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Editorial

Once again, I have the privilege of presenting to you the 26th edition of the ESJP—the second issue of this academic year. I would like to start by thanking our editors and authors for taking on the challenge of putting this edition together amidst thesis deadlines and the usual end-of-year busyness. Menno, Kasper, Sterre, Ties, Héctor, Umut Derman, Jake, Charlie, Alice, and Sofya: thank you for the attention and care you bring to your editorial work. with which you conduct the editorial work. We could not have done this without Jasper Peters, our secretary, whose diligent coordination kept all of us on track. Special thanks go to the authors of this issue: Alexander Legebeke, Caspar Smink, Sieb Brouwer, and Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra. To the latter, a heartfelt thank-you: not only did she contribute as an author, but she also served as interview-editor and kindly assisted with the final revision and formatting of this edition. Thank you to Prof. Dr. Willem Schinkel for generously making time for the journal. Finally, I would also like to extend gratitude to the members of our faculty who help keep this journal alive by nominating student work and reviewing submissions for potential publication.

This edition certainly stands on its own, but I cannot help finding it a beautiful coincidence that, together with the previous issue, it forms a kind of dialogue. Across both editions, the texts speak, each in their own way, to a central philosophical concern: the reverberations of the set of assumptions that underpin Modern Western philosophy. In the last edition, we saw reflections on the role of art in political struggles, the constitution of the European subject, and the intergenerational consequences of waste. This time, the focus turns to the human–nature dichotomy: its consequences, and the forms of thought that sustain—or perhaps emerge from—it (a chicken-and-egg problem, if you will).

Alexander shows how this dichotomy was already being contested in Romanticism and traces how that *ethos* echoes through contemporary philosophical critique, specifically in the work of Theodor W. Adorno. Georgina examines how such binary thinking has shaped scientific practices in psychology and the ways we conceive of the mind. Caspar argues that contemporary issues like climate change cannot be understood apart from the philosophies that shape our relationship to nature, and offers an ecological, assemblage-based perspective that does not just bridge, but helps us to overcome, this division. Sieb takes an analytical approach to the same problem, exploring how climate change raises the ethical question of whether it is possible to exploit future generations, and what the consequences of such exploitation might be. Finally, Georgina sits down with Professor Willem for a wide-ranging conversation that's almost meta in nature, touching on his academic practice, writing and reading routines (which may feel familiar to many philosophy students), and how we might craft a more meaningful academic path beyond what is traditionally laid out before us.

Together with our previous issue, this edition is an invitation: to rethink how we engage with the world, to revisit the philosophical concepts we take for granted, and to reflect on the relationships we form—both within the university and beyond.

Heloísa Nerone

Editor-in-chief

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About

The Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy (ESJP) is a double-blind peer-reviewed student journal that publishes the best philosophical papers written by students from the Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam and from the Humanities Programme of the Erasmus University College. Its aims are to further enrich the philosophical environment in which Rotterdam's philosophy students develop their thinking and bring their best work to the attention of a wider intellectual audience. Aside from serving as an important academic platform for students to present their work, the journal has two other goals. First, to provide members of the editorial board with the opportunity to develop their own editing and writing skills. Second, to enable students to realize their first official academic publication during their time as a student at ESPhil or the Humanities Department of the EUC. A new issue of the ESJP appears on our website every June.

To ensure the highest possible quality, the ESJP only accepts papers that (a) have been written for a course that is part of the Erasmus University College or Erasmus School of Philosophy curriculum and (b) nominated for publication in the ESJP by the teacher of that course. Each paper that is published in the ESJP is subjected to a double-blind peer review process in which at least one other teacher and two student editors act as referees.

The ESJP encourages students to keep in mind the possibility of publishing their course papers in our journal, and to write papers that appeal to a wider intellectual audience.

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In this Issue

In **The Senselessness of Reason: *On the Similitude Between Theodor W. Adorno's Critical Thinking and the Ethos of Early German Romanticism in Schiller and Novalis***, Alexander Legebeke reassesses Theodor W. Adorno's critical thinking as presented in the Dialectic of Enlightenment. The research proposes to read Adorno's work in light of a new set of foundations that take into account his literary style and philosophical thought. These foundations are those of early German Romanticism. To understand Adorno's German Romantic foundations, the philosopher's critical thinking will be compared to two prominent figures of early German Romanticism: Friedrich Schiller and Novalis. Their commonality lies in the fact that all these thinkers, belonging to the German Romantic movement and the Frankfurt School, represented a current of thought notable for their criticism of the Enlightenment. The author argues that Adorno's work can be better understood when considering its German Romantic ethos.

In **The Mind at an Impasse**, Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra aims to position 4E cognition within the genre of the sciences of the mind. What is 4E, a mind embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive, really? Is it a trend, a hype, a research programme, a farce, or a matter of plain faith? The paper unfolds in a structure of three parts, each with its own conceptual aim and rhythm. Across parts, Georgina attempts to disturb nets of self-evidence, drawing from Mark Fisher and a variety of other improbable scholars. Part I renders tangible the affective and material context of cognitive science and psychology as a genre. It moves through the genre's uneasy relationship with crisis, capitalism, and methodology, and traces the cybernetic origins of the mind as machine. Part II offers the conceptual backbone of the four E's, with fleeting associations. Part III centres on hope, the gesture of rendering contingent of mind–brain–body foundations, and on the imagination that may be invoked with the mind running amok.

Western modes of thought have commonly granted human beings, because of our ability to use reason, a primary position in its hierarchical categorization of the world and have formulated a worldview in which we occupy an exceptional position that is ontologically opposed to the position of other living and non-living things. However, this anthropocentric view of the world – and consequent nature-culture split – is problematic, especially when considering its environmental implications in the face of climate change. In his essay **Ecological Modes of Thinking in Times of Crisis: *On Assemblage Theory and its Implications***, Caspar Smink argues that instead of thinking about the world in the context of this nature-culture dichotomy, one should take an ecological perspective. This is because insights from the field of ecology severely problematize this dichotomy. Smink presents ecological thinking in the context of the concept of the assemblage, as formulated in the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, hereby showing what ecological thinking would entail philosophically.

In his essay **Exploiting Posterity**, Sieb Brouwer advances an alternative interpretation of intergenerational justice: the current generation exploits posterity through the unjust exercise of arbitrary power for personal gain. Unlike existing accounts on intergenerational exploitation that focus on fair reciprocity or fair shares, this paper centres on the concept of domination. The author argues that our relation towards posterity is understood as a domination relation, in which the future generations are subject to the unchecked power of the current generation. Exploitation occurs when present people instrumentalise this domination position for personal benefit. The claim is illustrated with a climate proposal by Broome and Foley (2016), which advocates that future generations should compensate contemporaries for climate mitigation efforts, showing

how such a transaction, even if mutually beneficial, constitutes intergenerational exploitation due to underlying power imbalances. Ultimately, the essay calls for a reorientation of intergenerational justice towards addressing these power asymmetries directly through mechanisms such as proxy representation for posterity.

"Only ever thinking with": *An interview with Willem Schinkel*. Interview editor Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra speaks with Prof. Dr. Willem Schinkel about the *how* of thinking, to share how his commitment to imagining less violent ways of living, gives form to his intellectual practice. They spoke about humour, and the role of taste, reading associatively, and the work that is needed to write at all; the banging-your-head-against-the-wall-of-it-all. From working with students to writing together, amidst the stories we may craft, we must remind ourselves and put into practice: there is only ever thinking with.

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The Senselessness of Reason

On The Similitude Between Theodor W. Adorno's Critical Thinking and The Ethos of Early German Romanticism in Schiller and Novalis

Alexander Legebeke

This paper reassesses Theodor W. Adorno's (1903–1969) critical thinking in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Readers may find Adorno's arguments ambiguous without understanding his literary style and intellectual attitude. To make Adorno's thought less ambiguous, I suggest that we should interpret his work through a specific Early German Romantic attitude, which reflects his style and philosophical thinking. A deeper analysis reveals the similarities between Adorno and the Early German Romantic movement, highlighting his philosophical affinities and structural echoes with Early German Romanticism. In Adorno's thinking, we find motifs such as aesthetic mediation, myth, ambivalence, purposelessness, human drives, a critique of the political sphere as being too rational, and a critique of disengagement from nature. All of these themes can be traced back to Early German Romanticism. Ultimately, I argue that Adorno's work can be better understood when considering its Early German Romantic *ethos*.

To understand the German Romantic movement, this paper will focus on the thought of Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) and Friedrich von Hardenberg, more commonly known as Novalis (1772–1801). Both Schiller and Novalis were born almost 150 years before Adorno. Therefore, one might wonder what these thinkers have in common. The commonality is found in the fact that all of these thinkers, belonging to the German Romantic movement and the Frankfurt School, represented a current of thought notable for their criticism of the Enlightenment. The common denominator for Schiller, Novalis, and Adorno is the form and content in which their criticism is presented. This paper includes a comparative conceptual analysis of Schiller and Adorno's work. For Schiller, there will be a focus on *The Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters,* in which Schiller sets out his philosophical thinking, written and published between 1794 and 1795, following the Reign of Terror. For Adorno, the focus will be on his book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he co-wrote with his intellectual companion, Max Horkheimer, in 1944 and was published in 1947, just after the end of the Holocaust. Throughout this paper, it is essential to remember that these historical conditions, both the Reign of Terror and the Holocaust, are direct motivations for the critique of these authors. In both Schiller's and Adorno's writings, we find a clear indication of their philosophical critique directed at the material reality of their time. The critique of instrumental reason, which stems from Enlightenment thinking, is the core of this philosophical response, according to which it is the cause that led to the atrocities. While we consider the philosophical arguments by Schiller and Adorno, Novalis's work will help define the anti-Enlightenment attitude. Novalis's poetry and philosophy suggest a sensuous approach to experiencing the world. The form we find in Novalis's poem is similar to Adorno's. This aligns with the critique of instrumental reason by Schiller and Adorno, who, through an emphasis on sensibility, aim to reconcile our thinking with nature and, reciprocally, to integrate nature into our thinking, rather than distinguishing it from nature as Enlightenment thinkers proposed. According to these authors, if this reconciliation is successful, then human cruelty will be reduced. As will be presented, Novalis's form and Schiller's content are found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

This paper will be structured as follows: first, a presentation will be made of how Novalis defines the Early Romantic *ethos*, focusing on the form of the critique. Second, there will be a presentation of Schiller's *Letters*, focusing on the content of the critique and how this critique is the theoretical foundation

of the Early Romantic *ethos*. Third, we will assess how this *ethos* helps us better understand Adorno's position in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The *Ethos* of Early German Romanticism

I live in the daytime
In faith and in might:
And in holy rapture
I die every night.
–Novalis, *Hymns to the Night*

The fragment of Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* is a prime example of German Romantic poetry. A few concepts can be recognised within this fragment. In the poem, we find an intense use of antagonistic concepts, such as pain and pleasure, rest and moment, and, as presented here, life and death, and day and night. These antagonistic concepts are precisely what defines the *ethos* of German Romanticism. They evoke ambivalence through their contradictions, all of which are present in the small fragment from Novalis's long poem. To understand this fragment, it is essential to grasp the intellectual influence of Novalis. Novalis was greatly inspired by J. G. Fichte (1762–1814), as he wrote extensively on Fichte's novel philosophy in his *Fichte Studies*, which date from 1795 and 1796 (Cahen-Maurel 2019, 142). The reader of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* must bear in mind that Adorno's arguments do not rely on strict argumentative processes; rather, through the contradiction and ambivalence of his arguments, the reader will understand that his arguments present themselves naturally through their internal movement. This movement is determined by the 'I,' an idea first formulated by Fichte.

Furthermore, in Fichte's philosophy, the concept of *Imagination* plays a key role. One of the characteristics of this philosophy is the synthesis of opposites, as seen in the fragment of Novalis's poem. In his *Foundations of the Science of Knowledge* (1794–1795), Fichte outlined a philosophy that centred on 'creative imagination.' This 'creative imagination' "is the power of our I that allows us to integrate and synthesise two opposing elements into our knowledge and cognition" (Cahen-Maurel 2019, 142). For Fichte, these opposing components are the 'I' and the 'Not-I,' the ideal and the real. The principle defining the core process of the 'creative imagination' is what Fichte calls reciprocal action. The following quote from the *Foundations*, cited by Cahen-Maurel, characterises the Romantic project and its reliance on a Fichtean understanding of the imagination, which Novalis was to embark on later:

> This power [imagination] is almost always misunderstood, but it is the power that combines into a unity, things constantly posited in opposition to each other, the power that intervenes between moments that would have to mutually annul each other and retains both. … The task was to unite two terms posited in opposition to each other, the I and the Not-I. They can be completely united by the power of imagination, which unites items posited in opposition to each other. (Cahen-Maurel 2019, 142)

For Novalis, Fichte's use of the word 'creative imagination' was not radical enough because it did not succeed in synthesising poetry and philosophy (Wulf 2023, 206). The Romantic project aimed to synthesise this aspect of Fichte's philosophy. The word 'romantic' was coined in the first edition of *Athenaeum* by Novalis and Schlegel (Wulf 2023, 203). *Athenaeum* was primarily a collaboration between Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829); their collaboration became known as the Jena Circle. Schlegel was a pivotal figure within the German Romantic movement. Schlegel founded a specific term for their collective efforts: *Symphilosophie*. *Symphilosophie* "is the true name of our connection," is what Schlegel wrote to Novalis in 1797 (Wulf 2023, 208). It was a concept based on the idea that two (or more) minds could achieve their full potential together (Wulf 2023, 208). As will appear later, the *Symphilosophical* form becomes important for Adorno's writing process of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For Novalis and Adorno, philosophising together

becomes an important aspect to overcome problematic dichotomies. If two self-determined 'I's' work together, the contradictions of their thought will present themselves through the reciprocal engagement.

For Novalis and Schlegel, romanticising meant approaching a totality in which everything connected. It connects life and the arts, individuals and society, humanity and nature. Novalis writes: "By giving the commonplace a deeper meaning, making the ordinary seem mysterious, granting the known the dignity of the unknown and giving the finite a touch of infinity, I romanticise" (Wulf 2023, 204). In this quote from his *Fragments*, an ambivalent attitude is noticeable—a vital characteristic of the Romantic way of seeing things. In 1800, Schlegel published a crucial essay in the journal *Athenaeum,* which elaborated on the notion of Romanticism. In *Gespräch über die Poesie*, he explicitly stated that '*das romantische*' cannot be expressed in terms of some genre. Alternatively, he affirms that the Romantic "is not a 'kind', but: an 'element' of literature" (Beiser 2006, 15). The foundations of their circle were built on the Greek conception of poetry (*poiētikós*), meaning 'creative' or 'productive,' which the Jena Circle transformed into an attitude to possess (Beiser 2006, 16). This attitude is an important 'element' within the Jena Circle. For the Romantics, possessing *poiētikós* means not merely a literal creative production, but a permanent, holistic approach to life and the world. If one possesses this attitude, subsequently, the literary production will consist of the Romantic element. The romantic attitude implies a different approach to the subject-object 'problem' of the Enlightenment thinker; however, the Romantics do not conceive of such a problem, as they aimed to integrate nature into their existence. Through *poiētikós*, they approached nature as something 'creative' while they were 'producing' this specific nature, thus nullifying the subject-object dichotomy. In Adorno, we also find this poetic attitude, as the romantic element in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is reflected in the lenient approach of his arguments. Adorno does not instrumentalise his thought; in that case, when reading his book, we should remind ourselves of the romantic elements, i.e., the productive force of the book.

Furthermore, the Romantic movement was a self-conscious antithesis to the Enlightenment ideals of the 18th century. Novalis's transcendental philosophy was an attempt to break away from the attitude which prioritises rational utility over sensible experience, which had been a core aspect of Enlightenment thought.[1] The answer to this division was the Romantic *Naturphilosophie,* which rested on the premise that the logical disjunctions of Kant's system were problematic. Novalis referred to his philosophy as 'magical idealism.' According to Cahen-Maurel, Novalis's magical idealism "is a serious reflection on the interweaving and positive intersection of the empirical and the rational, the sensible and the supersensible, sensibility and reality. In other words, […] magical idealism sees itself as a continuation of a program within the tradition of transcendental philosophy that attempts to reconcile or synthesise apparent opposites" (Cahen-Maurel 2019, 146). Within this program, Novalis sought to transcend the strong classifications and dichotomies established by the Enlightenment. Subsequently, the conception of nature had become explicitly disentangled from what was human. The opposition between Kant and the Jena circle was felt on both sides of the divide. As Beiser writes: "Probably no other aspect of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* has aroused the wrath of its neo-Kantian critics more than its organic concept of nature" (Beiser 2006, 154). According to the Romantics, Kant had been unable to produce a theory of the interaction between nature and freedom. On the other hand, authors like Schelling, who was also part of the Jena circle, wanted to "show that the constitutive status of the idea of an organism is the necessary condition of the possibility of experience" (Beiser 2006, 154). In other words, Schelling and other *Naturphilosophen* demonstrated that the nature of our mind is already integrated into the nature of the Universe, as in the 'objective' world (Ruiter and Ziche 2022,

[1] We find the Enlightenment *ethos* already in the preface of *The Great Instauration* (1620) by Francis Bacon: "It appears to me that men know not either their acquirements or their powers. Hence it arises that, either estimating the arts they have become acquainted with at an absurd value, they require nothing more, or forming too low an opinion of themselves, they waste their powers on trivial objects, without attempting any thing to the purpose." Bacon's emphasis on human power to utilise it for a *purpose* instead of making art, which he calls trivial objects, is a statement Novalis sought to reverse.

15–16). They claimed that Nature and mind are the same. Schelling explains that Nature should be encountered as an organism which evolves within nature.

As a consequence, there is no difference between a particular kind in this organic whole, only between certain stages such as subject and object (Beiser 2006, 168). For Schelling, the subject and object are only one part of a big unity. This unity manifests itself in various forms. Its concrete expression is in the form of equilibria in which antagonistic forces, just like the subject and the object, are realised. However, the Romantic attempt to overcome the dualisms was, of course, not without problems. The Romantics tried to emphasise the importance of the relationship between humankind and nature. To emphasise this, the Jena Circle aspired to give art a central role in German culture. It was mainly the Romantic Movement's growing social and political consciousness in the wake of the French Revolution that led them to develop a way of integrating art into social and political reform. Schlegel echoes this goal in *Athenaeum*: "[The French Revolution] prepared the German people for the high ideals of a republic by giving them moral, political and aesthetic education" (Beiser 2006, 49). Aesthetic education, in other words, was a necessary condition for societal reform. Schiller had written about this form of education a couple of years earlier, in his *Letters,* as we will see later. As Beiser comments: "In assigning such importance to art, the young Romantics proved themselves to be the disciples of Schiller" (Beiser 2006, 50). In the next section, we will see how Schiller's philosophy shaped the foundations of the presented Romantic *ethos* in Novalis and his *Symphilosophical* companions of the Jena Circle. As we will see, Schiller's philosophy especially emphasises that a culture which forms itself through aesthetic experience can oppose the instrumental attitude. This instrumental attitude is also identified by Adorno, who describes how political bodies utilise reason to dominate other humans.

