The strange un-agent of our species, our collective drift

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*Paleo-geography, 12,000 B.C.*

It’s windswept, the forests all a roar of air like oceans.
The mega-fauna falter spear by axe as
hands eat the mastodons,
letting the carcasses fade to ground half-done.
Atlatls are the points of time. They
shiver up the future in a shaking rod, stuck
deep to bone and bleeding there
in the almost ice-chilled moon.
This is before recorded history.

*Earth thought 93 of 365:* For at least ten thousand years -some say fifty- we have been eradicating species with our technology. *Homo sapiens* thinks time and again for present gain, whatever our race, culture or civilization. Technology + population = dead species.

Deep in the dark woods of that murkiest of essays, “The Question Concerning Technology”, Heidegger makes the claim that the history of technology reveals both our own self-enslavement and the *locus* where we can come to terms with freedom, thereby freeing ourselves in our world.¹ The history of technology is, in this way, *dialectical* – attention to it allows us to reconceptualize our being through a process of estrangement and rediscovery. Taking apart technology’s history conceptually –genealogically in Nietzsche’s sense- alienates us in the unwanted conclusions we find –the twists and turns

of non-sense and of covered over beginnings. But once we see the history taken apart, we also see technology as essential to our being and a place of self-consciousness. In effect, we see our power and our situation—a power that was overwhelming in a situation which was finite, both of which we denied. To see these things clearly—in that, lies freedom. Technology is then the locus of Aufklärung—enlightenment—in Immanual Kant’s usage: the thing that forces us to see the choice between thoughtless following of norms that have authority outside us, unreflectively and in which we are tragically caught, and thoughtful discovery of what actually makes sense to us, in our own comic grappling with our finite being and its situation.²

I’m interested in Heidegger’s claim, because I believe that climate change—one of a number of moral problems, most of them environmental, which Stephen Gardiner calls “perfect moral storms”—bizarrely displays what Heidegger had in mind.³ In fact, the entire Anthropocene—Paul Crutzen’s name of our geologic era—does.⁴ Furthermore, I believe recalling the rough outlines of what Heidegger claimed in his murky and bizarre essay can help orient us as we try to think about what adapting to climate change ought to involve. Climate change—as a temporally extended, globally expansive and causally indiscernible effect⁵ of our way of managing our lives—can reveal to us the way our being is undermining and in this way a kind of self-enslavement, an oppressive condition which

⁵ To say that climate change is “causally indiscernible” is to say that from the standpoint of any individual or locality in any given generation, climate change as an effect of anthropogenic causes appears mysterious, since individual, local and generational causes are negligible and make a difference only across a regional or global pattern than is extended across decades or centuries.
we have brought on ourselves unintentionally.\textsuperscript{6} It is fair to call our condition \textit{pathological}. However, the pathology is not psychological \textit{per se} but in our species being –both psychologically and institutionally in how we organize ourselves. Really, it would be better to speak of an \textit{ontological pathology}. Attention to this pathology can allow us to come to consciousness about our being, and so allow us to reconceptualize it. Our ontological pathology is to exhibit a strange \textit{un}-agency, a collective drift that undermines the conditions of our own being. Seeing this provides us with the possibility of freedom, just as no sinner can be free until she has faced her sin.

The link between seeing our ontological pathology and our roundtable on adapting goodness is this. One might think that goodness ought to change as a result of the new environmental conditions projected under climate change. Call this \textit{the adapting goodness thesis}. To make an initial distinction, such adaptation might take one of two forms. Following Rawls, it might demand we change the \textit{conception} of goodness –the way we fill out core features of goodness, such as benevolence- or it might demand that we change the \textit{concept} of goodness –the core features themselves.\textsuperscript{7} As I will argue soon, I believe the latter is truer –climate change forces on us a reconceptualization of some of the core features of goodness, its concept, not just its conception. And that is yet another reason why problems that are perfect moral storms are trenchant: they show us the need to recast the essence of goodness.

