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Meso-Metaphysics and Paradigmatic Environmental Anti-Modernism: Bruno Latour’s *Down to Earth* and the Rejection, and Embrace, of Metaphysical Necessity*

Post-Kantian philosophers have often preferred to speak of the impossibility of metaphysics.¹ In *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, for example, a primer on metaphysical speculation past and present, editors Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman point to Rudolf Carnap (and the Vienna Circle in general), Hilary Putnam, and Jane Flax as exponents of the “strong form [of] the thesis that metaphysics is impossible.”² These philosophers, and many others, Van Inwagen and Zimmerman say, argue that “there is no Reality to be described; all the statements we have called metaphysical are false or meaningless.”³ The “weak form of the thesis” is a distinction without much of a difference:

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* Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 140 pages. ISBN 978-1-5095-3056-4.

¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. & ed. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Michelle Grier, “Kant’s Critique of Metaphysics,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

² *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*, ed. Peter Van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 5.

³ *Ibid.*

“The goal [i.e., of a metaphysics] is there, but we human beings are unable to reach it, since the task of describing Reality is beyond our powers; metaphysical statements are meaningful, but we can never discover whether any metaphysical statement is true or false (or discover anything else interesting or important about the class of metaphysical statements).”⁴

However, while the distinction between weak and strong anti-metaphysical theses is very useful, a third category must be added to the classification scheme of anti-metaphysical theses: the thesis of transpositional anti-metaphysics. Advanced most commonly by materialists, and almost always unwittingly, transpositional anti-metaphysics is the metaphysics of those who must reject metaphysics for ideological reasons, but, and for the same reasons, must also smuggle in some kind of meso-metaphysics to settle accounts between known and unknown, material and stubbornly immaterial. Hegelianism and Marxism are perhaps the two most prominent forms of transpositional anti-metaphysics (Hegel’s *Geist* being but a romantic pre-version of Marx’s magical *Kapital*). As Marxo-Hegelian “grand narratives” collapsed in the twentieth century, depriving the transpositional anti-metaphysical camp of its most potent form of meso-metaphysics, a new kind of readier and more ad hoc meso-metaphysics took the old materialist-metaphysics’ place, namely, environmentalism in its ideological iteration.⁵ It is certainly possible, and laudable, to care for the environment qua Creation. Environmentalist meso-metaphysicians, by contrast, elevate the physical world to an organizing principle, imbuing the natural world as a whole,

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984).

or else some part of it or phenomenon occurring in it, with properties that do the work of metaphysics in fact if not in name.⁶

There are many subgenres of environmentalist meso-metaphysics, such as cyborgism,⁷ eco-feminism,⁸ transhumanism,⁹ and even the neo-paganism now prevalent in the post-Christian West.¹⁰ The more austere environmentalist meso-metaphysicians, such as Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould, posit a pure transposition of natural “science” (to speak equivocally about Sagan’s brand of Baconian anti-cosmological naked empiricism) for old-time religion, or at least, in the case of Gould, “non-overlapping magisteria.”¹¹ Over and against the Sagans and Goulds, however, one finds enthused devotees of Gaia as a kind of

⁶ See, e.g., Christopher Caldwell, “From Saving the Earth to Ruling the World,” *Claremont Review of Books* (Fall 2019): 40–44, citing also Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006), Nathaniel Rich, *Losing Earth: A Recent History* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019), E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2015), and Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁷ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

⁸ Stefanie von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

⁹ *Cyborg Mind: What Brain-Computer and Mind-Cyberspace Interfaces Mean for Cyberneuroethics*, ed. Calum MacKellar (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019) and Fred Baumann, “Humanism and Transhumanism,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 29 (Fall 2010): 68–84.

¹⁰ Kathryn Rountree, “Localizing Neo-Paganism: Integrating Global and Indigenous Traditions in a Mediterranean Catholic Society,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 4 (December 2011): 846–872, and Colin D. Pearce, “Lord Brougham’s Neo-Paganism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 4 (October 1994): 651–670.