Friedrich Schiller and Instrumental Reason

According to Schiller, Kant still adhered to nature as a causal-relational mechanism. Nature was only explained on theoretical grounds; in contrast to Novalis or Schelling, we, as humans, were not regarded as part of nature, which, according to them, is shown by experience. Instead, our dominant attitude towards the inquiry of nature displayed our arrogance. Consequently, this shaped our reason as an instrument which aimed to control this dominance over nature. Therefore, according to Schiller, the Enlightenment had only proven itself to be a 'theoretical culture'—an aesthetic component for "the actual barbarians" (Safranski 2016, 41). The task of the philosopher was to transform this 'theoretical culture' into a culture in which humanity is genuinely free. Schiller argued that the aesthetic world is not only a playground for the refinement of sense perception (*aísthēsis*), but that the aesthetic realm brings humanity to its essence. Schiller calls this essence the *homo ludens* (the human being who plays). If *homo ludens* does not fulfil its essential potential, society may be at risk. Schiller would argue that, due to our play drive (*Spieltrieb*), our 'animalistic satisfactions' will become subject to sublimation, helping our animalistic side to dignify and become human, while at the same time allowing our drives to constitute us as humans. Furthermore, according to Schiller, art will unveil our 'barbaric lawless drifts,' or those aspects of ourselves that Schiller calls 'drives.' When unveiled, we can direct these drives for the better.

For Schiller, the drives dehumanise our society, but we can overcome them if we educate ourselves and society through the arts. Later, for Adorno, this would become vital for his understanding of the socio-behavioural patterns of the masses as influenced by the culture industry, which, according to Adorno, numbed and mechanised human behaviour. Nonetheless, with his presented aesthetic theory, Schiller suggested that through play, humanity would eventually acquire its humanness: one feels the feeling, enjoys the enjoyment, and loves the loving. These duplications are exactly what, later in 1798, with the founding of *Athenaeum*, inspired the Jena Romantics. Through these duplications, Schiller criticises the increasing

instrumentality found within reason. Post-French Revolution society and *Aufklärung*-driven systems of thought are both subjugated to the laws of utility and justification. For Schiller, this instrumental type of reason becomes a social machine, what he calls a "steel cage" (Safranski 2016, 43). Schiller writes:

> *Utility* is the great idol of the age, to which all powers are in thrall and all talent must pay homage. […] The spirit of philosophical inquiry strips the power of imagination one province after another; the borders of art shrink as science extends its bounds (Schiller 2016, 5–6).

As we see, Schiller's concept of utility is closely aligned with the conditions of his time; the purposiveness of thinking often neglects philosophical contemplation. This aspect is also prominent in Adorno's thinking, as he identifies a problematic commodification of artistic expression that dulls the masses. Eventually, according to Adorno, even cultural expressions become a means for political ends. In Schiller, we already find the need for a culture which does not seek to find purpose in cultural expressions. As for Schiller, no systematic explanatory justifications are needed for being, feeling, loving, and caring. These aspects of life have no goals in themselves; they are not inherently meaningful because they do not serve as a means to another end. They are meaningful because they are genuine for what they are. Schiller also describes art in this sense. Art, like religion, serves society; if it wants to serve society, in a certain sense, it must come naturally and without intention (Safranski 2016, 45). For Schiller, art is, therefore, first and foremost a kind of drive for play, second, a means in *itself*, and lastly, the compensation for social deformation. This coincides with the Romantic *Naturphilosophie,* which also tried to overcome these problems of instrumentalization, as Beiser emphasised that "Schelling, Hegel, Schlegel, and Novalis did not wish to retain or revive the old metaphysical notion of providence, according to which everything in nature follows a plan. Rather, they believed that their teleology is completely intrinsic, limited to the ends of nature itself" (2006, 161). Thus, nature's laws are not applied; they are inherent to nature itself.

Furthermore, Schiller writes: "The antagonism of the powers is the great instrument of culture" (2016, 22). Schiller understood that through these antagonisms, society leaned towards the dialectics of the *Aufklärung*, which, through its logic, reasoned everything within a mathematical or mechanistic framework. This made any form of humanness abstruse. Schiller sought to confront precisely this complexity. With his introduction of playing human, we can attain, through art, a better self and a better society—a truly liberated humankind. For Schiller, with Robespierre as its figurehead, the French Revolution had become a 'theoretical culture,' identical to his description of the *Aufklärung*. Its terror, atrocities, and aggression are realised by what Schiller calls the "terror of reason" (Safranski 2016, 45). To understand how Schiller's aesthetic philosophy anticipates critiques of reason later taken up by Adorno, we must look more closely at his *Letters*. In the Second letter, Schiller writes, after his claims on *Utility* as "the great idol of the age," as earlier presented:

> The gaze of both philosophers and man of the world is now fixed expectantly on the political domain, where the very fate of humanity is argued out; or so it is thought. Does not any failure to join with this argument betray a culpable indifference to the welfare of society? (Schiller 2016, 6)

The 'idol of his age' has to do with the political bodies dominating society, as reflected in the second letter. Just as Adorno, Schiller's problems with politics stem from the political urge to rationalise and instrumentalise all societal expression; therefore, the politician does not leave any space for non-purposive aesthetic expression. This is more evident when Schiller turns his attention to the political climate of his day. For Schiller, the increasing rationalisation of political processes obscures the self-determining nature of humans. The Political bodies that decide upon the 'fate' of humans tend to mould society into a rational system. However, for Schiller, the systematisation of society is what leads to division, which strays away

from the natural ways in which humans organise themselves. Schiller further notes this in the Third letter, writing:

> This natural state (as any political body derives its original existence from forces and not from laws can be called) does stand in contradiction to moral man, for whom the only law should be to act in conformity with the law; but it is sufficient for physical man, who gives himself laws only so that he might come to terms with forces. (Schiller 2016, 8)

The law-giving nature of humans lies in the fact that we express ourselves aesthetically, which forms our morality. Thus, according to Schiller, aesthetic experience leads us to a more moral culture. For Adorno, this also becomes an important topic; the increasing commodification of the culture industry negates the creative and productive expressions of the human spirit, which would have educated the individual in becoming a moral being. Instead, the culture industry, like a machine, expresses pre-established forms of culture and expressions, which deform our aesthetic experience into a machine-like mechanism. Adorno claims that the political bodies determine the logic of these expressions. Schiller already identified this as stemming from Enlightenment rationality, which corrupted the political economy of his time. In the Fifth letter, Schiller writes:

> The enlightenment of understanding that the finer ranks not unjustly praise has, on the whole, had so little refining influence on resolve that it has instead tended to reinforce corruption through principle. (Schiller 2016, 15)

This corruptive *ethos* of thinking based on principles obscures the aesthetic experience. Therefore, according to Schiller, the political bodies of Schiller's epoch should educate the masses on sensible experience. In the final letters, Schiller makes an anthropological argument for the need of aesthetic education, i.e., "the emancipation of man from nature in the artwork which preserves us as sensuous beings" (Schmidt 2016, xxix–xxx). As Schiller writes in the Twenty-sixth letter:

> The emancipating aesthetic mood has to be a gift of nature; only the favour of chance can loosen the fetters of the original physical condition and lead the savage to beauty. (Schiller 2016, 99)

Schiller's historical conditions gave rise to his critique of the increasingly significant instrumental reason within the society and politics of his time. This critique is found within his concepts of 'utility' and 'terror of reason.' Schiller's aesthetic education aims to overcome the problematic inclinations that plague his epoch. This epoch is characterised by an increasing rational understanding of nature and political bodies that determine people's lives. Concerning these two problematic developments, we will see that Adorno expresses a similar critique.

Dialectic of Enlightenment: An Excavation

Now we will examine how the *ethos,* as presented in Schiller and Novalis, is reflected in Adorno's thinking. The eclectic character of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* makes the contents enigmatic. Adorno employs methods from history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism to investigate the concept of Enlightenment and its emphasis on positivism and reason. Apart from the interdisciplinary research within the content itself, the contents are also written in a literary style, as Rose writes: "It is impossible to understand Adorno's ideas without understanding how he presents them, that is his style" (Rose 2014, 14). The book bases its style and philosophy on the notion of dialectic. This can be traced to Novalis's fragment of *Hymns to the Night*, where Novalis conveys the contradictions inherent in our thinking. The book itself does not present any instrumentality, as Adorno is not concerned with persuasion, but instead formally presents how our thinking has been shaped.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* originated from the *Symphilosophical* efforts of three people. The conversations of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Gretel Adorno were carefully transcribed into texts and reassessed by the three (Van Nieuwstadt 2021, 277). The process of thinking, writing, and working was motivated, as Novalis and Schlegel described, by the idea that two (or more) minds could reach a greater potential. In 1941, Adorno asked Horkheimer: "When will we be sitting in the garden while dictating, erasing, and carrion-eating (*lämmergeiern*)?" (Van Nieuwstadt 2021, 277). *Lämmergeiern* means to strip off a text just like a vulture would strip off a carcass. Their *Lämmergeiern*, in particular, exemplifies the extreme nature of their *Symphilosophie*. Gretel's contribution here was of much importance; Adorno writes in Minima Moralia: "It [Gretel's dictations] enables the writer to manoeuvre himself into the position of a critic at the earliest stage of the production process" (Van Nieuwstadt 2021, 278). In this production process, the three were preoccupied with specific themes and concepts to be implemented in their work, such as the notion of dialectics, the subject-object dichotomy, science as an apparatus of power, and the human urge to dominate nature. The form and content of Adorno's book resonate with the Early German Romantic *ethos*.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* it is claimed that our reason can rationalise any form of instrumentality; thus, also the systematic killing of a group of people can be rationalised if the political body propagates that this is useful for a greater good. For Adorno, the Holocaust is proof that rationality had failed, because how is it possible that through centuries of scientific and philosophical development humankind eventually, through political organisation, killed 6 million people? He argued that the fact that we want to systematise thinking and reflect this systematisation into institutions and political control has shaped our reason as a tool. This tool eventually led to the atrocity of the Holocaust. Adorno's analysis of the holocaust strongly resonates with Schiller's account of the political bodies which decide upon human fate.

This made Adorno echo that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 6). Apart from political instrumentality, the ever-evolving sciences are also guilty of utilising humans and nature. Positivists, the heirs of the mechanistic philosopher of the Enlightenment, were the 19th and 20th-century vanguards of using mathematical calculations to justify scrutiny of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer's critical attitude towards this contemporary current of thought is very prominent. With their critique of positivism, they, just like Schiller, call on a resurrection of artistic endeavour, which in their day has been neglected. For Adorno and Horkheimer, art "still has something in common with enchantment: it posits its own", and to "which special laws apply" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 18). The reverse is presented in the following quote, where Adorno and Horkheimer attack their current-day culture, which increasingly tries to integrate art into science:

> With the progress of the Enlightenment, only authentic works of art were able to avoid the mere imitation of that which already is. The practicable antithesis of art and science, which tears them apart as separate areas of culture in order to make them both manageable as areas of culture, ultimately allows them, by dint of their own tendencies, to blend with one another even as exact contraries. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 18)

As Novalis tried, Adorno propagates the dissolution of strict opposites; for him, art can become science, and science can become art. In that sense, Adorno looks at these expressions as two categories of a unified whole, just as the Jena Romantics argued. On the contrary, the systemising of the world has led to strong dichotomies whereby nothing is connected as a whole. These dichotomies were also firmly rejected by the Romantic movement and its *Naturphilosophie*. For Adorno and the Romantics, the world is not a system; as experience always flows, so does the world. Therefore, you cannot grasp it in a system. A page later, Adorno and Horkheimer formulate a rare praise to none other than Schelling and his notions on art and nature, writing:

> According to Schelling, art comes into play where knowledge forsakes humankind. For him, it is 'the prototype of science, and only where there is art may science enter in'. In his theory, the separation of image and sign is 'wholly cancelled by every single artistic representation'. The bourgeois world was but rarely open to such confidence in art. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 19)

This confidence in art is a significant feature of the Romantic period. Schiller and Novalis had already emphasised the importance of artistic expression in regaining a sense-dominated attitude towards nature, rather than a senseless one. As Schiller emphasised, this senseless attitude became obvious in society, where humans are abstracted from their nature and subject to their self-preserving drifts, without any prospect of overcoming them. For Schiller, this led to political institutions arguing about humanity's fate. Adorno and Horkheimer repeat this, writing:

> However, the more the process of self-preservation is affected by the bourgeois division of labour, the more it requires the self-alienation of the individuals who must model their body and soul according to the technical apparatus. […] in the end the transcendental subject of cognition is apparently abandoned as the last reminiscence of subjectivity. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 30)

This division of labour has made humankind follow the mechanical laws that the Enlightenment formulated. Even humans become cogs in a wheel, their existence becomes a mere means to utilise the ends of the political body. Everything becomes a rational web of construction; in that sense, spontaneous expression becomes impossible. Adorno and Horkheimer were very well aware of this Romantic *ethos*, writing: "As the organ of this kind of adaptation, as a mere construction of means, the Enlightenment is as destructive as its Romantic enemies accuse it of being" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 42). This destruction became apparent with the historical conditions which embedded both currents of thought. During the *Reign* of the brutal revolutionaries and of the Nazis, the terror with which they handled society was rationalised as a sacrifice for the greater good, followed by 'blind' citizens. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, ideology pollutes our reason and alienates humankind from nature.

For the National Socialists, their German 'home' (*Heimat*) with its heritage was the opposite of a nomadic culture like that of Jews, who are not at home anywhere. The Nazi propagandist utilised many forms of mythification for the cause for which young men should sacrifice their life. For Adorno and Horkheimer, home is nature itself. To emphasise this very notion of homelessness, Adorno and Horkheimer quote Novalis, writing: "Novalis's definition, according to which 'all philosophy is homesickness', holds only if this longing is not dissolved into phantasm of a lost remote antiquity, but represents the homeland, nature itself, as wrested from myth" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 78). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the myth that needs to be wrested is the instrumentality with which the Nazi's justify their atrocities. For Novalis, it is the philosopher who, due to his arrogant thinking, becomes too far removed from his natural home.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, myth is interchangeable with Enlightenment; their famous quote, which, according to them, summarises the first essay, echoes: "Myth is already Enlightenment and Enlightenment reverts to mythology" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, xvi). In the anonymous manifesto *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* (1796/97), we find the Romantics criticising the significantly increasing demystifying nature of rational thought, which resonates with Adorno's notion that mythical thinking becomes rational. Rationality, as in the practice of their current day prestigious philosophers, i.e. the Enlightened philosopher, has made 'thought' something which can acquire absolute knowledge. For the Romantics, knowledge is, of course, ambivalent and dialectical, something which constantly changes. However, mythology should not become something which retracts society's interest in philosophical thought. The dialectics of mythology, as the Romantics write in the manifesto, should launch the ever-fluid Romantic attitude as found in their conception of *poiētikós*:

> Before we make ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythological, they will have no interest for the people. Conversely, before mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Hence, finally, the enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands: mythology must become philosophical to make people rational, and philosophy must become mythological to make philosophers sensuous. (Anon 1996, 5)

As Schiller formulated, aesthetic education would be the saviour of this desire for utility and power. For Schiller, things should be as they are, i.e., art as art. Adorno and Horkheimer were aware of this, but they concluded that the Romantic project was reversed in bourgeois society due to drastic societal changes and the structures of late capitalism. They write:

> The principle of idealistic aesthetics – purposefulness without a purpose – reverses the scheme of things to which bourgeois art conforms socially: purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 158)

As we see, Adorno adheres to the Early Romantic notion that in experience, things come as they are. Adorno's novel and groundbreaking analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are formed by a certain ambivalence towards reason, just as presented in Schiller and Novalis, because Adorno's dialectics seeks mediation, the perfect equilibrium of sense and reason, in the hope that it integrates itself into nature. This equilibrium is at best formulated in the last essay, which marks the entire book, quoting at length:

> Between the true object and the undisputed data of the senses, between within and without, there is a gulf which the subject must bridge at his own risk. In order to reflect the thing as it is, the subject must return to it more than he receives from it. The subject creates the world outside himself from the traces which it leaves in his senses: the unity of the thin in its manifold characteristics and states; and therefore, constitutes the "I" retrospectively by learning to grant a synthetic unity not only to the external impressions but to the internal impressions which gradually separate off from them. The real ego is the most recent constant product of projection. In a process which could only be completed historically with the developed powers of the human physiological constitution, it developed as a unified and, at the same time, eccentric function. Even as an independently objectified ego, it is only equivalent to the significance of the world of object for it. The inner depth of the subject consists in nothing other than delicacy and wealth of the external world of perceptions. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 188–189)

Additionally, Adorno's attitude strongly resonates with this perspective, especially in his discussion relating to idealism and positivism: the attitude of *poiētikós* aligns with his positioning concerning the dichotomies; he neither positions himself as an idealist nor as a positivist but instead aims to overcome them. Thus, how does he overcome these dichotomies? Similar to Fichte, he argues that the constant dynamics between the realisation of the 'I' and the world will liberate our nature. In the consecutive passage, Adorno and Horkheimer explain this phenomenon through mediation. Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) Romanticism is evident after he formulates the mediation between the dichotomies:

> If it proceeds positivistically, merely recording given facts without giving any in return, it shrinks to a point. If it idealistically creates the world from its own groundless basis, it plays itself out in dull repetition. In both cases it gives up the spirit. Only in that mediation by which meaningless sensations brings a thought to the full productivity of which it is capable, while on the other hand thought abandons itself without reservation to the predominant impression, is that pathological loneliness which characterises the whole of nature overcome. The possibilities of reconciliation appears not in certainty unaffected by thought, in the preconceptual unity of perception and object but in their considered opposition. The distinction is made in the subject, which has the external world in its own consciousness and yet recognises it as something other. Therefore, the life of reason, takes place as conscious projection. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 188–189)

Adorno and Horkheimer summarise their relationship to reason and nature in this extended quote. Humankind must not merely positivistically conceive the world, as this neglects the human subject. The same holds for the idealistic approach, as it places humanity in a circularity of its sense impressions. Only in

its mediation, that is, the mediation between the dichotomies, might our sense and reason be reconciled. If humankind actively tries to reconcile its sense and reason, we might overcome the rationalisation of our senses and the, perhaps much more potent, senselessness of our reason.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Adorno's critical thinking can be understood more coherently if the Romantic *ethos* is taken into consideration. His fragmentary structure and ambivalent argumentation often create a stumbling block. By understanding his intellectual tendencies, we can come closer to reconstructing Adorno's thinking. This research reconstructed his thinking through two essential exponents of the German Romantic movement: Schiller and Novalis.

