

# Timothy Morton's object-oriented ecology

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**Abstract:** In *Being Ecological*, Timothy Morton expands on his proposal for a new ecology, structured upon object-oriented ontology and markedly detached from the concept of nature. For Morton, experiencing this ecology would require a radical transformation in our relationship with the world. The fundamental premises of this ecology are: (i) overcoming the subject-object duality through a flat ontological matrix, in which all objects—human and non-human, natural and cultural, real and fictional—possess the capacity to affect and be affected in a dynamic, unstable, and fluid process; and (ii) multiscalarity as an ontological condition. These conditions highlight that any form of access will always be partial and insufficient, as every object remains open and enigmatic in relation to its potential. This proposal for an ecological consciousness and stance suggests a radical ethical-political and epistemological shift, opening up thought-provoking avenues toward a new philosophy of the Earth System.

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Review

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The book *Being Ecological* is only the second work by the English philosopher Timothy Morton to be translated into Portuguese. Preceded by *The Ecological Thought* (both published by Quina Editora in 2023), this work expands on the proposal to destabilize the concept of ecology as a condition for thinking, positioning oneself and acting in this era, conventionally referred to as the Anthropocene. Morton's work is characterized by a persistent focus on a central question that permeates his entire corpus: "what matters is not exactly what you think, but how you think" (Morton, 2023b, p. 75).

Originally associated with literary studies, with a strong emphasis on British Romanticism, Morton began his engagement with ecological criticism in 2007 with the publication of *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Morton, 2007). In this work, he explicitly establishes a starting point for his relationship with the emerging object theory, whose propositions were evolving along parallel lines, particularly through the works of Graham Harman (2002; 2005; 2011; 2018) and Levi Bryant (2011). This trajectory would lead to the development of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), a school of thought whose influence becomes increasingly evident and explicitly acknowledged (Pinho, 2022) throughout his later works (Morton, 2010; 2013; 2016; 2017; 2018). Although not explicitly presented in *Being Ecological*, it is also possible to note influences from other relevant authors in the debate on ecology in the context of the Anthropocene, notably Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway.

With a highly distinctive writing (and philosophical) style — one that freely incorporates references from literature, music, and pop culture while avoiding excessive jargon or philosophical quotations, thus making his work accessible to a wider audience — Morton states up front that if his style were a film directed by him, its producer would be Harman's OOO, and its executive producers would be Kant and Heidegger (p. 14). Regarding the latter two, Morton revisits their theses, seeking to push them to their ultimate consequences.

The radicalization proposed by Morton aligns with the premises and foundations of what is known as Speculative Realism. A dual movement is identifiable in relation to the theses of Kant and Heidegger. Initially, there is an alignment with Kant's proposition of a distinction between the thing-in-itself (noumenon) and the forms in which it is perceived (phenomenon), asserting that direct access to the former is impossible — only certain representations are available. Similarly, Morton accepts and understands Heidegger's concept of being as something intrinsically inaccessible. However, from this point onward, he recognizes the emergence of a profoundly structural issue in modern thought: the absolute distinction between subject (human) and object (world). The world can only be known insofar as it correlates with our faculties of perception, cognition, and conceptual and sensory filters (such as time, space, and categories of understanding). This establishes the foundation for an ecological framework in which all beings/objects, not just humans, are engaged in a continuous interplay of interaction and concealment. From this point onward, Morton explicitly adopts Meillassoux's (2022) critique of correlationism. While accepting the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself, Morton rejects the centrality of the human as the sole arbiter of reality. By displacing the human from its

privileged position, this critique of correlationism suggests that the “real” is perpetually withdrawn and unattainable—not just for humans, but for all objects. This establishes the foundation for proposing an ecology in which all beings and objects, not merely humans, are engaged in a perpetual interplay of interactions and concealments.

Such movements of radicalization are illustrated in the book through examples that bring the reader closer to his propositions. The term “bring closer” is important here, as full access to his arguments would be inconsistent with his own proposal.

