



Psychoanalysis, Climate Justice, and Nature **Jack Foehl**

Three Improbable Activists

Greta Thunberg is a sixteen-year-old Swedish climate activist with a self-described Asperger's diagnosis and a will of steel. In a now widely viewed and acclaimed TED Talk (2018), she described being eight years old and first hearing about global warming, "something humans have created by our way of living." She was told to turn off lights and recycle to save resources. But, she thought, if it were true that humans were changing the Earth's climate, if this was already having devastating consequences, we wouldn't be talking about anything else. Everything on TV, radio, newspaper headlines, would be this catastrophe and nothing else, just "as if there was a world war going on." But, "no one ever talk[s] about it." If burning fossil fuels was indeed so devastating and threatened our very existence, "Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn't it made illegal?"

Greta said that this was just "too unreal" for her. At age eleven, she fell into depression; she stopped talking and eating. Along with Asperger syndrome and OCD, she was diagnosed with selective mutism. "I only speak when I think it's necessary—now is one of those moments." Greta went on to describe how people on the spectrum like her tend to see things in black and white. "We aren't very good at lying and don't enjoy participating in this social game that the rest of you seem so fond of." From her perspective, "in many ways [...] we autistic are the normal ones and the rest of the people are pretty strange." Strange because everyone claims that climate change is an existential threat and we all just carry on like before. For her, "if emissions have to stop, just stop them. There are no gray areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't. We have to change."

Greta then continued with an incontrovertible array of statistics that are indeed alarming. Should global emissions continue at their current rate, the world will be eight degrees warmer in 2100 than it is today. The average surface temperature has already increased 1.62 degrees since the late nineteenth century, with most of that increase occurring in the past 35 years. This, along with warmer oceans, shrinking ice sheets, and rising sea levels are responsible for devastating increases in severe weather including droughts, intense storms, floods, and wildfires. We have all been touched by these changes, we all know someone or at least know *of* someone who has suffered losses due to these changes. Greta noted that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction since the dawn of time, with up to 200 species going extinct every day, a rate many thousand times higher than normal. We use 100 million barrels of oil daily, and yet even climatologists continue to fly to their conferences. “People keep doing what they do because the vast majority doesn’t have a clue about the actual consequence [...] No one is acting as if we were in a crisis.”



Blighted Corn (c. 1821, printed 1830) William Blake

Bruno Latour is another surprising climate activist. For years he built a solid ground of work challenging the legitimacy of scientific authority and truth. He is considered one of the most illustrious philosophers of the post-modern age, having developed a new discipline of science and technology studies. Over the course of many decades, Latour (1993, 2005, 2013) has shown how scientific facts are the product of the all-too-human procedures used to “discover” them. He showed how facts (the existence of entities like electrons, quarks, or muons) are networked. Rather than existing in a manner separate from our practices, they require the interweaving of the very practices used to investigate them to remain intelligible. If this network fragments, so too does the veracity of the facts within which they were developed.

But when his social constructivist arguments began to be used by climate-change skeptics to question the legitimacy of the scientific evidence supporting global warming, Latour developed a new dimension of his understanding. In this era of “post-truth,” his thesis of the scientific production of fact provides a framework for examining current practices in which facts are being dismantled by processes that question long held assumptions about living in a common world of nature. Current political and social movements challenge the assumption that we share a common frame of reference regarding basic “facts” about the natural world. This was always an issue in certain circles, as seen in the debates about evolution or immunization or flat-earthers or a host of other concerns. But the controversy has come center stage in a way that has begun to unravel the basic fabric of accepted truth; the Latourian “network” that holds together any received wisdom of a common world has fallen apart. We no longer

BPSI Reveals: Reception and Response

live in a world bound by the same network of truths. From Latour's perspective, facts remain robust only when supported by a common overarching frame of reference within which they remain relevant. When we lose what holds us in common—when communities fracture to the extent that we lose common reference points for what is true—"alternative facts" begin to hold greater sway.

