

# Insanity and Ecosophy from Guattari and Bateson to Malabou and back to Spinoza

Rick Dolphijn (Utrecht University) ([R.Dolphijn@uu.nl](mailto:R.Dolphijn@uu.nl))

---

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,  
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,  
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless  
successions of diseases' d corpses,  
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,  
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,  
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings  
from them at last.

Walt Whitman excerpt from *This Compost*

## 1. Another Mind

Guattari's ecosophy links an environmental ecology to a social ecology and a mental ecology. Mapping the transversal connections as they happen between these various planes of existence however starts and ends with a new type of subjectivity. An ecosophical subject that is first of all capable of thinking ecosophically. Refusing the Kantian "I think" (a most dominant theory of the subject up until today) Guattari then brings us back to the debate between monism and dualism that dominated the theories of mind before Kant. The question Guattari's ecosophy ultimately poses to us is the following: What are the consequences of preferring a Spinozist naturalism over a Cartesian idealism when it comes to conceptualizing the mind?

The difference between their respective conceptualizations is more than obvious. Whereas Descartes considered his *cogito* to be grasped "independent from anything else" (Gaukroger 1989:50) forming both "the starting point for knowledge and the paradigm for knowledge"(idem), Spinoza's thinking (in response) refuses to consider the mind an independent or even identifiable entity. Instead he claims that the mind is an idea of the body while the body is the object of the mind (see for instance E2p13). Spinoza in the end concludes (and this is the monism that many (latent Cartesians) still find so hard to grasp) that the body and the mind are actually 'the same thing'. He does not reduce the body to the mind (or vice versa), nor does he claim they move parallel to one another (Spinoza's solution to the mind-body problem is often explained as a "parallelism" but this, in the end, merely confuses the matter); the mind and the body are *different yet complete appearances* of one another.

The Cartesian tradition time and again constitutes a distinction between mind and body, as it does between man and animal (see Simondon [2004] 2012: 59), and between man and the outside world. Fortified by the Kantian Subject, the Cartesian philosophy of mind became what Deleuze calls the Major Tradition of Western epistemology, giving form to the

Antropocentrism that has dominated Western thinking for so long now and that keeps installing the dualisms that still imprison us today. Antropocentrism (and I am paraphrasing Foucault here) keeps on (1) identifying the opposition (man versus woman, sane and insane, culture versus nature), (2) creating a clear hierarchy between these terms, and (3) internalizing these hierarchies. The question that needs to be posed again and again is : why don't we instead follow this wholly other way of thinking, and agree with Meillassoux that we got stuck explaining and modelling everything there is through consciousness and language (which equals "by emanating Man") and why don't we start looking for what he calls "the Great Outside"?

The times certainly seem right, as today, living in what has been called the Antropocene, in the age in which we slowly begin to understand the grotesque destruction of the Earth by Man (and its machinery), a radical rethinking of humanity, of Subjectivity, seems most urgent. Meillassoux is right when he says that the question "what is there?" has been replaced by the question "what is there for us?" which aptly summarizes the antropomorphic projections which always already alienate humanity from the living Earth, from the Earth in which and of which humanity thinks. Empowered by the belief of its own superiority (since modelled after God) the human all too human the ecological movement today still holds the belief that we ought to "save the world", which shows a ridiculously idealist optimism. It once more shows how dualism has turned thinking into a most particular transcendental Anthropology as Foucault already said. Malabou is discomfortingly accurate when she analyzes this matter psychoanalytically;

According to Freud, the ego needs to reassure itself regarding the reality of the outside... What the subject is assured of is not the presence of that which is excluded, but rather the exclusion of what is excluded from presence. A phantasmatic or even fantastic, reality of the remainder object. To say "that does not exist" would originally mean "the existence of this thing is excluded". (2012a: 83).

The fact that we are somehow unable to understand this once again shows us –as Spinoza put it- that man is conscious only of its own desire, of its own endeavours.

It is important to understand that this disturbed type of realism is not limited to Cartesianism, to Kantianism or even to philosophy. This dualist logic deeply influenced the modern sciences. In his *Science and the Modern World*, published in 1925, Alfred North Whitehead shows us exactly this:

The general conceptions introduced by science into modern thought cannot be separated from the philosophical situation as expressed by Descartes. I mean the assumption of bodies and minds as independent substances, each existing in its own right apart from any necessary reference to each other.