But, at the same time, I am coming to reject an aspect of the \textit{adapting goodness thesis}. I do not believe climate change forces us to \textit{adapt} goodness so much as it forces us to

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confront our being and in so doing discover goodness. The image is not of seeing these conditions out there and than changing what we’ve been thinking: it’s not about adapting, reshaping, shifting some construction we have. It’s about, instead, realizing that what we have been going by has been deluded all along, because we haven’t yet come to terms with our ontological pathology. Climate change brings us face to face with our majestic and tragic history of misconceptualizing goodness out of blindness to our pathological being. Climate change forces us to a kind of self-consciousness rather than to a kind of moral invention. This is why the Heideggerian thesis is important to me—or its Hegelian analogue understanding climate change as a dialectical phenomenon. Furthermore, it is why I see climate change as less an issue of adaptation than as an issue of self-confrontation. It is a scene of enlightenment, in Immanual Kant’s sense, rather than a scene of invention. I call this the self-confrontation thesis. Climate change demands that we confront ourselves and re-discover goodness, discovering what goodness really has been from before recorded history.8

Before turning to my argument in a moment, I want to mark what is polemical in what I’m saying. The literature on adapting to climate change is exploding at present—and I see no reason to think that it will abate. The common theme in that literature is invention. I suspect that there are some opportunistic varieties of this—climate change as the new entrepreneurial opportunity, as a new industrialism in the making, etc. But I am thinking of earnest and largely moral responses, such as Mark Hertsgaard’s, where he imagines how his daughter might live passably well in the next fifty years on Earth.9 The

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8 This last part of my claim—the “before recorded history”- is, of course, neither Heideggerian nor Hegelian. My reasons for it will appear below.
key thing authors like Hertsgaard emphasize in adapting is learning to live a new kind of life, of making up a new ethos. A contemporary locus classicus for this view would be Alex Steffen’s *Worldchanging: a User’s Guide for the 21st Century.* In Allen Thompson’s and my *Virtues of the Future* – a collection of essays by many authors on adapting our conception of human flourishing to climate change – we were not decisive about whether climate change forces invention or something else, but the book can be read as yet another book in the ethics of invention.

Against this trend, and pushing hard against the ambiguity I did not see as an editor –self-critically, then- I would like to argue for an ethics of self-consciousness. I believe that climate change forces us to confront, critically, our own essence. In so doing, it submits us to crisis, in the precise sense by which we come to terms with our limits and the contradictions by which we exist in denial of our limits. Adapting to climate change does not involve inventing ourselves so much as it involves opening up to ourselves. In fact, I am tempted to claim that the entire rhetoric of adaptation is all-too-easily assimilated into a language that deflects us away from the central issue, which is that we have been blind to ourselves, that, in a sense still to be specified, we have been massively self-deluded. Rather than adapting to climate change – which allows us to think that the change is out there and we have to conform to it – I think we ought to own up to ourselves. Because we have neither confronted nor internalized awareness about our ontological pathology – we have produced climate change – and the task which faces us is deepening self-knowledge within our cultures and institutions so that we do not lose sight of our being as it

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produces climate change and related phenomena. The task is mainly philosophical, rather than creative.¹²

What does climate change reveal? It (a) shakes up our sense of our being, (b) forces us to rediscover the concept of goodness, and (c) brings us face to face with truths about ourselves we should acknowledge on pain of remaining self-oppressed. How?

I’ve already listed the main reasons. Climate change is: (i) temporally extended, (ii) globally expansive and a (iii) causally indiscernible effect. In addition, climate change brings out a number of things about human beings: it shows how we have been (iv) short-term thinkers, (v) self-gratifying in torque, (vi) easily caught up in organizations, and (vii) organizationally dispersed yet patterned across grand collective habits that are found within institutions – e.g., meat eating-sharing at least a family resemblance. In effect, climate change reveals how we resemble the evil Hanna Arendt called “banal” – a kind of fungus spread with little depth and over great distance around the globe.¹³ Blind to our world, we have slowly and collectively eaten away at our world over thousands of years.