Latour is currently lecturing around the world, discussing his recently published book, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2018). His lectures are multimedia events highlighting how "nature" is no longer something "out there" apart from us. The "facts" of the climate crisis have never been objective. Latour argues that we speak and live our facts "from the inside," where we are always (and always have been) offering a political point of view from within nature. Our challenge today is to notice and comment on the fragmentation of our globally networked consensus, to find ways of re-weaving a global context for revitalizing fact.

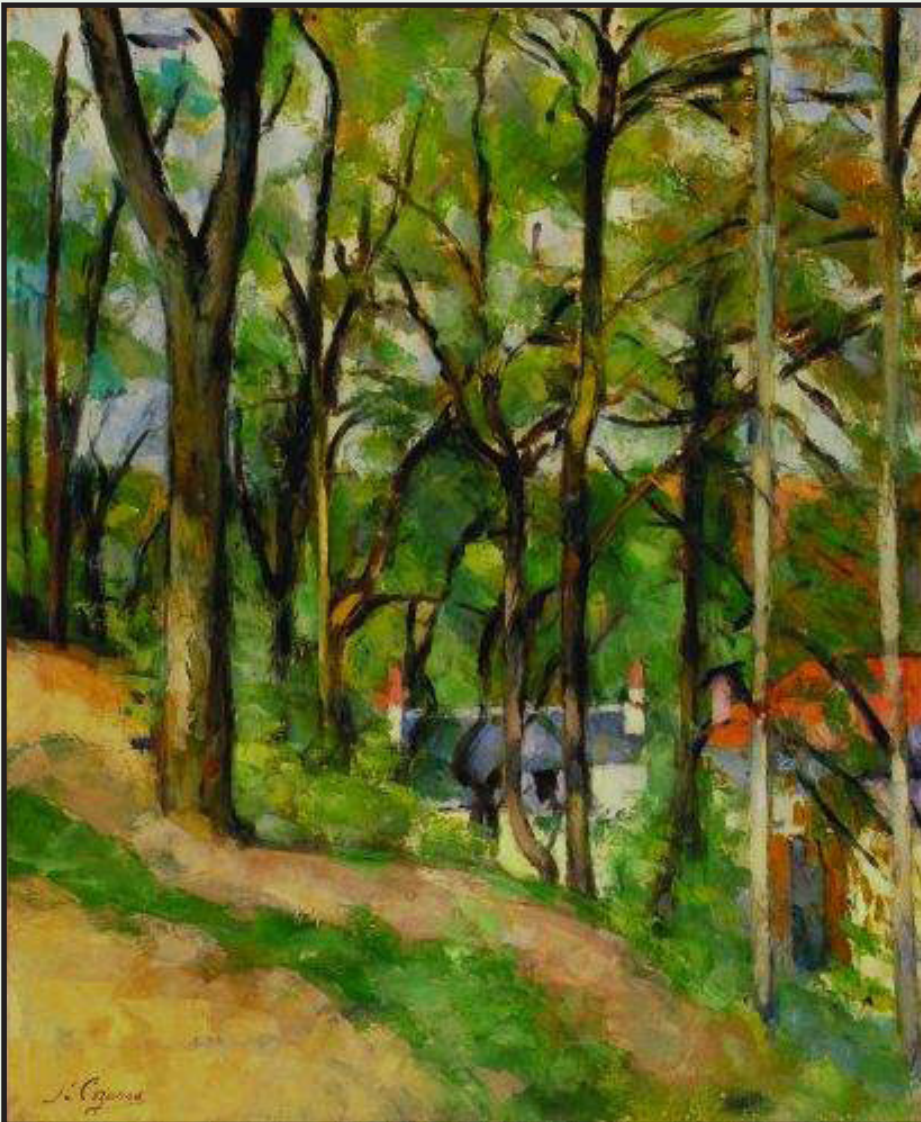


Paradise Lost (1882) Paul Gustave Doré

Donna Orange is a third improbable climate activist. Orange is one of the most nuanced philosopher-psychoanalysts in the world today, with many additional literary and reflective books calling to be written, but she has suspended these kinds of pursuits in the face of a literal wildfire. Orange retired from practice (if you can call what she does "retiring"), moving to a community of like-minded souls in Claremont, California, near Los Angeles. But reflective presence was literally set ablaze with the California fires, some quite near to her—vivid harrowing instances of the climate crisis. In response, Donna is on a mission, not one she exactly chose, but one that has an ethical imperative, one that comes, as she described in her presentation "Climate Justice and Psychoanalysis" (2019), from a "demand," an "urgent call" for us to "stop now!" As a psychoanalyst offering a keen perspective on the denial and lack of a response to the severity of the problem, Orange has been talking about this crisis and our complacency. Her recent book *Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics* (2017) outlines these thoughts, but she presents not simply a perspective, but an *exhortation*, a challenge to our complacency. She holds that rather than being active witnesses, we slide into the passive stance of being hapless observers as the world burns and floods and storms and...warms.

In spite of the global response of the Paris Accord (with the ignoble exception of the United States and Russia), Orange's book describes a profound immobility in the face of a growing catastrophe. She offers a framework for understanding this immobilized denial, suggesting a number of contexts. She has coined the notion, "Enlightenment egoism" (p. 8), the Euro-centric emphasis on western prerogatives, and a "double-mindedness" that ignores the profoundly unequal responsibility of the West with its carbon debt and colonialist prerogatives. She outlines the heritage of denial in this country, found in what she calls the "historical unconscious" (p. 37), the pervasive effects of white colonialism and our history of "chattel slavery" (p. 44). Orange reminds us of Loewald's notion of the unconscious as "a crowd of ghosts" (p. 40), suggesting that our collective ghosts of American-made local genocide with Native American massacres and slave lynchings continue unresolved in our culture, and thus in our field today. Orange also outlines specific forms of evasion from the crisis: she notes a "fear of vulnerability" (p. 65) with various defenses against primitive anxieties, a traumatic paralysis in the face of an overwhelming emergency; she elaborates a fear of responsibility and more centrally, the pervasive role of shame, seeing shame as an intersubjective field phenomenon that is specifically manifest as "climate shame" (p. 73), a

