

Faculty Scholarship

---

9-15-2022

## The Planetary Sublime Part II of The Problem of an Unloving World

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer  
*Case Western Reserve University, jeremy.bendik-keymer@case.edu*

Author(s) ORCID Identifier:


[Jeremy Bendik-Keymer](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.case.edu/facultyworks>

Digital Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)  
Commons

---

### Network Recommended Citation

 Bendik-Keymer, Jeremy, "The Planetary Sublime Part II of The Problem of an Unloving World" (2022).  
*Faculty Scholarship*. 94.  
<https://commons.case.edu/facultyworks/94>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Case Western Reserve University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@case.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@case.edu).

CWRU authors have made this work freely available. [Please tell us](#) how this access has benefited or impacted you!

## 6. The Planetary Sublime (Part II of *The Problem of an Unloving World*)<sup>1</sup>

Jeremy Bendik-Keymer

### Abstract

This essay interprets Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* in light of the European tradition of thought about the sublime. The first half of the essay stages Chakrabarty's historiography within that tradition focusing on a critical understanding of Kant. Then, the essay considers how the trace of the sublime in Chakrabarty's approach to planetary history is interpretable as a form of social alienation. That argument draws on the critical theory of Steven Vogel and decolonial critique. Finally, the essay considers the moods of protest as non-alienated responses to the planetary bypassing the coloniality of the sublime.

*Nature is a societal category. That is to say, whatever is held to be natural at any given stage of social development, however this nature is related to man and whatever form his involvement with it takes, i.e., nature's form, its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned.*

~ Georgy Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Ron Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 234

*It's cold out there, you got to be warm.*

~ A locker-room line, Warrensville Heights YMCA, Ohio

As I've suggested in a constructive reading of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "planetary," it makes sense for moral reasons that the planetary be told in countless different stories in countless different ways of life.<sup>2</sup> Hence, I take account of my position, of my story, when I approach discussion of planetary history.<sup>3</sup> From my position in the United States of America, and as a settler, I have become conscious of the colonial mindset into which I was brought up and educated. Rather than reflecting a mere social justice fad, that mindset has involved low quality moral relationships as a commonsense feature of my social world. This essay continues my reflective, critical engagement with the world – specifically, its *planet* – as I approach planetary history from my position.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the first part of the series to which this essay belongs, I explored what I call "fragmentary coloniality" in Earth system governance discourse around agency. Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, "Unacceptable Agency (Part I of *The Problem of an Unloving World*), *Environmental Philosophy* 18:2, pp. 319-344.

<sup>2</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Planetary' Box 4 (WELT)," *Paragraph* 38:2 (2015), pp. 290-292. Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, "'Planetary,' 'Planetaryism,' and the Interpersonal," *Blog of the APA* [American Philosophical Association], September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Davis and Jason Walsh, "The Politics of Positionality: The Difference between Post-, Anti-, and De-colonial Methods." *Culture, Theory, and Critique*. 61:4 (2020), pp. 374-388.

In this essay, I look at a landmark articulation of Earth history now, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.<sup>4</sup> My concern is that, if we are not careful, we will mark history with another fragment of coloniality by marking Earth with what I call, *the planetary sublime*. Chakrabarty does not speak in terms of the sublime, but I will argue that his historical category of the "planetary" readily lends itself to the tradition of the sublime. While I doubt that Chakrabarty is wrestling with fragmentary coloniality from his position as he marks planetary history, the historical sensibility urged in his book *as translated to me in my position* risks reproducing fragmentary coloniality. On my end, further critique is needed.

There is much to be said for the tradition of the sublime. Yet on reflection, *marking our historical moment* with the sublime risks reproducing environmental alienation, at least for some of us. Environmental alienation is a social condition that I develop from Steven Vogel's work, itself inspired by Georgy Lukács.<sup>5</sup> I understand environmental alienation as alienation *from pro-social relations* in ways that are reflected onto, and in, the environment. In the case of the planetary sublime, it appears that our troubled sociality could be displaced onto an ontologically capacious cosmos capable of being interpreted as a *threat*.<sup>6</sup> But the cosmic need not be seen as threatening. There are other ways to relate to it.

This fact is crucial. The moment we are born, we are already dying, and this could be seen as wonderful – as part of the process.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there *is* something threatening: that we could die of cruelty, callousness, or human indifference or that we could die benefitting from or suffering the burdens of injustice. I find it helpful to hear Chakrabarty's book-title as *The Climate of History in an [Environmentally Alienated Age]*. Or what about, *The Climate of History [when Capitalism and Imperialism Rule the Planet]*!<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, I want to point toward a *political mood* to absorb and transform the planetary sublime. We have independent reasons of justice to confront domination and unjust entitlement as part of being decent humans. Moreover, there could be a climate of history materialized from making Earth laws together, from dying lovingly, and such a climate should be an orienting aspiration for moral reasons of justice.<sup>9</sup> Given existing structural injustice, the mood of this aspiration, however, would be one of protest, not of reverence *per*

---

<sup>4</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). The book is wonderful in many ways: it shows a scholar working in full command of his art after decades of work with others; the book's voice is both conversational and pragmatic, moving through discussions with precision and imagination; the command of recent literature surrounding the "Anthropocene hypothesis," Earth science, post-colonial scholarship, and Anthropocene studies is helpful; and the historian's engagement with philosophical ideas is extensive.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), which centers on Lukács, and *Thinking like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), which discusses environmental alienation.

<sup>6</sup> I gained this insight from Emily Anne Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) – *Elemental Difference* for short. In turn, she attributes her awareness to Frantz Fanon's writing.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Earth* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> My approach to Gibson's "[entity redacted]" would be by way of negative dialectic, that is, by way of critically interrogating the social alienation making some forms of speech, thought, and community outside the realm of conventional discourse in what Mignolo and others calls "the Colonial Matrix of Power."

<sup>9</sup> A subtext of this paper will be renegotiating the sympathetic-antipathetic (i.e., ambivalent) relationship to Kant that runs throughout *The Climate of History*, e.g., through transposition of the sense-guiding notion of regulative ideals.

se. The threat confronted would not be the planet but societies structured with *planetary* injustice and ourselves behaving unjustly.<sup>10</sup>

After an overview of the book in part I, part II of this paper – about half of it – locates Chakrabarty's history in thought about the sublime. Part III argues, however, that the planetary sublime can reproduce environmental alienation. Part IV concludes the essay with a case for the moods of protest rather than of reverence: irreverence toward our world of structural injustice, being seriously fed-up, and being loving.<sup>11</sup>

### *I. The book*

Let's begin with some context. *The Climate of History* parallels the emergence of the social-historical and scientific category of the planetary within Chakrabarty's scholarship while advancing the historical thesis that "the global discloses the planetary." In other words, modernization as a social-spatial regimen generates a confrontation with Earth system science and the limits of the current order of life on Earth.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the book begins with the seminal article, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," from *Critical Inquiry* in 2009.<sup>13</sup> It moves to a revision of a piece on histories of capitalism and geological history,<sup>14</sup> then enters into writing published from 2016-2020, including from Chakrabarty's Tanner Lectures on Human Values and a volume edited by Martha C. Nussbaum. The book's post-script is a conversation with Bruno Latour.<sup>15</sup>

Excepting the postscript, the eight articles are divided into three parts: part I, "The Globe and the Planet;" part II, "The Difficulty of Being Modern," and part III, "Facing the Planetary." The first part shows the evolution of the distinction central to the book, finally articulating it in its final and third chapter, "The Planet: A Humanist Category." The second part backtracks toward Chakrabarty's canonical work in post-colonial studies,<sup>16</sup> troubling the discourse of the global, including of global justice, that structured the Marxist lineages and "philosophies of difference" forming the approaches of many humanists in the 1990s and 2000s, his own included. The final part of the book contains two chapters, one on

---

<sup>10</sup> On planetary injustice, see Frank Biermann, Elizabeth Dirth, and Agni Kalfagianni, eds. *Exploring Planetary Justice*, (special issue of) *Earth System Governance*, 6: December (2020), and John E. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> For a different kind of argument that prioritizes pro-social relations over planetary threat, see Kyle Powys Whyte, "Time as Kinship," in Jeffrey Cohen and Stephanie Foote, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 39-55.