The romantic qualities presented by Novalis's poetic fragment are assigned to Adorno as they are found in the form and content of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. First, the fragment from *Hymns to the Night* conveyed a strong ambivalent attitude through its paradoxical notions. The notions can be found in Adorno's ambivalent attitude toward idealism and positivism. Second, like F. Schlegel and Novalis, Adorno operates through *Symphilosophical* methods. This is illustrated in what Adorno calls *lämmergeiern*. Third, within the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno fiercely criticises Enlightenment thinking, which is also part of the theoretical foundations of German romanticism. Moreover, ultimately, like the *Naturphilosophen*, Adorno reflects on the interconnection of our thinking and nature, proposing an integration of our thinking into nature and vice versa. As mentioned, this way of thinking was first proposed by Schiller's aesthetic education. Schiller's thinking was embedded in a critique of barbaric acts motivated by the French Revolution, just as Adorno's thinking was embedded in a critique of Fascism. Schiller is one of the first to recognise the increasing dominance of instrumental reason. Schiller called this the 'terror of reason'. Through his analysis, he conceived a society where utility is the 'idol of his age'; in Adorno's time, this 'idol' led to a systematic genocide. Suppose humanity does not want to succumb to monstrosities led by senseless thinking. In that case, we must, like Schiller, Novalis, and Adorno, integrate a more ambivalent and humble attitude towards the nature of reason.

If we consider these aspects when reading the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we can understand Adorno's positions much better.

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The Mind at an Impasse

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—It began abstract and mindless nowhere
planets of thought have passed
it'll end where it began
– Allen Ginsberg, *Laughing Gas*

I

The figures in Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* run amok. "Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!", Ginsberg cries out; "Moloch whose name is the Mind!" Ten years before Ginsberg, Merleau-Ponty wrote "at each instant, I weave dreams around the things, I imagine objects or people whose presence here is not incompatible with the context, and yet they are not confused with the world, they are out in front of the world, on the stage of the imaginary" (2012, lxxiv). Merleau-Ponty presents us with a 'man,' one with "no 'inner man,' man is in and toward the world, and it is in the world that he knows himself" (lxxiv). This leaves the discipline of psychology a broad open stage. The scene of the science is 'the human mind and behaviour,' and this adage, this scene, is strange.[1] Everything that humans do and how they come to do it, everything that we experience and how we may think, imagine, weave dreams and calculate, rationalise, cry, run, eat, and when we do it, why we like it, see, scream, and silence: these are all notes in its genre. Everything 'in and towards the world' may 'seamlessly occupy the horizon of the psychological thinkable'[2] So, it is somewhat strange that the umbrella term '4E cognition' has grown in popularity over the last decades. A mind *embodied*, *embedded* within its environment or functionally *extended* amongst its tools and the world, a mind *enacted* in its world; 4E is put forward as a critical, even radical new approach in cognitive science. Hutto and Myin, for instance, write that were the E-approaches to reject certain foundational concepts of cognitive science, this would form a radical way of reimagining the mind, one which "does not force us to jump from one conceptual branch to another while staying within the same familiar tree—it demands that we switch to a new tree altogether" (2018, 105). In 2016, cognitive frontiersman Andy Clark thus presents us with a new 'man'; a "mobile, body-based brain-meat, immersed in the human social and environmental swirl, to know and engage its world" (10). The description resembles Frankenstein, but we will stick with it, take it under closer inspection. Because, when 4E is put forward as an approach that is *critical* of cognitive science, we can gather at least two things: first, the presumption that 'regular' or 'traditional' cognitive science would not be these four things, and secondly, that the mind can be embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted all at once, composing such thing as '4E.' Our first aim will be, therefore, to sketch what cognitive science could look like without 4E, or rather, to make a historical-conceptual exposition of certain central concepts and movements in cognitive science.

In an industrial, digital, cybernetic pace, the 'mind as machine' once dreamt up by Descartes was formalised in the Macey Conferences on Cybernetics, as championed by Wiener, Shannon, and McCulloch.[3]

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1 I write this essay under the deep methodological and conceptual influence of Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. My thinking around impasse, genre, and scenes is shaped directly by Berlant's remarkable work, which I recommend to every reader for its fundamental theoretical richness and its sensitivity to the textures, and buoyancy, of thought and lived experience. In parallel, I gesture toward Mark Fisher's *Flatline Constructs: Gothic materialism and cybernetic theory-fiction*, whose strange resonance surfaces here and there throughout, and which, I believe, should be taken up more intensively within theory on and around cognitive science and neuroscience.

2 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*: "Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (9).

3 See Boden's monumental *Mind as machine: A history of cognitive science*. See also Richards, *Putting Psychology in Its Place: Critical Historical Perspectives*.

In cybernetics, that ambitious, experimental, and interdisciplinary movement, the emphasis lay on form: information, systems, and especially the notion of feedback would come to affect, in vocabulary and approach, every scientific discipline of the subsequent decades (Hui 2019, 143; Pias 2005, 543-545). According to McCulloch, cybernetics aimed to develop "a theory in terms so general that the creations of god and men almost exemplify it" (as quoted by Pias 2003, 15). It was this desire to develop the new science that found its way into a new area of study: the mind.

In their seminal 1943 paper, McCulloch and Pitts were the first to propose the mind could best be studied in a quantitative way through binary logic, which they argued represented the brain's operations via neurons' on-off states. The neural interaction of these binary 'formal neurons,' forming the basis of mental processes, could therefore be quantitatively studied amidst fields like neurophysiology, logic, and information theory. Writing in a distinctly abstract tone, McCulloch and Pitts were hereby able to introduce the 'mind' itself, beyond its physical details, as an acceptable area of *quantitative* research. (Boden 2006, 195-198). This abstraction set the scene for functionalism, where cognition is understood as a system of mental processes that are defined by their functional roles. No structure or process is intrinsically cognitive, it only is cognitive when causally in relation to other elements—coupling—within the cognitive system. The same mental state, then, can arise from a variety of physical mediums, which is known as the thesis of *multiple realizability* (Boden 2006, 1358). Our minds could very well be the result of brains neatly kept 'in a vat', the archetypical functionalist example goes (see Dennett 2017). Or a computer, of course. Although their model was seen as overly simplistic and unrealistic, something McCulloch and Pitts themselves also admitted, the quantification of the mind had its effect (Kay 2001, 598)[4]. As they stated: "'Mind' no longer 'goes more ghostly than a ghost'" (McCulloch and Pitts 1943, 132). The ghost in the machine, as it were, had been successfully exorcised. From the newfound digital condition, a new mind was born. The mind as machine ran amok into 1960's tradition known as cognitivism. With its screws and cogs of 'mental *representations*,' the term for information structures that stand in for, are about, something else (in the world, a cat, a number, if those exist) upon oily, digital, '*computations*,' the (inter)actions according to predetermined sets of rules or algorithms, cognitive science pressed start and started walking.

A functionalist, computationalist foundation allows for a genre of psychology to arise that is, above all, incredibly productive. For a knowledge field to advance, specialization is expected. In psychology this takes the shape of themes operating as *fragments*. Memory, language, intelligence, executive functioning, vision, auditory perception, rationality—these are some of the major established fragments of psychology. Each of these has its own myriad of interpretations and theories, its proper journals, conferences, its numerous models, and concurrent empirical studies continuously expanding upon its niche. They may reach out from one fragment to the next, they may offer fundamental revisions, and fragments such as memory may incorporate its own auditory and visual compartments. If this fragmentation appeals to a 'divide and conquer' mentality, it surely has conquered: research carried out within these fields has been incredibly productive. There are more scientific papers being published than anyone could read, and even despite constructing ever-more narrow conceptual niches, not even specialists within those niches can keep fully up to date. This need not be a problem, because after all; scientists love solving puzzles. They do science because they want to, and there is nothing wrong with that, except for a potential foundational risk, as well as the structural complications. A foundational risk is that 'simply' producing study after study, 'building upon previous research,' without the corresponding foundational work that makes sure *what* it is we are building towards, *how* we build, and who this *we* who is supposedly building even is, this runs the risk of

4 See Boden, who illustrates how by the 1960's the mind as machine had become a heresy, making way for the vague, ambitious, and hand-waving manifesto for cognitivism, *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* by Miller, Galanter, and Pribram. For the heresy, see also McCulloch himself in "Through the Den of the Metaphysician."

ending up nowhere at all. Or the file-drawer. I refer to this as a risk, to describe a situation that while it may not describe an all-encompassing state of affairs of cognitive science, in general, it is felt with an unsettling strangeness, and carries with it an urgency. This affective compartment is what we find in replication crisis discourse. While the matter of why researchers prefer to elaborate upon certain foundations and not others, and why a study may carry different implications for genre-wide foundations, may be entrusted to the philosophy of science, the trust in this delegation of giants and their shoulders was shaken up when pillar studies were found to fail replications. Especially noteworthy, surprising, romantic, extraordinary findings turned out, on repetition, to be, well, different. In headline news and across faculties, the situation was declared a crisis. This crisis had a foundational repercussion that must be understood as typical of its genre. Because, what scientists *do*, and *why* they do it, can be a subject of psychology as well. The same 'human mind and behaviour,' includes scientists' own scientific praxis. And, imperative to a crisis: once a crisis is declared, it must be dealt with. Thus, according to Ivan Flis (2019), psychologists stumbled upon their scientific foundations, and were subsequently forced to face the very same issues and, poorly equipped, reinvent the wheel of the Vienna circle, Immanuel Kant, David Hume. They inadvertently create a 'native epistemology' of philosophy of science itself, without planning for it. The recursive risk that psychology as a genre carried with it, risked imploding upon a crisis.

But, as always is the case, the felt situation was quieter than that. Most researchers struggled keeping afloat doing research as-is, and with their endless grant requests, financial insecurities, systemic overworking yet underpaying, this was an unsettling situation, but not a new one. *Reflexive impotence*, to use Mark Fisher's term, was felt before, during, and after the crisis. Within the material conditions of research, psychologists knew that "yes, it is terrible," the exclamation goes, "but what could I possibly do." That this resignation is a self-fulfilling prophecy comes to show how a capitalist system can effectively immunise itself against critique. That is what Mark Fisher terms *Capitalist Realism*. Capitalism, itself an ideology that may be disputed as any other ideology, stays whether you agree with it or not, and soon enough, as an ideological basis itself, it appears naturalised; we can no longer think any other way, it is just the way things are. That Fisher's business ontology, the idea that "it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business," (2009, 16) was present in science, too, was evident: scientists are forced to be not only scientists, but businessmen, marketeers, and CEOs alike. They must advertise and sell their research to gain funding, distribute and account the costs and report in such a way that will make it marketable, attractive, for high-impact journals to publish it. If anything goes[5] in the 'marketplace of ideas,' so does the marketplace. But, of course, whether of the imagination or replication, a crisis does not fully envelop the affective experience of scientists. Most do know there are alternatives: it could be worse. If these were already times of 'publish or perish,' with increasing budget cuts across higher education it is starting to suggest we may soon be doing both. If these were already times of growing anti-intellectual sentiment and proliferating fake news, a scientific credibility crisis must be dealt with, with tactical stealth. True to the same recursive risk, the emphasis was laid on scientists themselves, through the genre-emblematic operator of human biases. Questionable research practices, a disinterest in conducting replications, and in some extreme cases, fraud. Double- blind peer review, research preregistrations and open science practices thus became more widespread, because these could be mitigated practically without raising too much of a foundational hell.[6] Doubts as to whether replicating more, and replicating better, would even be the end-all solution was invertedly affirmed not by explicit agreement amongst scientists but by their collective failure to replicate more (Peterson and Panofsky 2021). Closer to the time of writing, the replication crisis has lost its urgency, its concerns largely forgotten, and its deeper structural issues once

5 Feyerabend, *Against Method*.

6 Flis, "Psychologists Psychologizing Scientific Psychology: An Epistemological Reading of the Replication Crisis."

more slipped into amnesia. Because psychologists manage, they catch their footing, and they produce studies accordingly. The setting that functionalism and contemporary automaton-fetishism allows for, is helpful that way; the modern 'behavioural lab' consisting of one lone participant in front of a computer screen. The environment can largely be digital, that can be done. Highly profitable ubiquitous industries of social media and larger platformitisation that mimic and extend towards the cognitive and affective faculties of their human users, use and fund cognitive science research. Studies on Large Language Models that make cross-fragmental gestures towards human memory, human attention, are in fashion. It is always cheaper, and faster, to enact the Amazon Mechanical Turk.

II

What follows is an overview of the four E's.[7] Readers less interested in the conceptual differences may accept that 4E is not unified, and that 'it depends' serves as a fair summary—and may safely move on. If you are still here, then it is worth noting that the section on embodied cognition will be more theoretically dense, for a few reasons: it is often considered to be the overarching E, it helps do justice to the field's scale and history, and finally, it shows how divisive research within a single E can be.

Ich möchte ein Eisbär sein, im Kalten Polar
Dann müsste ich nicht mehr schrei'n
All das wär so klar
– Eisbär, Grauzone

The embodied mind raises the claim that the body, the physical constitution of *this* organism not *that* organism, matters—but how much? Embodied cognition refers to the inclusion of the 'body'—referring here to extra-neural structures (i.e., *besides* the neural system; particularly the brain; extra-cranial) within 'mental processes.' In this, embodied cognition is said to take issue with an internalist perspective of cognition, where mental processes would be attributed *solely* to the brain. It is commonplace to fault Descartes for this. However, the inclusion of 'body' into 'mind' can be accomplished in various scientific routes, not all of them being forefront or sympathetic to internalist critiques. We can distinguish between 'weak' and 'strong' versions of embodiment: is the mind merely *causally dependent* on the body, or is the body a *constitutive* part of what cognition *is*? Research within the weak version can draw from the established representationalist, computationalist, account to propose bodily-formatted representations. The body, here, is represented as internal informational states within the brain, that may be interoceptive -responding to the body as with pain, temperature, and the like- as well as motoric, i.e., directing the body to carry out movement (Prinz 2009). We can expand this account a bit further to also include mental processes that are traditionally considered to be non-bodily under the 'neural reuse hypothesis,' where processes traditionally termed 'higher' may originate on both a developmental and evolutionary timescale by 'recycling' neural pathways related to other functions; language production originating from motor pathways, and written language by visual feature detections, for instance (Dehaene and Cohen 2007). This research tradition maintains the brain as the place where all important stuff happens and effectively discounts the body and environment of fundamental importance. As the idea of neural reuse already implies: the brain is not infinitely plastic, but co-evolved within the body, its 'vat' so to say. But the brain is still locked within its vat. A nice, co-evolved, functional vat, but a vat nevertheless. Because it nevertheless operates under the pretext of 4E cognition, Shaun Gallagher (2015) thus refers to this as a case of *the invasion of the body snatchers*.

[7] There is a lot of literature on 4E cognition, and one remarkably thorough and helpful place to start are Shaun Gallagher's writings. See, for instance; *Enactivist Interventions, Embodied and Enactive Approaches to Cognition*, and the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. For a shorter paper, "A well-trodden path: From phenomenology to enactivism."

Contrary to the 'body snatchers,' a 'strong' embodied cognition argues for a constitutive role of the body, which can be understood from a functionalist perspective, or biologically. Within a *functionalist* perspective, there is no good reason to exclude the body from playing constitutive roles in cognition, as it is not tied to any specific physical medium such as the brain to begin with. A strictly internalist account of cognition can therefore be rejected, and the body can be seen as playing a fairer role within the larger cognitive system. A functionalist embodied cognition is 'strong' as cognition is constituted by any relevant structure, but the body is not strongly relevant in any special way; whether the cognitive process arises from the body of a human, or a large-eared pika is irrelevant. Thus, conducting research on *how* cognition is constituted in the body and bodily structures—specifically—is made almost trivial. For this, there is the *biological* reading: the body in a strong, biological account, is more than the proprioceptive and motoric functions (weak interpretation), but neither is it but one medium over which cognition arises (functionalist perspective). Our cognition is the way it is, precisely because of *our* body, not that of the large-eared pika. There would be no binocular vision had we evolved only one eye, and if our ears were not shaped the way they are, we would not be able to locate sound as we do now. Besides general morphology, this account extends towards a chemical-hormonal level, such as affective experiences. Fear, for example, is something we feel; our heart rate accelerates, we start to sweat, our breathing quickens—this experience is embodied, along with the facial expression of fear. Rather than relegating these affective experiences to their own research themes (to be studied in a way that is fragmented from other experiences, be it the more classically 'cognitive' processes or more 'biological' states) what qualifies as the mental 'fear' can be seen as inextricably linked to, and in fact *constitutive* of, the entire cognitive system. This *is* fear, this *is* language, this *is* vision. And thus, it invites the conceptual critique—the fear—whereby this take is accused of making a coupling-constitution fallacy: yes, these physical states always coincide with their mental states, but why 'Occam' our way to constitution? Where does it end?

Of course, when we define the body as 'extra-neural,' this may itself be stretched rather far. What about prosthetics, or other technologies, such as written language? Put more broadly, what role does the environment play in cognition? "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 7). This is where the *embedded* and *extended* mind come in. These, too, include a 'weak' and 'strong' version of causal dependency versus constituency. The embedded mind first arose as a research extension to the embodied mind, known as 2E (Rupert 2004, 393). The embedded mind states that for cognition to function well, part of the cognitive load required to carry out mental processes can be efficiently off-loaded onto the environment. That is *scientalese* for 'you don't need to have the entirety of the airport stored as a mental map prior to entrance, the arrows and overhead-signs will help you.' As such, navigation is in part embedded in the environment, in the sense that a well-structured environment facilitates cognition. What would William Grey Walter's Elmer and Elsie have to say about that?