¹¹ See, e.g., Carl Sagan, *Broca’s Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York, NY: Random House, 1979) and Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1999).

moral force, an elven heaven where the gods are mountains, forests, rivers, fauna, and ecosystems and within which human beings are subordinates at best, more often seen as interlopers in a pristine paradise.¹² For the hardline environmentalist meso-metaphysicians, the plotline of the Fall is reversed: it isn't that man was once in Eden but then was cast out, but that Eden was once free of human intruders but now must suffer our resentful presence. We aren't trying to get back into Paradise; Paradise is trying to kick us out.¹³

Perhaps no one writing today better exemplifies this form of environmentalist meso-metaphysics than Bruno Latour. Emeritus professor at Sciences Po Paris, recipient of more than two dozen major academic and cultural awards, and author of twenty books on topics ranging from law to politics to religion to sociology, Latour is arguably the most prolific, and least shy, advocate of substituting the Earth for other ideologies and paradigms. It is not for nothing that, prior to his ad-

¹² See, e.g., Timothy M. Lenton, Sébastien Dutreuil, and Bruno Latour, "Life on Earth Is Hard to Spot," *The Anthropocene Review* 7, no. 3 (2020): 248–272. Environmentalist meso-metaphysics may be the result, at least in part, of an equivocation on the word "nature". As Anthony Kenny points out, "Stoic ethics attaches great importance to Nature. Whereas Aristotle spoke often of the nature of individual things and species, it is the Stoics who were responsible for introducing the notion of 'Nature', with a capital 'N', as a single cosmic order exhibited in the structure and activities of things of many different kinds. According to Diogenes Laertius, Zeno stated that the end of life was 'to live in agreement with Nature'." Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2010), 222, citing *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, ed. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), ch. 57, E, Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), book 7, paragraph 87, and Cicero, *De Finibus*, 3.65 (available online—see the section *References* for details). As Romantics reified the natural world and Rousseaus found the mythical psychological Pure Land in the "natural," pre-civilizational condition of proto-man, the Stoic conception of "Nature" gave way, possibly, to a double-act de-reification of the physical world into a meso-metaphysics in its own right, "nature" denatured via the Stoics and the Romantics into the "Nature" of Earth Day and Greenpeace.

¹³ See Chelsea Follett, "How Anti-Humanism Conquered the Left," *Quillette* (May 1, 2019). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

vanced appointments in philosophy and advocacy, Latour taught for nearly a quarter of a century at the École des Mines in Paris. What Latour advocates is a veritable Hobbit philosophy of actual burrowing down in the dirt to find our place in the universe. This is meso-metaphysics for spelunkers, and Latour is not in the least coy about saying so. In his new book, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Latour seeks to ground—literally—his ideological environmentalism in the very crust and mantle of the planet on which we live, stripping away the familiar conceits of political debate to arrive at the actual bedrock of our existence, which Latour argues is, and must be, the Earth itself.¹⁴

Fighting back—in the breathless and overheated tone that has been the métier of French intellectuals since at least the days of Rousseau and Voltaire—against what he sees as the mistaken trajectories of the modern project, Latour advocates in *Down to Earth* for a new alignment of human life toward the ground beneath our feet. Lamenting the failure of even environmental politics to “‘transcend’ the Right/Left cleavage,”¹⁵ Latour posits rhetorically: “Are we not beginning to discern, more clearly every day, the premises of a new affect that would reorient the forces at work in a lasting way? Are we not beginning to ask ourselves: *Are we Moderns or Terrestrials?*”¹⁶ “What is important,” Latour says, “is to be able to get out of the impasse [i.e., of the Left and the Right] by imagining a set of new alliances: ‘You have never been a leftist? That doesn’t matter, neither have I, but, like you, I am *radically Terrestrial!*’ A whole set of positions that we shall have to learn to recognize, before the militants of the extreme Modern have totally devas-