<sup>12</sup> "Regimen" is used here creatively between its archaic usage to indicate a mode of governance and its ordinary usage to indicate an ethos for well-being to gesture toward modernization as a set of social-spatial processes entangled with ideologies that bear their imprint, as in "globalization," "global capitalism," "global justice," and, at the onset of the process, European cartography of the "globe" and concomitant colonization of it. It also includes such current ideologies as geo-engineering that, despite the inclusion of the "geological" in its name, bespeaks to what Chakrabarty calls "the global trying to absorb the planetary" (p. 216) in the attempt to manage planetary processes through modernization.

<sup>13</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), 197-222.

<sup>14</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories," *Critical Inquiry*, 41:1 (2014), p. 1-23.

<sup>15</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Mark Matheson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 137-188; "The Dalit Body: A Reading for the Anthropocene," in *The Empire of Disgust: Stigma and the Law*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Zoya Hasan (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 1-20; and Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

“Anthropocene time” and the time of two calendars – one global, another planetary – and the other called, “Toward an Anthropological Clearing.” This last chapter calls for both a philosophical anthropology and philosophies of governance suitable to the planetary age. Dialogue with Bruno Latour – amicably loose and intellectually focused at once – serves as the book’s postscript.

Of moving importance is the middle essay in the book’s second, middle part, chapter 5: “Planetary Aspirations: Reading a Suicide in India.” This chapter reflects on the Dalit – “untouchable” – body that is part of historically Indian caste injustice. It recounts the 2016 suicide of Rohit Vemula, a doctoral student at the University of Hyderabad. Vemula’s suicide note reinscribed his body within planetary thought through the gesture of it being stardust, while the unjust social stigma attached to his body in India’s caste history actively repressed and devalued the micro-organismic richness of dirt, excrement, and decay. For Chakrabarty, the Dalit body becomes a figure of the Anthropocene as an unsettling time.

Vemula’s act was a protest. He hung himself with a banner of the Ambedkar Students Association, part of an Ambedkarite movement against structural injustice. This gesture of *righteous irreverence* connected with the planetary in his note, but it is not emphasized as such in Chakrabarty’s account as I read it from my position. I will return to this mistranslation in part IV.

The central distinction in Chakrabarty’s book is between the “planet” and the “globe.”<sup>17</sup> Chakrabarty argues that humanists concerned with planetary problems tend to collapse the planetary into the global, despite their intentions to come to terms with the planetary. In the process of marking the distinction in kind, the book begins to unearth a perspective on the planetary that is unsettling. The planet, *sublime in its power and complexity*, should unsettle our thought about an acceptable, social world. The question is how.

## II. *The sublime*<sup>18</sup>

The sublime is an early modern aesthetic category that found a new life in the debates around post-modernism in the 1990s through Lyotard’s work, among others.<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke made the sublime especially well known over two hundred and fifty years ago, but it was Immanuel Kant who articulated it near the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in a way that continues at times to be relevant.<sup>20</sup> The core conceptual distinction in *The Climate of History* is an inheritor of the “sensible potential” of the sublime, yet in a way that troubles the residue of Kant’s narcissism and the overly subjective elements of the sublime as rooted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century canon. In this section, I aim to show how.

By “sensible potential,” I do *not* mean that the sublime is to be understood merely as something that people have felt. Rather, the tradition of the sublime creates imaginative

---

<sup>17</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank Karsten Harries for teaching this concept extensively at Yale University in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Burke, *An Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) - *An Inquiry*, for short - and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951).

room within the order of the sensible into which and then against which the meaning of the planetary can fissure, split and then chasm. In that imaginative room, we may find opportunities to stay in touch with our situation reflectively. My question later in this essay will be about whether our situation so reflected could reproduce environmental alienation.

To begin the argument for how *The Climate of History* marks the Earth with the planetary sublime, it's helpful to return to Burke to take up how the category of the planetary might appear within thought about the sublime. According to Burke, "the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation . . ."<sup>21</sup> Calling something "sublime" is a fitting response to things that should cause us "terror," yet without showing us imminent "danger." As Burke writes,

The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an *idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances*; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call "sublime."<sup>22</sup>

Sublime things *could* threaten our self-preservation, but for the moment, our being safe, they involve a strangely pleasing experience – a feeling of "pleasure" caused by a relation to "deprivation."<sup>23</sup>

Their experience is almost reflective. Burke considered the sublime to be mixed with philosophical and religious sentiments such as "astonishment," "reverence," "awe" and "wonder."<sup>24</sup> A typical passage reads:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.<sup>25</sup>

That the sublime is a blended emotion, presumably, makes sense because terror is admixed with momentary freedom from danger, the opportunity to enjoy what would normally be only fear-inducing and require "self-preservation."<sup>26</sup> Feeling that one could readily need to act to protect oneself, yet having the momentary opportunity to be free from danger, presumably opens for Burke the space of various forms of emotional appreciation of the meaning of that which is beyond our powers.

This ambivalent appreciation reflects a state-of-affairs latent even when something does not appear dangerous. Burke writes that,

---

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *An inquiry*, part II, section XXII

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, part I, section XVIII, emphasis mine.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, part I, section II-IV, VI & VII.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, part II, section II.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, part II, section 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, part I, section VI.

Besides those things which *directly* suggest the idea of danger, ... I know of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power.<sup>27</sup>

A main source of terror is that something be overpowering. In this way, reflecting the early modern ambivalence between being subject to the natural world yet becoming safe from it,<sup>28</sup> Burke holds that “nature” is foremost among the causes of the sublime:

There are many animals, who, though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds. And to things of great dimensions, if we annex an adventitious idea of terror, they become without comparison greater. A level plain of a vast extent on land, is certainly no mean idea; the prospect of such a plain may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean; but can it ever fill the mind with anything so great as the ocean itself? This is owing to several causes; but it is owing to none more than this, that the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.<sup>29</sup>

That Burke isolates an almost titillating pleasure in thinking about what is terrifyingly dangerous when experiencing it from a position of safety seems unhelpful when facing the overwhelming terror of a category five hurricane brought on by global warming. Yet what Kant does with some such tradition of the sublime radicalizes and then inverts Burke’s account to which he was strongly indebted. It is Kant’s inversion of Burke that strikes me as important, including in how it can clarify some aspects of Chakrabarty’s own conceptual turbulence in his book.