Think about how climate change shakes up our sense of our being. When we see what it is that we are doing in changing our global climate, we see that we have the power,

¹² This claim may seem impossible, since clearly if we acquire self-knowledge, we will have to change our institutions accordingly, and that will require creativity of some sort. I agree. But I also think that if we are guided by self-knowledge, we will not be inventing ourselves anew—creating in the sense of bringing the new into existence— as bringing ourselves in line with what we really are, an unintentionally wanton species. This strikes me as a different project than the creative one, at least as conceived in modernity, e.g., with Nietzsche or the 20th century avant-garde.

collectively\textsuperscript{14}, to alter global conditions over – to us- vast periods of time. Climate change will lag for a millennium and the knock on effects of that lag will be to utterly and unimaginably transform any conceivable human history. We have simply changed the course of time for all future humans anywhere on the planet. When you add to this that in similar perfect moral storm phenomena like the sixth mass extinction, we have been eating away at our planet for at least ten or eleven thousand years, the temporal extension of our efficacy extends far back before recorded human history. Climate change and related phenomena show how our power has been at work for times that exceed our imagination – and will continue to do so.

Our power is global and comes about in infinitesimal increments of aggregated, collective (but not deliberately coordinated) effects. We can’t see it happening – each bit of wood or coal we burn doesn’t add up, although it does. With the sixth mass extinction, each bird we shoot makes no difference – although it does. Our global, massive power runs invisible to us.\textsuperscript{15}

This invisibility is reinforced by another recurring tendency in human being. Our power’s invisibility is bound up with our ability to organize ourselves into large, collective patterns – such as economies- where we become immersed in organizations and largely unreflective about the wider institution to which are organizations belong. We focus on ends structured by these institutions and interpreted in terms of the organizations to

\textsuperscript{14} One of the keys to my argument is a sense of the collective which is \textit{not} coordinated, at least in the sense of a collective \textit{agent}. I use this “non-agent” sense of “collective” here and will explain it shortly.

which we belong, whose authority we internalize.\textsuperscript{16} If we were not so deeply organized in our capacities and able to carry on from one generation to the next—as a kind of cultural habit-institutions that we have taken to work for us, we simply could not have the power that we do. Climate change is happening because, primarily, the large-scale economies of our world have begun to add up fast, cresting on the steady wave of our population growth. Our being is deeply organized and brings every new generation of humans into the spiral of its seemingly unavoidable power via the pull of its habitual institutions and the \textit{de facto} authority of the organizations structuring the world into which we are born.

Such an organizing potential might be promising—and perhaps it will be one day. Yet so far in the history of our being, our organization is not especially coordinated beyond circles of affiliation or productive—calculative-self-interest (such as production chains, markets, states, empires, etc.). Seen from the standpoint of long-term history, the way we organize ourselves and point our institutions tends to torque collectivities around short-term relatively self-gratifying ends. Empires seek their own. Tribes overuse their lands. We angle sharply toward the good of our own generation and the next two, without much thought beyond that. These potentials have been in us since before recorded history\textsuperscript{17}, yet capitalism reifies them into human nature itself and then has exacerbated them. We tend not to organize ourselves in such a way that we are \textit{sustainable} or \textit{universal}, although we have slowly been coming to aim for such ends as a largely utopian breakthrough.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} A demand of reason, in Kant’s sense—living up to the categorical imperative, for instance.
This breaking down into short-term foresight and non-global groups appears in our reasoning too. We deflect and take flight towards our own self-gratification through myriad individual rationalizations, the latest and most sharp being capitalism’s economic ones. Our sphere of concern stretches only so far out—whether in terms of our communities of affiliation or in terms of our familial memory and foresight. Geological time scales do not make sense inside our being in terms of the existential pathos that animates human being.\(^{19}\) And the problem of extending our sentiments to take to heart humans globally has been a problem since the Stoics of antiquity.\(^{20}\)