Making a strong, constitutive claim for the environment is Clark and Chalmers's famous 1998 extended mind thesis. According to the extended mind, to use their thought experiment: whether you remember an address by checking your notebook, or through your biological memory, ought to be considered equally cognitive, as per their principle: "were it to go on in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process" (1998, 8). Let it be clear, then, that this is an inherently functionalist thesis—as we saw before, the physical medium does not matter, what matters is what it *does*. Neither does the extended mind, nor subsequent work from their founders in the predictive processing account, reject mental representations outright. But they may become 'minimal,' and extended along; "the vehicles of representation do not stop at the skin; they extend all the way out into the world" (Rowlands 2006, 224). But here is where a lot of the fun starts for the philosophically, media-lly, artistically inclined, as the extended mind emphasises technology. Specifically in the sense of technology serving as an externalised

memory, this appears to coincide, or at least approach, Bernard Stiegler's conception of 'tertiary retention.' Back to 4E literature, Gallagher argues that if you conceptualise the extended mind more liberally, social institutions and cultural practices can be incorporated into 'mind' as well. Is the legal system part of your mind? A mind in itself? Don't legal contracts scaffold, reliably, guide and schematize cognition as it would be in the head? Gallagher admits to a Hegelian streak here. When I visited the Leopold Museum in Vienna, I found myself in front of paintings by Egon Schiele, where my mind wandered off. I suddenly experienced a Eureka-moment as an insight for my essay whose deadline was steadily approaching yet kept off-bay by geographical distance. The insight was fleeting, as upon my return home it had left no trace. However, finding the same paintings by Schiele online, the insight returned to me. This didn't really happen to me, but it could have. We walk along: "If we think that cognition supervenes on the vehicle of the notebook, it seems reasonable to say that it supervenes on the vehicle of the museum—an institution designed for just such purposes" (Gallagher and Crisafi 2009, 49). In the same line, they mention 'conversational thinking,' where a conversation following from my museum visit might in a very similar way scaffold and structure my cognition as well. "In every act of cognition that runs through these tools or institutions, the mind is extended" (49). Have you read *Camera Lucida*? Did Barthes' photograph not collect all the possible predicates from which his mother was constituted, "and whose suppression or partial alteration, conversely, had sent me back to these photographs of her which had left me so unsatisfied" (1981, 70)? But there's a catch. According to Gallagher, this liberal interpretation can come to fruition when functionalism is abandoned, in exchange of the enactivist interpretation of affordances, into 'social affordances' (2013, 4). Because that is the way we were going anyways.

In enactivism, cognition is understood as being for action. It is 'laying down a path in walking,' as goes the adage by its founders Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991). Rather than reducing thought to internal computation or abstract symbol manipulation, cognition is understood as something that emerges directly from sensorimotor activity, from the ongoing, dynamic interplay between brain, body, and environment. To model this, enactivism turns to nonlinear dynamical systems theory instead of classical cognitive architectures or modules. Enactivism draws from a variety of traditions and takes on multiple conceptual shapes, but importantly, it offers students and scholars of the mind a different vocabulary, to then reveal a deep conceptual ocean with significant implications for the science itself. As any child looking through the window from the backseat of a car can tell you, the large rock formations appear quite climbable from a distance. Yet, upon getting closer, the cliffs and distances between are revealed to be quite large, and definitively unclimbable. Was our first representation of the mountain wrong, then? For a non-representational enactivist, this change in cognition reflects a change in affordances, which defined by the dynamic coupling of body-environment is not an error, but simply a *change* in this coupling. As Gallagher puts it: "The affordance doesn't disappear because I change the representation of my distance from the mountain, I actually have to change my distance, and when I do so, the body–mountain relation, which defines the affordance, and my perception, changes" (2017, 97).

The notion of affordance is the legacy of J.J. Gibson, who struggled with the weight and legacy of the concept 'information,' a term he used only sparingly: "I would use another term if I could" (2014, 231). Gibson rejected information as information *about* something, which implies information as content—striking a familiar chord with our previous discussion on symbols and representations. Affordances are not properties of the world out there, waiting to be represented or computed. Rather, affordances are to be understood as '*information for*,' such as information *for* perception. Nor are they subjective impressions generated 'in here.' Instead, they arise in the dynamic relation between an organism and its environment. A surface, for example, affords walking not because the brain decides it does, but because of the way that surface and that body fit together. As Gibson puts it, an affordance "points both ways" (121)—to the

organism and to the environment. This mutuality complicates any strict separation between inner and outer, perception and action, as well as subject and object. The common idea of an organism roaming in its environment, its cognition interpreting the world as it falls into the mind, as it were, is turned on its head. According to some enactivists, then, enacted cognition is best described as processes of *sense-making*. An environment is never neutral for the organism to roam through, but valorised: things, happenings, can be good or bad for the organism. So, the organism must make sense of its environment—and that is what cognition *is* (De Haan 2020, 54-56). But this is not a passive regulation behind a screen of computation and representation, or solely a matter of inference (unless it is active). In fact, a significant strand of enactivism termed 'radical' is explicitly anti-representational (See Hutto and Myin, 2013). Now: *the organism brings forth its world*.[8] Here, the organism is said to be self-generating in regulating this interaction, and it owes these insights to the legacy of Humberto Maturana and Fransisco J. Varela, who developed the notion of *autopoiesis*. "Autopoiesis means, in Maturana's definition, that a system can generate its own operations only through the network of its own operations. And the network of its own operations is in turn generated through these operations" (Luhmann 2009, 151). Here, cognition is co-extensive with life itself—taken by other authors as the life-mind continuity thesis—and falls back within the tradition considered as second-order cybernetics (Hui 2024, 11). What in the Macy Conferences was still limited to feedback, recursion, now made explicit, could then be systematically furthered towards Luhmann's systems theory (Hui 2019, 20, 127). In waves and circles overboard, the 'touring machine'[9] has come to an end here, where it began, and there are many questions left unanswered and many things that could be discussed.

III

If everything is drained from interest, if imagination is in crisis or too preoccupied with staying afloat, where do we go from here? And yet. We set forth from an 'and yet'. In the tenth letter, Schelling addresses how in the Greek tragedy, freedom and fate appear, at first glance, to be in an irreconcilable opposition (see Hui 2021, 14-16). There is nothing less free than fate. Every act against fate, all resistance, no matter how cunning or wicked its protagonist, is in vain. And yet, this is where Schelling writes: "Only a being *deprived* of freedom could succumb under fate. It was a *sublime* thought, to suffer punishment willingly even for an inevitable crime, and so to prove one's freedom by the very loss of this freedom, and to go down with a declaration of free will." (Schelling, *Tenth Letter*, 193) It is precisely in the *willing* submission to fate that freedom asserts itself. By choosing to embrace what cannot be avoided, the tragic hero does not overcome the opposition by negating fate, but is instead elevated above fate. After *and yet*, anything may follow.[10]

As we have seen, if we were to take representation, computation, and information, as central concepts in cognitive science, 4E approaches offer no unified stance on how to treat them, and, any attempt to delineate the conceptual grounds of 4E cognition itself, finds itself presented with a multitude of contradictions, corrections, claims, and counterclaims. If anything, they are better understood as operating within an axis. This begins with the extended mind at the fully functionalist end, where cognitive processes are defined entirely by their roles in a system, regardless of physical substrate, and often align with the core assumptions of traditional cognitive science. Next come the embedded mind and weak embodied cognition, which tend to retain computational and representational assumptions. These are followed by strong,

8 Maturana and Varela, *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding.*

9 See Fred Moten, "The Touring Machine (Flesh Thought Inside Out)"

10 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 266: "If body, then everything can follow."

biological embodiment, and finally, at the opposite end, we arrive at enactivism. Looking from the end of enactivism, especially in its more radical, anti-representationalist forms, you can get a critique *par excellence*.

Even attempts to ground fragments like memory in embodied terms, or to isolate 'body snatching' cases, fall short. In fact, the very notion of such fragments as discrete, self-contained units is called into question without a functionalist or representationalist account to back it up. As a result, a great deal of research built on these fragments—and often reliant on machinic methodologies—begins to feel, if not outright misguided, then increasingly like an answer to a question no longer worth asking.[11] Enactivism is methodologically inspiring too, offering specific suggestions such as studying consciousness from a first-person perspective (Gallagher 2003) to adding an existential dimension to psychiatry (De Haan 2020). These are but two examples, and enactivism provides a robust theoretical justification for them. Yet, in its liberal interpretation, the extended mind also finds its way again to unlikely connections and corners that its original theorists would term 'cognitive bloat.' But it makes these connections, and it does so in an exciting and elegant way. Take Shaun Gallagher's own call towards giving cognitive science a 'critical twist':

> What I suggest is twofold. First, that the concept of the extended mind, if we can get it right, offers a new understanding of what cognition (the mind) actually is and how it works. As such it offers a new perspective for understanding decision making, judging, problem solving, communicative practices, and so forth, which importantly includes reference to the kind of externalities that critical theory ought to be concerned about – institutional practices and procedures, norms, rules, technologies, and so forth. Such externalities not only shape our cognitive processes and thinking, but also play a dominating role in bureaucratic systems, democratic processes, and in an extensive range of social, legal, and political phenomena. Accordingly the *idea of the socially extended mind at the very least offers a new tool for the practice of critical theory*. Second, although cognitive science is already studying the kind of cognition that some theorists take to be socially extended cognition, the proposal here is that we give this kind of cognitive science a critical twist. (Gallagher 2013, 12, italics mine)

In *Exceptional Technologies* (2018), Dominic Smith quotes this citation at length. "We need not lose a concern for embodiment conditions," he writes, "and we need not attempt to reduce the concerns of philosophy of technology, media theory or 4e work to one another. Instead, we can play on the crossover potentials between these fields" (76). *And yet*, only now can we appreciate and foreground what makes 4E cognition interesting, exciting, special: the connections made to other fields. There is an untiring appeal to the imagination, as the concepts and approaches allow for remarkably interdisciplinary connections to be made.

Yet, if our way to find our footing within the impasse is by scavenging what we got, we see a complicated picture arise. Of course, reality is always messier than we can grasp, and conceptual spaces are no different. That is a good thing. Nevertheless, people outside of the discipline must be cautious when engaging with 4E; it may not be what you think it is, and that is not a bad thing. The bad thing, the problem, the risk, that accompanies lending from these spaces is that it is not findings, but scientific flair, the allure of objectivity and authority in its genre, that may be carried over. This risk cuts both ways, but to soften that pernicious orientational metaphor: the original work may, in its originality and optimism, be cast as less rigorous, less serious, or incomplete without its scientific element. And, towards the science, that space where we are reluctant to merely replicate and revulsed at the risk of reinventing the wheel, while we are still at the prelude. Here, if we do not know the spaces we think to contribute to, we can never know, after all, is it new, or *new to you*?[12]

Thus, if we portray 4E cognition as a radically new way of envisioning the mind, growing popular within cognitive science as well as beyond, we may be caught within this same trap of resistance. We may

11 Unless, that is (and admirably so) when the question is made explicit, as it is by Lyotard in "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?"

12 See Boden, "Creativity in a Nutshell" in *The Creative Mind*.

attempt to negate or affirm something that will only leave us feeling out of place, and if we are at this impasse, we try to catch our footing in ways that may not work. One such way is by presenting claims. This is one claim I put forth in this article: 4E is not a unified conceptual approach. And yet, they are a foundational approach, and this is different from working within or against the impasse—it is 'and yet,' written from within, and yet, we continue moving. 4E is a foundational approach, in the sense that they appeal to foundations in cognitive science. Hereby, 4E cognition suspends the foundations of cognitive science, proving that *they could be different*. This is itself a radical gesture, contingency. But it is not finished.[13] By suspending the traditions that came before them, these studies, authors, strands, then affirm their own ideal and ideas of man in and towards the world. The mind as a machine may be discarded in favour of a strongly embodied human subject in the flesh, as we see in enactivism, or it can be reclaimed, as in the extended mind. The concepts, the foundations, rendered contingent, are elevated into necessity once more. In a crisis or something more quiet, stumbling upon foundations or scavenging for ways to make do within the impasse, the mind runs amok. In this situation, 4E appears interesting, strange, and an untiring appeal to the imagination, from the 'and yet'. We follow through the imagination. It will end where it began.

Over and over—refrain—of the Hospitals—still haven't written your
history—leave it abstract—a few images
run thru the mind—like the saxaphone chorus of houses and years—
remembrance of electrical shocks.

– Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish*

13 In his lecture "Art and Freedom," Yuk Hui put forth the *creative* act as a double act; first by suspending necessity, by rendering it contingent, and then by elevating contingency into necessity again—Beethoven: *Muß es sein? Es muß sein*! Drawing on writings by Kandinsky, Nietzsche, and Schelling, I was enchanted by his idea. As the lecture remains unpublished, any missteps in interpretation are mine alone.

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Ecological Modes of Thinking in Times of Crisis

On Assemblage Theory and its Implications

Caspar Smink

Image 1. Endosymbiosis: Homage to Lynn Margulis, by Shoshanah Dubiner.

> Not man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms or all types of Beings. (…) man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other—not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.); rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product.
> – Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

> It is the story that makes the difference. (…) The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.
> – Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*

Ending the Anthropocene

Western modes of thought have often categorized the world as being constituted by oppositional ontic categories, such as subject ↔ object, identity ↔ difference, and nature ↔ culture. In this dichotomous thinking, it has frequently been the case that one ontological category is granted hierarchical primacy over the other, as is seen in the dichotomy between nature and culture, for example. The domain of nature here is conceptualized as the external environment, something that exists outside of us (Haila 2000, 155). The domain of culture is where we as humans reside, it is the world of human artefacts and activities. Here, the latter is placed hierarchically above the former. On top of that, in this schema, human beings are often seen as occupying an exceptional position because of our ability to use reason. The underlying ontology thus puts human beings as fundamentally distinct from other living and non-living beings.

It is commonplace to point to the origin of the nature-culture split in the advent of Modernity and the Enlightenment. Whilst often criticised, this dichotomy is however still common today in many strands of environmental philosophy and poses major environmental implications (Whiteside 2004, 358; Haila 2000, 156-157; Possamai 2013, 838). Here, works in early modern philosophy, like those of René Descartes and Francis Bacon, are often cited as the epitome of this worldview. In the case of Descartes, authors point to his so-called substance dualism, with which he explained the world as consisting of two substances, namely *res cogitas* and *res extensa*—i.e., mind and extension/matter (Haila 2000, 157). Bacon is often cited because of his perspective on the sciences: according to him, nature should be subjected to 'torture' by science as to force it to give up its secrets; it should be controlled and enslaved in order to reduce it to blind obedience towards mankind (Possamai 2013, 838). Possamai mentions that Descartes shared Bacon's views of nature, by stating that the objective of science should be to seek domination and control over nature (2013, 839).

An outgrowth and heir to this kind of thinking, as originally posited by Descartes and Bacon, is the discourse surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene. The term was coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000. It was, and in almost all cases still is, meant to refer to the present era as one where the Earth has been profoundly impacted by human activity, for example, through anthropogenic climate change. The concept provides a tempting narrative for humanity's current predicament and for understandable reasons. The dangers of our changing climate do not loom on the horizon but are imminent, and so are the consequences of anthropogenic climate change already barrelling down upon us like the sword of Damocles that has been cut from its thread. Nevertheless, the concept is problematic.

The concept of the Anthropocene implies that our current time can essentially be characterized by 'The Human,' due to the way people have negatively impacted the earth. Thinking and talking about our current time in this manner, however, reinforces the kind of thinking that has arguably led us to this point of crisis in the first place. When labelling our current time 'The Anthropocene,' human beings again reinforce this hierarchical and anthropocentric categorization and uphold the aforementioned dichotomy between nature and culture. This attitude has been demonstrably destructive as it has led to a complete disregard of our natural environment, seeing it simply as a territory for extraction and exploitation, and leading to, among other things, the current disruption of the climate. As tempting as referring to our contemporary time as 'The Anthropocene' is, it does not offer an adequate understanding of the current situation.[1] The current crisis is neither a singular or a neutral event and should thus not be approached as such. We have to find a way to think differently about the situation.

Thus, the narrative of 'The Anthropocene,' as often embraced in cultural and philosophical discourses, together with a singular approach of the climate crisis, does not do justice to the complexity of the situation. The negative human impact on the Earth is not to be expressed in the announcement of a new epoch: The Age of Man. A different narrative needs to be formulated. It is from this position that I will engage with the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These thinkers relationally decentre the concept of the human, meaning that they do not categorically position it above other living beings. Together

[1] Another major problem with the concept of the Anthropocene – which is slightly less relevant in this paper, but nonetheless critical to mention – is that the Anthropocene brings with it a certain singular political subjectification of people in general. The Anthropocene implies an abstract, singular, universal and unitary definition of human beings, categorizing all of them under the undifferentiated concept of 'The Human,' or 'Man,' seeing that the word 'Anthropos' meant 'man' in the original Greek. It is this undifferentiated concept of 'The Human' that does not do justice to the complexity of the current situation. The term is unnecessarily vague and unfair in attributing responsibility for the current changing climate, because it implies that every human being is equally responsible for what is happening. Historically, however, regions like North America and Europe have proportionally been responsible for most of the emitted greenhouse gasses (Rocha et al 2015, 8). These regions also have the (financial) means to better deal with what is coming at them. The most vulnerable nations, communities, and peoples will probably be hit hardest by the changes to the earth, despite these communities having historically emitted far less than their wealthier counterparts. On top of that, climate change is also associated with an inexhaustible number of latent risks that have worsening compounding effects on existing social, economic, political, and demographic inequalities (Sun & Yang 2016). Every person is, however, equally subsumed and held accountable under the Anthropocene, whilst it has been the Western attitude that has long upheld, and in many cases still upholds, the dichotomous distinction between 'Man' and 'his' environment. This, in turn, depoliticizes the responsibility of the human actors.

with decentring the human, they also differentiate the concept and embed human beings in an ecological web of relations, meaning that they look at the different kinds of relations and interdependencies that constitute both living and non-living things.

In this paper, I posit that we should think these webs of relations through the concept of the assemblage, as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari. The assemblage is chosen because it offers an ontological alternative to western anthropocentrism, as well as dichotomous thinking, and so I argue that we should think of ecology as a multitude of ever-changing assemblages. The ontology as posited in the concept of the assemblage is the same as the one that I read in the concept of ecology; consequently, when philosophizing about ecology we should think of it in the same ontological terms as the assemblage. Ecology finds its origins in natural scientific empirical research and is, when used in the context of philosophy, not equipped with a firm ontological grounding. My aim here is to provide this grounding using the concept of the assemblage, giving philosophical substance to the concept of ecology, and opening up new avenues for exploring what ecological thinking, moving away from dichotomous thinking about the environment, could possibly entail.

I will start with a brief overview of the concept of nature in Western philosophy, after which we will discuss the concept of ecology; this will show the falsity of the former and its inability to effectively formulate the troubles of contemporaneity. Following this, we will discuss the assemblage and make the link between ecology and the assemblage explicit. Our discussion here will be assisted by a short digression into the tendency of Western philosophy to focus on static unitary concepts (like nature and culture), the origin of which is often traced to Platonism. We will end with possible ways we could move forward, and what stories could be formulated once the concept of nature and the narrative of the Anthropocene have vanished.

