

Levi R. Bryant | A World Is Ending

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As I watch the pandemic unfold I find that I can only think in fragments. It is as if I have lost what Kant called the "transcendental unity of apperception", that formal "I think" that is supposed to accompany all of my representations, and have instead become a series of disparate and disconnected impressions without a unity behind them. In the Transcendental Deduction Kant said that the conditions for the possibility of experience are also the conditions for the possibility of the *objects* of experience. In the Transcendental Dialectic, he tries to show how the Idea of the world as a whole or totality is a condition for our experience. If my formal "I think" has shattered, does this also mean that the world has shattered given that there is a parallelism between the two? I will therefore write in fragments, hoping that they might help me to find some unity, some *logos*, beneath these fragments that would allow me to make sense again.

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A world is ending. I do not say *the* world is ending, but rather that *a* world is ending. This thought flashed through my mind last night, but it had been lurking there for weeks now in a sort of unconscious form I dared not say aloud to myself.

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Four weeks ago I taught my last class prior to Spring Break. I was dimly aware of COVID-19, but it was an abstraction and unreal. It was a sort of joke between me and my partner. I think I thought that things like that cannot happen here. They are always elsewhere.

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In my youth, I was a Heideggerian. My deceased grandmother gave me a copy of *Being and Time* for my eighteenth birthday. I had discovered philosophy two years before. This was in the days prior to the internet and big bookstores, so books like this were exceedingly hard to come by in a small steel town like the one I grew up in. I had a fascination with existentialism and had read *of* Heidegger for years, but his work was nowhere to be found. It was one of the best gifts I have ever been given, a true Red Ryder BB Gun. I felt I had been given something rare and precious.

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When I say something like I thought that COVID-19 could not happen here, I wonder if I did not mean something more fundamental than a geographical location. I am sure I meant that, but I think lurking behind this "here" is the idea of the Open. We must analyze *Dasein*, Heidegger said. *Dasein* is often interpreted as "human existence," but it cannot be that for even the human manifests itself *in Dasein*. *Dasein* is the *clearing* within which things appear or manifest themselves, a sort of light before light. No, *Dasein* is not human existence. It is better to translate it as "Being-there" or even "Being-here," or simply as the Open.

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I am no Heidegger scholar, nor am I interested in a scholarly debate regarding his thought. When I refer to the Open, I mean the way in which the world and ourselves are here for us. There is a *continuity* to the world, a *logos*. Today is like yesterday and tomorrow will be like today. To say that things like that do not happen *here* is not to speak of a *place*. Or rather, if we are speaking of a place, we are speaking of a properly *ontological* place, the logos of a world. Again, *a* world,

not *the* world. Things like that do not happen here because there cannot be events that fundamentally betray the orderliness of a world or the Open. At least, that is what I naively thought.

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Santayana spoke of an animal faith. This was his refutation of skepticism. He said that we have a sort of animal faith in the reality of the world. This, in a sense, is the Open. One need not *believe* in the open. It is a conviction prior to all beliefs. The world is always-already open and there is a continuity to the world. I do what I do today because of the Open. I have animal faith that the world will be there tomorrow as it was today and yesterday. I do not even need to think about it and my day-to-day dealings have always already been premised on this Open or world.

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What was it that Hume said? He said something like he was a skeptic in the armchair, unable to demonstrate that the future must be like the past. Yet when he played billiards, he suspended his skepticism and trusted the laws of physics. The Open is something like this. No one is truly a skeptic when they leave their writing desk and get on with things.

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But tomorrow is gone and it is gone because a world is ending. The Open is closing. It is ironic that multiple generations of philosophers who waged war on the metaphysics of presence now find ourselves suspended in a perpetual present. I no longer understand the world I inhabited on my last day of class prior to Spring Break. In our home we call that time “the before time.” There is no longer a tomorrow. There is just this listless present where one day bleeds into the next and where each day is the same. We must therefore distinguish between the same and the continuous. The continuity of the world or Open paradoxically allows change to take place, but in the shadow realm of the same there is no change. All projects are suspended. It is limbo, like the airport in Spielberg’s film *The Terminal*.

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We have fallen out of time and are therefore radically between times or Opens. Everywhere there are radical transformations unfolding, terrible transformations, but time has nonetheless been suspended. We hope for tomorrow to return like the sun in the morning, but we are unsure whether tomorrow will ever return and worry that if tomorrow does someday return it will be a terrible time no longer worth living in. Will tomorrow come again?

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The expression “before time” might be cute, but is philosophicaly inaccurate. The before times were not before time because time then existed. There was the Open. No, we are living in the before time or that liminal space between worlds where time has been suspended. This is the before time. All we can do is wait. We have become shades and haunts of a world or Open that once was. We ourselves have become fragments of a lost time, remainders who once had time but who have now lost all time by virtue of having nothing but time. Some of us wake in the morning and dutifully get dressed. Yet we then do nothing but wait as we are now shards of lost time. A ghost is a memory of a place that was once here. We are all now ghosts. We haunt a world that still seems to be here but that is nonetheless gone. We are echoes of a world that once was.