In short, climate change shows us the contours of our own power in a complex light that we have a hard time grasping: our little actions take place over thousands of years passed on in patterns of our collectivities, and they terra-form the biosphere as they go—stretching our effects far into the future. At the same time, we have a very hard time grasping our collective being, either diverging from it in a kind of gratification-inflected myopia made only the worse by capitalism (but not confined to it by any means and dating back to pre-history)–or becoming lost in it through identification with organizations whose authority leads us to short-term or non-global ends. We have this truly massive power, but we are truly challenged in grasping it, let alone guiding it. That is what climate change reveals—something about us that has been brewing since before recorded history when only the geological record shows us that our cluelessness now was our cluelessness then. How can we become aware of this massive but hard to grasp power? So climate change shakes up our sense of our being.

How does climate change force us to rediscover the concept of goodness? Given what I have said, everything depends on the relation between goodness and the form of power. I am using that expression, rather than “agency”, because the logic of agency implies coordination and intentionality, which do not fit the situation and the collective being we’re discussing. To the extent that we speak of collective action problems with respect to climate change, we are not for the most part speaking of group agency, where each part of the whole can explain its relation to the end in view. The sense of “collective” with respect to perfect moral storm problems is aggregative, neither calculative nor mereological. Hence, I will discuss, in what follows, the link between the form of power and goodness – rather than between agency and goodness.

There are a couple of distinctions that I need to use. The first I have mentioned already – that between a concept and a conception. Let us suppose that we move from an elitist universe to an egalitarian one. This implies a changed conception of goodness, not a changed concept. In such a move, those who have moral standing expands and what due treatment is changes. However, the roles of moral standing and due treatment do not change. The concept of goodness is like that – it provides the logic in terms of which any goodness can be understood. In the example just given, the concept of goodness remains the same while the conceptions change: from a restricted class of those with moral

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standing, we move to an expansive class; from forms of due treatment expressing hierarchy, we move to forms of due treatment expressing equality. The underlying logic is unchanged: goodness involves giving due treatment to all those with moral standing. My claim, as I’ll shortly substantiate, is that climate change forces us to rediscover the logic of goodness, i.e., the concept. This is a more radical moment in our history than most moral transformations.

The second distinction is between the good and goodness. Goodness, as I understand it, is a character trait that expresses one’s internalization of the good. The good is primary—an objective thing. Goodness is secondary, a subjective thing, in the sense that it concerns how we take up the good. The good can be without there being goodness in a world, in the sense that what is good could be determined without anyone taking it up. And this distinction is important for critique. It allows us to say, for instance, that it would have been good 11,000 years ago if we had seen X, even if no human saw, realized, or internalized—took up—what was good. That it would have been good is a result of there being the good irrespective of whether there was goodness. The distinction between the good and goodness allows us to learn and to grow. It is a necessary distinction for philosophy as the task of growing up.  

Climate change, as a species of a perfect moral storm problem, challenges us to discover goodness—not simply to adapt it—by forcing us to consider how our concept of goodness has been inadequate to what the good demands. Let me start with what the good demands, and then I will work back to what goodness ought to involve, the form of power, agency and so on.

Given the phenomenon of climate change and similar problems like the six mass extinction\textsuperscript{24}, the good demands this: that we do not wantonly destroy what we take to be of value.\textsuperscript{25} To do so –to destroy what we value for no good reason, thoughtlessly- is self-undermining in the absolute sense that it undercuts what we think is good, making the very capacity of discerning the good useless and irrelevant. At the very least, you might think, the good demands that we can track it and hold ourselves steady to it. Otherwise, how can the good be good to us?

Not only is wanton destruction of what we take to be of value undermining, it is also oppressive. It is a form of self-oppression. In such a situation, we deny ourselves what we take to be of value through whatever indirect mechanisms constitute our wantonness. In so doing, we make ourselves heteronomous in the sense that what we take to be of value is not what we track. Rather, how we act is in line with the negation of what we value. This is oppressive. We end up ruled by what we did but did not intend. This is a kind of self-enslavement, to echo Kant on the enemy of enlightenment.