Kant’s interpretation of a similar phenomenon to Burke’s acknowledges the overpowering potential of nature and the fear nature should stir in a prudent person.<sup>30</sup> But then seizing on the reflective space of strange pleasure that Burke found in our actually being safe from nature enough to judge it aesthetically, Kant argues that what is actually sublime is not nature’s power, but our moral freedom in the face of nature. Faced with nature’s overwhelming and terrifying power, it is *we* who are sublime, because we have moral responsibility and its implied freedom to be responsible.

How Kant arrives at the surprising inversion expands on Burke’s account. Kant first defines might as “that which is superior to great hindrances” and considers nature “in an aesthetical judgment” as might. He acknowledges that might “must be represented as exciting fear,” and then comments that “we can regard an object as *fearful* without being

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, part II, section V. He proceeds to interpret the overpowering and terrifying in nature through its “vastness” and “infinity” (*Ibid.* part II, sections VII & VIII).

<sup>28</sup> Chakrabarty frames modernity in part around the near global agreement over time that people have a right to safety. See *The Climate of History*, chapters 5 and 8.

<sup>29</sup> Burke, *An Inquiry*, part II, section II.

<sup>30</sup> Although Burke does discuss the infinite in relation to the sublime and therefore can be placed in dialogue with Kant’s notion of the “mathematical” sublime, it is Kant’s notion of the “dynamically sublime in nature” where the contrast with Burke’s account appears most sharply. See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Second Book A (“Of the Mathematically Sublime”) and B (“Of the Dynamically Sublime in Nature”).

afraid of it: viz. if we judge of it in such a way that we merely *think* [of it].”<sup>31</sup> Kant then moves beyond Burke’s awareness of the mere idea of “danger.” Kant writes,

Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like – these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, *provided only that we are in security*; and we willingly call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height *and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.*<sup>32</sup>

Whereas Burke merely focused on the strange pleasure of being able to have an idea of danger while momentarily being safe, Kant goes on from Burke’s almost bourgeois position to take our capacity to think about danger as conducting us toward our critical power of reason to demand that the world make sense:

[T]he irresistibility of [nature’s] might, while making us recognize our own physical impotence, considered as beings of nature, discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of and a superiority over nature, in which is based a kind of self-preservation entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature. Thus humanity in our person remains unhumiliated ....<sup>33</sup>

It is our moral freedom found in demanding what ought to be, not in succumbing to what is, that Kant thinks nature’s overpowering dynamism should lead us to acknowledge. What is sublime is not nature, but us considered as morally responsible beings with consciences:

Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we can become conscious that we are superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us (in so far as it influences us).<sup>34</sup>

Kant even suggests that the mental state fitting to such a confrontation with nature, far from being a Burkean terror mixed with “astonishment,” is, rather, a “mood of calm contemplation and .. quite free judgment.”<sup>35</sup>

It is this Kantian transmutation of the sublime that, I think, Chakrabarty’s book challenges by developing the sensible potential of the sublime. At the same time, I think the

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 28, emphases mine.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 28.



logic in Kant's account challenges *The Climate of History's* conclusions too. To see how both of these things might go, we should begin by noting that the attitude the book develops is not the sublime *per se* but a recuperation of the virtue of reverence. In this vein, Chakrabarty writes that,

Reverence is not simply about curiosity, wonderment, or biophilia. Reverence suggests a relationship of respect *mixed with fear and awe*, with proto-Italic roots that mean "to be wary." We do not fully understand the planet and its processes. It does not belong to the structure of mutuality that [many thinkers of the Earth's bounty] outlined.<sup>36</sup> We cannot even always predict its "anger," so we need to be wary of it. The planet can, as demonstrated by the Australian fires of 2019,<sup>37</sup> reduce us to our creaturely lives where we compete with other species (as with camels in Australia over water) for sheer survival. Watching out for something that is both miraculous (because it bears complex life) and dangerous – not always to be embraced in mutuality – this is the spirit of which [the geologist] speaks.<sup>38</sup>

*The Climate of History* ties the project and process of modernization – both ideologically and materially – to the a "pursuit of overcoming the feeling of reverence for the world around us" by way of the drive to make people safe as a basic right. Chakrabarty sees such a loss of reverence as a "loss in the sphere of values."<sup>39</sup> In such a light, cultural moments like Kant's inversion of the Burkean sublime to focus on our own moral superiority have contributed to losing our awareness of our own limits within nature. By them, the sublime is an aesthetic misdirection.<sup>40</sup>

To speak of *The Climate of History* disclosing the sensible potential of the sublime is not to say that it is repeating Kant's gesture. Nor is it to say that the book is returning to Burke. "Delight" – the strange pleasure, even titillation, Burke described – is far from the moral earnestness of reverence. If there is something to the tradition which the book develops, it must be found in the interstices of Burke's and Kant's account. But to see what it is, we have to deepen the disagreement between the book and what Kant seems to represent, and this exposes some conceptual turbulence in the book's argument.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Chakrabarty seems so subsume thought about good relations to our ecological order within a projected view of reciprocity that he calls "mutuality," and which he implies was fitting for human life in the relatively stable, temperate, and bountiful Holocene epoch. This is not the only way to think of ecologically minded relationships, a point to which I will return later.

<sup>37</sup> C.f. Danielle Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 198, emphasis mine. The "geologist" is Andrew Glikson, whom Chakrabarty follows in showing concern for our having "lost a sense of reverence toward Earth" [in modernity].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> But see by contrast the neo-Kantian Susan Neiman's invocation of reverence as an "Enlightenment" (and neo-Kantian) virtue, *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown Up Idealists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chapter 8, "Reverence."

<sup>41</sup> In articulating the planetary as a "humanist category," Chakrabarty (*Climate of History*, p. 79) notes as a given that Earth System Science articulates the planet through what Timothy Morton called "hyperobjects" – objects that exceed the mind. These are inheritor of the Kantian mathematical sublime. But I am interested in the ways Chakrabarty's text wrestles with traces of the dynamical sublime. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

What Kant located through the aesthetic judgment of the dynamically sublime in nature was human moral responsibility understood in part as reason's capacity to make demands on what is so that things make better sense to us, a capacity supposing some degree of free agency. But *The Climate of History's* humanist category of the planetary, in dialogue with expanded notions of agency like Bruno Latour's and Jane Bennett's, causes trouble for moral agency, or so it would seem.<sup>42</sup> After all, Latour and Bennett both show the extent to which human intentional action depends on, and to a degree is determined by, "assemblages" of more than human biotic, abiotic, and technological systems – on "thing-power" as Bennett says.<sup>43</sup> Adding to this, *The Climate of History* argues that what the "Anthropocene moment" of our geological self-awareness shows us is that humankind is a "geological agent," the vast and deep aggregate of human beings causing unintentional effects of increasingly planetary importance since the beginning of the megafauna extinctions by killing at a distance and the almost correlative rise of agriculture, all the way through the planet-exposing systems of modernization and their industrial terraforming and climate changing of scale.<sup>44</sup>

What Chakrabarty underlines are two kinds of determinism: a determinism caused by unstructured or poorly structured social processes – call this "social process determinism" – and a determinism of socio-ecological entanglements – call this a "socio-ecological determinism." The former should be located within the latter because it draws attention to the realm of social organization within socio-ecological determinism. That the energy processes of fossil-fuel based industrialization lead to forcing the planet's carbon sinks is a social-ecological determination of what becomes possible for our agency over centuries.

