As a “pre-quel” to Morton’s Ecology without Nature (2008), in which the author argued for rethinking our relationship to the environment without the overly Romantic notion of nature, the present book sets out to provide the background “mesh” that he will discuss in Ecology without Nature in terms of “practical” ecological concerns. In this sense, The Ecological Thought, as the title itself suggests, lays the theoretical ground that the earlier work had put into practice.

Given the venue for this review, I will argue for its place in the larger “speculative” realist orbit, and, joining with the other reviews in this issue, argue for a more ecumenical, even ecological, consideration of realism. In other words, I see Morton’s book as akin to the “object oriented ontology” found in such thinkers as Graham Harman and Levi Bryant, while also touching on the post-metaphysical realism on order from other thinkers (e.g., Jean-Luc Nancy). By challenging the bases of any anthropocentrism (and even deeming “anthropocentrism” to be a line of attack from within anti-realisms), Morton’s book joins forces with these thinkers, though, as I’ll note, the premises of his “relationalism” will be at odds with the “allure” and secreted otherness of objects found in several of these thinkers. But his attunement to “hyper-objects” and an
almost Latourian “mesh” should itself mesh well with thinkers in and around these incipient movements. Finally, before turning to the review proper, let me note that Morton’s work is simply a fine piece of writing. If anything is represented by Harman, Latour, Bryant, and many others considered in relation to this speculative realism, it’s a facility with master figures while not getting lost in the mesh of their writings. Morton’s work is a lively book and performs the relationality of concepts, descriptions, allusions, etc., that is its topic.

For this reason, this is a difficult work to summarize, since it lays out its concepts by thinking ecologically (it’s an ecological thought at the level of “form,” if the mesh doesn’t undo such form/content distinctions as a matter of course), that is, each chapter enfolds on the other, rather than having discrete subject matter. This should not be read to mean that this is but a meandering tome in search of its thesis, but that Morton performs a kind of horizontal thinking that he believes necessary for coming to terms with ecological being. In his earlier Ecology without Nature, Morton argued that nature itself is a modern concept that pushed a part of being to some “out there” beyond human cultures (like the carrot on a stick always used to make Bugs Bunny march along—he never would get to it). This present book makes clear just how destructive he takes this concept to be. In the first place, “nature” repeats the capitalist treatment of the non-human as a resource for human beings, except this resource is the mark of a pre-cultural origin to which we are to return. Politically, this is disastrous, not least because of the use and abuse of nature in various right-wing ideologies of the past two hundred years. (Here Morton is dead-on in his critique of Heidegger-inflected environmental holism as a repetition in another form of Heidegger’s notorious 1930s political convictions, an argument I’ll let the reader discover for herself.) It’s also problematic in the way that it can’t help but be puritanist and reactionary to what is technologically and culturally omnipresent, though Morton is also clear that there never was a time of a lost communion of humans with nature. In this way, “nature” is a by-word for “wilderness areas”
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that “are giant, abstract versions of the products hanging in mall windows”¹ (7).

Thus, in a sense, Morton's book is directed less at the ideologues who will deny global warming until well after the water has waded up to the knees of Floridians than at deep ecologists, who, following Arne Naess, talk about a profound a priori harmony between human beings and nature disrupted by modern capitalism. It's not clear from Morton's book what the ontological status of such a “nature” would be, since it's one thing to say that ecological thinking must deal with nature as it is now, another to argue against the deep ecologists that there is some \( x \) that is outside and beyond the human, and still another to deny tout court a non-human real.

The point, as I take it, is that it's the Romantic “nature” as well as any conception of a pre-established harmony that truly must be done away with: “The idea of Nature as holistic, healthy, real thing avoids the challenge” of radical coexistence (11). In this way, Morton argues, we must also do away with the notion of the “environment,” which has also stood for that which surrounds the human. But an ecological thought, he argues, does not just protest the “rigid ideological categories” of human/animal, culture/nature, etc. Rather, it sets out to demonstrate not just how nature itself is a category of the human (when it posits what does not belong to it) but also how what we consider the natural (minerals, machine-like movements, etc.) is the human.²

