

CONNECTEDNESS

Civilization and Its Discontents, a book Sigmund Freud wrote nearly a hundred years ago, begins with a consideration of “the oceanic feeling,” “a feeling of something limitless, unbounded,” “a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole.” Freud, who confessed that he was unable to discover this affect in himself, did not, to be sure, coin the term, which first appeared in a 1927 letter from his friend, French writer and Nobel laureate Romain Rolland. What the psychoanalyst proposes is an original interpretation, according to which the sense of “being one with the external world as a whole” is a symptom of ego boundaries melting away, recalling the state of an infant at the maternal breast, still unable “to distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him.”

In primary and secondary fusion with the world, though, there is no longer or not yet a relation to that world: melting into the other is as detrimental to the logic of relationality as absolute separation and detachment. Could it be, as a result, that relations of any kind depend on careful acts of calibrating the distance (physical and otherwise) between the relating and the related to? Perhaps, but this intuition misses something crucial about relations and connections that are neither posterior to the interrelated terms nor limited to their positive approximations. It is necessary to delve a little deeper in order to start getting a hang of the way they operate.

The elemental texture of the feeling, which Rolland puts into words and about which Freud expresses his doubts, matters. The oceanic feeling dissolves, by liquefying, the boundaries between the ego and the world. Today, another sort of feeling is on the rise, “the terrene feeling,” which is the analogue of the oceanic feeling, this time around directed toward the earth. Both the critics of the Anthropocene and the advocates of deep ecology or Gaia theory have this feeling, tinged with a mix of disgust and fascination, repulsion and attraction. Unlike water, the earth is a hard substratum for physical existence, but it is also manifold in its unity, combining, accommodating all the other elements on its surface and in its depths. We cannot fuse with it by melting, but we can decay into it, becoming a part of it as a result, which is what happens in death, at least according to some funerary rites. And we can also clog it with nondecomposable materials.

by Michael Marder

*Ikerbasque: Basque Foundation for Science
& University of the Basque Country*

Whatever our position, the twenty-first century forces us to form a relation to the earth, and to clarify the very logic of relationality in the process.

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO ATTUNE OUR RELATION TO THE EARTH IN A SITUATION WHERE WE ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY TOO FAR FROM AND TOO CLOSE TO IT?

The difficulty of the task at hand is that the immanent inclusion in the earthly fold of the being called “human” (the Greek *anthropos*) is simultaneously disturbed and exacerbated today. The age of space travel, presaged by the intellectual movement known as Russian cosmism, puts us at a distance from the planet, even if we have never left its surface. The technological advancement that allowed us to see the earth as it looks from outer space assigns to us the role of outside observers, unmoored from the planet. In Kelly Oliver’s sharp formulation, “the photographs of earth from space provoke the ‘love it or leave it’ reaction that feeds the illusion of control and mastery by suggesting that we must, or can, choose one or the other, but not both.” No one can stay unaffected by this provocation; even Prince William weighs in on the issue. On the other hand, the Anthropocene, with industrial waste encrusted in the earth’s strata and present in every ecosystem on the planet, signals the inextricable involvement of our transgenerational “techno-bodies” in the planet’s geophysicality. How is it possible to calibrate our relation to the earth in a situation where we are simultaneously too far from and too close to it? Isn’t the earth’s relation to us ultimately unregulated and unregulatable, despite all the daring of geoen지니어ing?

One doesn’t need to be an adherent of the Actor-Network Theory (ATN) or Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) to realize that the web furnishes the contemporary image of ontology, of being itself as a scattered but interconnected whole at the digital,

socio-political, economic, and ecological levels. On this view, to be outside the web is to be no longer. Connections are everything. What we fear most is being disconnected, off the grid. But it is also what we sometimes secretly and sometimes openly desire, a little like the partisans of the terrene feeling with their attraction to and repulsion from the earth. More pervasive than the interconnectedness of the web is the idea or the ideal of connectivity, the possibility of establishing and maintaining connections. One should be able to be connected to anything and anyone at any time. Connectivity thus tends toward totalization; its imaginary institution tends to be total.

