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All Art is Ecological

Review: Timothy Morton,
All Art is Ecological,
(London: Penguin Books, 2021), 105 pages.

Timothy Morton's book, *All Art is Ecological*, was published in 2021 by the British publishing house Penguin Books as part of their "Green Ideas" series. The book consists of two essays: (1) "And You May Find Yourself Living in an Age of Mass Extinction" (pp. 1–37), and (2) "Tuning" (pp. 39–105), which were previously published as the first and second chapter of Morton's ground-breaking book *Being Ecological* (2018). Here, as in most of his books, and which is certainly true for *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), Morton discusses various ecological issues, both from the history and everyday life, from a specific philosophical perspective – today usually known as "speculative realism." Morton argues in favor of this new perspective because he believes that other approaches to solving the globally pressing environmental and climate issues, such as the "environmental approach" and "animal rights approach," are fundamentally flawed. Namely, as he points out:

The environmental approach could be described as taking care of the whole at the expense of individuals, while the animal rights approach could be described as taking care of individuals at the expense of the whole. (AAE, 48)

Morton starts his first essay by semantically distinguishing the terms *are* and *may*, thus making a strict distinction between "You *are* living in an age of mass extinction" and "You *may* find yourself living in an age of mass

extinction.” However, regarding the title of his essay, Morton eventually settled on the latter option because, as he states, it introduces his readers to the “feeling of not-quite-reality” – that is, to the “feeling of the uncanny” (AAE, 2). This feeling is especially important in the context of the ecological crisis because, according to Morton, it can lead to an awareness that the “normalization of things” is the real distortion – a distortion of distortion. As he rightly suggests:

Being in a place, being in an era, for instance an era of mass extinction, is intrinsically uncanny. We haven’t been paying much attention, and this lack of attention has been going on for about twelve thousand years, since the start of agriculture, which eventually required industrial processes to maintain themselves, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, hence mass extinction. (AAE, 14–15)

In that sense, by taking the uncanny feeling into account, ecological awareness becomes nothing more than an “awareness of unintended consequences” (AAE, 16). In order to solve this issue, Morton proposes a change of perspective based on two important insights of the so-called “object-oriented ontology”: (1) “nothing can be grasped, or accessed, all at once in its entirety” and (2) “thought is not the only access mode” (AAE, 10). This prompted him to critically question the human understanding of space and time, as well as their place and role on this “ecologically threatened” planet. On that note, he argues that:

We tend to have only two vague temporal categories in our heads: ancient and recent. We use these as a template to conceptualize what we call “prehistory” (the pre-“civilization” human stuff, and the nonhuman stuff) and “history” (the “civilization” stuff). It would be better, more logical and requiring fewer beliefs to see everything – even now – as history and to see history as not exclusively human. (AAE, 34)

This is one of the main problems when it comes to (anthropocentric) environmental ethics. On the one hand, we tend to forget the “openness” of entities that surround us, which can be accessed not only by thought but also in numerous other ways, while on the other hand, we usually violate – (un)intentionally or out of ignorance – the rights of other human and non-human beings. That is exactly why we need a change in perspective – a change to which we first need to adjust. Or as Morton puts it: we first need “tuning” (AAE, 43).

In the second essay, “Tuning,” Morton focuses more on art because he believes that artistic practice has an important role in understanding our relationship with non-human beings. In other words, art can help us “change our perspective,” or as Morton says: “Art is important to understanding our relationship to nonhumans, to grasping an object-oriented ontological sense of our existence” (AAE, 57).

This is where “tuning” and “attunement” come into play. Morton uses these terms in a metaphorical sense to explain one of the central concepts of object-oriented ontology – the “openness” of the entities that surround us. For instance, by referring to his personal aesthetic experience, Morton states that: “Attunement is the feeling of an object’s power over me – I am being dragged by its tractor beam into its orbit” (AAE, 86).

On the other hand, “tuning” and “attunement” are also closely related to the way we perceive the subject-object relationship, that is in this case, the relationship between the subject (i.e., observer) and the object (i.e., work of art). Here, once again, Morton gives his readers a vivid example that is imbued with his personal experience:

I am experiencing unknown effects on me coming from something that I am caught up with in such a way that I can’t tell who “started it” – am I just imposing my concepts of beauty on to any old thing, or is this thing totally overpowering me? The real feeling of experiencing what we some-

times call beauty is neither about our putting a label on to things, nor of our being absolutely inert. Instead it's like finding something in me that isn't me: there is a feeling in my inner space that I didn't cook up myself, and it seems to be sent to me from this "object" over there on the gallery wall, but when I try to find out exactly where this feeling is and what it is about the thing, or about me, that is the reason why I'm having this feeling, I can't isolate it without ruining what precisely is beautiful about it. (AAE, 95)

Thinking about art in such a way led Morton to the realization that – in the context of solving environmental issues – maybe we do not need to have a rational reason, a well-structured ethical concept, or a clear ethical norm to act morally (i.e., ecologically sustainable). Perhaps we can start from our ignorance and the feeling of the uncanny. Maybe those two are enough for immediate moral action. Or, as Morton briefly puts it: "Perhaps indifference itself is pointing to a way to care for humans and nonhumans in a less violent way – simply allowing them to exist, like pieces of paper in your hand, like a story you might appreciate – or not – for no reason" (AAE, 103).

With this provocative way of thinking, Morton tried to draw attention to the fact that it is not difficult to be "environmentally aware" (AAE, 105). Namely, we are naturally part of the environment in which other non-human beings live – and which *have* or *should have* the same right to flourish just like us. This, Morton believes, is also reflected in art, which, as the title of this book suggests, is "ecological" by itself. Therefore, one should keep in mind Morton's important message: "You don't have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological" (AAE, 105).

In conclusion, the book *All Art is Ecological* provides a provocative and entertaining, but no less concise and instructive study into the nature of the relationship between art and ecological awareness – from the perspective of one of the leading object-oriented ontologists of our time. In that sense, this book can also be read as a short introduction to Morton's philosophy, which judging by his other books, provides solid theoretical foundations for a critical reflection on the contemporary human condition.



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