Here, though, I am less convinced. I think Morton's “mesh” does much to “deconstruct” the old nature/culture binaries, but I've also been convinced by ecologists and environmental thinkers such as my colleague Mark Woods, whose forthcoming book argues for a thinking of the “wild” irreducible to human conceptualization. In the first part of that work, Woods traces the production and the history of the legal creation of specific wilderness areas—a social/political construction if there ever was one. But this should not take away from the “strange strangeness,” to borrow Morton's term, of such “wild” areas. Moreover, it seems to me that the “wild” is itself a wild concept, too anti-essentialist in itself to be tamed under a given heading.
It is just for this sort of reason that Morton introduces the idea of the “mesh” as a means for understanding the “interconnectedness” of existence. Since he is well aware of the use and abuse of internet (the web, networks, etc.) and spiritualist (vitalism, the holism, etc.) metaphors and concepts, Morton seeks out this term to take up those forms of connections and separations among the objects of the world, without arguing that there is some substance (e.g., Thales water) hovering in the background of all things. To think the “mesh” is to think these connections and blank spaces that exist in a mesh, which is akin to Bruno Latour’s irredentist theory of assemblages, wherein there are no substances but only collectives of relations. To bulk up this concept, Morton turns at several crucial places to the writings of Darwin and points out how his thought enables anti-essentialist, anti-teleological thinking inimical to considerations of structures not a posteriori to material events. He writes, “The ecological thought stirs because the mesh appears in our social, psychic, and scientific domains. Since everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground. Darwin,” he concludes, “sensed the mesh while pondering the implications of natural selection” (28). The seeming “pointlessness of life forms” in evolutionary theory, he notes ironically, provides the “saving grace” of ecological thought.

In his first chapter, “Thinking Big,” Morton attacks the postmodern thesis according to which all that is left to us, after modernity, are petit narratives bereft of totalizing force. Yet, he clearly is not out to return to “thinking big” in terms of “centered” modes of thinking (humanism, theology, substance ontology, etc.). Conceptually, a mesh is itself nothing but a set of relations that are None-All, to use Lacanian parlance, or all-at-once, but also not utterly divided temporally and temporarily from each other. Thus, it functions as “vast yet intimate” space-time: “there is no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness. The more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become” (40). Here Morton raises the mesh of the works of Darwin. The turn to evolutionary theory in the last several years—not to offer amateurish
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one-offs, but profound analyses—is welcome and mirrored in Morton's work. From Martin Hägglund's radical atheism project to Elizabeth Grocz's vitalist conceptions of time to Adrian Johnston's considerations of the cadence of change, no longer do Continental philosophers equate Darwinism, as Heidegger did, with de-spiritualized mechanization or unrepentant biopower, as some Foucaultians argue. For Morton, thinking the mesh of Darwinian interdependence means taking cognizance of the non-existence of species difference wherein an essence of “animality” could be offered as simply “non-human.” (Whenever the legatees of humanism declare an essential human trait, it's not long before some animal is found with an akin characteristic [70-71].) The point is to think the “strange strangers” of those that coexist with us, including the strange depths of our subjectivities. At this point, Morton lapses into the mode of the poetic, working through Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a means of conceiving this mysterious strangeness among and within us.3

This brings us to the “uncanny” element of the mesh itself, which, while precisely not something in which we would be at home or heimliche (so much for all the metaphors of deep ecology), is something “you never perceive directly,” since it would cease to be the “interconnectedness” of things and be but one thing among others (57). The point, as I take it, is to think an expanding unboundededness of relations, while being attuned to the mysterious element this “unboundedness” marks. But this “mesh” is not a formalism. He argues that it informs, rather than forms, a “true materialism” that “would be nonsubstantialist: it would think matter as self-assembling sets of interrelationships in which information is directly inscribed” (83).5

This brings us to the second chapter, “Dark Thoughts.” I want to be careful not to suggest that Morton is providing us with another environmentalist or new age conception of the “ineffable.” A “dark ecology” does not stop short of thinking the non-human beyond, like a spiritualist version of negative theology. Rather, it marks how “knowing more about interconnectedness results in more uncertainty” about
the very categories we use to mark out the world. Where this has led some to a postmodern skepticism that dictates all we know is that we cannot know about the world, Morton is right to champion a mode of realism, but one in which clarity is precisely the enemy of thought about what is real: “The book of Nature is more like a Mallarmé poem than a linear, syntactically well organize, unified work” (61). More recently, Morton has linked this “ecology” less to Darwinian biology than (meta)physics, attacking the Newtonian pool hall view of the world of previous generations of “realists”:

[In the late 80s I remember one rather belligerent fellow guilting us out for even thinking about deconstruction—“Reality as I see it is like a boring painting, but you make it sound like an acid trip.” The funny thing is, the current state of physics means that the view of matter as shiny pingpong balls, with a separate self viewing them, is the hallucination. In any case, these developments [in physics] are 1) Real, 2) Pressing and 3) They severely limit (or in the case of nonlocality, profoundly undermine) a materialism consisting of little shiny pingpong balls, bundled with the attitude of subject–object dualism, in particular, the mind–matter manifold that has done some damage (shall we say) in its rather brief historical run.]