What does total connectivity do to actual and possible relations? The answer is: in the name of freedom, it seals off the breathing spaces, the pores or the gaps, the blanks or the disjunctions, that make relations what they are. It effects a fusion detrimental to the vitality of relations. The dream is to be in more than one place at the same time and, ultimately, to be anywhere and everywhere. To be, in other words, godlike after the death of God.

Something similar happens in the case of entanglement, a concept derived from quantum physics and introduced by another Nobel Prize winner, Edwin Schrödinger:

When two systems, of which we know the states by their respective representatives, enter into temporary physical interaction due to known forces between them, and when after a time of mutual influence the systems separate again, then they can no longer be described in the same way as before, viz. by endowing each of them with a representative of its own. I would not call that *one* but rather *the* characteristic trait of quantum mechanics, the one that enforces its entire departure from classical lines of thought. By the interaction the two representatives [the quantum states] have become entangled.

Not by chance, already at the time of the concept’s coinage, one of the main applications of entanglement, which is the *maximal sense* of connection, is teleportation. The Anthropocene is human entanglement with the earth, assuming that, as a result of their interaction, “two systems,” the geologic and the anthropic, can no longer be described separately from one another. In fact, there were not two independent

systems to begin with: since its evolutionary origins, *Homo sapiens* is a species of earthlings, embedded in the earth's elemental realities and ecosystems. The oceanic feeling is the affective evidence of this lopsided, unequal or asymmetrical, relation. Yet, as a consequence of species activity, the earth becomes immanent to humanity, just as humans are immanent to the earth. The terrene feeling testifies to this entanglement, but the point of balance (or of identity in difference) is not sustained for long, as lopsidedness makes its comeback: whereas, previously, the earth was independent of human earthlings, now humanity is on the verge of proclaiming itself an interplanetary species, wishing to part with the perversely humanized earth. All the same, if the Anthropocene designates human entanglement with the earth, then we have no good philosophical reasons to criticize it while praising "entangled lives," the *maximal sense* of connection, far in excess of symbiosis.

IN METAPHYSICS, THE HUMAN IS CONCEIVED AS A CREATURE WHO LIVES ON BUT IS NOT OF THE EARTH

The *minimal sense* of connection returns to the image of the web, presenting all of us, human or not, as nodes in a vast network. What are the lines intersecting at nodal points? What lies between them, between us? Obviously, the elements, such as the atmosphere, in which we are enveloped and which infiltrates our bronchial tubes and the lungs, or the earth sustaining us, as well as the cables buried underground or under the sea and the air through which radio waves and satellite or wireless signals travel. The material infrastructure of connectivity is largely inconspicuous, receding to the background unless it malfunctions: the earth gives way under our feet or spews fire into the air as a volcano; satellite communications are interrupted or an internet cable is accidentally cut by a construction crew. In "business as usual," the in-between evanesces. To sum up, in the minimal sense of connection, we face the *relata* (i.e., parties to a relation) without the relating; in its maximal sense, we deal with the relating without the *relata*.

One explanation for the inflation of the notion of entanglement is disregard for its origin in quantum physics. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Karen Barad forged a crucial link between the sciences and the humanities. However, her endeavour is all too often reduced to a single keyword, loosely taken to signify mutual imbrication or inextricability. In "new materialism," matter taken in its relational character as entanglement is unwittingly idealized. In turn, oblivious to elemental density, to the un- or non-transmittable, and to whatever may still be outside a global network, the minimal sense of connection in the image of the web is avowedly idealist. What is missing between entanglement and alienation is a space and a time for relations, for connections, and, therefore, for the disconnects, punctuations, intermittencies, and tears in the fabric of existence.

It is prudent, as always, to listen carefully to what the word itself tells us, to what, not limited to the field of etymology, the word as a unit of language among many other units and many other languages (not only of the human variety) contributes to the making of being. The Latin heritage preserved in *connection* does what it says, connecting two words into one at the juncture *n*, which, redoubled, marks simultaneously their sameness and difference, repetition and disruption by a space or a spacing, attachment and detachment. It adds to *con-*, with, a form of the verb *nectere*, to bind or to tie. Taken together, the two units convey: "with a bond," "with what guarantees the being-with." *Connection* says, literally, *with with-ness* and betrays an underlying anxiety that the *without* is lurking nearby.