From Nature to Ecology

As mentioned in the introduction, the Cartesian and Baconian worldviews are often seen as the epitome of anthropocentric and dichotomous thinking between nature and culture. The consequences of their ontological assumptions and philosophies of science are, not surprisingly, problematic. A good example of this is the mechanistic worldview Descartes developed in order to analyse the substance of *res extensa*. Here, movement was conceived as the change in spatial relationship between singular, inert, objects. The 'outside world,' *res extensa*, was thus reduced to the spatiality of passive singular objects. This creates "a generalized attitude of scientific reductionism," an attitude that attributes the functioning of a phenomenon to one basic or set of essential principles (Possamai 2013, 839). The functioning of the entire 'outside world' is reduced to the principle of cause and effect (Possamai 2013, 839). This becomes problematic when confronted with insights from contemporary ecology, which understands nature more as a holistic structure in which "apparently simple parts interact in complex structures to create previously unknown [emergent] properties" (Whiteside 2004, 359).[2]

Another reason for calling the worldviews of Descartes and Bacon environmentally problematic is their anthropocentrism. As mentioned above, both held the view that the objective of science, and of human knowledge production, should be to seek domination and control over nature. This approach positions human beings as being directly and ontologically opposed to the environment, and objectifies nature as something to be used for human needs (Haila 2000, 156-157). Following Rigby (2014, 63), I would like to say that the issue here is not necessarily with the validity and value of the scientific method employed by

[2] I added the term 'emergent' to the original quote. It refers to a phenomenon where an entity exhibits a property whose origin cannot be traced to the function of one part of the entity, nor to the sum of its parts. It is thus not something that is already present in existing components, but something that *emerges* from the working together of multiple differing components.

philosophers like Descartes and Bacon, and that this is of less of a concern in this analysis, but to show how nature is portrayed in this type of discourse. It frames nature as something that is only valuable insofar as resources can be extracted from it: a domain created by God for human mastery and exploitation. Although we might think of our view of nature as presently being more sympathetic, it is still deeply influenced by these early modern thinkers and anthropocentric views in general. Nature is often still seen as an external realm which is valuable only insofar as it is valuable to us. It is in this regard that I argue that we should replace the concept of nature with that of ecology.

The concept of ecology refers to the scientific discipline that studies the relationships between living organisms and their environments, the interactions of organisms with one another, and their heterogeneous spatial and temporal distribution. So, ecology could be described as a collection of organisms and the structures they co-create and inhabit. These structures are called ecosystems (Scheiner & Willig 2008). Ecology is, as emphasized by Catton (1994, 77), "the systems of interactions among differentiated organisms and between them and the non-living components of their environment". An important question of this field of research is the one of how these components of ecosystems organize themselves. Here, two important subsidiary concepts have emerged, autopoiesis and sympoiesis, which explain the functioning, becoming, and changing of ecosystems.

Autopoiesis was first presented by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1991). For them, the term deals with finding a common denominator which is able to define and answer the question of what life is and what discriminates it from non-living things (Luisi 2003, 49). The term can be translated as *self-organization*, meaning that, for Maturana and Varela, living things are to be distinguished from non-living things by this notion of self-organization. The analysis is based on the smallest biological unit, the cell. They observe that cells have a semi-permeable boundary, meaning that certain chemicals are able to get into the cell whilst others are not. Inside the boundary, a network process, pertaining to the different components, transforms the substances that have entered, so that they can be used for the cell's maintenance and stability. The interesting thing is that the cell undertakes this process itself, can both maintain and reproduce itself, and can interact with its environment for nutrient absorption. The definition of living things, according to Maturana and Varela, is this self-referential, self-defining, and material metabolic mechanism. This is constitutive of autopoiesis and the cells of all cellular and multicellular organisms (Luisi 2003, 50-51; Žukauskaitė 2020, 144-150). So, as explained by Luisi (2003, 52), a living system is a system "defined by a semipermeable chemical boundary which encompasses a reaction network that is capable of self-maintenance by a process of self-generation of the system's components from within." It is important to note that autopoiesis explains how these living systems relate to their environment *structurally*: each interaction with the environment triggers certain structural changes within the organism in order to keep it stable. What sort of responses can be mounted is also determined by this structure. So, although the focus seems to be on homeostasis, the theory does not rule out changes in the internal structure through interactions with its environment. The theory explains these systems as closed on the level of organization (the cell), but more open on the level of structure. Total structural closure (homeostasis) is not possible because of the system's metabolic dependency on the environment. Structural changes in autopoietic systems happen non-linearly based on environmental interactions. These changes are quite unpredictable. This differentiates autopoietic systems further from non-living things, which react linearly to their environment by mechanism of cause and effect. Autopoiesis also explains life as a property that emerges from this process (Žukauskaitė 2020, 145).

Three decades after the concept of autopoiesis was presented, the concept of *sympoiesis* was introduced, being developed "in generative friction with the model of autopoiesis" (Dempster 2000;

Bernava 2023, 85). Through the notion of sympoiesis, natural systems are described that do not have as clear or as definitive of a boundary as cells do. Such systems include ecosystems and natural-cultural systems (Bernava 2023, 85). Whereas autopoietic systems are organizationally closed, sympoietic systems have loosely defined boundaries. They are what is called allopoietic, meaning that these systems produce something other than themselves. Sympoietic systems have autopoietic components and the concept is thus often used to explain biological functioning at higher levels of complexity, such as multicellular organisms and ecosystems, for example. It explains the 'working together' of the many component parts which constitute complex organisms and systems, and how they are collectively produced. Because of their complexity, sympoietic systems are neither self-referential nor self-defining in the way autopoietic systems are but are able to be more flexible and adaptive to a changing environment, as well as produce new forms of organization. They have a bigger potential for change, are even more unpredictable than autopoietic systems, and are evolutionarily oriented (Bernava 2023, 85–86). Through sympoiesis, multiple differing (autopoietic) components are able to come together in an assembled process of interaction and becoming, i.e., different autopoietic systems have the potential to interact with each other and together become a different organism. They hereby create more complex life forms and give rise to certain emergent properties (Žukauskaitė 2020, 150–152). Symbiogenisis is thus the origin of all complex life, which problematizes traditional notions of individuality, both biologically *and* politically. The latter because it challenges both human exceptionalism and bounded individualism by stating that we are not ontologically different from other multicellular organisms and that we are not, in fact, undividable beings, but assembled through and constituted by a multitude of other organisms which are all dependent on each other.

It is through sympoiesis that we can conceive of natural-cultural systems not as two separately functioning entities, like in the Cartesian or Baconian schemas, but as sympoietic systems. Seeing that all human activity is implicated in ecological webs of relations, society is as well. The abstract structure and demarcations of a society in relation to nature cannot be presupposed. Societies are, like sympoietic systems, not structurally and organizationally closed. This also means that one cannot determine *a priori* what is 'natural' and what is 'cultural.' In fact, these categories become obsolete or, at least, need to be seen as a *continuum* of the same material reality, seeing that they develop concurrently and sympoietically. The presupposed boundaries between the two can thus be collapsed and we can start to look for different ways of describing the dynamics between people and their environment, such as with the concepts of ecology and sympoiesis.

When seeing ourselves not as bounded individuals, but as constitutively part of and constituted by ecosystems, we also come face to face with the material realities that form the basis of our existence; the interconnectedness that links all living and non-living things becomes clear to us (Smith 2021, VII–VIII). Ecology and ecosystems allow us to conceive of our environment and by extension ourselves not as an "unchanging artefact of divine manufacture, but as [a] process of perpetual becoming" (Rigby 2014, 65). Hence, ecology and ecosystems confront us with a view of our environment that is in opposition to the previously described dichotomous view of nature that stands outside the world of culture. The concept of nature has hereby become problematic due to it being understood in Western thinking as simply being the space that surrounds us, something that is passive, and that can be exploited by us. In this very limited understanding, it has become intertwined with an anthropocentric view of the world and has come into opposition with an ecological understanding of it. It is here that the antinomy between the concept of nature and ecology becomes a concern to philosophy, and so the need for philosophical reflection arises. To think of ourselves as separate from our environment, and to act accordingly, would be to ignore the insights granted to us by the ecological sciences and to stick to presupposed unitary concepts like nature and culture as definitive categorizing principles of reality. This in turn upholds the narrative surrounding the

Anthropocene. On top of that, ecology also challenges traditional ontological distinctions between objects and subjects. The question then becomes how we should change our philosophical outlook accordingly. It is here that I arrive at the concept of the assemblage in order to provide an alternative ontological grounding that I argue is necessary to give us an idea about what ecological thinking could entail.

The Assemblage

In the parts above I have repeatedly talked about the traditional dichotomous distinctions that are made in Western philosophy between perceived entities like nature and culture. Whilst I have submitted Descartes and Bacon as the epitome of this kind of thinking at the advent of Modernity, it could be said that this kind of thinking finds its origin in Platonism and its concept of the *Idea*. In Platonism, Ideas designate truth about the identity of beings and determine what differentiates them from other beings (Adkins 2015, 11; Bestegui 2012, 59; Schults 2024, 54). An Idea is being *as such*. They refer to being *qua* being – being *qua* being meaning something in its entirety, something universal and unchanging from which the particulars that we actually see in the world are derived. Ideas are transcendental and universal, meaning that they stand above (transcend) perceived particulars, and always constitute the necessary and unchanging conditions for an entity's identity. This universality can also be thought of as the *essence* of a thing. Particulars *resemble* the Ideas but are not the Ideas as such. What we see is a mere *representation* of the Ideas. The Ideas, originating in the world of Forms, are the cause of the appearances of things or phenomena we see in the world (Altamirano 2015, 510). The Idea is thus a transcendental concept, something that is only found in the intelligible (Altamirano 2015, 503). Because of Plato's use of the transcendental concept of the Idea, he favours ontological categories like *stasis* and sameness over those of *kinesis* and difference, with the category of *essence* taking the most primary place in his philosophy due to its close proximity to the Idea. Similarly, because of Plato's influence on Western philosophy, static ontological categories like *stasis*, sameness and essence have been strongly emphasized and more valued over categories like relation, motion and difference. The identity of a thing (its sameness) is typically thought of as more important than its difference from other things (Schults 2024, 54). Eternal essences are preferred over changing appearances (Altamirano 2015, 509).

One of the main criticisms of Plato is exactly this move: giving ontic categories like *stasis*, sameness, and essence primacy over those of relation, motion, and difference. The critique focusses itself especially on the inability of the analogy between essence and representation of actually explaining the becoming, being, and changing of existing things. The effort to develop a counter ontology is often called 'the reversal of Platonism' and is associated with thinkers like Deleuze (Beistegui 2012, 56).

Deleuze argues that transcendence should have no place in philosophy (Beistegui 2012, 58). Furthermore, as mentioned above, together with Guattari he adds that Plato's transcendental metaphysics is unable to actually describe the prescribed essences and give an explanation as to how there exists a connection between the intelligible and the sensible world if these are taken to be ontologically distinct. Hence, they critique Plato's doctrine of analogy. Alternatively, the Deleuzian task is described by Schults (2024, 52) as "the articulation of a flat ontology that can account for the morphogenesis of existing things (or the becoming of assemblages) through resources immanent within the world of matter and energy without any appeal to transcendence." A flat ontology is concerned with an explanation of being, and its becoming and changing, that does not rely on hierarchical categories (e.g., essence over difference), nor dualistic explanations. Deleuze's and Guattari's ontology is thus occupied with material immanence and monism, instead of transcendental dualism. They emphasise the importance of ontological categories that are the opposite of those favoured by Plato (e.g. difference over essence), hereby also critiquing Plato's discontinuity and dualism. Difference and change are not to be subsumed through the transcendental concept of the Idea. Rather, they argue that, instead of essence, the multiplicity of the world needs to be

recognized for a credible explanation of difference and change. It is in their effort to account for difference and continuity without having to rely on transcendence that Deleuze and Guattari introduce their own metaphysical concept, with its subsequent ontology: the *assemblage*.

The concept of the assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari has been described as 'the general logic' at work in their 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus*; moreover, and maybe more importantly, everything is an assemblage according to Deleuze and Guattari (Nail 2017, 21, 28). In this way, it serves as the fundament of their metaphysics. A basic explanation of an assemblage would be to describe its structure as consisting of heterogenous elements that never form a unified whole and as always able to make new connections with different assemblages. Like a machine, it can constantly make different connections. An assemblage never has a fixed identity, and its functioning can consequently not be reduced to the functioning of one or a set of its component parts, nor can an assemblage be reduced to the sum of its relations. Assemblages have certain emergent properties and are external to their relations, meaning that their relations cannot be traced back or reduced to the components that form their makeup. Assemblages also function non-linearly; they are what Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 505) call *rhizomatic*. A rhizome is originally a botanical term, meaning a mass of roots that is organized horizontally instead of vertically. Deleuze and Guattari use it to describe networks where everything is connected to something else; networks consisting of a multitude of entities where the lines of relation are organized non-hierarchically.

The assemblage, with the help of the rhizome, is able to account for the becoming and changing of entities without having to appeal to any sort of representation of a fixed essence through transcendence. It does this by rejecting both unity and essence in favour of multiplicity and events. Unity is rejected by pointing to the fact that it is not able to account for change without a call for transcendence, only continued combination and recombination of heterogeneous elements can. This is because unity necessitates relations that are internal to that entity, which means that connections are limited to the parts that are already present within the boundary of a presupposed entity. Consequently, connections with elements outside of a unitary entity are impossible. This means that the logic of unity and the logic of change are irreconcilable. Assemblages, however, are external to their relations. They do not have a presupposed structure and boundary and never form a unified whole. They are always able to form new connections with different entities. In this way they can account for change, because assemblages themselves change when forming these connections. In tandem with the rejection of unity, any claim for essence in assemblages also becomes contradictory, because for assemblages it is not about what definitively and necessarily defines it, but about a specific context from which it emerges. This specific context is what is meant with 'events.' An assemblage is thus always an event, something that happens in and through time in the context of a material environment. Strictly speaking one should not ask what an assemblage *is*, but *where* it is, how it functions, how it is constructed and how it becomes (Nail 2017, 22-24). These questions are always empirical (Nail 2017, 26). This is because the structures, boundaries and functioning of specific assemblages cannot be presupposed *a priori*.

To begin with a more thorough description and analysis of the assemblage, a quick look at the word's etymology is useful. The original French term on which the translation of assemblages is based, *agencement*, is related to the Latin term *agens*, which means 'steering' or 'putting in motion.' This notion of steering points to a certain activity inherent in the concept of the assemblage; it expresses how assemblages are not solely dependent on external activity for their organisation and functioning, but how they are themselves active in organising, arranging and the putting together of their component parts. An assemblage does not, however, operate independently, and can also be influenced and changed by other assemblages.

Deleuze and Guattari identify two main dimensions (axis) of assemblages which lend them a sort of order and consistency: one vertical and one horizontal.

The vertical axis is the operation of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This means that every assemblage is territorial. It inhabits a physical place, making the question of *where* it operates equally as relevant to *how* it operates, or how a specific assemblage can be identified. "The first concrete rule for assemblages is to discover what territoriality they envelop" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 503). Although assemblages are always territorial, this does not mean that there is no possibility for changes in territory. Assemblages have the possibility to deterriorialize since every sort of environment (*milieu*), and consequently territory, is confronted with exterior environments (and territories), which exert influence on one another. An assemblage and its territory are not able to maintain their form and structure indefinitely. There is a possibility of movement inherent to assemblages with which they can leave their territories, dismantle their structure, and reconfigure it anew. This makes deterritorialization possible. Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 55) call this movement a 'line of flight,' "the movement by which 'one' leaves the territory" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 508).

However, since 'leaving' a territory necessarily means encountering another, these lines of flight always bring with them a constant movement of both deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Both are caught up in one another. These sorts of movements are rhizomatic, can come about in a large variety of ways and move in many different directions, thus lines of flight are not singular. I would like to illustrate this process of constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization with an example that Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 55) themselves give concerning a wasp and an orchid. Certain orchids display the characteristics of female wasp's reproductive organs to get more attention from male wasps, this to be able to spread their pollen more numerously. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the orchid deterritorializes when forming this image of the female wasp. The wasp, however, reterritorializes on that image as an assemblage that does not solely consist of the wasp anymore: it is, at the same time, deterritorialized as the assemblage wasp, and reterritorialized as the assemblage wasp-orchid. The same goes for the orchid. Both are again deterritorialized and reterritorialized when the wasp moves away to transport the pollen (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 10). Through this example we see the deterritorialization of both assemblages wasp and orchid and see the reterritorialization of the assemblage wasp-orchid, which is then again in turn deterritorialized. These lines of flight are primary to everything in assemblages, because they offer the possibility of movement and mobility in assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 55).

Next to the vertical axis, they also identify a horizontal axis. This horizontal axis consists of two segments: one of content and one of expression. The segment regarding content could be said to be concerned with the material and non-discursive aspects (or components) of assemblages. This *machinic assemblage* is described to concern things like material bodies and actions (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 88). This segment could be said to describe the assemblage's concrete elements/components that also give the assemblage a degree of material consistency (Nail 2017, 26). The non-material segment (expression) is called a *collective assemblage of enunciation* and concerns speech acts, statements and 'incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies.' It includes the implicit presuppositions that are inherent in linguistic relations and in many ways determine the possibilities of how bodies (be they persons, institutions, etc.) are able to interact with each other (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 78, 88). Such as how the possible interactions between a judge and the accused are already largely determined by these subjects operating under the semiotic signs of 'judge' and 'accused' in the assemblage of courtroom, justice system, prosecutor, penitentiaries and other yet to be identified parts of that assemblage. This example of the interaction between a judge and the accused shows how assemblages both have a material and non-material segment that influence how it operates. The

segments of the machinic assemblage and the collective assemblage of enunciation both exist simultaneously and are inseparable (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 504). It also shows how it is possible that assemblages are more than their territories, they belong to them and are firstly territorial, but are, once again, not solely defined by them (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 502, 504).

Another important thing to mention about assemblages is that in every assemblage there is such a thing called an 'abstract machine.' Abstract machines operate within concrete assemblages. They form the conditions for connection with other assemblages and how certain potentials within assemblages can be realized when a connection with another assemblage is made. They are thus defined by the aspects deterritorialization and reterritorialization. They are abstract because they are not actual things in the world but rather encompass the different potentials that an assemblage has and determine which potentials of an assemblage become realized when encountering certain other assemblages. Not every potential can be realized with every connection, but they are nevertheless still there, albeit not physically present in the world (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 510–511; Nail 2017, 24–26).