The author is not alone, of course, in trying to tease out a workable ontology consistent with the fantastic, almost trippy visions of the world on offer from physics and biology as well as the deconstruction of the subject where co-existence or Heideggerian “Mitsein” comes to the fore. The trick is to produce concepts that don’t fall back into the old binary oppositions now rendered moot while also not simply rendering oneself mute in the face of our quite dark thoughts about ecological devastation. This occasionally, however, leads Morton to link “the ecological thought” to all manner of progressive thinking, which, while critical of identity politics, would “also be friendly to disability” studies (85). Morton’s “dark ecology” guides us to a rather bright version of the future in which races are known not to exist, disabilities are to be thought as differential abilities, and homophobia becomes homo-philia.
But, on the flip side, isn’t there a danger of this being anti-ecological in the every day sense? Thinking big seem to mean here simply describing as inoperative the stubborn localized identities of various “collectives” whose members, such as indigenous critics of globalization, are simply holding to naïve essentialisms, while Morton also aligns himself to the goodness of rather heterogeneous areas of study—many of which are indeed anti-ecological. In other words, Morton’s metaphysical claim is that “absolutely everything is absolutely related to absolutely everything else.” But this doesn’t mean the ecological thought can be all things to all people.

This brings us to Morton’s minimal thesis: existence “is coexistence.” His final chapter, “Forward Thinking,” champions an ethics that no longer is content to find ways to “let nature be” (101). (This, of course, is an implicit criticism of Heideggerian environmentalisms founded in the dead-end of “Gelassenheit.”) In this chapter, Morton weaves considerations of “cooperation” across species and across the globe as an “obligation of ecological thought” (101). But here more theoretical choices need to be made. It is not a simple binary, but for a short review let’s put it thusly: Levinas or Heidegger? Morton’s work is convincing on the problems of using Heidegger’s later writings for the “ecological thought,” and his references to Levinas and the “elemental” are the most incisive in this work. But ultimately, again to simplify, it is Heidegger who is the horizontal thinker of being as being-with, of existence as “co-existence.” This “co-existence” of the mesh, in which, again, everything is related and relatable, is hard to square with a Levinasian conception of otherness that is specifically unrelatable, in fact, the non-relation par excellence. (This is why when Levinas used the phrase “relation to the Other,” he talked about “separation” and the “epiphany of the face” both to side-step a relational ontology and in order not to depict the Other as someone with whom I could be with; this was specifically his critique of Heideggerian Mitsein.) The aim of Morton’s analysis is to have the mesh, to have relationality, but also have something irreducible, singular, testifying to each...other. And here, let me be bold and tickle Graham Harman a bit, by asserting that his work could be the “vanishing
mediator” between Heidegger and Levinas, precisely since he seeks a non-relatable interiority, which as non-relatable, is unnameable. Though he would critique Morton’s relationism, this would be a welcome conversation to begin.

What Morton, for his part, provides in the end is both a “realism” and an ethics of certain humility given our place in the world: “perhaps the ecological art of the future will deal with passivity and weakness; with lowliness, not loftiness” (109). In this way, we are forced from our place as sovereigns over nature, returning us to an “animism” that Morton puts under erasure (“animism”). What he means is not thinking of trees and the grass and books as having an animating soul, the mark of vitalisms and panpsychism—terms thrown about in critiques of variants of speculative realism—but rather as having a “sentience” marked by an openness to the very interconnectedness under discussion. As he does throughout this book, Morton himself shows an abundant openness to a variety of discourses, from Darwinian theory to Romantic literature to treatises on cybernetics, that make up the de-centered “ecological thought” as well as the thinking that is itself ecological.

But this is not simply a thought or even a praxis. It is what Derrida calls in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* the “undeniable”: the reality that enmeshes us in a world in which I “follow” and simply “am” (he plays on the homonym of “je suis,” meaning both “I am,” and “I follow”) related to unspeakable cruelties and movements in, around, and beyond us. Before all denials is the undeniable, in a manner symmetrical to Morton’s claim that deeper than any “deep ecology” is the mesh. He writes: “We are only beginning to think the ecological thought. Perhaps there is no end to its thinking. T.S. Eliot declared, “Human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality” (*Burnt Norton*, lines 44-45)” (134). Eliot himself turned to his own forms of “sovereign cruelty” and mysticisms as a means for “bearing” any reality at all. It is undeniable the mesh offers another way.