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If I can say that a world is ending, then I must have some idea of what a world is. Clearly, the world is not the earth, for I still walk about the earth and move about it. Heidegger says that the world is the totality of equipmental relations constituting meaning or significance. The famous hammer, for instance, only has meaning in relation to nails, boards to be fastened, a home to be built, and the earth from which the home shelters us. The hammer takes on meaning in terms of a set of projects that gather things together upon a horizon of care. In kindergarten, we would sing a song called “The Skeleton Dance” to learn about the parts of the body. It went something like “the hip bone connects to the thigh bone and the thigh bone connects to the knee bone...” This is how it is with a world. The things

of our world all refer to one another in terms of our projects or concerned dealings constituting a fabric of meaning.

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So long as my equipment functions, it is largely invisible or unconscious. It is fully integrated in the activity of my concerned dealings with the world. It is only when some element of my equipment is broken or missing that the thing becomes present to me as a thing and that I become aware of the totality of references constituting meaning. The thing passes from being “ready-to-hand” to being “present-at-hand.” The world is broken and therefore things are now present-at-hand. That is an opportunity.

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A couple weeks ago, I went to the market to stock up on food our family would need to get through the coming weeks now that we were ordered to “stay-at-home and shelter.” A trip to the market is now an encounter with your mortality. Now everything in the world is present-at-hand or broken because the relations between things that allow them to be unconscious and ready-to-hand in a seamless network of meanings and references has been broken. Every humble thing of the world is now menacing. I now notice everything. As I touch the foodstuffs I wonder if they have the virus on them. Is the virus now on my hand? Have I passed it to the steering wheel of my car and then to the doorknob? I bring the groceries into my home. Counters need to be wiped down with bleach wipes. Packaging needs to be removed. Death lurks everywhere and the friendly objects of the world are now all threatening. My simple act of going to the market has endangered myself, my family, and people I do not even know. The things of the world are no longer allies but potential agents of the virus. We wait five to fourteen days, wondering if we have caught it and are just still asymptomatic. We are no longer Haraway or Clark’s cyborgs or prosthetic gods, for the world of things that made our life possible is broken. The world is broken.

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In returning from the market, I discover the earth beneath the world. I discover the earth first and foremost through the virus.

Plagues were supposed to be something relegated to the past of history. They belong to the past such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They were supposed to be the stuff of another here, another world, at least in first world countries that enjoy so much privilege. Plagues today were always supposed to be the affliction of less developed, poverty-stricken nations. No doubt this has contributed to the ability of developed nations to neglect and ignore those people. Yet the earth continues to rumble beneath this world that we thought we had vanquished through culture.

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I discover the earth second through all of the things that we rely on and upon which our lives are rendered possible, that have now become obtrusive either as absent when needed or present in their menacing possibility as carriers of the virus. Everywhere there is an absence of toilet paper. Lacan taught us that the symptom is structured like a language, that it speaks, that it expresses a message or a series of signifiers. It is odd that toilet paper, of all things, should have been that which people hoarded. It is as if at some level they registered the earth that rumbles beneath the world, that renders the world possible, and chose a thing that marks the intersection of nature and culture to say what they did not have words to say. We spoke through a symptom.

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People are calling the pandemic an apocalypse. By this, no doubt, they mean a catastrophic or cataclysmic event of tremendous destructive power. Many will die and economies around the world are collapsing. But in its original signification, “apocalypse” means “to reveal” or “uncover.” The pandemic is an apocalypse in both senses of the word. I will resolve to think of the pandemic as an event, a terrible event, and will try to decipher what this event uncovers or reveals. In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze proposes an ethics of the event. He says that we must be worthy of the events that befall us, which he equates with wounds. If a world is ending, if this is an event or wound, then we must forge concepts worthy of that event that might allow time to begin again and the sun to rise in the morning. We must strive to gather concepts that would contribute to the birth of another world.

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The network of humble people upon which all of us depend has now been uncovered. For decades, we have lived with the zombie myth that wealth is created by those at the top. Yet as we have been thrown into this realm of shadows, losing our jobs and having to “stay-at-home and shelter,” we see the entire economy grind to a halt and come to see that the only reason we can continue, to eat, is due to those who work in such deadly conditions. Those who were invisible like the engine of a well running car are now revealed. Those who were held in contempt by so many as not deserving of a living wage are now revealed as essential to everything. Had we studied ecology we would have known this all along. The apex predator is the least essential element of an ecosystem. So too with the billionaires. Yet they too have been affected by the least among us and find that they cannot escape or go elsewhere in this.