Taking into account the lines of flight that allow for continuous deterritorialization and reterritorialization on the vertical axis and the segments of content ana expression that account for its concrete and non-concrete components on the horizontal axis, we come to what Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 89) call 'the tetravalence of the assemblage.' This means that, when taking everything together, assemblages have a sort of 'four sidedness,' which is expressed concisely in the following passage by Deleuze and Guattari:

> Taking the feudal assemblage as an example, we would have to consider the intermingling of bodies defining feudalism: the body of the earth and the social body; the body of the overlord, vassal, and serf; the body of the knight and the horse and their new relation to the stirrup; the weapons and tools assuring a symbiosis of bodies. A whole machinic assemblage. We would also have to consider statements, expressions, the juridical regime of heraldry, all of the incorporeal transformations, in particular, oaths and their variables (the oath of obedience, but also the oath of love, etc.): the collective assemblage of enunciation. On the other axis, we would have to consider the feudal territorialities and reterritorializations, and at the same time the line of deterritorialization that carries away both the knight and his mount, statements and acts. We would have to consider how all this combines in the Crusades. (2005, 89)

Assembled Ecology

Now that we have discussed both concepts of ecology and assemblage, we can make their connection explicit and argue that the concept of ecology should be philosophically understood as functioning and consisting of a multitude of assemblages. The concept of the assemblage tries to explain the morphogenesis of existing things without having to appeal to any notion of transcendence, essence, or identity. These are ontological categories still paradigmatic in Western philosophy due to the influence of thinkers like Plato. As we have seen, however, these categories and their subsequent ontologies are unable to actually explain how things become and change overtime, i.e., they are unable to account for things like difference, movement, and relationality. Thus, if we stick to a transcendental ontology of essence and/or identity, we are unable to explain the becoming, changing, and workings of ecosystems. A unitary concept like the concept of nature (as discussed above) presupposes that there is a realm of reality (or territory) that exists separately from other realms of existence. It assumes a fixed identity or essence by which it can be wholly and definitively defined. However, when we take this as existing reality, how are we then to explain change in 'natural' systems? How are we able to explain that life adapts to the environment it finds itself in and consequently changes this environment with it? The only way to explain these phenomena effectively and convincingly is with the ontology of the assemblage and not through an unexplainable analogy between existing things and their essences. The assemblage explains how entities become and change overtime

through resources immanent in the world of matter and energy. It explains reality (the material world) as a continuous process of becoming; reality as a Harlequin's cloak of unevenly assembled patches. All that exists on the earth envelops a territory but is also always involved in a constant process of territorialization and deterritorialization. All entities are external to their relations and consist of heterogeneous parts, be they material or enunciated. Here, there is no unity to speak of: its logic is irreconcilable with the logic of change.

This certainly does not mean that we have to get rid of categories or classifications for understanding the world. What is vital, however, especially in our current time, is realizing that these categories are epistemic and not ontological; they are the product of empirical inquiry and consequent understanding of the world. Epistemic categories are based on perceived *similarities* between existing things and not *intelligible* essences; in this way, they always exist in relation to other categories. Categories are the products of humans trying to understand the world and hereby relating to it. This does mean that categories are never stable; luckily, they do not have to be because they exist in a world of perpetual change. Hence, ontologically, we should understand the concept of ecology in the context of the assemblage. How a particular ecosystem and the parts that make up its constitution function exactly is always an empirical question; this cannot be presupposed *a priori*. This is also why the two terms should be maintained and not merged. Every ecosystem is, ontologically speaking, an assemblage and every assemblage can, empirically speaking, be studied like an ecosystem. The concept of ecology thus refers to the empirical functioning of assemblages and the concept of the assemblage refers to how we should understand the concept of ecology ontologically.[3]

Staying with a Troubled Earth: *Speculatively Fabulating New Compositions*

It can be argued that the approach above makes everything infinitely more complex. However, the case for ontological complexity is strong, both from philosophical and scientific perspectives (Cudworth and Hobden 2013, 647). It should thus not be neglected. This is also why we should not speak of problems and pretend that there exist definitive solutions but instead speak of *troubles*. These troubles require an embrace of multiplicity and all its complexities, precisely because dualistic thinking has turned out to be demonstrably ineffective at understanding our contemporary 'problems.' The task that lies ahead is to articulate ways of acting with the Earth that try to compose with it, rather than promote those practices that actively decompose the webs of life.

How do we go about this? At a time when the old anthropocentric world is falling apart, we can turn towards thinkers like Donna Haraway in order to imagine new ways of thinking about the earth and our place in it. In her book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she employs a conceptual device she calls 'Speculative Fabulation,' partially based on a literary practice employed by writers like Ursula Le Guin in her book *A Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1996). Haraway uses it as a theoretical tool in order to suggest different stories we can tell about ourselves and our place on the Earth (Wiame 2018, 525–540). Stories that are both based on so-called Science Facts, e.g., insights from ecology, and works of fiction. Haraway uses her Speculative Fabulation to propose new stories, ones that do away with human hero-master narratives, e.g., discourses that violently oppose 'Man' against 'his' environment. Instead, she uses it to situate people in the already ongoing sympoietic relations that make the Earth.

New stories like these need to be written, composed, and fabulated. Stories that can be developed into practices that will be able to deal with and keep the immanent troubles in sight. These stories will not

[3] The reader should know that I intend not to impose an absolute distinction between epistemology and ontology here, since this would very much undo the work we have done so far going against presupposed distinctions and dichotomies. This does not mean that the distinction between epistemology and ontology here is arbitrary, but that we should understand the two categories as much more intertwined and their borders as much more porous than dichotomous schemas allow.

be able to provide us with universal and definitive answers or concepts, nor should they. Philosophical universals are oppressive and so are their stories. Instead of universal master narratives, new and contingent paths need to be tried, and alternative futures need to be imagined; diligently and concisely. New assemblages need to be deployed or newly thought, told, and practiced in order to challenge those destructive assemblages, like the capitalist assemblage, which subsumes all under the destructive and oppressive logic of capital accumulation and mastery over nature. These alternatives and their discourses need not be accompanied by definitive solutions or paths of action, because these are fairytales in this world of ontological complexity. Instead, we should try to *stay with the trouble,'*to borrow the phrase from Haraway (2016). Staying with the trouble helps us to articulate the alternative words, stories and narratives that could serve as a guide on this troubled planet that is our home.

Ecological thinking with the concept of the assemblage has thus brought us here; to the realization that understands that the morphogenesis of existing things, including ourselves, comes about through a continuous process of perpetual becoming. This relationally implicates all entities with each other. This realization is of philosophical relevance, but also vital in staying with a troubled Earth. The Western practice of dualistic thinking cannot continue. New practices need to be deployed and developed that compose, fabulate and think with, instead of separately from, their respective environments. The sympoietic becoming that is vital to all life needs to be emphasized, which means insisting on processes of perpetual becoming, instead of universal being. It is here that practices of ecological care can replace violent mastery, and Man can once again become human in recognition of and humility to the Earth, to which it owes everything.[4]

4 *Authors note.* I would like to extend my gratitude towards the people that have helped me turn this text into the paper that you see in front of you. First, I would like to thank Dr. Christoph Brunner, who's supervision was of tremendous value during the thesis trajectory on which this paper is based and ultimately allowed me to write the text that I have presented here. Secondly, I thank the editorial board of the ESJP for allowing me the opportunity to publish in their journal and the editorial team responsible for reviewing my text for their diligent treatment of the material and their precise suggestions for improving the original text, both of which were constitutive for what the paper has become. Thirdly, I would like to thank Sander Tuns, who's critical notes, writing tips and monthly pictures of Kant's grave together with the number of days remaining before the deadline spurred me on to finish the thesis project in time. Last but not least, my gratitude goes out to Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra and Luise Fürst with whom I formed a small assemblage of philosophically tantalising friendship when this text was written for its original purpose. I thank you all. All errors remain my own.

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Exploiting Posterity

Sieb Brouwer

> —If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever.
> – George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Imagine a world scorched dry by climate change, stripped of its vibrant ecosystems and unable to nurture life in its myriad forms. Or imagine a future burdened by debt, inherited from choices made by the current generation. In such a world would future generations be *wronged* by our actions today? What responsibilities do we have towards those who come after us?

Our responsibilities to future generations can be framed as a matter of just allocations of resources.[1] A rich philosophical literature explores how benefits and burdens should be distributed across society and between generations. These discussions on distributive justice typically focus on the *pattern* of resource distribution, asking what constitutes a fair share. For instance, utilitarians advocate for distributions that maximise a chosen moral metric, while prioritarians emphasize improving the situation of the worse off. Ultimately, all these theories of distributive justice grapple with the core question of fair allocations. In this essay, I propose a novel interpretation of intergenerational justice in the context of climate change, one that is not centred around the notion of fair allocations: excessive emissions unjustly manifest the domination position of the living generation over posterity, constituting exploitation. The current generation leverages their arbitrary and undue power for personal gain, effectively exploiting future generations.

The concept of exploitation is particularly relevant here because exploitation theory often focuses not merely on the final distribution of outcomes but also on the conditions under which transactions occur. I contend that certain intergenerational transactions, specifically those concerning climate impacts, are unjust precisely due to these unfair underlying conditions. While intergenerational exploitation remains a relatively underexplored area within the literature, some scholars maintain that exploitation can only occur between contemporaries (Vrousalis, 2022, 112). Others argue that intergenerational exploitation is possible but offer diverging reasons and conditions for what makes such transactions exploitative (cf. Bertram 2009; Mulkeen 2023; Rendall 2011).

The central claim I defend is that the current generation exploits posterity through the unjust exercise of arbitrary power for personal gain. I develop this argument in three steps. After preliminary remarks, I first critique, in Section 2, the existing accounts on intergenerational exploitation for neglecting the central role of power. Second, in Section 3.1, I contend that, contrary to Vrousalis (2022, 112), intergenerational exploitation is possible on his account. Third, in Section 3.2, I argue that the intergenerational context is fundamentally characterised by unequal arbitrary power relations: the current generations dominate posterity. We exploit posterity when we instrumentalise this domination position for personal gain. Finally, Section 3.3 presents a concrete case of intergenerational exploitation, drawing on a climate policy proposal by Broome and Foley (2016). Broome and Foley maintain that we can solve the climate crisis by letting future generations compensate the current generation for a transition towards sustainability.

[1] Resources should here be understood broadly. It can refer to physical goods such as natural resources, income, or wealth, but it can also refer to capabilities. Capabilities are "positive freedoms" to attain a set of different functionings (Sen 1980).

1. Preliminaries on exploitation

Broadly construed, the term 'exploitation' refers to someone illegitimately receiving too much for too little. Wertheimer (1999, 16) follows this colloquial expression and defines exploitation as benefitting from a transaction that is, in some way, unfair to the exploited. On this broad definition, any transaction that is unfair qualifies as exploitative. Consider a paradigmatic case of exploitation from Vrousalis (2022, 15):

> *The Pit: A* and *B* are alone in the desert. *A* finds *B* lying at the bottom of a pit. *A* offers *B* costless rescue, on condition that *B* works for *A* for $1/day for the rest of her life. *B* accepts.

In the Pit case, *A* benefits from a transaction that is unfair to *B*. Yet, different accounts of exploitation provide different conditions for what precisely makes the Pit case unfair and hence exploitative. Some maintain that the unfairness lies in the attitude *A* has towards *B*: *A* fails to treat *B* with equal concern of respect.[2] Others maintain that the unfairness lies in *A*'s restriction of *B*'s freedom.[3] In this essay, I adopt Vrousalis' account of exploitation as domination. On this account, the Pit case is unfair because *A* uses his domination position to extract unilateral labour flow from *B*. That is, *A* enjoys superior power over *B* and can decide on a whim and with impunity whether he shall save *B*. He decides to instrumentalise these unequal power relations to obtain cheap labour from *B* for an extortionate price.

Vrousalis' account is the only account in the literature that inexplicably links the concepts of domination and exploitation. To exploit is to derive a benefit from unjust and unequal power dispositions and to dominate is to have the capacity to exploit (Vrousalis 2022, 74–75). I contend that the intergenerational setting is fundamentally characterised by *unjust power relations between the current generation and future ones*: the current generation dominates posterity (I develop this argument in Section 3.2). We exploit posterity when we instrumentalise this power for personal gain.

The Pit case is also illustrative for another reason. Note that the transaction in the Pit case is mutually beneficial and voluntary. Transactions between agents can be negative-sum, zero-sum or positive-sum. A negative-sum transaction is a transaction where the total losses exceed the total benefits meaning both agents are worse off. A zero-sum transaction is a transaction where the loss of one agent is equal to the gain of the other agent. A positive-sum transaction is a transaction where both agents benefit, and this surplus is divided (usually unequally) among the agents. Exploitation can occur in any of these types of transactions, but interesting cases are positive-sum transactions, such as in the Pit case.[4] It demonstrates how the distribution of outcomes is not the only factor relevant for moral assessment, but also the conditions under which these transactions take place.

As a final remark, the Pit case exemplifies exploitation among contemporaries. In this essay, I am concerned with exploitation across non-overlapping generations. Overlapping generations can certainly exploit one another: the young can exploit the elderly and vice versa. The relevant question is whether such exploitation is possible between non-overlapping generations. Consider three generations G_1, G_2, and G_3, as shown in *Figure 1*:[5]

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2 Equal concern and respect might here be expressed in the Kantian sense: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (Kant 1996, 80). In the Pit case, *A* arrogates to himself a superior moral status and deems *B* not worthy of the same level of respect: he uses *B* as a mere means for his own ends. Sample (2003) defends such an account.

3 Vrousalis (2022) falls under the freedom-based accounts.

4 The Pit case does not specify how much surplus value is created by the labour of B but it is reasonable to assume that it is higher than $1/day.

5 If G_1 can exploit G_3, I believe the case extends naturally to G_n, where $n \in \mathbb{N}$ such that G_i overlaps with $G_{i\pm1}$.

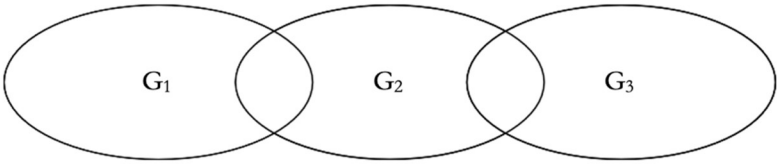

Figure 1.

G_1 overlaps with G_2, G_2 overlaps with G_3, but G_1 and G_3 do not overlap. Suppose that, in the Pit case, *A* represents G_1 and *B* represents G_3. This framing immediately highlights some tension that has led some scholars to believe that intergenerational exploitation is not possible. How can the current generation transact with an entity that, as of now, does not yet exist? How can G_1 obtain a benefit from G_3? These questions will be addressed in Section 3.1 and 3.3.

2. Exploitation as a breach of fair reciprocity

In this section, I introduce one existing account in the literature on intergenerational exploitation and highlight some difficulties. Bertram (2009) argues we exploit people when there is a breach of fair reciprocity.[6] For *A* to exploit *B,* Bertram proposes the following set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions:

> [1] *A* and *B* are linked together in cooperation.
> [2] The distribution of rewards resulting from that cooperation among *A* and *B* fails to be proportional to the distribution of the effortful contribution.

Bertram argues that exploitation occurs when individuals linked in cooperation fail to respect a principle of fair reciprocity. A minimal interpretation of this principle of fair reciprocity is that the distribution of awards is roughly proportional to the distribution of effortful contribution. The Pit case, on this account, is exploitative because there is disproportionality in the distribution of benefits from this transaction as almost all surplus value of the transaction goes to *A*. This account can be extended to future generations if one conceives of generations as a temporally extended system of cooperation. Bertram (2009, 155) mentions the example of the Liverpool Football Club as one example of such a temporally extended cooperative scheme. It was established in 1893 and remains to this day a successful football club. To sustain such an institution over time requires that multiple generations contribute their fair share. Bertram does not specify what fair contribution would practically entail in this context. One interpretation is that each generation must support the club, perhaps by purchasing tickets and attending matches. Exploitation then occurs when generations fail to respect this principle of fair reciprocity. For example, suppose that addressing climate change and maintaining a healthy environment is an intergenerational project that links together multiple non-overlapping generations. If G_1 depletes natural resources without contributing adequately to climate solutions, it exploits future generations: the rewards G_1 receives are significantly greater than its corresponding share of effortful contribution.

One issue with Bertram's account is that he does not provide a clear definition of what it means to be 'linked in cooperation.' He provides the example of a factory that endures across several generations, where each generation contributes to its ongoing operation by putting in their fair share. In such a stylised example, it is easy to conceive multiple generations as connected in a mutual enterprise. However, outside these hypothetically constructed scenarios, it becomes more difficult to identify real-world intergenerational

[6] Other accounts that focus on intergenerational exploitation include Rendall (2011), Liberto (2014), and Mulkeen (2023). A detailed discussion of each of these accounts fall outside the scope of this essay, but it should be noted that none of them are centred around the concept of domination.

projects. Plausibly, the climate crisis is one such project that links non-overlapping generations in cooperation. Yet, without a clear explication of [1], the account leaves many questions unanswered.

My main issue with Bertram's account is the proportionality stipulation in [2]. Some authors have argued that proportionality is neither necessary nor sufficient for exploitation. Let me first illustrate sufficiency. As Mulkeen (2023, 760) notes, gift giving violates this principle of fair reciprocity. There is a disproportional non-reciprocal distribution of benefits, yet gifts are not exploitative. A lack of reciprocity also does not appear to be necessary for exploitation. Consider a variation on the Pit case:

> *A Proportional Pit case: A* and *B* are alone in the desert. *A* finds *B* lying at the bottom of a pit. *A* offers *B* costless rescue, on condition that *B* works for *A* for a wage that reflects proportional effort for the rest of her life. *B* accepts.

Intuitively, the amended Pit case still seems exploitative, but on Bertram's account, there is no exploitation, because there is proportionality in the distribution of rewards and effortful contribution. Note that the final distribution between *A* and *B* might still be highly unequal in this example. Perhaps *A* has capital or certain means of production that allow him to generate a lot of surplus value with the labour of *B*. It seems as if the Pit case is exploitative for a different reason besides the lack of proportionality. Namely, it is the instrumentalisation of the unequal power relations between *A* and *B* which makes the Pit case exploitative. *A* dominates *B* and uses his domination position for personal gain.