In the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first, *with* (*mit*, *avec*, *com/cum/con*) drew the attention of numerous philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Luce Irigaray, Roberto Esposito, and Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback. From Heidegger's suggestion in *Being and Time* that human existence (*Dasein*) is always a being-with (*Mitsein*) or a being-there-with (*Mitdasein*) to the deconstructive insight into the dispersal of the origin and a disseminated multiplicity that supplants it, thinking with the *with*, or – as I formulated above – *with with-ness*, allowed for a fresh articulation of



singularity and universality, unity and multiplicity, part and whole connected by means other than dialectical, mereological, or logical. This showed how being-with disrupts the very connection or community it forms. In the oceanic feeling, “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” is persistently dissolved on its own terms of “being one with” that world. Being one with something or someone indicates fusion and, at the same time, implies a separation, the distance of the *with*, where there is already more than one in or outside the one.

Assuming that the oceanic feeling cedes the affective stage to the terrene feeling, the question is: how to interpret being one with the earth, rather than with the world? The connective *with*, which denotes a disconnection between the parties it conjoins, tacitly continues the metaphysical paradigm that the terrene feeling claims to repudiate. In theological and

philosophical metaphysics, the human is conceived as a creature who lives on but is not of the earth (despite the derivation of the biblical Adam, all the way down to his name from the earth, *adamah*). While the feeling of being one with the earth affirms the immanence of human life to planetary existence, it also differentiates the human from that existence. That is why, whether in response to the magnificence of Gaia or the deplorability of the Anthropocene, the crypto-metaphysical response is uniform: we need to become posthuman biologically, technologically, or bio-technologically.

What if, instead of either adhering to or protesting against the injunction to be one with the earth, we tried to be with the earth? What would this being-with or being-there-with (Heidegger’s *Mitsein* or *Mitdasein*) entail? What could this broken planetary bond or this articulated break look and feel like? Would it not skirt the pitfalls of the maximal and the minimal senses

of connection without striking a fictitious balance between them, the golden middle that is inconceivable there where the doubling of the *with* coincides with its silent negation?

HUMANITY IS AN ERRANT SPECIES; PERHAPS THIS IS WHY IT IS A PLANETARY SPECIES, DREAMING OF BECOMING INTERPLANETARY

Being with the earth does not mean that we can travel with it, as on a gigantic spaceship, or treat it as portable thanks to a preconceived set of ideas projected onto other planets. Nor does it mean that we should transpose the structures of sociality onto our relation to the planet, as in Michel Serres' idea of a "natural contract" with the earth, mimicking the old social contract of the European Enlightenment. What it does bring into play is the temporal dimension of being-with in the diachronies and asynchronies of deep planetary or geological time, flattened at the surface by a history of industrial civilization, on the one hand, and the existential time of living beings and ecosystems, on the other. Not only do such diachronies respect the multiple disconnects lodged in every connection, but they also flesh out the meaning of being-with as a shared destiny, shared, once again, asymmetrically, asynchronously, with the *without*: the earth itself will persist long after the human species becomes extinct along with the untold numbers of other species that are now dragged along into non-being.

P.S. Planets are errant stars; they fascinated the ancients because unlike other stars they did not stay put in the night sky. Humanity is an errant species; perhaps this is why it is a planetary species, dreaming of becoming interplanetary. In their wanderings, planets are nevertheless bound to stars they orbit, not to mention the gravitational fields organizing the spacetime around them. Does our errant, nearly lost, kind have any analogous bonds left?

Michael Marder is IKERBASQUE Research Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country (UPV-EHU), Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain. His writings span the fields of ecological theory, phenomenology, and political thought. He is the author of numerous scientific articles and eighteen monographs, including Plant-Thinking (2013); Dust (2016), Dump Philosophy (2020), Green Mass (2021); and, most recently, Senses of Upheaval (2021). For more information, consult his website: michaelmarder.org.