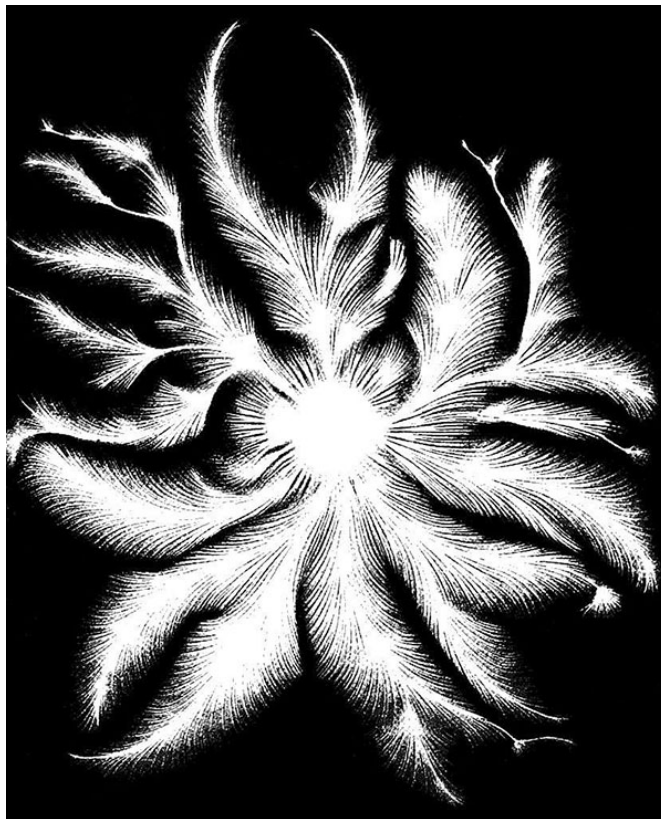
If wholes are always smaller than their parts, neoliberalism is smaller than cynical reason has cracked it up to be. It isn't an angry god trying to kill me, but something that is *too easy* (for performances of intellectual sophistication) to subvert, for instance by unplugging a small German town from the oil-based energy grid.² What is required is a critical "gnosticism" – not the cartoon pathologized version that separates soul and body, but the heretical one, in which believing in a vast, angry

Neolithic god that is so high you can't get around him, is precisely the problem. Bakunin: "These divine particles, human souls, retain as it were a vague remembrance of their primitive divinity, and are irresistibly drawn towards their whole; they seek each other, they seek their whole."³

The fragility of hyperobjects is political good news. Cynical reason has been lamenting neoliberalism as the inescapable psychopath Cthulhu – it loves this kind of doom-speak. But ontologically, neoliberalism is quite small compared to a polar bear. Maybe this kind of thinking is what distinguishes an anarchist from a Marxist, or at any rate a certain kind of successful academic Marxist. That kind of ideology theorist is really just a believer in Ra, someone mindlessly retweeting an agrilogistic meme that has been wildly successful in transforming earth into a narrow temporality-diameter extinction pipe.

Subsistence affects things like nation-states, as huge and powerful as they appear. Subsistence is why you need a passport. It's not to guarantee your identity, but to guarantee and prop up the identity of the state. Islamophobia sees Muslim terrorists as inevitably part of some larger, shadowy organization, while in the United States, white

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A record of a negative discharge of electricity, also known as a Lichtenberg figure, in the text Walter E. Woobury, "Photographing Electrical Discharges" in *Popular Science Monthly*, Volume 49, (July 1896). Photo: Wikimedia Commons

terrorists are always described as “lone wolves.” No matter how many of them shoot people in churches and outside abortion clinics and blow up government buildings, having trained in the Christian equivalent of an al-Qaeda training camp; no matter how many wolves there are, they are always seen as lone wolves, not as members of a pack.⁴ The concept that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts comes in ideologically handy because then Islamophobia can claim that Islamic terrorists are part of some emergent, shadowy whole, while white terrorists are individuals without a whole in sight. Humankind Is a Subscendent Whole

Subscendent wholes are fuzzy and ragged. They involve an uncountable number of parts. The effect of this is to cause the whole to be weirdly shrunken.