But that modern industrialization has lacked what John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering call "ecological reflexivity" is a social process determination, a feature of poor social organization.<sup>45</sup> The point worth underlining is that social process determinations are subject to social responsibility and so to moral responsibility. They fall within the realm of freedom. That is why we can become indignant or judgmental about them as something unjust or bad for us and many other kinds of living beings in the current order of life on Earth.

Even socio-ecological determinism demands a moral response from us. For it leaves us with the question of how we should respond to our biological finitude and vulnerability. We are not able to totally control the planet and are vulnerable to any number of macroscopic

---

<sup>42</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, chapters 1, 3, 4 & postscript. Thomas Nail's distinctions between these two thinkers in his essay in this issue are very helpful.

<sup>43</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, summarizes the position, including Latour, well.

<sup>44</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, chapter 1; see also my "'Goodness itself must change' – Anthroponomy in an age of socially-caused, planetary environmental change." *Ethics & Bioethics (In Central Europe)*. 6:3-4 (2016) 187-202; itself a distant development of the paper I presented at IAEP-ISEE's annual meeting in Nijmegen in 2011 called, "The Strange Un-agent of Our Species, Our Collective Drift." I follow Moishe Postone in viewing industrial forms as central to modernization both in capitalist countries and in once state-communist ones. See his *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>45</sup> Dryzek and Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene*. Cf. Robert Jackell, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) on the idea of "organized irresponsibility," an example from recent organizational theory of the notion of poor social organization. See Urszula Lisowska's concluding section in her essay for this special issue for her take on ecological reflexivity.

and microscopic things in the cosmos. But these facts demand, in a given instance of them, that we respond to them, just as the question of how we die is a moral one, given that we all shall die. The “nature/culture” distinction against which Chakrabarty and Latour argue is something that makes some degree of sense when it is recast in terms of our moral responsibilities, namely as a distinction between the historically (including natural historically) given and what ought to be by conscience.<sup>46</sup> “Culture” is the name we should give to *anything* understood *under the aspect of our responsibility*, whereas “nature” should be the name for *anything* understood *under the aspect of its givenness*.<sup>47</sup> Kant himself never held that we are anything but empirically entangled in nature. The question is how to figure our intelligible capacity for responsibility when it arises through the “Fact of Reason,” or as G.W.F. Hegel would later put it (but also Christine Korsgaard), within self-reflection.<sup>48</sup>

In arguing for reverence and prudence, *The Climate of History*'s argument is a work of culture – of what Marion Hourdequin calls “moral response-ability” – for the emergence of the planetary.<sup>49</sup> That we exist in planetary processes exceeding our power and adequate comprehension is something to which we have to respond. The question is how. When the book implies that our sense of agency no longer applies to planetary processes either because we are socio-ecologically determined (the Latourian route) or because we are untethered, unself-conscious, or impotent within the long arc of humankind's aggregate affects (the “geological agent” route), what it is saying is that we have new determinations of moral responsibility to consider – for instance, changed social organization producing aggregate effects (what I have called changed “forms of power”<sup>50</sup>) or changed ethical orientations toward our own finitude.<sup>51</sup> In the third, fifth, and last chapters of the book, Chakrabarty comes to these by way of the need for a political theory of governance that is formed around the emergence of the planetary and for a morality that includes the world of life as our moral relatives.<sup>52</sup> In this way, *The Climate of History* becomes an argument for a more responsible and complex understanding of agency, not the dissolution of it within planetary processes.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, chapter 4. Neiman, in *Moral Clarity*, chapter 3, links the domain of conscience to awareness of the “Fact of Reason” in Kant's Second Critique. Nail criticisms of dualisms in his essay for this special issue do not strike me as having grasped Kant's reason for the distinction, nor how the distinction is practical, not ontological.

<sup>47</sup> There is a criticism of Latour to be made here. Compare Parker, *Elemental Difference* and her reading of *natura naturans* in Bennett's work.

<sup>48</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), “Third Antinomy”; G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Marion Hourdequin, “Cultivating Climate Response-Ability,” *Blog of the APA*, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Of course, Hourdequin gets the distinction from Donna Haraway.

<sup>50</sup> Bendik-Keymer, “‘Goodness itself must change’.” On “aggregate effects,” consider the social-spatial analyses of planetary urbanization in Neil Brenner's *New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> See Nail, *Theory of the Earth* on the Lucretian idea of dying naturally by committing to a “generous” process of cosmic entropy.

<sup>52</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, chapters 3, 5, and 8.

<sup>53</sup> It is important to underline that agency need not be individualistic. This point basic to the practice of law and to any collective working as an intentional unit leaves open room for a more complex and nuanced understanding of how a collective that is not tightly unified as a collective agent can still organize through reflective processes to come to terms with its complex causality, including introducing reflexive institutions and practices to aid in organizing through coordinated agency what is not strictly speaking a single corporate agent.

The sensible potential of the sublime is relevant to what the book is doing primarily because it keeps in view that the planetary, in its overpowering emergence into the world, is potentially *dangerous beyond imagination* and thus demands of us that we respond to it morally.<sup>54</sup> In this way, as with the sublime traditionally understood, the planetary calls for a response that discloses our responsibility. Here, the structure of the core idea of *A Climate of History* coheres with the logic of the Kantian dynamical sublime. What such a logic does not, however, do is to cohere with the rhetoric Kant used to describe the sublime, the triumphant “superiority” of the human over nature, in Kant’s bizarre words.

Here a point about how *The Climate of History* can be used to criticize Kant is helpful. Kant’s rhetoric is not “mere” rhetoric, as it is loaded with misdirection and inconsistency on Kant’s part. The first problem with Kant’s grandiosity is that it is morally irresponsible, even within the context of Kant’s examples. To face a hurricane or a volcano is to face something that can eradicate human life and living order easily. To prate on about one’s moral superiority in the face of such threats is, ironically, to be morally compromised, namely, by being narcissistic. Faced with the risk of life and limb of others, moral attitudes should show appropriate care and concern for the risks others may face, not thoughts of one’s own superiority. This is an alternate species of what Bernard Williams once called, criticizing Peter Singer, “one thought too many.”<sup>55</sup> Even showing a similar attitude toward risk of life and limb to oneself is morally problematic in so far as others depend on you (as Kant believed that others do when it comes to anyone’s moral potential to contribute to bettering humankind’s plight).<sup>56</sup> Kant’s awareness of moral superiority in the judgment of the dynamical sublime is self-undermining on its own terms.

The rhetoric is also inconsistent with Kant’s awareness, marked within the “Third Antinomy,” that humankind must exist in the order of nature as a fully determined kind of being, on pain of giving up the capacity of reason to make sense of the world.<sup>57</sup> The Principle of Sufficient Reason demands a view of ourselves as causally determined objects in the natural order. That we also have reason to view ourselves as subjects making demands on the causal order through what we think ought to be is something that Kant insisted must be held by the mind in order to make moral grammar possible – something Kant later understood as acknowledging the Fact of Reason.<sup>58</sup> Yet he labored to articulate his two-standpoint view convincingly. Although he came close to recognizing that what is morally responsible about us is our capacity to reflect on ourselves as determined beings,<sup>59</sup> he did not expand on freedom as our capacity to work within our bounds by identifying possibilities that we can then accept as ways to act by virtue of having reflected on them. But he should have. He had all the basic tools to do so. Yet even on such expanded neo-Kantian grounds, and

---

<sup>54</sup> It would be worthwhile to see how Celermajer and Winter would understand this moment in Chakrabarty’s argument, where the imagination as such is challenged at a *formal* level. Their accounts of imaginaries do not seem to me to have fully internalized this moment of finitude that is crucial to Chakrabarty’s argument.