Following this statement, Whitehead practices the kind of "Spinozist revolt" (I wouldn't call it a history because the arguments are not cumulative, knowledge is not "built up" in the Spinozist tradition) that time and again disrupts the Cartesian Philosophy of Mind. For continuing his critique on the Cartesian individual, by which he means the cogito, Descartes concept of knowledge with which I started this paper, he then states:

This emphasis had put the notions of the individual and of its experiences into the foreground of thought. At this point the confusion commences. The emergent individual value of each entity is transformed into the independent substantial existence of each entity, which is a very different notion.

Whitehead noted how the modern world was radically different from the pre-modern world, or actually from those parts of the world that at least until recently were able to resist this type of life. Whitehead noticed how the American Indians, contrary to us modernists, accepted their environment and he even saw (again, this was in 1925) how studies of the Amazon rainforest had already noticed the interdependence of the organic and inorganic matters that populated this part of the earth. The Modern world on the other hand, with the human mind and its rationalist ideas as its origin, was aimed at dominating the Earth, at imposing its Ideas upon it. As Whitehead puts it:

[S]cience seated itself securely upon the concepts of matter, space, time, and latterly, of energy. Also there were arbitrary laws of nature determining locomotion. These were empirically observed, but for some reason they were known to be universal. Anyone who in practice or theory disregarded them was denounced with unsparing vigour. This position on the part of scientists was pure bluff, if one may credit them with believing their worn statements. For their current philosophy completely failed to justify the assumption that the immediate knowledge inherent in any present occasion throws any light on its past, or its future.

## 2. The Ecological Mind

In his *Science and the Modern world* Whitehead discusses the horrors of Cartesian dualisms. Noting how the beautiful English landscape is “wantonly defaced” by constructions from the industrial era, Whitehead shows us how the disturbance or even destruction of relations between us and what surrounds us, or, as he puts it, how “the ignorance of the true relation of each organism to its environment” is consequential to dualist thinking. The Anthropocene, or Modernism, ruined the relation, causing not only our insensibility, but also crippled the earth, or perhaps we should say that it changed the way in which the many bodies that make up the earth are able to *affect* one another. The saddest case today is probably Fukushima where we see how the constructions from the post-industrial era have radically disturbed all possible bodies and with that all possible minds, refusing any form of presence *in general*.

What Whitehead was only hinting upon was further developed in the early 1970’s when Gregory Bateson launched his “ecology of mind” being one of the first to understand that the ecological crises that haunt us today (and that announced themselves already in that age) cannot be positioned outside of us, not outside of our body, but also not outside of our mind. As Bateson concludes [1972]2000, 491-492):

When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise “What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,” you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is part of your wider eco-mental system - and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.

In Guattari’s rereading of Bateson in his essay *The Three Ecologies* (2000) it is especially this kind of “insanity” (to refer to Bateson above) that he reads in the state of the world today

which necessarily involves all three ecologies, meaning that he is just as worried about Lake Erie as he is about the insanity that has overtaken kinship networks today, that has destroyed domestic life and neighborhood relations. Arguing that these realities reveal similar types of 'insanities' as we see them in our relationship to nature, Guattari agrees with Bateson's ecology of mind, which means that the mind "cannot be contained within the domain of the psychology of the individual, but organizes itself into systems or 'minds', the boundaries of which no longer coincide with the participant individuals".

But how does this system producing a thought? How is the insanity of Lake Erie present in an idea? Spinoza tells us that a true idea convenes with its *Ideatum* (the object imagined) which means that when a true idea is in the mind it necessarily has to exist in nature (E1P30Dem). Yet his "nature" is then not so much "out there", what he refers to are the material relations through which Lake Erie comes to be. The insanity is in the motor apparatus that causes the idea. In a later publication Bateson explains this with great precision when he studies the binocular image (which is an object imagined, an *Ideatum*). He shows us how the mirroring retinal surfaces, the optic fibres, the different brain halves, form several doubled apparatuses by means of which the object imagined is created (sharpening the edge, creating depth). Yet it is the apparatus as a whole that gives rise to one image, to one unified idea. And this single image produced holds no traces of its making. The complex synthesis of information fold into an abstraction that still incorporates the insanity of Lake Erie yet it cannot be traced back to its cause. The insanity is just there. Sure, whenever the image is dominated by obvious pollution one can ward it off (Spinoza calls this *disconvenientia*). But as the body always has "many constituent relations" (D SPin33) pollution is folded into a series apparatuses, histories, concepts, and other images and thoughts. We should conclude that the madness is always there, somewhere, and that the ideas by which we live are unaware of their causes. Thus Guattari shows us how 'insanities' are not the starting point of knowledge but, on the contrary, are given rise to by those processes that happen *before* signification jumps in, by the material aggregate of bodies, the machinery, that at one moment creates a single unified mind.