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

tated the stage.”¹⁷ Lest there be any mistaking his point, and as if to emphasize his advocacy of a metaphysics of which he is apparently unaware, Latour proclaims that “the Terrestrial is bound to the earth and to land, but it is also *a way of worlding*, in that it aligns with no borders, transcends all identities.”¹⁸ This is a geo-meso-metaphysics and Latour is the prophet of what he here, and elsewhere, has called the “new climatic regime,” the millenarian spice added to the meso-metaphysical dirt of Latour’s brand of the immanentized eschaton.¹⁹

Over the course of this short book, divided into twenty chapters across just 109 pages of text interspersed here and there with highly idiosyncratic diagrams illustrating Latour’s meso-metaphysical ideas, Latour explicates his theme of disrupting politics, displacing modernity, and re-enchanting the world with the lithosphere itself. Like Napoleon crowning himself emperor, this is old-world meso-metaphysics declaring itself to be infinitely more powerful than before. Breaking free of the modernist constraints against radicalism, Latour declares that “class struggles depend on a *geo-logic*,” quickly assuring us that “the introduction of the prefix ‘geo-’ does not make 150 years of Marxist or materialist analysis obsolete; on the contrary, it obliges us to *reopen the social question* while *intensifying* it through the new geopolitics.”²⁰ Here we can see the preliminary step in the transition to a full meso-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55–56; emphasis in original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54; emphasis in original; citing Donna Haraway, unprovenanced in endnotes.

¹⁹ See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), cited endnote 3, 110. For an alternative form of Gaia meso-metaphysics, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): cited endnote 35, 115.

²⁰ Latour, *Down to Earth*, 62–63; emphases in original—those who do not like the wild overuse of italics will not like Bruno Latour’s new book; citing Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2002), endnote 58, 119.

metaphysics, and the way in which that step has now been discarded in favor of an even more religious environmentalism.

This meso-metaphysical, religious environmentalism is summed up in what Latour, and many others in the environmentalist camp, call the Anthropocene, that period of human history wherein the actions of man—again, an interloper in Eden and not a natural part of the natural world—must be taken as the dominant ecological factor, or, conversely, in which the ecosphere must be seen to be a kind of substitute for human nature. Turned into a household word in 2000 by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, it is no coincidence that the idea of the Anthropocene first gained intellectual credence in the Soviet Union.²¹ Soviet scientist Vladimir Verensky (1863–1945), for example, advanced a preliminary thesis that would later become the concept of the Anthropocene, and the idea of a purely materialist human-geologico-climatic science is fully in keeping with the ideological restrictions of Marxism-Leninism. The irony of the Anthropocene is that it appears to foreground human activity while definitionally subsuming it within the non-human world. Latour shows nicely how the Anthropocene inevitably gives way—indeed, is always-already giving way—to Latour’s new meso-metaphysics of Earth qua soil and stone:

As long as the earth seemed stable, we could speak of *space* and locate ourselves within that space and on a portion of territory that we claimed to occupy. But how are we to act if the territory itself begins to participate in history, to fight back, in short, to concern itself with us—how do we occupy a land if it is this land itself that is occupying us? The expression ‘I belong to a territory’ has changed meaning: it now designates the agency that pos-

²¹ See Joseph Stromberg, “What Is the Anthropocene and Are We in It?” *Smithsonian* (January 2013). Available online—see the section *References* for details. See also “Soviet Industrialization,” in Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1: *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1988), 147–168.

sesses the possessor! If the Terrestrial is no longer the framework for human action, it is because it *participates* in that action. Space is no longer that of the cartographers, with their latitudinal and longitudinal grids. Space has become an agitated history in which we are participants among others, reacting to other reactions. It seems that we are landing in the thick of *geohistory*.²²