<sup>55</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chapter 1, “Persons, Character, and Morality.”

<sup>56</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

<sup>57</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Division, Book II, chapter 2, section 9.III, esp. B 578.

<sup>58</sup> Again, see Neiman, *Moral Clarity*, chapter 3 on this point.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, B576-577.

certainly back in Kant's explicitly stated ones, there is all the more reason to view the overpowering in nature with something other than superiority. We are part of that same thing, nature, and our responsibility is, as Kant saw, empirically contingent, subject to the determinations of such things as the planet, just as Latour and Bennett held. The real question is what becomes open to us - and what becomes closed - on reflection.<sup>60</sup>

The planet exceeds us not only by way of power but also by way of comprehension. This is something that Chakrabarty emphasizes, favorably noting Morton's work on hyperobjects.<sup>61</sup> Kant reserves the "mathematical" sublime for what exceeds the power of human imagination, relying on the idea of the infinite.<sup>62</sup> If we bracket the infinite in nature, however, what matters is that Kant identified not only the "sublime of power," but the "sublime of comprehension." We need not rely on the idea of infinity to let the planet's complexity blow our minds. "Facing the planetary,"<sup>63</sup> one of the problematic things about the sublime of power is its presumption that we can grasp what faces us enough to take it in and set it over against ourselves. The image of the person in such a representation is much too self-possessed in its comprehension of the overwhelming, natural event. But what if we cannot imagine this thing – the Earth system – that is of such great power that *it can destroy human civilization*?

Another way to put this last point is that the sublime, as a position of aesthetic judgment, presupposes the person in a position of relative self-possession. Burke and Kant both indicated this through conceptualizing the sublime on the basis of the momentary "security" of the aesthetic judge. What they did not indicate, but which Kant should have indicated (given his view of our existence within the continuum of all natural events), is that their view of the person implied being able to stand over against the power of nature as a knowing (-enough) subject. This view is unsettled by the sublime of comprehension and is reflected on Chakrabarty's emphasis on reverence as involving awe, not simply fear.

The planet exceeds our cognitive grasp of its processes. This, in turn, makes our moral responsibility provisional and quite likely fallible when facing the planet. At the least, the planet's excessive complexity makes it so that we cannot rely on enjoying moral responsibility ourselves as individual persons, but need instead to join together within large, social processes by which institutions and practices can come to some sort of ecological reflexivity regarding the planet. If there is anything sublime about our situation in this, it is that the institutions and practices involved in trying to "think like a planet" would appear to need to greatly exceed us in our localities and current generation.<sup>64</sup> We need, perhaps,

---

<sup>60</sup> One point of the preceding two paragraphs is to problematize the to my mind too quick dismissal of Kant's dualism in Celermajer and Winter's piece for this issue. I accept their moral outrage but do not think the conceptual issues for Kant are as clear cut as they make them out to be. Kant seems to me to be on fairly compelling conceptual grounds but to be in the grip of a vice that skews his expression of the underlying logical point.

<sup>61</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, section 26.

<sup>63</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Part III, "Facing the Planetary."

<sup>64</sup> See Paul D. Hirsch and Bryan J. Norton, "Thinking like a Planet," in Allen Thompson's and my *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), chapter 16.

reverence for how hard it will be for countless people across countless institutions and practices to understand our situation, let alone become responsible in it.<sup>65</sup>

The planetary, then, is objectively unsettling of human subjectivity in two senses, one for each of the forms of the sublime, of power and of comprehension. Contrary to the view of *The Climate of History* when looking at the deep history of *homo sapiens* or the disclosures of Latour and Bennett, the planetary does not undo agency, but rather unsettles it within the current forms of power on this planet. As the world of modernization has crossed the planetary boundaries to the current order of life, the planetary has emerged as a needed object of consciousness and concern. The forms of power that organize societies now need to be cooperative around the planet, not just around the globe, and across countless generations, not just for an imaginable posterity. Making these forms of power possible will have to be institutions and practices that are ecologically reflexive, including a metaphysics and ethics that allow people to go non-narcissistically into the cosmos when our time has come. The necessity here is moral necessity, what being responsible with each other, the more than human world, and our own eventual demise broadly demands. The alternative is moral wantonness. The planetary sublime then appears as a broad and relevant sensibility for our time, precisely because it keeps in view some such moral reality. Then, too, the sublime isn't about safety within terror, but about reflective responsiveness *within the specter of annihilation*<sup>66</sup> *at the mind's limits*.<sup>67</sup> I will come back to this (and question it).

What Kant might better have noted, and this in the interstices of Burke's account, is that reflection on power and on incomprehension are at the center of the sensible potential of the sublime. In turn, reflection gives us the mental and emotional space to relate to that on which we reflect. If our object of reflection is some process in nature, then the sublime can be interpreted as an opportunity to relate to that process. *What the sublime opens is the chance to relate to nature*, rather than being "superior" to it. Here, Kant's preoccupations with control and superiority got the best of him.<sup>68</sup>

One reason to keep in view the planetary sublime is that it keeps open the logical space for relationship with the planet by keeping open the reflective awareness of moral responsibility. The terrifying prospects of runaway global warming, ocean acidification and trophic level collapse, total toxicity throughout the biosphere, and the likely onset of the Sixth Mass Extinction – any one of which, but especially the last, is a horseman of the apocalypse for *homo sapiens* – could be seen as a crisis in a relationship that has been malformed since its onset in the social processes of modernization, that is, around the "globe" in *The Climate of History's* terminology. The globe has never related well to the planet.

The book is right that only now, thanks to Earth System Science, can humankind for the first time begin to conceptualize some of the planetary in some of its vast and complex details. But as I will go on to explore in the next part of this essay, what also matters is how our wider social processes relate to the field articulated and captured in Earth system science by the "planetary." Is the relationship fundamentally one of ambivalence mixed with threat?

---

<sup>65</sup> Vogel's long lists of rhizomatic labor going into any single thing that we encounter as produced in modern society come to mind here as well. See *Against Nature*, chapter 2 and *Thinking like a Mall*, chapters 2, 3, and 5.

<sup>66</sup> The trace of the dynamical sublime

<sup>67</sup> The trace of the mathematical sublime

<sup>68</sup> On the conditions and form of relating to the Earth, see also Lisowska's essay in this special issue.

Or is the relationship at peace with the “planetary”? What makes the difference? Can we talk in principle about some of the things that might make the difference?<sup>69</sup>

Kant spoke of “a mood of calm contemplation” emerging from the initial shock of the sublime. In the context of the disclosure of the planetary as a category of thought, Kant’s attention to reflection seems to lead to some such thing as what Anders Schinkel calls “deep wonder” at our own epochal contingency.<sup>70</sup> This may be beyond reverence and the relatively settled thing Chakrabarty calls “wonderment.”<sup>71</sup>

### III. Alienation

... *this threatening quality of matter, a projection of hostility ...*

~ Emily Anne Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body*, p. 90

So goes what I have tried to make as a subtle case for locating the planetary within thought about the sublime, which Chakrabarty’s historical marking of our time as a time in need of reverence appears *to me* to do. But it is not a case that, on reflection convinces me, although I have made it as strongly and subtly as I can. On reflection from my position, I find that that the planetary sublime risks being a part of *environmental alienation*.<sup>72</sup> This is for a very simple reason, the kind of that is most difficult to deny: *the planet need not be seen as a threat*. Amped up as we are these days in crisis mentality, it may at first be hard to see what I am saying.<sup>73</sup> But the fact is that what I say is true.