If what the good demands is that we do not wantonly destroy what we take to be of value, if what it demands is that we track and hold ourselves steady to what we find is of value, then what does goodness demand? Since goodness is the subjective state whereby we internalize the good, goodness demands that we guard against wantonness, fend it off,


\textsuperscript{25} I have developed the idea of \textit{structural wantonness} initially in “The Sixth Mass Extinction Is Caused by Us.” In Thompson and Bendik-Keymer, \textit{op cit.}, and expanded it towards the idea of the tragic in “A Conceivable Human Future: Time & Morality in the Sixth Mass Extinction”, unpublished talk at \url{http://www.case.edu/artsci/phil/A Conceivable Human Future.pdf}.
and steady ourselves to the good. Without doing these things, we do not internalize the good. It’s as simple as that, I think.

What is still not apparent is how climate change forces us to change our concept of goodness. Here is where things get tricky. The standard picture of goodness is one of agency. Goodness is a quality of agency, so the story goes (which goes back to Aristotle) – one who expresses goodness has internalized what is good in her actions. But the problem with climate change and related phenomena is that our agency is not the site of goodness. If we were to internalize what is good, we would not do so primarily in our agency – which is inconsequential and not coordinated as a collective, calculative group agent- but in our form of power. The way climate change forces us to change the concept of goodness is by showing us the link between the form of power and the good, rather than the link between agency and the good.

This is a shift in logic. It is a shift in logic, because to get at the form of goodness, we need concepts other than intention, calculation, coordination and the like – all those used for agency, whether individual or collective (group). In place of such concepts, we need to examine ones like overall tendency, mindless organization, and self-dispersal. We have an overall tendency to eat away at the conditions of our being, thereby undermining our own agency. Time and again, we become absorbed in mindless organizations that have an inertia all their own; and we disperse away from coordinated collectivities, through a myriad of relatively self-interested (or group interested, or present-focused) rationalizations.

At the center of each of these new terms is the denial not only of the individual agent but of the teleologically arranged group agent as the locus of goodness. Rather, the institutional species becomes the locus of goodness, and not as a matter of intention, but as a
matter of Constraining and shaping design that, to a large extent, does away with reliance on intention. I call this the form of power.

*The form of power is the form that power takes, even unintentionally.* As I tried to sketch earlier, the contours of our power appear under climate change in a complex jumble where our intentions barely have a home. Whether we intended it or not—and I can think of no time when people in general did—we have eaten away at our Earth over thousands of years, acting in well-worn patterns we unreflectively took up and which do not cohere with long term sustainability, diverging from the sustainable good in the interest of ourselves, or losing ourselves in organizations, and barely if at all discerning how our invisible effects add up, if they even do. The power we have has the following form: it is invisible, non-local, non-individual, non-(unified)collective, selfish, mindless, and utterly wanton. There isn’t a lot of agency in it. Bizarre as it seems, I think we need to confront this fact.

To sum up what I’ve just claimed, climate change forces on us a changed concept of goodness, because it displays to us how internalizing what is good—in this case, guarding against wantonness, fending it off and holding ourselves steady to what we value—depends not just on agency but also—and perhaps mainly—on our form of power. To express goodness, we do not need only to become good agents, but also—and perhaps even *primarily*—live within a good form of power. It is our aggregative, temporally dispersed, organized yet happenstance behavior that is the scene where goodness grows or fails. Goodness is not just—maybe even mainly!—in me, or you, or in our families or even in our groups. It is—also, and in the kind of case we’re considering most importantly—in the arrangements we can barely see out of the corners of our eyes (and only then through objective study of how we happen to add up). It is largely, then, in the
design constraints we’ve accepted that channel us toward what we value—or it fails in their absence.