This ecological being of Morton is both ontological and performative—entity and action. The first step toward this understanding-action would be to overcome the fetishization of big data to attempt to experience, in some way, what these data actually signify. The thesis follows the premise of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO): the object itself is inaccessible, and no database is comprehensive enough to fully capture it. Any access will always be partial and will only produce “truthlets” or factoids. This characteristic becomes even more evident in his framing of what he calls hyperobjects — things that are distributed across time and space, allowing access only to fragments, one at a time, since they are unstable and discontinuous relative to human temporal scales. The new climatic regime (to use Latour’s terminology) would be a prime example of a hyperobject.

Data are not facts. To consider data as facts would be to mistake the part for the whole. Treating them this way reinforces a modern, non-ecological understanding. Morton highlights how science operates from this perspective by clinging to data as if they conveyed the entire truth. Even if we were to consider each part individually, it would still only represent a fraction of itself, as each part transforms into a new object, which, in turn, also eludes complete access. This partiality of access, though deeply unsettling to the modern mindset, is not necessarily a problem for Morton.

If this is correct, then there would be an inherent multiplicity to every object, or more than that, every object could be conceived as a multidimensional system. But the idea becomes even more intriguing. For Morton, thinking about this system in ecological terms would require constructing a way of thinking in which the whole is always smaller than the sum of its parts — ontologically smaller. There is an implicit reference here to the concept of transfinite sets, originally proposed by Georg Cantor and revisited by Meillassoux (2022) in *After Finitude*, a work considered foundational for Speculative Realism. In the same spirit, an approximation can be made to Latour’s *plus intra* (2020), which suggests that Terrans—ecological beings, according to Morton’s perspective—seek to appropriate the Earth by intensifying relationships, exploring new layers and overlapping parts that interact in non-obvious or “mysterious” ways. This mystery would be an inherent and insurmountable condition. It is through this interplay of multiple systems of intensity — and therefore multiscalarity — that his ecological framework is structured.

Morton argues that if it is impossible to know something directly or fully, the only way to relate to it is to attune to it — that is, to establish a living and dynamic relationship between things. Once again, the influence of Latour’s concept of mediation is evident here, although Morton takes it further. Things affect one another — not to the extent of losing their identity, but through exchanges and influences. In this process, a kind of

resonance emerges, establishing varying degrees of intimacy and connection.

Fundamental to understanding the foundation of his ecological proposal is the need to define and demystify the term “object.” From the perspective of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), an object can be understood as an irreducible<sup>1</sup> unit, both in relation to its constitutive parts and to its performances, effects, and interactions with other objects. According to Morton, objects are entirely different from objectified things because they are radically open, in the sense of potential, and therefore intrinsically mysterious. Moreover, all objects—human, non-human, natural, cultural, real, fictional—despite being constitutionally different, engage in intense processes of relation, and these processes produce effects in the world. Even these relationships, or the way things are connected, could also be treated as objects.

To refer to this complex of connections across multiple scales, Morton proposes the concept of the “mesh,” a derivation of Whitehead’s nexus and Latour’s network, with its core centered on the idea of incompleteness in any delimitation. In other words, no contextual boundary would be sufficient to provide a complete explanation of the thing we seek to explain. It always signals that there is more—much more—in a movement that does not presuppose boundaries. The mesh articulates, on one hand, the idea of multiscalarity (including through the temporal dimension) and, on the other, the system of transfinities. Ecological awareness, from the perspective of this object-oriented ecology, would be the awareness of this mesh and acting based on its understanding.

The transversal intention that permeates this bold ecological proposal is the overcoming of the subject-object duality through the establishment of a flat (or less uneven) ontology, in which everything could be both affected and capable of affecting. Morton aims to move us from what he calls the “uncanny valley,” a place where there are deep asymmetries between objects and where the origin of all forms of prejudice, racism, and speciesism can be found, toward a spectral plain, where all objects would possess ontological dignity, without losing their characteristics of differentiation.

For Morton, the classic subject-object duality is, in reality, a subject-object duality. The pejorative use of the term “object” serves as a mirror reflecting the prejudices inherent in a certain metaphysics. The idea of the object as an inert, static, manipulable, and lifeless thing would cast it into the depths of the uncanny valley. The term “uncanny,” according to Morton, describes something that is at once familiar and strange — an ambiguity. This ambiguity, in an ecological context — now on the spectral plain — must be appreciated, not merely tolerated. Morton turns to aesthetics to help understand this difference: when faced with a work of art, the intention is not to tolerate its strangeness, but to establish a relationship and appreciate it, without allowing our frame of reference to become an obstacle.