Latour condemns both what he calls “globalism-plus,” that is to say, globalism full-speed-ahead, globalism as continued and uninterrogated dominant paradigm, and “globalism-minus,” the anti-globalist reaction (including what Latour calls “Local-minus”) which rejects the political chicanery and selfish over-consumption of the globalist elite without offering any real alternative to the entire ideology of globalism which Latour wants to uproot and discard.²³ “Neither the Global nor the Local has any lasting material existence,” Latour cries.²⁴

The “third attractor” for human action must be Gaia, Latour therefore decides.²⁵ Latour will not allow for “Galilean” detachment or the deployment of outward-looking science to solve the Earth’s problems, or, more accurately, the problem of the Earth.²⁶ Strictly speaking, for Latour it is not the Earth that has, or is, the problem, but human beings. Our very humanity is the cause of the Earth’s current distress. What Latour is calling for here is no less than a repurposing of human nature and a burrowing down, like moles, into the ground below us: human being made humus being, former pride in *ad astra* rational power abandoned, sent down to the ideological countryside for a re-

²² Latour, *Down to Earth*, 41–42, citing Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”

²³ Latour, *Down to Earth*, 28–32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 38 ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

education in what really matters in the new dispensation.²⁷ “In order to begin to describe objectively, rationally, effectively, in order to paint the terrestrial situation with some degree of realism,” Latour writes, “we need all the sciences, but *positioned differently*.”

In other words, to be knowledgeable in scientific terms, it does not help to be beamed up to Sirius [Latour’s shorthand for scientific detachment]. It is not necessary, either, to shun rationality in order to add feelings to cold knowledge. It is essential to acquire as much cold-blooded knowledge as possible about the *heated activity of an Earth* finally grasped *from up close*.²⁸

If this is successfully carried out, Latour allows—and only if—then the current dead-ended politics which does not see the primacy of Gaia in all of human endeavor might be overcome and a truly geocentric humanity might somehow emerge, demoted from master of Creation to lowly fellow-worker among other Earth-bound living things.

This anti-Copernican revolution, common to other Gaia-ists and environmental meso-metaphysicians, is thus a two-step dismantling of not just modernity but of humanity as we know it, the overcoming of Nietzsche by Marx, and then of Marx by Tarzan.²⁹ Under this schematic, we are to give up our will to power by collectivizing under a materialist ideology, and then, in the same move, give up our class politics by depoliticizing down to bare biological existence:³⁰

²⁷ Cf. “It is perhaps time . . . to stop speaking about humans and to refer instead to *terrestrials* (the Earthbound), thus insisting on *humus* and, yes, the *compost* included in the etymology of the word ‘human’. (‘Terrestrial’ has the advantage of not specifying the species).” Latour, *Down to Earth*, 86, citing Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 55, in endnote 89, 124.

²⁸ Latour, *Down to Earth*, 73–74; emphases in original.

²⁹ See Arthur E. Murphy, “The Anti-Copernican Revolution,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 11 (1929): 281–299.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

The system of engendering [Latour's proposed shift in analysis away from "system of production"] brings into confrontation agents, actors, animate beings that all have distinct capacities for reacting. It does not proceed from the same conception of materiality as the system of production, it does not have the same epistemology, and it does not lead to the same form of politics. It is not interested in producing goods, for humans, on the basis of resources, *but in engendering* terrestrials—not just humans, but all terrestrials. It is based on the idea of cultivating attachments, operations that are all the more difficult because animate beings are not limited by frontiers and are constantly overlapping, embedding themselves within one another. . . . Dramatizing somewhat extravagantly, let us call it a conflict between modern humans who believe they are alone in the Holocene, in flight toward the Global or in exodus toward the Local, and the terrestrials who know they are in the Anthropocene and who seek to cohabit with other terrestrials under the authority of a power that as yet lacks any political institution [i.e., the Earth].³¹

Latour spends most of his book making the case for a deconstruction of humanity as we understand it, and so it is surprising to find that he concludes *Down to Earth* by arguing passionately—with Thermidorian hyperbole, to put it more accurately—for the preeminence of Europe in leading the way toward the Gaian future. It is precisely because Europe invented modernity, Latour asserts, that Europe must be the one to turn back its dangerous tide. But even in his startling Eurocentrism the reader will note the Bilbo Baggins cast to Latour's thought, for one of his arguments in favor of Europe's being the juggernaut of anti-modernism (or, perhaps better, anti-humanism) is that the European Union began as an exchange of "coal, iron, and steel,"³² substances toward which a professor of mines-turned-meso-metaphysician would be amicably disposed, and also because Europe, or Euro-

³¹ *Ibid.*, 83, 90.