### 3. The Trauma

All ecological crises, that, to a higher or lesser degree, threaten our existence, are somehow incorporated within us and give form to our ideas. Time and again the changing flows of matter create different bodies and different minds, that, haunted by these insanities, do everything to persevere in their being, to give rise to the biggest possible kind of unity. Whenever this does not work, whenever the plasticity of any individual has been driven insane in such a way that it does not function as an individual anymore, a particular type of destruction takes place that is irreversible, and which Malabou calls "the trauma".

Again, the trauma is not something which originates in the mind; its radical unhealthiness (insanity) arises from a fatal injury that happened to both the body and the mind. Traumas do not end the body, they end "duration" as Deleuze (with Spinoza 62-63) calls it. It is not what we refer to as a natural death but the injury rather invokes an end to existing, as we can read this already with Spinoza, who said "No reason compels me to maintain that the body does not die unless it is changed into a corpse" (EIV P39 Schol). Malabou states that traumas are "dissolving the whole without entirely annihilating it" (33). A trauma ruins the plasticity of the body, which means that that the matters which are supposedly functioning as one, *continue* to have a problem doing so. The trauma is thus not something called upon. It is not

actualized by a particular signifier. It is always already actual, there to stay, preventing the individual to be present.

When Malabou (in the *Ontology of the Accident*) explains the consequences of the trauma, she makes use of Spinoza, showing us once again that he was remarkably different not only from his contemporaries (Hobbes, Descartes, even Leibniz) but also has a lot to say in the current debates on how the mind works. Key here is the way he conceptualizes not so much “the mind” (*mens*, which in the end is not too different from how Descartes conceptualizes his *mens sive animus*), but the “conatus”, a concept not commonly used in our age but crucial for understanding the (dispersed) materiality of the idea. The *conatus* is probably best understood as the essential drive that forms and moves a body. Yet contrary to Hobbes with Spinoza this conatus was not mental but material, and contrary to Descartes the idea of self-preservation central to the conatus determines all the thoughts that the body in *casu* produces.

Being in conversation with Antonio Damasio and interested in how the trauma in any possible way affects the human individual, the conatus, with Malabou, mainly concerns the brain or the nerve system we incorporate. For Spinoza (as for his contemporaries) however the conatus is in no way limited to the human being. The conatus is necessarily at work in every realized body *and causes every realized body to think*. In his famous letter to G.H. Shaller dated October 1674 he ascribes the *conatus* to a stone, concluding that:

“[A] stone receives from the impulsion of an external cause, a certain quantity of motion, by virtue of which it continues to move after the impulsion given by the external cause has ceased. The permanence of the stone's motion is constrained, not necessary, because it must be defined by the impulsion of an external cause...Such a stone, being conscious merely of its own endeavour and not at all indifferent, would believe itself to be completely free, and would think that it continued in motion solely because of its own wish. This is that human freedom, which all boast that they possess, and which consists solely in the fact, that men are conscious of their own desire, but are ignorant of the causes whereby that desire has been determined. Thus an infant believes that it desires milk freely” (Spinoza 1955: 390).

Not only does the conatus, with Spinoza, show us how the mind is consequential to the body, it also emphasizes that its desire to persevere in its being is necessarily at work in all of the ideas that this produces. This is by all means a strong critique of how the ecological debates are now evolving. It tells us that:

1. We cannot save the Earth. It is only because the human being, like the infant, like the stone, like any material constellation, would believe itself to be completely free, which is not the case at all, that dualist thought has been able to control and to destroy the world we live in.
2. Since every individual is always a multiplicity of individuals, and since the conatus accompanies every individual, we cannot but conclude that ecosystems think, that they have an idea, that they are conscious of their deeds, and thus (very important) can suffer from a trauma that consequently prevents the realization of their unity. (The conatus then comes close to what Deleuze and Guattari called “the abstract machine”.)

3. Emphasizing the ecosystem, our aim should be to start thinking insanity and ecosophy is to think Lake Erie, or even worse, Fukushima. For when Malabou talks of the coldness, the indifference, that happen with the trauma, isnt Fukushima then the best possible example of how a form is injured, robbed of its plasticity, indifferent to its own survival? Isnt Fukushima today showing us what it means to be actual but not real?

The ecological crises that happens today, demands us to pay serious attention to how this “sudden accomodation of the worst”, this trauma that continues to manifest itself, is at work in all dimensionalities and directionalities of existence. For us human beings, ecosophy demands us to open ourselves up to the coldness and indifference that has taken over some of the ecosystems today, that has traumatized them, disturbed their presence, their ideas with which we live.