Ultimately, it is this duality that would structure the matrix of anthropocentrism,

1 - Irreducible, in this context, refers to the so-called principle of irreductions, proposed by Latour in the second part of his work *The Pasteurization of France*, titled “Irreductions” (Latour, 1993), according to which “nothing is, by itself, reducible or irreducible to anything else.” In the context of the discussion put forth by Morton, irreducibility serves as an important safeguard against the modern, non-ecological correlationalist tendency.

which, in turn, is at the root of the ecological crisis that afflicts us. This refers to the classical bifurcation between nature and culture (Whitehead, 1993), or environment and society, the central anchor of modern thought, which, following Latour (1994), epistemologically structures the division of the sciences into purifying poles. These poles access the phenomenon (always partially) and aim to explain it in terms of their own assumptions and theories, thereby draining it of any inherent constitution. It becomes clear why Morton's ecology is structurally detached from the concept of nature. It is, in fact, an ecology without nature, since it denies the very existence of this concept and any form of dualism. In doing so, it seeks to collapse the anthropocentric premise.

It is undeniable that the classical duality between nature and culture has enabled advancements in various dimensions of human life. However, at the same time, it has also created the conditions for the emergence of all the numerous chained crises<sup>2</sup> — or what has come to be referred to as the polycrisis<sup>3</sup> — that we are experiencing with increasing intensity every day, leaving us bewildered. Morton points out that the establishment of human temporality<sup>4</sup> as the standard scale cast the other temporalities into the void. Once again, the multiscalearity proposed by Morton helps to explain ambivalence as an inherent characteristic of modernity.

In the vain attempt to synthesize a disconcerting work such as *Being Ecological*, multiscalearity appears to be, indeed, a more general point of connection. From an epistemological perspective, multiscalearity should not be treated merely as a methodological option, as is common in environmental research. Instead, multiscalearity would be an inescapable and non-negotiable ontological condition for ecological thinking and living.

It would be intriguing to speculate on how such a premise could unfold into new ethical-political and, certainly, epistemological frameworks. To begin with, the fetishization of a solution-oriented science would no longer make sense, since the definition of the problem is typically based on human needs, that is, within a strictly mono-scalar context. Any solution or pursuit of efficiency would only be effective from a specific and limited perspective. The disregard for other scales, beyond the anthropocentric, would continue to deepen the logic that gave rise to the problem itself, exporting new and unpredictable problems to other ignored scales.

Morton emphasizes that the political, technical, and psychic tools we have for thinking, planning, and acting are part of the problem, as they are embedded within the same ontological framework that surrounds us and imposes absolute limits. Without transcending this ontological-epistemic framework, it would be impossible to conceive of new ways of relating to reality, in line with what Merleau-Ponty (1953/2022, p. 10) already proposed when he stated, “It was not scientific discoveries that provoked the change in

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2 - In the same vein, Safatle (2023) uses the term “systems of interconnected crises”.

3 - The concept of polycrisis was initially proposed by Morin and Kern (1999) and later developed by Swilling (2013, 2019). In 2023, the Global Risks Report by the World Economic Forum adopted the concept as the foundation for its analyses (WEF, 2023).

4 - It would also be interesting to consider, in this context of the standardization of human temporal scale, which epistemic bases are regarded as reference, and which numerous others are disregarded, marginalized, and thus left open to all kinds of violence.

the idea of nature. It was the change in the idea of nature that made those discoveries possible.” In other words, no truly disruptive transformation can flourish within the same ontological framework.

However, the interconnected and increasingly intense crises that afflict us provide an indication that we may already be within a period of anomaly, in Kuhn’s (1962/2018) terms, and that a new ecology without nature, as proposed by Morton, could serve as a catalyst for the emergence of a new paradigm that enables us to survive the dire Anthropocene.