Contextual criticism in the humanities has become sclerotic. Rather than the dangerous frisson of noticing a historical unconscious, what has become routine is to explain a cultural document away by “situating” it in a context that usually takes the shape of a decade within a particular century and pertains to the country and the specific region in which the document was produced. Needless to say, all these contextual features are thought in an anthropocentric way. We are talking about what it was like for humans when the painting was made, not what it was like for mice. But contextualization is potentially highly explosive: a cultural document subscends its contexts. There is no good reason to stop. Ironically most contextual criticism is trying to *contain* what is most interesting about context. And we can test this by thinking about ecology.

The thing about ecological contexts is that you can’t draw a line around them in advance, because ecology is profoundly about interdependence. The biosphere depends on earth’s magnetic shield to protect lifeforms from solar rays, and this depends on the way earth’s iron core is spinning, and that depends on how the earth formed in the early stages of the solar system, and so on. We are dealing with a potential infinity of entities on a potential infinity of scales – there is no way to ascertain whether the pleroma of beings has an end point, at least not in advance. Ecological awareness just is this context explosion.

Very large entities such as mountains and oceans sometimes move in such a way that the vibrations of their movement create sound, far too deep for humans to hear. The sound waves travel across earth, sweeping up all kinds of entities in their waveforms. You can record and broadcast this infrasound, but you have to build a special, very long speaker to push the wave through efficiently, and you have to speed it up

about eighty times, so that humans can hear it – an incredibly deep, loud roar. It’s like the soft roar that is part of the signature of an explosion: not the shattering, but the pervasive rumble.

Infrasound is literally the sound of context, exploding. And the way it explodes undermines the idea of nicely bounded wholes that poof out big enough to contain their parts in a nice unified group. The longer the description of all the elements of such a thing goes on, the more it threatens to open up an abyss. Wholes might be boreholes that go so deep down that we can’t fathom their depth.

Infrasound is a Tolstoy novel about mountains, oceans, and deserts. It is a perfect example of our current Age of Asymmetry: an ecological age in which we have so much more scientific data about things, which makes the things appear so much huger and more mysterious so that increasing knowledge doesn’t master objects. There is, instead, a Cold War–like explosion of knowledge and withdrawnness at the same time, and for the same reason. This is a sharp difference from Hegel’s picture of art history, in which knowledge gradually outstrips art materials, resulting, from the late eighteenth century on, in irony and the art of successful failures to embody spirit.⁵ That picture is just a symptom of the hubris that marks the beginning of the Anthropocene, which we have been calling modernity. But the impetus to transcend one’s material conditions in every respect has resulted in drilling down, literally, ever deeper into them, to the extent that now we have realized that this very movement has created far larger and more immersive material conditions than ever before. Global warming lasts for a hundred thousand years. This Age of Asymmetry turns out not even to be neatly asymmetrical. It’s not really about humans full of inner space versus nonhumans also full of inner space. Because it’s at this very moment that humans discover that they are one of those objects, precisely insofar as we are now allowing them all to be Pandora’s jars like us, to contain multitudes.

Subscendence guarantees that objects encounter us as if they were the flu, getting inside our own fuzzy, ragged boundaries and executing their operations from an intimate place. Subscendence means, therefore, that we humans really aren’t nihilistic negation monsters, but chameleon-like entities that are susceptible to colors, surfaces, sound waves – the way the flesh at the back of my eye is palpated by electromagnetic waves spraying out of an excited yttrium-oxide coating on the inside of an LCD display or cathode-ray tube. I see red because yttrium waves are splashing onto me. Because I’m not a rigidly bounded whole but a

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ragged, subscendent one, I can wave along with this redness for a moment.

Susceptibility is very good news for ecological ethics and politics. I can be touched. Thinking itself is touching and being touched, not a guarantee of full metaphysical presence, but a disorienting flicker that haunts me or pleasures me or hurts me, and so on. A visual artist knows that visuality is badly misrepresented by philosophies that use the language of sight to establish constantly present things-to-be-seen, and the too-easy linkage of seeing and knowing. Perhaps ecological philosophy needs to generate a whole new language that inclines more toward touch, toward the haptic. This is really because seeing is subscended by touching. It's not that seeing is *reducible* to touching, as if touching were more constantly present, the equivalent of a doubting Thomas thrusting his hand into the wound and feeling it for himself; it's that seeing, like hearing, is a part of touching, a whole that is not greater than the sum of its parts. The touch is lowly, susceptible, risky, humble – it subscends being able to see around and above and beyond a thing. It subscends because it is nearer, more intimate, quite the opposite of “more encompassing and less intimate.”