3. Intergenerational Exploitation

3.1. Extending Vrousalis' account

In this section, I develop the second step of the argument by showing how Vrousalis' account can be extended to the intergenerational setting. Vrousalis (2022) defends an account of exploitation as domination. Yet, he provisionally concludes that G_1 cannot exploit G_3. He states: "*Labour and effortful contribution do not flow backwards in time*. So G_1 cannot exploit G_3" (Vrousalis 2022, 112, emphasis in the original). First, I introduce his account and then I show how it can be extended to the intergenerational case.

On an exploitation as domination account, *A* exploits *B* if *A* benefits from a transaction with *B* in which *A* dominates *B*. The relation between exploitation and domination is one of instrumentalisation. Exploitation occurs when one *instrumentalises* their domination position for personal gain. Consider the Non-Servitude Proviso (Vrousalis, 2023, p. 67):

> *Non-Servitude Proviso:* For any able-bodied and able-minded agents or groups engaged in mandatory mutually-affecting cooperation, and barring any special justification that exempts them, none should possess unilateral control over the labour of any other.

The Non-Servitude Proviso provides a *pro tanto* reason against unilateral control of the labour of others. That is, we have a strong normative reason to oppose domination relations among individuals for they give the dominator unilateral control over his subject. Suppose two individuals, *A* and *B*, work together on a collective project. Barring any special justification, the Non-Servitude Proviso establishes that it is permissible that *A* and *B* work unequal amounts of time on this project as long as this inequality does not reflect unequal power. The Non-Servitude Proviso also illustrates why the Pit case is exploitative. In the Pit case, *A* possesses unjust unilateral control over *B* and uses this domination position to extract some cheap labour flow from *B*.

Note that on Vrousalis' account, exploitation is necessarily cashed out in terms of *labour*. This is also the reason why he rejects the possibility of intergenerational exploitation, because does not flow backwards in time directly. At present, an individual in G_1 cannot extract labour from an individual in G_3,

as the latter does not yet exist. In the intergenerational context I adopt a broader notion of what it means to benefit from a domination position. Here, benefit may sometimes take the form of omission—of failing to act—and yet still count as a benefit. Although it may be possible to conceptualise the extraction of intergenerational labour flow, it likely takes a different form. Consider, for example, the case of debt imposition. Current generations can create a debt and impose this on posterity. Future people might then be bound to pay off this debt through labour or effortful contribution. In this way, the present generation may extract labour flow *indirectly* from future generations. This appropriation of labour flow is not direct, but through financial mechanisms whose benefit lies in the present access to resources.

I now turn to the question of how the current generation can exploit future generations. On an exploitation as domination account, exploitation is to benefit from a domination position. In Section 3.2, I define what constitutes a domination position and argue that the relation between the current generation and future generations is one of domination. Here I show how the current generation can use their position of domination to extract a benefit from non-overlapping generations.

One way might be through the use of overlapping generations. While future generations cannot directly transact with the present, intermediate generations can act as intermediaries. Recall generations G_1, G_2, and G_3. G_2 could pay a fee to G_1, with the expectation that G_3 will later compensate G_2. In this way, a chain of payments enables an indirect transaction between the present and the future. A practical implementation of this idea can be found in the structure of pension systems. Pension systems are funded by one generation and pay out benefits to another. Another way for the current generation to benefit from posterity is through loaning and borrowing money. The current generation can loan money and impose a debt on future generations. In this manner current generations borrow from future generations. Even though the future generation is not an actual financial agent borrowed from, contracting debt does have the effect of moving real resources from future generations to the present generation. It is effectively a *real* payment from future people to current people, which leads to decreasing purchasing power of future generations.

These mechanisms are just two ways into how the current generation can benefit from their domination position. In reality, there might be a myriad of ways the present can exploit their temporal power for personal gain. I have highlighted the previous two mechanisms, because some philosophers maintain that some of these transactions are justified because they are mutually beneficial. However, consider a starker example: G_1 decides to extract all natural resources from the planet, leaving nothing behind for G_3. On my account, this would also constitute exploitation as it is an exercise of arbitrary power for personal gain. But unlike the mutually beneficial scenarios, this scenario would involve a zero-sum transaction: the benefits of G_1 equate to the losses of G_3.

3.2 Republican domination

This section advances the third step in the argument that the intergenerational context is fundamentally characterised by domination relations. To do so, I draw from republicanism, a strand within political theory and philosophy that takes political liberty as one of its central pillars. I first summarise the republican conception of freedom as non-domination and then I argue how this characterisation is also prevalent in the intergenerational context. Republican theorists define freedom as non-domination or independence from arbitrary power (Lovett 2010; Pettit 1997). Consider the Kindly Master:

Kindly Master: The kindly master owns a slave, but never actually interferes with her.

The republican notion of freedom is a response to the classical negative interpretation of freedom. In the latter interpretation, freedom is usually defined in terms of interference. For instance, Hobbes (1651, chapter

21) defines liberty as: "(…) the absence of opposition (by opposition I mean external impediments of motion)." In this interpretation, the slave in Kindly Master is considered free, as she does not experience actual external interference. Republican theorists hold that interference is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom. The slave in Kindly Master is unfree due to the mere possibility of arbitrary interference of the master. She is under a relation of domination towards the master regardless of whether she is interfered with or not.[7] Freedom in republican terms is a relational concept. Pettit (2011, 709) uses the analogy of a doorkeeper to illustrate this point:

> Are you free just insofar as both doors are open in the choice between *A* and *B*? Not necessarily. What freedom ideally requires in the republican book is not just that the doors be open but that there be no doorkeeper who can close a door – or jam it, or conceal it – more or less without cost, there is no doorkeeper on whose goodwill you depend for one or another of the doors remaining open.

Canonical examples of domination include slavery and feudalism, where individuals exist in a relationship with a master who could at any point, at will and with impunity, interfere with their lives. Lovett (2010, 120) argues that domination relations are characterized by three key features: unequal power relations, dependency, and arbitrariness. Unequal power implies that *A* enjoys significantly more power over *B* than *B* enjoys over *A*. Dependency means that the dominated party is, to some extent, reliant on the relationship with the dominator—leaving the relationship would come at a significant cost. Finally, republican theorists contend that domination involves the exercise of arbitrary power. Lovett defines arbitrariness procedurally: power is arbitrary when it is not in some way procedurally constrained. Accordingly, non-domination can be achieved if there are externally enforced constraints. These might for example be rules or regulations effectively governing power and constraining the dominator in a way that he cannot act on a whim and with impunity.

It is important to note that unequal power and dependency, on their own, are not sufficient to constitute a domination relation. A university librarian holds a degree of power over me, as she has the ability to prevent me from graduating if I do not return the books I borrowed. Yet, this is not the relevant sort of domination that republicans are concerned with. Domination requires that power is exercised arbitrarily. In this example, the librarian's power is constrained by institutional rules and is therefore not arbitrary.

On the republican interpretation domination is inimical to freedom. Feudalism and slavery are extreme cases, because under feudalism and institutions of slavery the three relevant characteristics are pushed to their relative extremes. Masters hold vast unequal and arbitrary power over their subjects. I contend that our relation towards posterity can similarly be characterised as such a domination relation.

First, there are unequal power relations between the current generation and those who follow. These power asymmetries are qualitatively different compared to the power differences between contemporaries (Meyer 2021, 3). The current generation has the ability to affect the well-being, quality of life, and interests of future lives. We might, for instance, choose to consume all available resources, leaving only enough to satisfy our own needs.

Second, future generations are in a strong dependency situation. They are in no position but to accept the situation imposed upon them. In fact, the dependency appears again to be even stronger when compared to paradigmatic cases of domination. A slave has the possibility to leave the slavery condition by

[7] This is not to suggest that the slave in Kindly Master is worse off than one who is subject to constant interference. Clearly, a situation involving a benevolent despot is preferable to a malicious despot. But would we say that the slave in Kindly Master is more *free*? Republican civics deny this. From this perspective, a despot remains a despot regardless of their intentions. Benevolence does not eliminate the underlying structure of domination.

trying to run away and escape. Although the costs associated with this exit strategy are extremely high—potentially involving death or serious harm—the option still exists. For future generations, by contrast, it is an impossibility to escape the situation conferred upon them. They can do nothing but live in the circumstances we confer upon them.

Third, the power wielded by the current generation is arbitrary as there are no external constraints effectively governing this power. There are no measures in place that force the current generation to track the interests of those yet to exist. That is, there are no institutionalised representations of future people. The current generation can decide on a whim and with impunity to burn all the crops of the land, keeping just enough to feed themselves because there is no voice to oppose this.

Given the above, I contend that the current generation holds a strong domination position over future generations. In the language of the Pit case, G_3 finds itself in the bottom of the pit, due to the nature of their temporal position in relation to G_1. They are vulnerable to the exercise of arbitrary power and G_1 has the capacity to decide their fate on a mere whim and with impunity.

An upshot for the domination account is that it identifies certain relationships as problematic even when they benefit the dominated. This can also be illustrated again in the Pit case. *B* might benefit from the transaction with *A*, but there is still an objectionable master-slave relationship between *A* and *B*.[8] A domination conception of intergenerational justice argues that we do not exhaust our duties by providing future generations with their relevant fair share. Instead, it demands that we confront the root issue: the unjust asymmetries of power between present and future generations. As Orwell stated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever" (1949, 188). While grim, the quote captures the enduring danger of power exercised without accountability, precisely the kind of domination we risk imposing on posterity.

A critic might ask: "how can we *not* exploit posterity?" If the current generation enjoys a strong domination position over posterity, there might be nothing one can do but benefit from this, but this conclusion happens too quickly. Domination is a scalar concept: one can be more or less dominated depending on the severity of the unequal power relations, dependency, and arbitrariness. It might not be possible to achieve complete non-domination in the intergenerational context, but it is possible to reduce the degree of domination. One way of achieving this is by reducing the arbitrariness of the power wielded by the current generation. Recall that power is arbitrary if it is not externally constrained. There is a large literature devoted to proxy representations of future generations in democratic decision-making (Beckman 2008; Ekeli 2008). It is possible to set up an ombudsman that could act on perceived expectations of posterity. While this might fail to achieve complete non-domination, it still reduces the arbitrariness because it imposes some procedural external constraints on the power wielded by the current generation.

3.3 An illustration: Broome's efficiency without sacrifice

In this final section, I provide one example of intergenerational exploitation, arguing that the climate proposal put forward by Broome and Foley (2016) constitutes such a case. They contend that greenhouse gasses create an economic inefficiency through an externality. This externality can be incorporated into the price of carbon by imposing a tax on future generations. This is a Pareto improvement as both the current

[8] A similar point carries over to the literature on distributive justice. Suppose that the current generation adopts a sufficientarian principle and ensures that we leave future generations enough resources to attain a threshold. Meyer and Roser (2009) defend such an intergenerational sufficientarian duty. On a domination conception, even if the resulting allocation is just there is still a problematic relationship between the present generation and future ones.

and future generations are better off after this transaction. Consider the following analogy (Broome and Foley 2016, 157-158):

> Two Cities: City *A* and city *B* are connected via a river. This river flows from *A* to *B*. City *A* has a factory that benefits only *A* but pollutes the river and thereby harms *B*. The marginal cost of polluting for city *A* is zero.

Standard economic theory tells us that a Pareto improvement is possible in this scenario by letting city *B* pay city *A* to emit less. Both cities are better off as a result of this transaction: a Pareto improvement.

According to Broome and Foley, the climate crisis is similar in the relevant sense to Two Cities, where city *A* represents the current generation and city *B* future generations down the line. Broome and Foley propose several mechanisms through which future generations could compensate the current generation. Imagine, for instance, that city *A* regularly sends gifts to city *B* down the river. City *A* could send fewer 'gifts' down the river and as a result, be better off. These 'gifts' can be thought of as the earth, its resources and the infrastructure that the present generation leaves behind. I have already illustrated above in Section 3.1, through overlapping generations, another way of facilitating compensation. A final mechanism Broome and Foley (2016, 156) propose—and the one they most strongly endorse—is through intergenerational borrowing. They advocate for a global financial institution: The World Climate Bank. This bank can issue climate bonds to finance a shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources while also compensating for the current generation for potential losses incurred during the transaction. This action can be dubbed 'borrowing from the future,' where G_1 takes out a loan and imposes a debt on G_3.

In an earlier publication, Broome (2012, 34) points out three options to deal with the climate crisis. The first option, 'business-as-usual,' is the worst option and essentially entails doing nothing. The second option is 'Efficiency With Sacrifice,' which implies that the current generation takes action and reduces emissions at their own cost. This can also be achieved through a carbon tax on contemporaries. The third option is 'Efficiency Without Sacrifice.' In the last option, future generations compensate the current generation for the transition through, for instance, a World Climate Bank as outlined above. He notes that while the second option might be better in terms of justice and the overall distribution of burdens and benefits, the third option is better than doing nothing. Decades of ineffective climate negotiations have made the second option unlikely, so Broome concludes that we should opt for efficiency without sacrifice even though it might be unjust and exacerbate inequalities.

In this section, my aim is not to defend or reject the proposal, but rather to demonstrate that it can plausibly be interpreted as a case of intergenerational exploitation. If my interpretation is correct, we at least have a *pro tanto* objection to the proposal on the grounds that it is exploitative. Recall that on an exploitation as domination account, exploitation is the instrumentalisation of a domination position. Under Broome's proposal it is evident that the current generation benefits from a transaction with future generations. Granted, this transaction might be mutually beneficial and future generations might be better off as a result, but this does not preclude the transaction from being exploitative.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the current generation exploits posterity when they exercise arbitrary power over those who come after us for personal gain. While some existing accounts in the literature acknowledge the conceptual possibility of intergenerational exploitation, none place domination at the centre of their analysis. I have contended that intergenerational relations inherently shaped by power imbalances: the current generation dominates those yet to exist.

What this essay ultimately calls for is a reorientation of our understanding of intergenerational justice. A reorientation of our responsibilities towards posterity. It is not enough to simply ensure that future generations attain a certain threshold of well-being or leave them their fair shares. We must instead shift our focus on the structural power asymmetries between the present and the future. Future individuals, by their mere temporal position, find themselves at the bottom of a pit, continually vulnerable to the potential exercise of arbitrary power. It is vividly illustrated by Orwell's depiction of boot stamping on a human face—forever. The current generation holds the capacity to instrumentalise those in this pit. This can manifest in various ways, from imposing debts on future generations 'for their own good' to replacing natural habitats with mere synthetic replicas. While it may not be possible to achieve complete non-domination, it is possible to give a voice to posterity. This essay serves as a call for a procedural element in intergenerational justice. A call for the representation of those who come after us, to mitigate the subjugation by the arbitrary whims of those who came before.

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"Only ever thinking with"

An interview with Willem Schinkel

By Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra

On the 19th of June, 2025, I had the pleasure of speaking with Willem on behalf of the ESJP. I wanted to talk about the *how* of thinking: to share how his commitment to imagining less violent ways of living, gives form to his intellectual practice. We spoke about humour, and the role of taste; "the ways bodies are attuned to the world, to the affects that they are receptible for, the way their attention is structured and focused." We spoke about reading associatively, and the work that is needed to write at all, the banging-your-head-against-the-wall-of-it-all. After all, "We are just moving with currents." In a time when academic philosophy is predominantly marked by structures of masculinity, whiteness, individualism, and property, I believe and hope this conversation comes to show that philosophy can refuse adaptation, can move with and through the world. All thinking, living, ideas, emerge from togetherness, proliferating in messy, shared directions. From working with students to writing together, amidst the stories we may craft, we must remind ourselves, and put into practice: there is only ever *thinking with*.

Georgina. *Willem, in your work you have described thinking as freedom, and you're also fond of calling this a form of woekeren, proliferation. Can you recall a moment or experience that first drew you to this?*

Willem. I can't recall a specific moment, but I think it's partly a consequence of trying to break out of certain habits of thought that are very much endemic to philosophy. People start doing all kinds of exegesis, they take one specific thinker, or compare one thinker with another, and then think that this is philosophy. To me, this seemed like a form of scholasticism attuned to the way academics build careers. This felt unsatisfactory, and it felt like a hindrance, something that gets in the way of the immediacy between thought and the world. What came instead was a more ecological way of thinking, influenced by philosophers like Deleuze, who writes about thought as affect. You are affected by something in the world. It is not just 'you,' locked in your mind. That is not where thought happens. I think the notion of proliferation, of life as proliferation, is very ecological, and I have become more attuned to that over time. It corresponded with my own mind. The way I thought that my mind works and always has, is as a machine of association. You never know where things come from, but it will be some outside thing that you are affected by, something that *gets you to think*. It's nonsensical to think that philosophy means you just sit down, in a chair, and start to 'think real hard.' You are expected to become an expert in, say, Kant or Heidegger—whichever white guy—and think that philosophy means to write about philosophers. But this has never been my experience.

Georgina. *We see there are certain thinkers, such as Luhmann, Benjamin, Deleuze, Bouteldja, Spinoza, W.E.B. Du Bois, that keep reoccurring across your work. In my perception, this is more as a methodological spilling, an associative usage as well. How did that arise?*

Willem. I think it's a learning process. Some of these thinkers have been there longer than others, and the moment others emerge, the ones you already knew start to change. You're forced to rethink your attachment to certain things. When you start to discover Du Bois, for example, you have to rethink the way you'd previously processed certain white European thinkers. Which doesn't mean you have to get rid of

them or discard them altogether, but you have to start thinking with them, against them, more than before. It's a continual process of learning. I'm not in the habit of throwing things away. I think I'm intellectually something of a hoarder. The way I buy books and read also attests to that. I'm all over the place, and I'm not happy to confine myself. But that also means I'm continuously looking for authors, for strands of thought, that help me get out of where I thought I was. I started out in a tradition, in some conception of critical theory, broadly conceived, ranging from Marx to Bourdieu. But I felt very dissatisfied with that, so I started to read, for instance, feminist theory, which really helped. From there, I moved on to queer theory and black studies. I think if you really want to learn, you have to continue to look for those places where it's initially uncomfortable. That is what I continuously try to do, which does not mean I discard work I've engaged with previously, but it does mean that that engagement will continuously change.