The moment we are born, we are already dying. This can be seen as something *wonderful*. It is part of the process. Certainly, we may die prematurely, and the causes of such dying are worth our being wary. But to generalize to the whole of the planet from the irregular possibility of our premature destruction is reactive. There may be sadness in being human, just as there can be happiness, but there are other ways to see the planet’s capacity to

---

<sup>69</sup> Pedersen, Stevis, and Kalfagianni’s essay for this special issue indirectly shows how much social alienation can shape the uptake of the sciences, rendering science dialectical in the terms that Brenner and Chatterjee accept at the Committee on the Environment, Geography, and Urbanization at the University of Chicago. As Pedersen, Stevis, and Kalfagianni show, the history of what Pedersen calls “planetarism” is fraught with multiple forms of social alienation, including misanthropy, racism (often linked to eugenics), and pessimism.

<sup>70</sup> Anders Schinkel, *Wonder and Education: On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

<sup>71</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, chapter 8. He speaks of Aristotelian wonderment here, and seems to have in view some such view as Martha C. Nussbaum’s view of Aristotelian wonder as in her *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Although most of this section is indebted to Steve Vogel’s work, it was a remark by Thomas Nail during our panel discussion at the IAEP annual meeting in 2021 that stuck in my mind and led me to this criticism. Tom noted that Dipesh’s characterization of the planet as indifferent and cold was anathema to many Indigenous views of our elemental being in the cosmos. Christine affirmed this criticism. Thinking about these emphases and Tom’s work, which I view idiosyncratically as a systematic ontological critique of narcissism, I came to view the coldness in views of the planetary as a residual form of modern narcissism that we are structurally saddled with in engaging with our time through modern epistemes. Previous work in decolonial philosophy involving Native American and First Nations Indigenous law, combined with further acquaintance with Maori philosophy, led me to see Tom’s point from multiple perspectives.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Whyte, “Time as Kinship.”

usher in our own extinction than to see it as threatening and fearful. *These other ways are a clue.* They clue us into different possible relationships to that which exceeds our control and redirect us to consider the sources of our sentiments.<sup>74</sup>

What is truly fearsome, to die in a planetary catastrophe or to die within inhumanity - in cruelty, callousness, or human indifference? In the first case, we end as we will inevitably end, and we see our loved ones die. But this needn't be without love, ceremony, and connection amongst ourselves. It need not be bad dying. In the second case, where we die benefitting from or suffering the burdens of injustice, we die with human torment inside ourselves - either of a bad (or empty) conscience or fending off the realization of the heartlessness of others. I find that it is death in the situation of injustice that is truly fearsome because it is cut off in basic ways from good, social relationships.

This realization makes me ask how the characterization of planetary power over us can get its sublime tonality. How can its power to usurp our wills and interrupt our lives, to crush us - all things that are part of our being finite beings in the cosmos that are born to pass away - how can these difficult or sad things be interpreted as signs of a basic threateningness to the planet? To threaten is properly a bad human relationship, namely, one of either domination or coercion to counter the (there it is again!) threat of domination. People can be a threat, but the planet? It makes me wonder.

A slippage seems to happen. What is properly interpersonal becomes - I worry - improperly planetary. How to explain it? One tradition offering a plausible answer is the tradition of Marxism running from Lukács through contemporary environmental philosopher Steven Vogel. According to this tradition, when social organization inhibits good social relations, it can come to seem to people - and to settle into culture - that the nature of things cuts against social cooperation and a host of related pro-social virtues and practices. People adapt to their bad *social* situation and, over time, come to see it as a fact of the matter in the nature of things. They adapt their preferences, and, under the workings of cultural development and institutionalization of the bad state of affairs, can even come to identify and espouse them as worth honoring. "This is the way things really are."

The name the Lukácian tradition gives to this is "alienation," or as Vogel clarifies it, *environmental alienation*. In his reading of Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, Vogel summarizes:

It is precisely in [the] failure of humans to "see themselves in the world they have created" that their alienation consists.<sup>75</sup>

Here then expands on that:

Alienation ... arises when humans fail to recognize themselves in the world that surrounds them: when the objects that they produce through their labor ... become powers over and against them.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> See here Gibson's, Celermajer's and Winter's, Nail's, and Lisowska's articles for this issue!

<sup>75</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.



The underlying assumption here is of a specific kind of social constructionist position. When Vogel summarized his reading of Lukács decades earlier, he wrote:

The objects “naturally” surrounding us have social roles and meanings; they are literally “social constructs,” built by human labor; the “natural environment” is never encountered independently of its social context; and the “nature” revealed by natural science cannot be separated from the socially organized practices through which such a science operates – these are then the four senses in which “nature is a social category.”<sup>77</sup>

In other words, anything of nature is already mediated by human society in so far as we come to it, the objects of Earth system science and its construction of the “planet” as a field of inquiry no less. By this earlier reading with which Vogel has remained consistent, alienation results when,

Processes of [social] construction appear as external “things” (i.e., are reified) precisely to the extent that those who engage in them do not recognize them *as their own [social] practices*.<sup>78</sup>

For instance, the planet – a hyper-object that Earth System Science and the discourse of the Anthropocene have produced – comes to be a sublime thing fraught with threat and incomprehensibility, although both its impersonal nature and disruptive relationship to modern society are productions of modern society itself.

Vogel’s examples of environmental alienation, however, come *before* the planetary turn of Chakrabarty’s historical moment. Vogel’s first book focuses on the example of nature as a pristine entity opposed to human society, and his second book focuses on the example of alienation from the commons.

In the first case, bad social relations that emphasize instrumentalization over other dimensions of human flourishing and that take the Earth as a mere resource produce a split in our life with the Earth such that the relations that are non-instrumental have no place in society. Accordingly, they are projected as a pristine nature that is non-instrumentally valuable and tarnished by human presence. In effect, a bad conscience emerges whereby good social relations that we can have involving Earth become alien to us, given the way human relations have become structured by capitalism through domination and exploitation. A pristine nature then appears as a place untarnished by human action and antithetical to it. It becomes the utopian good conscience of our bad conscience.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Vogel, *Against Nature*, p. 38. At his recent retirement fest, Vogel ended the day with some remarks in which he stated that reading Lukács’s claim that “nature is a social category” when he was in graduate school was the moment when he stopped, struck, and turned to environmental philosophy. From graduate school to retirement, his work is seen by himself as a response to this claim. Denison University, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 1, 2 and 6. Ben Mylius has been working on the “separation thesis” in his dissertation in progress (Columbia University Department of Political Science). This work examines the ideological underpinnings of the ecomodernist idea that humankind should separate itself from the biosphere, becoming

In the second case, bad social relations that emphasize self-interest and individualism to the detriment of cooperation lead people to view responsibility individualistically and to approach problems both individualistically and by prioritizing self-interest. Impersonal forces then seem to threaten social cohesion and sustainable answers to collective problems, because cooperative answers and a view of cooperative motivations seem unimaginable. Then there is no conceivable answer to many a collective action problem. Are we doomed?<sup>80</sup>

Vogel calls what is happening in both cases “environmental alienation.”<sup>81</sup> The way I put this, however, emphasizes more what goes on with pro-social relations constituting the sociality in social production than with the literal construction of societies. I focus on the moral (or immoral) relations giving social processes their particularly pro- or anti-social qualities as collective enterprises.<sup>82</sup> Then, I view Vogel’s understanding of environmental alienation as a helpful guide like this: Exploitation and uncooperative competition between people are transmuted into the tragic predicament of the nature of things, and human flourishing and collective justice are abandoned for adaptation to an uncompromising, tragic environment. Modifying Vogel’s view, I think of this as our *producing the meaning of our environment as tragic due to our reproducing injustice within society*. It’s the immoral relations that guide the environmental ones. That’s where the action is.