Now we can think humankind without having to think “Mankind,” and without having to imagine that there is no such thing as the human species or that differences between humans are superficial or irrelevant. We can talk about the human species while acknowledging difference because *humankind forms a subscendent whole*. There is an irreducible gap between little me and the human, but not because the human is ontologically greater than the sum of its parts. Humankind is not a negation of a human being, but rather an implosive whole that is susceptible to all kinds of phenomena. The Anthropocene is one of the first truly anti-anthropocentric concepts because via thinking the Anthropocene, we get to see the concept of “species” as it really is – species as a subscendent hyperobject, brittle and inconsistent. The Anthropocene is the moment at which humans come to recognize humankind, insofar as it subscends its parts (such as plastics and concretes in earth's strata). The Anthropocene is the moment at which species as such becomes thinkable in a non-metaphysical way, such that humankind cannot rigidly exclude nonhumans. The human becomes visible as a species, that is to say, as a whole weirdly *smaller* than the sum of its (human, bacterial microbiome, prosthetic) parts. Humankind is, as I said before, intrinsically disabled without hope of a “healthy” (explosive) wholeness.

Spot the Hypocrite is the favorite game of the left, a product of the monotheistic holism

we've inherited from Mesopotamia. In a world in which wholes are always bursting like spider's eggs into many, many parts, cynical distance cannot be achieved, because there is no place from which to grasp the totality without losing something. So, when it comes to a choice between Spot the Hypocrite or Burst the Spider Egg, we should be playing the latter game. A Google employee is capable of having critical, anti-Google thoughts. A bureaucrat in Soviet Lithuania is capable of having more-than-mixed feelings about what she's doing.

[...]

Ecological Economics: Multiplying Pleasures

With these lines the nonviolent direct action movement was born:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number

...

Ye are many! They are few!
– Percy Shelley, “The Mask of Anarchy”⁶

Shelley forgot to add: not just in an empirical sense having to do with bodies you can count, but in an *ontological* sense having to do with the structure of how things actually are. We are many all the way down, because we are wholes that are always less than the sum of their parts. We don't just combine into multitudes, we contain multitudes, as any self-respecting stomach bacterium will tell you.

We are many in the ontological sense too, and this implies that we can, should, and will achieve solidarity with at least some nonhuman beings. The pathway toward this solidarity is about increasing and enhancing and differentiating more and more pleasures. This is quite different from the ecological task many of us assume is the right one: creating a restricted economy. Doing that would be a disastrous repetition of the oil economy, where concepts such as efficiency and sustainability (both perfectly anthropocentrically, not to mention neoliberally, scaled) have wreaked havoc on happiness, whether one is human or not. Talk of efficiency and sustainability are simply artifacts of the relentless use of fossil fuels. In a solar economy, you could have a disco in every single room of your house and way fewer lifeforms would suffer, perhaps vanishingly few, compared to the act of simply turning on the lights in an oil economy. You could have strobes and decks and lasers all day and night to your heart's content.

Economics is about how we organize enjoyment. As we begin to think about what ecological society would look like, we will begin to talk about how we organize enjoyment at the

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largest scales of our coexistence. An ecological society that doesn't put pleasure-enhancement and diversification at its center is ecological in name only. The very concept of utility (as in an "electric utility," the American term for a power corporation) will need a serious upgrade. Happiness will no longer have *merely existing* – as opposed to *qualities of existing* – as its default, top level. The issue of how to live, the spiritual problem of reflexive consumerism, will become far more complex yet far less violent. In a solar economy, the economic whole will subscend the parts. In an oil economy, oil subsumes everything in its explosive-holistic wake. In a solar economy, the question of who siphons and sells the solar power is a different type of question than the question of who owns the oil. In many more senses than we can now enact, humankind will have seized the productive forces, which is different from saying that nonhuman lifeforms will continue to be exploited. This is because humankind is a fuzzy, subscendent whole that includes and implies other lifeforms, as a part of the also subscendent symbiotic real.

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This text is an excerpt from Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People by Timothy Morton, recently published by Verso.

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I am grateful to Luke Jones for discussing this with me.

2

Emily Stewart, "German Village Feldheim the Country's First Community to Become Energy Self-Sufficient," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, November 10, 2014 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-10/german-village-first-to-become-energy-self-sufficient/5879360>. Hermann Scheer, *The Solar Economy: Renewable Energy and a Sustainable Future* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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4

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6

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