pervasive sense of powerlessness in the face of climate trauma; she also describes the destructive role of envy, a culture-wide obsession with those who have more, which renders the indigent, have-less masses invisible. These First World concerns are a self-enclosed preoccupation that distance us from suffering outside the consulting room.



Corner of the Woods (c. 1900) Paul Cézanne

Orange sees the climate crisis as an ethical imperative. She draws from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas emphasizing the suffering Other as the starting point for any dialogue regarding climate justice. From a Levinasian perspective, "the hungry child in a distant land is no longer out of our reach" (Orange, 2017, p. 109). She calls for a radical response of "disrupting massive political injustice when we are able to see it" (p. 91). Hers is a call to action rather than a call to understanding, something I will address at the conclusion of this article.

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The Duality of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis reflects both the failings of our culture and offers a profound stance of hope in response to the unconscious destructiveness that Orange outlines. Numerous social critics outside the field (e.g., Adorno [1953, 1966], Foucault [1990, 1996], Deleuze & Guattari [1983, 1988]) have demonstrated how psychiatry and specifically psychoanalysis have been repressive disciplines in the service of social hegemony and normativity. The early promise of a psychoanalysis critical of social order does not easily sustain. Perspectives from Herbert Marcuse (1955) and Eric Fromm (1941), influenced as they were by the Frankfurt School, use cultural critique to question and transform the limiting and oppressive role of social power. From their view, psychoanalysis was seen in the service of *emancipation*. Therapeutic objectives weren't simply framed in terms of resolution of internal conflict but in terms of *freedom*, in terms of sustaining a critical stance in relation to repressive social norms. But at many points, psychoanalytic theory has ignored systems of social power, has lost sight of how psychopathology, health, and the very meaning and experience of subjectivity are culturally constituted. In the service of cultural norms, psychoanalysts have at times ignored and even supported pervasive social injustices (e.g., pathologizing homosexuality, deep racial discrimination and mistreatment, etc.). Like Orange, I think this difficulty arises out of the deep traumas that were part of psychoanalysis in its formation during the period of the World Wars.