Goodness is then largely a quality of our structural unconscious, to echo a phrase from Foucault. However, pace Foucault, this unconscious appears to predate recorded history and may even be, plausibly, bound up with biological patterns with which we evolved as a species. It appears to be an ontological matter, i.e., concerned with our ontological pathology toward a self-eroding, self-enslaving form of power. It may be equally a part of our species unconscious. Or, rather, to make the point: the lack of goodness is currently a part of our structural, even species, unconscious. In this way, we have a banal, original sin—an ontological pathology.

How does all this bring us face to face with truths about ourselves we should acknowledge on pain of remaining self-oppressed? Let me start with a poem. It’s from Philip Levine’s latest collection, News of the World.

A STORY

Everyone loves a story. Let’s begin with a house. We can fill it with careful rooms and fill the rooms with things—tables, chairs, cupboards, drawers closed to hide tiny beds where children once slept or big drawers that yawn open to reveal precisely folded garments washed half to death,

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27 See Pinet, op cit.
28 Pace Arendt.
unsoiled, stale, and waiting to be worn out. 
There must be a kitchen, and the kitchen 
must have a stove, perhaps a big iron one 
with a fat black pipe that vanishes into the ceiling 
to reach the sky and exhale its smells and collusions. 
This was the center of whatever family life 
was here, this and the sink gone yellow 
around the drain where the water, dirty or pure, 
rann off with no explanation, something like the point 
of this, the story we promised and may yet deliver. 
Make no mistake, a family was here. You see 
the patch worn into the linoleum where the wood, 
gray and certainly pine, shows through. 
Father stood there in the middle of his life 
to call to the heavens he imagined above the roof 
must surely be listening. When no one answered 
you can see where his heel came down again 
and again, even though he’d been taught 
ever to demand. Not that life was especially cruel; 
they had well water they pumped at first, 
a stove that gave heat, a mother who stood 
at the sink at all hours and gazed longingly 
to where the woods once held the voices 
of small bears--themselves a family--and the songs 
of birds long fled once the deep woods surrendered 
one tree at a time after the workmen arrived 
with jugs of hot coffee. The worn spot on the sill 
is where Mother rested her head when no one saw, 
those two stained ridges were handholds 
she relied on; they never let her down. 
Where is she now? You think you have a right 
to know everything? The children tiny enough 
to inhabit cupboards, large enough to have rooms 
of their own and to abandon them, the father 
with his right hand raised against the sky? 
If those questions are too personal, then tell us, 
where are the woods? They had to have been 
because the continent was clothed in trees. 
We all read that in school and knew it to be true. 
Yet all we see are houses, rows and rows 
of houses as far as sight, and where sight vanishes 
into nothing, into the new world no one has seen, 
there has to be more than dust, wind-borne particles 
of burning earth, the earth we lost, and nothing else.
I said at the outset that I see the task called “adapting to climate change” increasingly not as a creative task but as a philosophical one. I think we are putting the cart \textit{way} before the horse (in fact, the horse has been left on another continent) to talk about invention, inventing new life-styles, a new economy, new technology, new, new, new. In terms of this conference, I am advocating an \textit{old} world perspective, older than the Old World called Europe, and older than recorded history. To my mind, talk about invention, in fact—and with it, talk about adaptation—is part of the \textit{problem}, not the solution, \textit{in so far as} it \textit{maintains the fantasy of agency that clouds our view of where goodness resides.} In a psychoanalytic mode, I’d even be tempted to say all the inventive talk is a repetition compulsion repressing the very truths we need to face.\textsuperscript{30}

What Levine’s poem says to me in this context focuses my argument so far. We do not need to adapt to climate change so much as we need to confront ourselves as a species. “[T]here has to be more than dust, wind-borne particles / of burning earth, the earth we lost, and nothing else.” But so far, there isn’t, not when it comes to “the deep woods surrendered / one tree at a time after the workmen arrived / with jugs of hot coffee.” This is our predicament—and it is older than recorded human history, seemingly a function of our species being, although capitalism has exacerbated it and elevated it to a new height.

\begin{quote}
[W]here are the woods? They had to have been because the continent was clothed in trees. We all read that in school and knew it to be true. Yet all we see are houses, rows and rows
\end{quote}

of houses as far as sight, and where sight vanishes
into nothing, into the new world no one has seen [....]