Given the prevalence of environmental alienation in my society, I remain unconvinced that the planetary sublime is not a form of environmental alienation. There are domination and incentive structures in my society keeping fossil capitalism, colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and extractivism in place. These involve numerous rationalizations, including the forms of environmental alienation Vogel discusses that I relayed in the examples above: America and pristine nature, America and the inexorable free market.

Given the inexorable self-destructiveness of the Anthropocene – of modern society plunging the Earth into destabilization – it seems plausible to view that destabilization as a threat because threat is the condition of the modern system, running through it as an internal motivation. In a society of reactivity, the Earth then appears to us *through* our reactivity. Our reactivity becomes a condition on the phenomenality of the Earth, the way it is to be taken up, interpreted.

Moreover, there is an incentive structure here that fits social conditioning: Viewing the Earth as a threat maintains threat as the emotional currency of the system, motivating people to react narcissistically, out of concern over their capacity to control things. And what if the system runs on threat? The planetary sublime then appears as an ambivalent way to maintain environmental alienation. While it may emphasize responsibility, the condition of

---

basically technological. Chakrabarty argues that this has already happened as a matter of course (*Climate of History*, Introduction).

<sup>80</sup> Vogel, *Thinking like a Mall*, chapters 3 and 5. That we are doomed is also Stephen M. Gardiner’s worry in *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Yet Gardiner does not consider that we are alienated and presumes an alienated view of self-interest as a basic human motivation to drive his “tragic” conclusions about what I would call the banality of evil in our time of global heating.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

<sup>82</sup> In debate with Steve, I specify our disagreement as one in which he focuses on practical reason whereas I focus on relational – interpersonal – reason (the domain of knowing by acquaintance, not know-how). See my *Involving Anthroponomy within the Anthropocene: On Decoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2020), chapters 2-5 especially, and in the endnotes.

doing so is viewing the Earth as a threat. My worry is that the planetary sublime translates in my society as another fragment of coloniality.<sup>83</sup>

On reflection, this is what troubles me most: Viewing the Earth as a threat is a coherent way to be part of a threatening system without squarely facing up to the source of the threat - the unjust system. The planetary sublime is then a kind of limbo for concerted action against injustice and exploitation. It becomes part of the problem. It is another kind of epistemic corruption, after the analyses that Stephen M. Gardiner has made.<sup>84</sup> I am not claiming that *The Climate of History* has this vice, but that the sensible potential of what it opens up readily translates into the uncritical space of that vice in my society.

Certainly, it makes sense to fear what processes in the planet can do to us in the instance. Fear is important, practical, and human when in the flow of our emotions aimed at flourishing.<sup>85</sup> But to *mark the planet with the mood of the sublime* – with the sublime’s specific aesthetic and psychological qualities – to *make an epochal marker out of the threatening qualities* seems to be the problematic thing from my position. The planet should not be *marked* as a threat. Isn’t unjust society, rather, the marked threat and the planet is caught up in it, producing already unimaginable loss of life and introducing confusion into Earth’s systems? Isn’t the true threat modern wantonness, period? Shouldn’t the mood of the planetary correspond to this recognition? Perhaps the moral thing to do, then, for someone in my position is to work to *not* see the planet as threatening, hard as this may be. Then I have moral and political reasons to see *injustice* as threatening and the planet as *caught up in* that injustice.<sup>86</sup>

#### IV. Protest

What is at stake here is a shift in emphasis for my agency, one that redirects my energy toward responsibility for planetary justice rather than toward ambivalent and ambiguous fear that can remain depoliticized.<sup>87</sup> The sublime is complex and subtle, but at the end of the day – and at the beginning – it is something that I must pass through. If our planet can ever

---

<sup>83</sup> Cf. On fragmentary coloniality as a concept, again see Bendik-Keymer, “Unacceptable Agency.”

<sup>84</sup> Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*, part E.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chapter 1.

<sup>86</sup> Focusing on social alienation changes the way one can approach every single other argument in the essays of this special issue. It’s that powerful. It allows us to read the coloniality that is the opponent of Gibson’s and Celermajer’s and Winter’s essays as largely a *derivative function* of domination and knock-on social alienation. Because the terms of communication between and within cultures are fraught with domination, epistemic and ontological diffraction occurs. Monologues preclude dialogues and the richness of the countless ways to relate to where we are, even given Earth system science as a delimited episteme that’s needed for certain visualizations and findings crucial to, say, the climate crisis. Nail’s focus on ontology gives way to a critique of the narcissism and delusion that is a condition of accepting, say, fixity as a fantasy, and this even without appeal to contemporary physics. The history of planetarism as an at times problematic ideology comes into focus as well (in Pedersen, Stevis, and Kalfagianni’s history of the emergent tradition). Even the way in which a *university* get structured comes into focus around its internalized forms of social alienation (see, e.g., my criticism of the University of Chicago in the 1990s in my *Solar Calendar, and Other Ways of Marking Time* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2017, preface and study 2). That we would lose “wonder” to acquisitive curiosity and negative anxiety similarly makes more sense given attention to social alienation, a point that could enrich Lisowska’s approach in her essay.

<sup>87</sup> On responsibility for justice, see Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

emerge through mostly cooperative, largely respectful action, politically and difficulty wrested from the narcissistic cycles of existing unjust institutions; if the planetary can ever emerge in a way that is, we might say, *pro-social*, where, for instance, we might make Earth laws together and eventually die lovingly; I will have to play my part in confronting domination and unjust entitlement – a mood not of reverence but of protest. What temperamental climates, what sensibilities, are right for *that* moment on Earth?

It may help to return to the point of facing alienation for Lukács as for Vogel:

Lukács's argument leads ... to a call for a practical act of self-recognition, the revolutionary act that produces a social order in which humans' own responsibility for the world they inhabit has become a matter of self-conscious choice.<sup>88</sup>

The point of facing alienation is to become autonomous, or, as I say when speaking of interdependent human societies across the intergenerational and global range of humankind, *anthroponomous*.<sup>89</sup> The point of facing *planetary* alienation is to become more anthroponomous – more capable of forming cooperative worlds in which people in right relations with each other through their lands, waters, and skies oppose domination and come to live in a way that makes sense to them in the full openness of their many genres of humanity.<sup>90</sup> In my understanding, which is “pluriversal” (or as I say, of “many worlds”),<sup>91</sup> the key to anthroponomy is becoming unalienated with respect to *relational* - interpersonal – reason, even more than with respect to practical reason, although all forms of reasoning (theory, practice, interpersonal relating) depend on each other and, when we flourish, cooperate in human life and society.<sup>92</sup>

What this means in lived relationships is that societies become more anthroponomous to the degree that they form what Kyle Whyte calls “high degrees” of “collective continuance” formed of pro-social qualities in habits of relationship, qualities such as *consent, diplomacy, trust, reciprocity, care*, etc.<sup>93</sup> At the center of such relationships is personal accountability – being able to come face to face with oneself, especially when called out to be responsible by others with just cause. Each of us trying to be anthroponomous has to be able to own up to ourselves.<sup>94</sup> Lukács's and Vogel's goal to facing alienation is as basic as being accountable for ourselves: *I am part of this society and its alienation. I act it out and carry it in my interpersonal relations and attitudes – in my sensibilities.*

---

<sup>88</sup> Vogel, *Against Nature*, p. 35. He summarizes a paragraph later: “[Lukács's] theory will be based not on nature but on self-recognition.”