Georgina. *Do you keep a notebook for small ideas, things you might want to write about one day, even if they're not fully developed or seem a bit silly?*

Willem. Oh yes, I have all kinds of notebooks. The notebook practice is a whole story in and of itself. Some notebooks are on the computer, one has the length of a book already, some are physical. I don't know what gives rise to either. But this is again such a good testament to the whole illusory idea of an 'individuated thinker'. I'm just moving with certain currents. I am swayed in certain directions, affectively, as part of something really underestimated in academic philosophy, which is *taste*. Why do people do certain kinds of philosophy? Taste. Analytic philosophers, continental philosophers, they subdivide themselves into these camps, and of course they have all kinds of arguments for that. But ultimately, it's a matter of taste. It's a way in which their bodies are attuned to the world, to the affects that they are receptible for, the way their attention is structured and focused. We are just moving with currents. So, why do I in certain cases have a physical notebook, and sometimes a file on a computer? There is no reason whatsoever, there is no rationality. Who knows! And why do I start to write a certain book? Why does one thing all of a sudden turn from notes into a book, why do I decide that in the next years I really want to focus one certain thing next to all the other things I do. I want to write book about, in this case, property. Can you really account for that? I highly doubt it. You can craft a *story* about it, and it's important to do that. But it's never a causal account, which is also one way to think about the freedom of thought; it's free in the sense that it's undetermined, or under-determined. You cannot say "this is why." If you could, it would be a totally heteronomous thing, because there would be something akin to a causal connection. To not have that be the case, it has to be free. But freedom, then, does not mean that there is an individuated autonomous agent. It is the freedom of participating in certain proliferations that are ongoing in the world. There are moments of choice, because there's all kinds of proliferation, and some of them are fascist. So you must continuously ask yourself: how do I want to resonate with what's going on in the world?

Georgina. *I noticed that if I don't have some sort of idea, I find it very difficult to start a paper. Teachers can tell you to write what you know, but I sometimes feel like I am waiting for God, or Godot, or something. Across all those proliferations and the ideas you take in and associate with, when does the writing begin for you?*

Willem. I think I understand what the teachers mean to say, because I think it's no use waiting for an idea if you don't start to engage with something. This engagement can be through reading texts, but it can also happen by taking reading less literally, by engaging with other people, with the world. But personally, I think *through* writing as well, absolutely. In some books I will have a rough outline, sometimes I may even subdivide it into chapters, and order my notes per chapter. But at the same time, even if I have that in a very detailed way, I know that once I write, twice as many ideas will emerge, at least. The writing is really the creative process. But there's no way to write without reading, and you have to continuously be engaged with

other work. That is another reason why this individuated idea of creative authorship is such a problematic notion. It's one of those concepts Walter Benjamin writes about as being very useful for fascism, and I think he is right. If you really look at how people write anything, it's just a web of relations from start to finish. Obviously, there is a particular singularity to the itinerary that you travel. But you read in order to write, and you have to write to develop something.

Georgina. *I like that when you let go of this individuated subject, you come across all these other people in other fields. But I think this is reflected in your style of writing, as well. One thing that particularly strikes me is that, whereas we tend to think of philosophy as this very heavy, often boring form of critique, you are very funny. You actually are really funny! You have a way of describing something that is present in your dissertation already when you list the antinomies of violence, across Theorie van de Kraal and your most recent Aphonismen, and I admire this. Is this gesture towards humor a conscious choice for you? Or is it something that happens halfway in writing?*

Willem. That is nice to hear, thank you. Yes, it is totally conscious. because, in one way, and that is also reflected in my style: I'm not a purist, I'm not an aestheticist. I think writing very often is banging against a wall, it's trying to break through something, it's a tool and sometimes a weapon. Humour is a very good way of doing that. Laughter is very important. Laughing together is one of the most important things in the world, right? But if that is the case, it is inconceivable to me why academic work should often be so humourless and not funny at all. The same goes for a lack of love. We know that love is the most important thing in the world. But this makes it very strange to then keep love outside of philosophy, to park it somewhere else, preferably in heteropatriarchal relationships under the label of "romantic love," while here, in academic philosophy, we do "thinking," loveless.

There are ways to place readers at a distance from some preconceived habits of thought, and humor is one of those things. There can also be shock. Not for the shock itself, but just in naming, renaming, redescribing things. Sometimes, this is halfway revolutionary. Just this morning I was writing for a book about the Earth and climate, where I note how important it is not to individuate and moralize actions. But it is also impossible *not* to note the ritualistic celebration of carbon emissions that exists in the roasting of dead animals on barbecue sets, the moment it's nice and warm outside! This is a very weird way of participating in the catastrophe of global warming. It gets warmer, there are more warm days, and then people start to burn coal and roast dead animals, participating, as in a metonymic way, in the larger catastrophe. Of course, making explicit what we already know has an alienating, estranging, or shocking effect. Same as when we make it explicit that the most popular electric car in this country is produced by a South African neo-Nazi with nostalgia for apartheid, who also happens to be the richest dude in the world, meaning he's the most successful exploiter of other human beings and of the Earth. This is stating facts, but naming the constellation of facts in this way works; people think, or at least this is what I'm often told, "huh, I hadn't seen it like that." And that helps. Not to start bickering about whether it is the truth or not, it helps in the same way that I try to read in order to think something else, to get myself *out* of where I was.

The most important thing in writing, is that the best writing is done together. All the writing I do with Rogier is a way to get out of the illusion of individuated authorship. When we wrote *Theorie van de Kraal*, I would write something and send it to him, he would write something and send it to me, and then we would just get to work with it. Each sentence has been revised. Ultimately, we don't know who wrote what. At times, you think you know where a particular chapter is going, and then when the text comes back it's a completely different direction. But we always accept this. There is never a moment of, "wait a minute, I don't agree with that, because we wanted to make *this* point, didn't we?" No, there is a total acceptance of

whatever comes your way. We have to deal with that, and that is just life, this being thrown amidst currents, proliferations, and finding bearings by calibrating one's modes of attention and attunement.

Georgina. *I think what you do is more than just naming. You mentioned affect, which is something I'm interested in, along with queer theory and reparative reading approaches. It seems to me that in your writing, you are very aware that in writing one can create a world in which the reader is affected. Just as when you say that our proclivity for certain theories is a matter of taste. Taste is embodied. That way of writing, which is more aesthetic and affective, doesn't seem to follow a strict line from one author to the next. In your work, there's an attunement, resonance, with certain imagery or a feeling that seem to deliberately guide your process. But in stark contrast is much of philosophy, where the method still is to move from person to person, reference to reference.*

Willem. Yes, taste is the way you are attuned to certain affects and not to others, and it relates to the way in which your attention is calibrated. What nowadays is called philosophy, is academic philosophy. Paradoxically, however, all the philosophers that are revered in that discipline have explicitly stated that *precisely that is not philosophy*. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Deleuze come to mind. They state this is not philosophy, it's a weird way of going about it. If you read Kant—and I mean, I read all the critiques of Kant during my years as a PhD student, during my lunch break—sure, he will talking about Hume and the like, but it's not like he would say, "oh, this person wrote this, and that person wrote that, and we compare them and that's what philosophy is." Kant is also riffing! At the same time, it's important to acknowledge what has been said and written before. There has to be engagement with the history of thought and there has to be a degree of rigor there, even though rigor in canonical practices is not the same as practicing philosophy. That's why I'm always, maybe overly, concerned with footnotes. Even the *Aphonisms* book has footnotes, because it's important to show that I'm just a singular voice in a larger web. But it's still a continual process of learning. In the same way, I think I'm still often too wedded to a certain idea of 'critique.' It's still lingering, and it's hard to kill. I think that process could be much improved. Which is to say: there's a little critical theory dude inside me and it needs to be killed.

Georgina. *I think the moment you step into writing that is acknowledged for being affective, for being a way to conjure up certain imaginaries, you inherently become interdisciplinary. When you no longer have to follow through the entire cemetery of the white men, and instead look at affect and the act of affecting your reader, you can turn to artists, as they know all about that. You, in turn, have written quite a bit about art. In one paper, for instance, you end up discussing various artworks grappling with 'the face' and algorithmic surveillance technologies. How do you see your relation to art?*

Willem. Yes, that specific paper was written with Patricia de Vries, and I fully acknowledge that all the knowledge about art in that paper came from her! But I have written about art, more through the notion of the art world, which I find sociologically very interesting. At some point I want to write a book about a sociological conception of art. In a way, this stands somewhat queer to the rest of my work, so I am not sure, it will be written after I'm retired, probably. I am not a pure sociologist at all. I'm usually described as a 'sociologist and philosopher,' and I'm okay with that—if labels have to be attached, that will do. A couple of years ago I had, for some occasion, to list the number of disciplines I have published in, which came to something like twelve different ones. The world is not as discrete as the academy is, the world is continuous. It's no use trying to stick to the boundaries of disciplines, but this means you have to do a lot of work, which for me is reading a lot. But I never limit myself to one thing, it doesn't fit with me as a person at all, and it never has from the beginning. I cannot conceive, for instance, how you can write anything without also being historical. It's just not possible.

Georgina. *That reminds me of Lauren Berlant.*

Willem. Yes, and Berlant is a very wise, very powerful author. Interestingly, that is somebody who wrote as an esthete, very aesthetically curated. My writing is incomparable. I don't think I have anywhere near the level of care that Berlant had in their writing. I'm not a perfectionist either. When I write, it's a form of excretion. What to do with that? You flush it and you move on! It's for use. I don't have a lot of love for earlier books I wrote, either.

I think there are two things going on though. One is that I'm getting older, and I actually start to like recent books, which is dangerous. I take it this means I'm starting to get less creatively attuned to things. The kind of rigidity that comes with age, perhaps. But I also note that looking back, there are certain themes that have always been there, even if I hate the way in which they were there then. It is no surprise to me that my dissertation was about violence. Everything I do still is concerned with the very limited ways in which thought and writing might contribute to inventing ways of living together with less violence. Looking back, that is certainly one red thread. But it's been funny to see students write master theses about my work as an 'oeuvre.' There is something to that I guess, but it's also pushing things into an overarching logic that I myself do not always think is there—but then maybe others can see this much better than I can. One problem I have is with the collaborative work, does an 'oeuvre' imply that the work I did with Rogier somehow entered my oeuvre? Well, yes and no. Things can exist in parallel universes at the same time.

Georgina. *But there are some Leitmotifs, sometimes. Phrases from Fanon, such as "certain hommes veulent enfler le monde de leur être,"*[1] *will come in as a recurring melody.*

Willem. Yes, and the most important one by far for me is by Walter Benjamin: "that things 'go on like this', *is* the catastrophe."[2] I take that quote everywhere I go. I could tattoo it, but that might feel too much like that story by Kafka, *In Der Strafkolonie*, where there is this machine that writes the law into the skin of the backs of people, and it writes it in such a way that it totally destroys these people. It somehow feels like it would be something like that to tattoo quotes.

Georgina. *Walter might not really like that, no. Now, you've mentioned that you do a lot of your best work with other people. What stands out is that you've earned deep admiration from students. It is one thing to be well liked as a teacher, but it is rare for a professor to also be political, to carry a sense of urgency and awareness of the world and its suffering. You have stated before that you have hope in the students, not the university, and you created the master 'Engaging Public Issues' that seems to reflect those values. Could you say a bit more about that?*

Willem. That's nice to hear, although I don't think most students at Erasmus University are particularly big admirers of me. But what's important is that it's the other way around as well: I admire the students I get to work with. Creating this master programme was also creating space for a particular kind of student that was previously very dispersed, and more unhappy than I would like to believe they currently are. I've just finished supervising the master theses of some of these students, and I'm struck by how 'grown-up' they have to be. Especially when I compare it to myself in my early twenties, when I felt very lonely being surrounded by neoliberals trying to make money, and I was nowhere near where they are. That tells you something about the world. Now, these students are at least together. I am in awe of what they do, interpersonally and in their activism, at the level of care they exhibit for each other, and how they connect this to their intellectual work. I can create a certain space, and for sure the archive in my head sometimes helps in our conversations, but it definitely works the other way around too.

1 Fran Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 219.

2 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* p. 473.

Georgina. I think *that kind of connection and collaboration also has to do with activism, particularly amongst your students.*

Willem. That is true. In a sense I do subscribe to the idea of the scholar-activist, but I find the initiative usually lies with students. Of course, I've been engaged in various kinds of activism for years, long before the master's programme. But most of that was quite traditional, as 'contributing to the public sphere,' engaging in debates, blablabla. At a certain point, it became clear that this was, overall, a rather useless way to spend my time and energy. Most of the activism I get involved in actually starts with students. We must recognize that, particularly within the university, whether it's about climate or Palestine, it always starts with students. Your role as an academic, then, can be to help wherever you can, whether it means doing groceries or doing a lecture at an encampment; whatever students need. That's what you do. The activism of a scholar aligns with that, but scholars tend not be the source of activism—which is not to say they can't and shouldn't get organized in better ways. But scholars will not be the start of the revolution, even though every revolution has had its books and thinkers. It's important for me to be very explicit about that. This also relates to certain academics who feel that, especially during student protests, their role is to mediate between the students and the university board. I abhor that kind of approach. I react to it viscerally, it makes my hair stand on end. You have to follow your heart in your allegiances, and help students wherever you can and not think for them, only ever with them.

Georgina. *Do you think there's something about being a student that involves a different relation to theory?*

Willem. Not necessarily to students per se, because it very much depends on the more general conditions, on the general relations of production, and on the general regime in which whiteness and masculinity operate in the world. When I was a student, this level of activism we have today did not exist. This was a time when the general idea—which I, too, only gradually began to sense and unravel, distance myself from—that the world as it was kind of fine, and that if you were white, you could make a life, a dignified life within the existing order. For most of my master's students, it is clear that this is no longer the case, and they are acutely aware of it. They are aware that whiteness, masculinity and capital are the main hindrances to ways of living with less violence. This is nothing inherent to being a student. Yet being a student does mean that you are more receptive than the ones who think that they can teach. I obviously include myself in that. Under different circumstances, that receptiveness can translate into a very adept way of mimicking, of noting "this is the game, and this is how it's played, so I'm going to adapt to this current order as soon as possible." Most students do this, but the students that I am surrounded with tend to have a different response. When I was a student, there were way less students that had the non-adaptive response, that did not say "I'm gonna mimic this." But students can go either way given the general conditions, and they are as dangerous as anybody.

Georgina. *One thing I've been thinking about is generosity. Working in collaboration, being with others matters a lot to me, and I find academia preys on generosity, it perverts generosity. Generosity arises despite the university, and we need to foster it among ourselves. Being a teacher can be generous, just like working with someone, and letting them run with an idea that emerged between you. I've been told that back in the day, if you found something special, a reference or an idea, you were told to guard it like a little egg so no one would steal it. I think only a system creates that kind of attitude, because with the people I work with, it simply never has occurred to us, and never would.*

Willem. And happily so, but this system is still here. This system is the affective reflection of a regime of intellectual property rights. That has probably been the most innovative addition to the legal superstructure of capitalism in the last hundred years. Intellectual property rights have become central to

appropriation and to calibrating the work people do. That logic is everywhere. And yes, academics sit on so-called discoveries or ideas. In a sense, I can also feel that. Sometimes you think, "am I really going to say what I feel in this meeting, or will someone just run away with it?" The impulse is to hold back, but I try to resist that, especially with students. And I also think that whatever I'm saying now is not really mine. Tomorrow I'll think of something else and work with that, and this "I'll think of something else" simply means something else came my way. But we are trained, and disciplined, to sit on things, to *own them*. That is a very problematic feature of the university, but it is also a feature of the capitalist mode of production more broadly. It is a way of maintaining artificial scarcity. If you have a reference that could be useful to others, but you sit on it until you publish, so that it becomes a gateway everyone has to pass through, then your reputation is propped up, and you can build a career from that. Academics make a career by claiming ownership, by establishing property. But property is nothing other than the creation of artificial scarcity.

This is deeply problematic, because it gets in the way of living together in ways that are much less tense, much more relaxed. But the idea that something is *your* idea, is really something you need to be rescued from. You can make a career by making a name and collecting all kinds of symbolic capital. But I truly think this is something that leads to unhappiness and a sense of profound hollowness inside. Because it is ego, and ego kills you. People suffer from ego, I too suffer from ego. I am very convinced that especially those who are very well known as in "these are brilliant thinkers," once they start to actually believe that themselves, they will be very, very unhappy. They need to be rescued from that delusion. Even though, obviously, they're not a priority.

Georgina. *As a final note, is there anything you'd like to share with students reading this? Maybe those just starting out in philosophy or trying to find their way in these uncertain moments?*

Willem. It's kind of difficult to put myself in that position, but I would say that the only way I, as a student, ever really felt like I was learning something, was by breaking out of the curriculum. The curriculum is there, and it consumes a lot of your time. But it is the result of a set of contingent choices made by a group of very arrogant people who think they can decide what is important. It becomes a way of going through the motions. You're stuck in that system, and you have to get the grades. Pending revolution, this is what we do. And I hate to say it, because it means giving people more work, but finding ways to step outside that structure can really help.

One way to step out is that you have to develop a very irrational reading practice. As I said, I'm in a fortunate position that allows me to afford a lot of books. Speaking of ownership*: I'm a total fetishist of books*. It's the only thing I am really interested in buying. And I do it, in part, out of a feeling that whatever happens, I will still have this, I'll still have access to the archive. The way I read is a mix. Sometimes I have specific things that I read for. Other times, I come across something completely random, online or elsewhere, and I have to buy it and start reading. The most irrational thing I do is this: I walk past my bookshelves, think, "huh?," take something out, and suddenly I'm reading it. Right in the middle of all kinds of other things I need to do, other things I'm already reading. Why? I don't know why, I have no idea why! It's totally irrational, and to think there would be a plan to this is nonsensical. But this method is at the same time incredibly useful if you want to make lateral connections and ignite a certain associative capacity in yourself. I sometimes get embarrassed when people say I seem to know something about everything, or that when teaching I can talk about almost anything. It's obviously such a masculine practice. But I simply try to inform myself, to push myself into all kinds of directions, and to do so in a way that acknowledges there are only ever lateral connections, by way of the proliferations through which the world works. So, in short, and I hate to say it, because it takes more time, but I do think it's rewarding: your reading should be guided in part

by a kind of rigorous discipline, some things are important to work through. But the other half should be completely unplanned, totally contingent, shaped by whatever you happen to bump into. That, to me, is a very rewarding combination.

BLITZ

Thomas Hobbes **A cup of tea**

Sounds like a category mistake, comparing them like this. They're both very imperial. Then I will, yeah, then I'll choose them both: you have to face all imperialisms at the same time. *Willem, it is a 'blitz,' huh.*

Aspects → Rhizome

(deep sigh) *Willem, lock in.* I will place an arrow from aspects to rhizome.

Rotterdam Krimpen

Boycotting AND **proletarisch winkelen**

Suits and ties **14 thousand angry beavers**

Angry what? *Beavers!* What are beavers? *The beavers!* What kind of beavers? *The ones in the water, building dams and such!*
Oh, beavers! The beavers! The beavers!

Walking **Cycling**

Walter Benjamin Spinoza

Gestell Bestel

None.

Ayn Rand Friedrich Hayek

Both thankfully dead.

Critique **Tough love**

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