Orange's notion of "double mindedness," might be better framed as *dualism*, one of the most pervasive and insidious problems in our culture today. I will contrast dualistic thinking and experiencing with what I call "lived depth" (Foehl, 2014; Foehl, in press). This is one way of framing the change that has taken place in our theoretical landscape in psychoanalysis, where all theorizing offers different articulations of what has come to be understood as the *analytic third*, an increasingly sophisticated appreciation of intersubjective processes. Current psychoanalytic theory offers a stance in response to the crisis of dualism. Although this can be seen as a crisis in relation to our climate, it is a more pervasive crisis of thinking, relating, and experiencing constituted in our current social situation, a reduction of a necessary *thirdness* in experience, thought, and action. Mark O'Connell (2019) has made a powerful commentary on this perspective in a Massachusetts Institute of Psychoanalysis (MIP) program that will be published: "When Thirdness Dies: Modern Lies, Vanishing Truth and American Illiberalism." In regard to the climate, dualism can be understood as having lost sight of a relationship to *nature*, what the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1995) calls "the non-constructed ground of experience."

All of the great naturalists write in a tone of poetic exhortation about *nature*, the whole, interconnected totality of our existence in a world where no single being can be considered in isolation. John Muir (1918), the Scottish-American environmental philosopher and wilderness advocate recounts the epiphany he had while hiking Yosemite's Cathedral Peak for the first time:

When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow

mountaineers. Nature as a poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go; for the mountains are fountains—beginning places, however related to sources beyond mortal ken. (p. 110)

Naturalists juxtapose this deep experience of life as a unitary phenomenon with a technological perspective that posits an objective truth devoid of our very subjective inclusion in that truth. From this perspective, the natural world is *res extensa*, things extended in space, separate from mind or soul (*res cogitans*). Nature without soul is thus literally at our *disposal*. As recent as 2012, for example, a research consortium concluded that fish, without a neocortex, cannot feel pain. Thus, we have attitudes that contribute to the legitimation of mass harvesting to the point of extinction. Terry Tempest Williams (2016), a contemporary environmental writer, puts the dilemma starkly:

The irony of our existence is this: We are infinitesimal in the grand scheme of evolution, a tiny organism on Earth. And yet, personally, collectively, we are changing the planet through our voracity, the velocity of our reach, our desires, our ambitions, and our appetites. We multiply, our hunger multiplies, and our insatiable craving accelerates [...] We believe in more, more possessions, more power, more war. Anywhere, everywhere our advance of aggression continues. *My aggression toward myself is the first war*. Wilderness is an antidote to the war within ourselves. (p. 209-210, emphasis added)

How do we find our way back to a world interrelated and interconnected, whose priority is to thrive and evolve? What kind of belief systems are emerging now that reinforce and contribute to a world increasingly disconnected from nature? And what about the belief—my belief—in all that is wild? I return to the wilderness to remember what I have forgotten, that the world can be wholesome and beautiful, that the harmony and integrity of ecosystems at peace is a mirror to what we have lost. (p. 216)

Upper Cathedral Lake & Cathedral PEak, seen from the shoulder of Tresidder Peak, Yosemite



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The dualism of disconnection and alienation between self and world, between self and other, begins as a particular kind of alienation between self and self, a dualism at the heart of self-experience and perception.

Disorders of Thirdness

This is where psychoanalysis provides a unique window into both the causes and potential responses to this contemporary crisis. Even though psychoanalytic thinking from Freud's time



Der tag im Wald (1935) Paul Klee

can be seen as inherently dualist in its juxtaposition of internal and external reality, good and bad, primary and secondary, etc., Freud always transcends reductions with triadic concepts of the Oedipus, *nachträglichkeit*, and the structure of the psyche. Especially with the work of Winnicott (1960), developed further by Bion (1961, 1962), by the Barangers (1961, 2012), by André Green (1975, 2004), Britton (1998, 2004), Meltzer (1975), Ogden (2004), Benjamin (2004) and Nelson Coelho (2016), contemporary psychoanalysis is best understood as developing an understanding of the *third* and the disorders of thirdness. The concept suggests that the very structure of subjectivity is in dialectical tension with an intersubjective ground. Rather than dyadic interaction in which subject is seen as separate and impinged by objects or other subjects (where we see the effects of power, the mark of prejudice, fanaticism, violence, and intolerance that inundate our daily living), subjectivity and perceptual experience are characterized by *dimensionality* and *depth* (Meltzer, 1975; Foehl, 2014).