This is the story of our “house”, our oikos. Facing it is not spiritualist window-
dressing, but is necessary for our sustainability – our survival within meaning-rich lives. A
species that undermines its pursuit of what it values can’t last long, geologically speaking –
not when it is so wanton as to radically upset the global biosphere in a mere handful of
thousands of years.

We do not need to invent a new life so much as to come to terms for the first time as
a species with what we are (notice I did not say who we are). Previously, we have been like
Father or Mother in the poem. “Father” would

call to the heavens he imagined above the roof
must surely be listening. When no one answered
you can see where his heel came down again
and again, even though he'd been taught
never to demand.

Or, like “Mother”, we have stood

at the sink at all hours and gazed longingly
to where the woods once held the voices
of small bears--themselves a family--and the songs
of birds long fled [.]

These are pictures of cluelessness, of tragic blindness to self. And, more tragic and more
clueless, they are matched with the invisible erosion of our house by our impotency.

You see
the patch worn into the linoleum where the wood,
gray and certainly pine, shows through.
The worn spot on the sill
is where Mother rested her head when no one saw,
those two stained ridges were handholds
she relied on; they never let her down.

In Levine’s poem, we can see how the tragedy is rationalized by “children tiny
even enough to inhabit cupboards, [then] large enough to have rooms of their own and
abandon them”. Our children must be provided for and grow; we all know this—it is
foremost on most of our minds.

We can even feel this wearing out of the house as intimacy, as the human mark of
the house worn in, as home, not simply house. The children return and see the floor
through the linoleum, see the stained ridges—each wear born of despair, and clueless to
the wearing through- and we, the readers, like the children returning home, think: those
human marks—marks of “Mother” and “Father”—are marks of love, give the home
personality and meaning. And yet they are the marks of self-erosion.

Yes, that very wearing out, done while our children grow, is the same exact form of
power as the larger world exhibits, “the deep woods surrender[ing] one tree at a time”,
eventually (in a hundred years?) nothing more to be seen than “dust, wind-borne particles
of burning earth, the earth we lost”. Our blindness to our ontological pathology is such
that we even familiarize our own self-destructiveness and make it a mark of home! Our
oikos is the anti-oikos.

This is the inconvenient truth, pace the well-meaning Al Gore. What makes what
I’m advocating a philosophical task is that it demands self-knowledge. The task is not
inventing a new form of life so much as deepening self-knowledge within our institutions
and cultures. We need to see ourselves as the fungus we are—where that does not imply
self-hatred, but rather is the beginning of humanity, for it is a first step toward allowing us
to internalize the good. We need to see our self-dispersal, mindless organization, and overall tendency in our form of power, and to deeply internalize that in the design of our institutions to such an extent that our life—our agency—is channeled toward what is good, rather than against it.

We have no idea what we’re doing, and haven’t for over ten thousand years.

We tend to destroy everything around us out of gradual self-interest as soon as we have the power to get what we want.

We barely work together on anything beyond localized self-interest.

We fantasize that we can control our situation through action, when we largely succumb to our own action without realizing it.

Things like these are in the air as burning particles of truth. I hope that we can let them set fire to our being. As Kierkegaard noted, this—coming to terms with our “sin”—is the opposite of the despair we currently live in, the despair of each of us, “Mother” and “Father.” We need to see the out-of-the-corner-of-our-eye-wantonness of our unintentional species being, the way our entire form of power to this point in time—since the dawn of our species—has been like “a fat black pipe that vanishes into the ceiling to reach the sky and exhale its smells and collusions.”

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