Relevant and highly illustrative, in this context of virtual anomaly, is precisely the framing of this hyperobject known as the Anthropocene. The denial by the Anthropocene Working Group, associated with the International Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (SQS), in March 2024 (IUGS, 2024) to designate the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch is a clear sign of the inadequacy of the modern paradigm to address a multidimensional issue that profoundly affects us.

The case is also quite useful for understanding Morton’s proposal. The denial establishes the focus of understanding a phenomenon from a very specific mode of access, in this case, exacerbated by the strange presumption of attempting to measure the Anthropocene using the tools and epistemic framework of the Holocene. More importantly, in the context of Morton’s thinking, is that, although the decision is strictly confined to the domain of geology, it resonates and spills over beyond its boundaries. This precarious and contingent decision of the SQS, which, in theory, can be read as a denial by modern science of the establishment of the Anthropocene, immediately generates a new object, with concrete and complex developments and effects in reality. This new object resonates with the very causes of the phenomenon, amplifying it in a cycle of positive feedbacks, and accelerating — albeit thoughtlessly — an even faster and more intense transition, precisely toward the Anthropocene itself.

Once again, Morton’s proposal is highly thought-provoking for rethinking how to navigate this increasingly complex and inapprehensible world. Certainly, we will still rely on the use of our limited, inadequate, and inefficient tools. However, returning to the initial point, the issue is not so much what but rather how: “Use what is at hand and observe how these tools evolve as they are used across different scales and with other forms of life that are unfamiliar to us” (Morton, 2023b, p. 200). And how such changes might shape new epistemological trajectories. Perhaps an object-oriented ecology — open, under construction, and far from consensus — an instability that may need to be stabilized, as a mark of the ambivalence of our times — could occupy the space, no longer of a rigid philosophy of nature, but rather of a new and dynamic philosophy of this new and strange Earth system.

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# A ecologia orientada a objetos de Timothy Morton

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**Resumo:** Em *Ser ecológico*, Timothy Morton aprofunda sua proposta por uma nova ecologia, estruturada a partir da ontologia orientada a objetos, marcadamente descolada do conceito de natureza. Para Morton, a vivência dessa ecologia dependeria de uma mudança radical em nossa relação com o mundo. As premissas básicas dessa ecologia seriam: i) a superação da dualidade sujeito-objeto a partir de uma matriz ontológica plana, na qual todos os objetos (humanos, não humanos, naturais, culturais, reais, fictícios) seriam dotados de capacidade de afetar e serem afetados, em um processo dinâmico, instável e fluido; e ii) a multiescalaridade como uma condição ontológica. Essas condições permitem compreender que toda forma de acesso será sempre parcial e insuficiente, visto que todo e qualquer objeto será sempre aberto e misterioso em relação ao seu potencial. Essa proposta de consciência-postura ecológica sugere uma mudança ético-política e epistemológica radical, com abertura para desdobramentos instigantes em direção a uma nova filosofia do Sistema Terra.

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*Resenha*

**Palavras-chave:** Ecologia; ontologia; objetos; multiescalaridade; antropoceno

# La ecología orientada a los objetos de Timothy Morton

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**Resumen:** En *Being Ecological*, Timothy Morton profundiza en su propuesta de una nueva ecología, estructurada sobre la base de una ontología orientada a los objetos y marcadamente desvinculada del concepto de naturaleza. Para Morton, la experiencia de esta ecología dependería de un cambio radical en nuestra relación con el mundo. Las premisas básicas de esta ecología serían: i) la superación de la dualidad sujeto-objeto a partir de una matriz ontológica plana, en la que todos los objetos (humanos, no humanos, naturales, culturales, reales o ficticios) estarían dotados de la capacidad de afectar y ser afectados en un proceso dinámico, inestable y fluido; y ii) la multiescalaridad como condición ontológica. Estas condiciones permiten comprender que cualquier forma de acceso será siempre parcial e insuficiente, ya que cada objeto permanecerá siempre abierto y misterioso en relación con su potencial. Esta propuesta de conciencia-postura ecológica sugiere un cambio ético, político y epistemológico radical, abriendo paso a desarrollos prometedores hacia una nueva filosofía del Sistema Tierra.

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*Reseña*

**Palabras-clave:** Ecología; ontología; objetos; multiescalaridad; antropoceno