On one register, this takes shape in the experience of an interconnected relationship with the other and the world, described by the Naturalists above. We cannot experience another *in relation to* self without the experience of an intersubjective context in which self and other are constituted. Without this interconnected, intercorporeal ground, the other is polarized into what is alien. “Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” becomes: “These aren’t people, they are animals. Drug dealers, criminals, and rapists.” And in kind, we have Robert De Niro gesticulating as he shouts on stage: “Fuck you, Donald Trump!” where Trump becomes a two-dimensional pariah, where his supporters become a “basket of deplorables.” This kind of dualism flattens discourse, turning the other and the environment into “fish who cannot feel pain”—the insensitive and power-grabbing right, the domineering and condescending left—each finding the alien, the enemy, missing our common humanity and our deep connectedness in a Natural World that binds us. It’s not just that we are misunderstanding each other, not a failure of communication *between* you and me. In disorders of thirdness, there is a collapse of context that provides the condition for any possibility of productive discourse. Latour’s “network” is gone.

We can find an immediate thirdness in our perceptual experience in the form of depth. Think of visual perception and the immediate way we see a shifting set of figures or objects or others in a context or ground. When things are working well, there are several sets of relationships in this very basic kind

of experiencing. First, we can perceptually situate things in relation to their field. There's a specific kind of dimensionality in this situating where we find the things of our world in relation to everything else, and it is the relationship between things and their context that creates meaning. Second, this form-field relationship brings the perceiver into the creative process of what is perceived. The object of experience is never separate from the subject who experiences it. The perceiver is the third point of connection between form and field, where depth announces an indissoluble link between myself and things. In this relationship, there's a specific kind of reciprocity between perceiving and what's perceived. Seeing always necessarily implies the experience of being seen, touching always entails the possibility of being touched. Paul Klee noted that it wasn't only he who looked at the forest, but he felt that the forest looked at and spoke to him. We are implicated in the world that we experience, at one and the same time dialectically connected and separate from it. And this is an important point: this perceptual experience provides the very condition for the possibility of thinking. When I say, "I see," this statement of perception also becomes a statement of incipient thought or understanding. The perceptual third of depth finds its bearings in the capacity for thought where there is a dialectical relationship between thinking and the capacity to observe one's thinking in relationship to one's context.

What does this have to do with Nature, the climate, and our current crisis? The climate crisis is a central and calamitous disorder of thirdness, the consequence of decades of exponentially worsening dualism. The multi-dimensionality of experience and thought collapses, flattens or polarizes into a fixed dyadic that is sustained by socio-cultural practices that seep into our very nature. The entire

thrust of Continental Philosophy is a critique of a technological attitude where we lose the experience, awareness, and understanding of our vital interpenetration with the world, Nature, and others.

We "fall back" (Heidegger's *vorfallen*, Das Man) into the anonymity of a world of consumption, we submerge into a technologically facilitated mass culture that seems to be social but in fact is profoundly alienated from an intersubjective existential ground. Rather than connected, we are alone, and in place of genuine dialogue, we substitute an identification with our tribe or hoard. This fundamentally changes the way we think and see

and feel. Instead of the depth of perspective, where what I know and see is found in a context where I can acknowledge other ways of seeing, I feel impinged by the unfamiliar which is dangerous and false. Instead of a necessary space or distance between belief and fact that allows for reflection and



Lichter Wald (1934) Paul Klee

BPSI Reveals: Reception and Response

recognition of difference, I find the antinomy of right and wrong, where conviction is replaced with certainty (O’Connell [2019] elucidates this at length). This is the world of occluded vision, of dissociation, of socially constructed opposition and paranoia.