³² *Ibid.*, 102.

pean elites (ironically the very same champions of the globalism that Latour openly despises), have advocated accepting the flood of refugees which, Latour asserts, have been forced from their homelands by the ravages of globalism against Gaia, who has lately arisen to overturn the Anthropocene.³³

There is much that is novel in Latour's *Down to Earth*, and those who are interested in what is taken by many in the Western academy to be the cutting-edge of philosophical innovation will want to spend an afternoon reading Latour's lively, if scattershot, polemic. But for all the novelty of many of Latour's takes on modernity, and granting his apparent unawareness of the transpositional meso-metaphysics he shares with so many others in the environmentalist line, I could not shake the feeling while reading *Down to Earth* that I had heard much of it before. Serendipitously, I was reading an edited volume on Deconstructionism not long after finishing Latour, and found the scratch to my mental itch: for example, Georges Bataille's "The Meaning of General Economy," in which he works out the "dependence of the economy on the circulation of energy on the earth," and "Practical Politics of the Open End," in which Gayatri Spivak and his interlocutor, Sarah Harasym, try to find the "ground of globalism." The epistemological dizziness of anti-metaphysical philosophies of all stripes has given rise to the need that Bataille, Spivak, and Harasym, along with others such as Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, have felt to root the human person in something more mentally substantial than material substance, even while denying that such a rooting can, or should, take place.³⁴ The somersaulting of the anti-metaphysician back, inevitably,

³³ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

³⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 19–26, Gayatri Spivak, "Practical Politics of the Open End," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory / Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale* 12, no. 1–2 (1988): 104–111, both cited in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

into metaphysics becomes, over time and when sustained, meso-metaphysics, the transformation of the thing denied into itself again, encrypted counterintuitively in such a way that only the encrypter cannot read the plain text but only the artificial reposturing.

Whether Bruno Latour is correct about the environmental questions he and his many followers and colleagues raise is not a matter for philosophy to decide. If the earth is warming or cooling, if an ecosystem is healthy or frail, is not to be determined by thought alone, by assertion and insistence, but by patient inquiry into the physical world. Would that the environmentalists had thus constrained themselves to the environment. What Latour wants to give us in *Down to Earth* is a halfway-house metaphysics, a meso-metaphysics, that offers nothing to illuminate either physical science or immaterial philosophy.



**Meso-Metaphysics and Paradigmatic Environmental Anti-Modernism:
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Metaphysical Necessity**

SUMMARY

Bruno Latour's latest book, *Down to Earth*, argues that the Earth itself must "ground" philosophical modernity and provide a "ground" for thinking about globalism and the problems of the globalist agenda. In this review I find the use of the Earth, and of various other stand-ins for metaphysical principles, to be a kind of "meso-metaphysics," a metaphysics which denies transcendence but all the same makes use of transcendence and operational otherness when needful for a given ideology, such as the radical environmentalism espoused by Bruno Latour. I see this as ultimately a rejection of both metaphysics and of the possibility of science and philosophy, as the conflation of the physical ground with a philosophical ground dooms meso-metaphysics to incoherence.

KEYWORDS

Bruno Latour, Gaia, metaphysics, climate change, Marxo-Hegelian *grand narratives*, globalism, Vladimir Verensky, anthropocene, Georges Bataille, Gayatri Spivak, Donna Haraway, neo-paganism, anti-Copernican revolution.

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