<sup>89</sup> Bendik-Keymer, *Involving Anthroponomy* (for short).

<sup>90</sup> On genres of humanity – a term from Sylvia Wynter – see Parker, *Elemental Difference*, chapter 4.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Worlds: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). See my use of the literature on “worlding” in “Unacceptable Agency,” section 4.

<sup>92</sup> Bendik-Keymer, *Involving Anthroponomy*, chapter 3. See also my extended argument with Steven Vogel on this matter in “1492 and the Roots of Planetary Injustice: Working through the Past for an Environment that is Social, Historical, and Personal,” MS (Department of Philosophy, Case Western Reserve University, 2022). The online version can be found at “*Vergangenheitsbewältigung* Now: 1492 & the Roots of Planetary Injustice,” *Blog of the APA*, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Kyle Powys Whyte, “Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice,” *Environment and Society* 9 (2018), pp. 125-144.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Charles Larmore, *Practices of the Self*, trans. Sharon Bowman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Let us imagine, again, if imagine is what it is (and not already your way of being), that we come to face with the non-random, indeterminate, and awesome planet with its inevitable role in our extinction one day.<sup>95</sup> Modern civilization – if “civilized” is what it is – has destabilized the planet gravely. The weather is withering and catastrophic by turns. The chemicals coursing through the planet’s waterways flow slow violence. The earthquakes and volcanoes industrial society have activated are crushing and explosive. The zoonotic viruses brought by animal husbandry, deforestation, urban expansions and concentrations and by global mobility repeatedly overwhelm our immunity. There’s a lot of dangerous shit (going) around. We have to be careful for our loved ones, especially for our kids.

But should *the planet* be seen as sublime, as an awesome threat? The planet will do what it does. We are born to die anyway. The thing that is unacceptable is the threats societies have caused for themselves and others.

Imagine, then, further that we have managed to construct a largely workable, even if imperfect, cooperation around the globe, have turned to planetary science to develop Earth system laws that are roughly just across generations, albeit imperfect and in need of punctuated contest and revision. These laws go with the flow of the planet’s evolved energy dispersal systems and rest on, while fomenting, biodiversity and prudent use of lands through consensual, multi-generational accountability processes.

Most importantly, imagine that the arc of justice has bent much, much farther than it has in our time. People live in relative security, not collective insecurity. The global norm is to have a living wage, strong communities, mostly local responsibilities coordinated as morally needed with more regional or global arrangements for pragmatism and accountability, i.e., for mutual flourishing and good relationships. People of their worlds on this planet do not have strong reasons to grow up with fears about what is beyond their control, let alone to make narcissistic qualities into so-called “virtues.”

To my mind, it is hard to intuit that the sensibility reflecting the planetary situation of this imagined history would be marked by the virtues the sublime, e.g., reverence. If reverence would make sense here, it would not be fore-fronting fearfulness, but gratitude and, when the destabilized planet led to tragedy, to sadness and love. This planet of history is not alien. It is *familiar, difficult, and sometimes troubled*. It challenges us deeply. It is not cold. It is warm. Perhaps we ought to be thinking of this kind of pro-social warming just as much as global warming.

But it is cold outside – cold and indifferent between people. The alien and impersonal logic of capitalism has produced a globe that has these low degrees of collective continuance and these qualities of bad relationships: ruthless competition, selfishness, vanity, greed, insecurity, reactivity, empty desire, stupidity, presentism, and more. It has produced relentless distrust and cynicism, even in relation to ourselves. The explicitly hateful logic of colonialism, still going strong after a century of decolonization, has hacked its own way down into collective continuance and served up more bad relationships: racism, patriarchy,

---

<sup>95</sup> Nail, *Theory of the Earth*, chapter 14. If humans become extra-terrestrial as the tycoons of the present hope with their colonizing eyes on Mars, why would we leave this planet behind to die an almost certain death on Mars? Earth would still have a role in our extinction. On these colonizing fantasies, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Planet Is a Political Orphan,” *Noema*, 2.3.2022, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-planet-is-a-political-orphan/>. Thanks to Stefan Pedersen for this article.

CIS/het normativity, extractivism, abstract bureaucratic jurisdiction, and more. Circulating in our planet are the material flows of truly unjust social relations. These are a threat to everyone whom we love – and they are a threat by way of the planet.

Despite the utopia I imagined moment ago, the planet of *this* history of injustice is *not* going to make it easy for everyone to live in relative, collective security. To do that is going to be hard.<sup>96</sup> And the planet of this history of injustice is not going to make it easy to form Earth system law that deals with the shocks to modern regimens as massive flows of climate refugees course through the planetary system and political instability follows on collapses in insurance markets, banking, food systems, water systems, and more. The idyll hardly weathers the state of exception.

Accordingly, we have reason to protest and to be seriously fed-up *now* with the institutions, practices, ideologies and people that spearhead and continue *that* threatening through the medium of the Earth. Through the bad relationships that they have engendered, they are in the way of every being that would benefit from a more just world. To be fed up with them, to protest them, is to protest these bad relationships, not to focus on the threat of the planet. Really, it is not to focus on the planet at all, but to keep it peripheral as a point of orientation. The drama and the action is *in here*, in the world, where the social processes of injustice and all their supporters must be protested. Against Kant, this is not about oneself, even as a moral being. It is about each other. The mood of this world on this planet is seriously loving and upset at injustice.

Here I find myself returning to Rohit Vemula's protest against structural injustice in the name of a cosmic order that is wondrous and deeply familiar. His very body was made of stardust, not of the coded "shit" that his unjust social history impressed on him (and not of the devaluation of shit, which is otherwise so rich with decay, important for the cycles of energy dispersal and life that compose Earth).<sup>97</sup> Hanging himself with a banner of the ASA (Ambedkar Student Association), a pro-equality organization in the spirit of B.R. Ambedkar, Vemula's righteous irreverence for the structural injustice that consumed him was directly linked to a *home-coming* with the planetary. It was not the cosmos that was then unfamiliar but this world of injustice. The planet was a site of peace in Vemula's words, even in Chakrabarty's:

[T]he body as "stardust" dissolves the individual body into some *connected* view of the physical universe and goes beyond [merely] human flourishing.<sup>98</sup>

No, the threat was the relentless injustice human beings can commit on each other.

---

<sup>96</sup> Not impossible, hard. See Stephanie Wakefield, *Anthropocene Back Loop: Experiments in Unsafe Operating Space* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020).

<sup>97</sup> Chakrabarty, *Climate of History*, pp. 117-118 especially.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117. Emphasis mine. One might argue that Chakrabarty means "connected" in a non-emotional sense, but Vemula clearly meant otherwise.