The Climate Crisis of the Consulting Room

The above-mentioned world is our sweet spot as psychoanalysts, something we address in the consulting room daily. But rather than addressing it through interpretation of specific certainties—holding a pseudo-objective stance that is somehow out of the fray—we become implicated in a process, an experiential field. Our task in the consulting room is to see beyond the

exchanges of interaction between two subjects about internal or external content; we engage the fluid moment, the shared atmosphere of mooded bodies in space and time. Psychoanalytic depth entails seeing and responding to a living context within which flattened discourse might unfold dimensionally.



Wald Bau (1919) Paul Klee

Ironically, the psychoanalytic setting has its own form of climate crisis. Freud (1915) describes how, in the *mise-en-scene* of analysis, there is a “fire in the theater.” This “outbreak of a passionate demand for love” (p. 162) is equated to the panic of a fire, an irruption of the real into the imaginary of the analytic scene. But in contemporary theory (Civitarese, 2005), real and imaginary are seen in a tensioned dialectical relationship such that the external certainties are taken up in a dream-paradigm of the session where all that unfolds is experienced as the climate of the interconnected moment. The analyst is “a servant to the process” as it unfolds, finding depth-perception in the midst of flattened statements about fact.

Here’s the rub. How do we transform our knowledge, and our ability to navigate the climate crisis of the consulting room, to effective activism responding to the global climate crisis? Donna Orange’s radical ethics, her deep experience and work as a philosopher and analyst grounded in the teaching of Emmanuel Levinas holds that we must in every context (not simply the context of the consulting room) respond to the other. She says, “The others’ suffering persecutes me, takes me hostage, requires substitution, one-for-the-other” (Orange 2017, p. 110). This is the appropriation of a context that privileges the other’s perspective, given the power of our own context-defining bias, our own tendency to flatten discourse into duality.

Psychoanalytic Emancipation

In a different framing, following Walter Benjamin (1929), Marcuse (1955), and Fromm (1941), we can envision psychoanalysis as a form of *emancipation*. Psychoanalysts have been and can be cultural critics, taking our praxis into social discourse. In our work but also in but in our public lives, in *every* context, there's a call to convey what we know, and to live that knowing in how we engage. More than knowing, this calls for a sustaining of thirdness in the midst of the firestorm of cultural dualism. From my stance, this entails something immediate and profoundly personal, beginning with our bodies—our embodied perceptive and expressive presence—to perspectives other than our own, held in context with Nature. Specifically, it's *Nature* and not simply the world or life. Merleau-Ponty (1995) notes that: "Nature is the primordial, that is, the non-constructed, the non-constituted [...] Nature is an enigmatic object, an object that is not an object at all; it is not altogether in front of us. It is our ground (our soil), not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us" (p. 4). Nature is our ultimate context, the prism through which we find ground beyond duality. Emancipation comes in staying deeply connected to our personal embodied ways of seeing while engaging perspectives other than our own.

But more specifically, the climate crisis requires action that moves us toward climate justice. Orange's book and presentations are an exhortation. More than anything, she suggests specific steps of activism. The idea is that it is no longer sufficient to reduce our own carbon footprint, nor to "contribute at the office" in the practice of our craft. We must use our expertise to communicate, witness, and effect change in ways that respond to dualism today. This is a crucial form of personal emancipation that pays tribute to the interconnections that bind us as part of Nature; it is the grounding (the soil) that carries us all.

myan Tree, thomas/Flickr



continued on page 2

BPSI Reveals: Reception and Response

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Steps Toward Activism

- Create a Psychoanalytic Consortium, networking different psychoanalytic organizations, with an emphasis on climate change;
- Consider volunteer consultation to other disciplines on the nature of dualist protocols;
- Join the Climate Psychology Alliance (climatepsychologyalliance.org) and volunteer in a wide range of social interventions addressing climate justice;
- Work with the NAACP on environmental injustice in the placement of waste facilities;
- Download the NAACP's Action Toolkit: "In the Eye of the Storm, A Peoples Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum";
- Volunteer through immigrant aid organizations.

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Mountain Torrent (c. 1670) Jacob van Ruisdael

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In the Woods (1855) Asher Brown Durand