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Paraphrasing Badiou, the problem of politics and ethics is not that of the different, but of how to construct the Same. Ontologically, he says, there is nothing but infinitely decomposable multiplicities without one. Between me and my identical twin - if I had an identical twin - there are as many differences as there are between me and the Chinese person across the globe. Difference, he contends, is just a trivial fact of being. The question is how we can draw a transversal line across these differences to construct a space of the Same. The virus is the great leveler. It refuses to be an elsewhere. It is indifferent to whether you are rich, poor, belong to the ersatz “middle class,” black, white, male, or female. As they are thrown out of work and suffer the disease, the “middle class” discover that they have more in common with the homeless person than with the billionaire. So long as we had jobs and therefore paychecks and healthcare, this precariousness and vulnerability at the heart of our being was invisible. However, now like Rancière’s part of no part that is abject before both government and employer, it is revealed that we are all the part of no part, that is to say, precarious and vulnerable. The terrible and cruel injustice of our economic system, the tremendous inequality of power and representation, is revealed and laid bare for all to see, and in this it becomes possible - perhaps - to construct a One or a People.

Crisis was always Elsewhere and always happened to Someone Else. For this reason, it was possible to think in terms of a Them that is not us. The us was always geographical, spatially located, a geographical here that took great comfort in not being Them, those unfortunates, over There. With the virus the Planetary is disclosed. There is no Here that is other than the There. Like action at a distance, the there reverberates here and is ineluctably intertwined with the there. We discover that the nation-state was always a symbolic fiction and that there always was a planet. And with the disclosure of the Planetary it becomes possible to construct a true Us that is not diacritically constructed against a Them. In the face of the stranger we now have the opportunity to see ourselves.

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Thatcher famously said that society does not exist, there are only individuals and families. This has been a global governing philosophy for decades, a deadly virus all its own. It is what allowed society to be replaced by economy, a wasteland in which the only values have been efficiency, instrumentality, and profit. We have been living in a post-apocalyptic world for some time, a true desert. We have mutilated our humanity in the name of these wasteland values. In the constitution of a planetary Us we rediscover society and our interdependence with others. Perhaps we can now begin to hear ancient languages in the word “economy.” Perhaps we can redeem this wasteland word, and recall that it is of the *oikos* or the home, that it shares a common root with ecology, and that the *oikos* or home, that dwelling, calls for a very different set of values than the wasteland values of efficiency, instrumentality, and profit.

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Are we in a nightmare or are we waking from a nightmare? Like many I have had dreams that I am dreaming. I have had dreams within dreams. So perhaps we are waking from a nightmare within a nightmare. As we sit here locked in our homes, perhaps we wonder what we were doing in that world that was before and why we allowed ourselves to live and work that way. It is as if the virus has

created an involuntary general strike, an acephalous general strike. Will we be able to go back, I wonder? Certainly not as we did before.

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Like the crises of the past, the wilderness was always seen as Elsewhere. The wilderness was seen as that which is *not* the city, town, or civilization. It was nature opposed to culture. It was therefore possible to think nature, and materiality with it, as culture's other. Nature was culture's Them. And indeed, an entire series of binary oppositions surrounding culture/nature, form/matter, mind/body, intellect/senses are organized around this way of thinking the wilderness spatially as an Elsewhere. The material term is always treated as subaltern and fallen, while the intellectual term is always treated as privileged. Occupations are even valued in a hierarchy based on their proximity to materiality, with those remote from materiality being valued the most. Augustine, or perhaps it was Aquinas, for example, treats music as a higher art than painting because it is closer to spirit or pure thought. No doubt our discomfort with materiality has to do with its unruliness, with the way it evades our mastery. Those who work with matter know that things never quite turn out as planned (form). As Adorno observes, matter is the concept of that which is not a concept. It is that which evades the Apollonian serenity of form. This, in turn, is linked to our finitude and mortality. In matter we encounter not only the limits of our power - though paradoxically, also, the conditions of our capacity to do anything at all - but also our mortality as embodied beings. An entire way of thinking, frame of thought, appears to be a fantasy that dreams of escaping our bodies and imbrication in matter. Perhaps there is something of this in our exploitation of the earth. Perhaps we set about so ruthlessly exploiting the earth not simply because of our thirst for endless profit, but out of rage against our own bodies and mortality.

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Through the virus, we discover that the wilderness is not an Elsewhere, but rather that the wilderness is all that there is. There is an unruliness and nature that rumbles right there at the heart of the city, the town, and civilization, a wilderness. The wilderness is in the

city and the city is in the wilderness. And in this discovery of the wilderness we encounter a correlate of the planetary that calls for a rethinking of our relation to materiality and our embodiment.