**Ted Toadvine**

***The Memory of the World: Deep Time, Animality, and Eschatology***

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This book is a remarkable work of environmental philosophy. However, for those of us more accustomed to monographs which open with calls to arms grounded in shocking descriptions of ecological disaster, it is striking that Toadvine’s book begins with a rather unremarkable vignette:

One damp and chilly weekend in February 2018, I had the opportunity to visit Lyme Regis, a small coastal town in West Dorset, England, with a reputation for being one of the best fossil collecting locations in the world (p. 1).

As soon becomes clear, the motivation for Toadvine’s trip to the Jurassic Coast - and its detailed description in this book - is less paleontological than *ecophenomenological.* Toadvine’s novel aims in the book are broadly twofold. First, he sets out to demonstrate (*contra* Quentin Meillassoux and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential contentions) that the ‘deep time’ associated with vast evolutionary and geological scales ‘is an essential structure of human experience and that its depths can be understood only in experiential terms’ (p. 6). Second, he intends to investigate – phenomenologically - what the relationships between our multifaceted experiences of lived ‘human’ time, and deep time, might mean for contentious contemporary ‘issues’ in environmental ethics, including biodiversity preservation, the ‘Anthropocene’, and our recent obsession with associated apocalyptic narratives (hence the fossils).

*The Memory of the World* is divided into three parts, which concern deep time, animality, and eschatology, respectively. Part I establishes Toadvine’s phenomenological methodology and addresses the alleged inaccessibility to experience of deep scales of time. Some material here will be familiar to readers acquainted with Toadvine’s previous (excellent) book, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy of Nature*, which explores Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s claim that, although not fully transparent to reflective consciousness, the ‘elemental’ time of our evolutionary forbears internally conditions the temporal horizons of our bodies as lived here-and-now, and thus delineates our ‘subjective’ temporal experiences. Drawing partly upon essays that Toadvine has published over the past decade or so, *The Memory of the World* extends a Merleau-Pontian account to deep geological and cosmic durations. Here, Toadvine argues that lived time is plural, multi-rhythmic and never entirely linear. Hence, Toadvine argues, the titular ‘memory of the world’ shows up for us, almost paradoxically, as ‘the asubjective and differential passage of nature from which we emerge and to which we remain liable’ (p. 17), thereby undercutting Meillassoux and Chakrabarty’s objections.

Part II emphasises our implication in the generative temporality of evolutionary time to direct discussion toward otherness: specifically, our (proper) relationships with more-than-human lives, and the animality within. Drawing heavily upon fruitful resonances between Jacques Derrida and Merleau-Ponty’s work, in particular, Toadvine problematises the received wisdom of any straightforwardly ‘biologistic’ (p. 92) human-nonhuman continuity. Toadvine argues instead that the ‘strange kinship’ (p. 19) which Merleau-Ponty describes with animal others in his *Nature* lectures ought to be understood in terms of an ‘alteraffection’ (p. 91) (rather than the more solipsistic ‘autoaffection’ identified in classical phenomenology by its less sympathetic commentators, like Luce Irigaray). Such an alteraffection, characterised by its openness to ‘abyssal’ (p. 89) discontinuities, Toadvine contends, would be more attentive to the multiplicitious otherness of heterogeneous ‘nonhuman’ things, living or otherwise, which resist subsumption into our reflective consciousness but which are nonetheless never entirely alien to us.

But this is no mere macro-level ontological or epistemological claim, philosophically interesting, but without any clear ‘real-life’ purchase (an objection perhaps not unfairly levelled at some other ecophenomenological works). The phenomenological revelation and acknowledgement of our stubborn – and not fully thematizable ‘inner animality’ (p. 20) - Toadvine argues, has concrete implications in terms of pressing environmental ‘issues’, which can in turn be *better* understood and analysed. In chapter seven (which is, for me, the book’s highlight), for instance, Toadvine argues that, at least as it is conventionally understood, preservation of species biodiversity is conceptually problematic and difficult to motivate ecocentrically or biocentrically. By approaching biodiversity ecophenomenologically, however, we can make better sense of its intuitive value as a temporal matter of evolutionary memory. Toadvine argues, in short, that the biodiversity of current life reflects the specific, contingent, and historical expressions of relationships between biota and abiota – the ‘biodiacritically embodied memory of life’ (p. 21) - in which all life is implicated. It is not just about extant species. On Toadvine’s understanding, then, each endangered species is strictly irreplaceable insofar as it carries with it not only a specific temporal and ontological history, but also (as with an endangered language):

a unique reservoir of expressive possibilities that, although they exist as nothing more than virtual differences, embody a unique memory that is the dynamic legacy of their becoming… Extinction is therefore the loss of our own past, the redrawing of the differences that compose our identity (p. 170).

Understood as such, species biodiversity could not be straightforwardly scientifically indexed, nor its value made easily commensurable with others in the requisite manner to licence a profit/loss analysis.

The chapters in part III (‘Eschatology’) – the longest of the three - are wide ranging. Working against the backdrop of the Anthropocene and our obsession with ecological apocalypse, one of Toadvine’s main concerns here is with an ecophenomenological analysis of what ‘a’ (or ‘the’) ‘world’ is or might be*,* and, correlatively, what its ‘end’ might consist in. Thinking mainly alongside the later Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy – whom Toadvine takes to ‘radicalise’ (p. 213) ecophenomenology rather than break with it – Toadvine invites us to problematise the existence of a shared and unified world here-and-now (a ‘*mundus’* or ‘*cosmos*’ [p. 214]) which would universally orient and ground a meaning to our lives, the threatened future loss of which (e.g., due to climate disaster) causes us great anxiety. Reminding the reader of the implications of the foregoing ecophenomenological investigation of deep time outlined above, Toadvine contends that current eco-eschatology ‘not only deforms our relationship to time but also prevents us from encountering the materiality of each thing in its absolute singularity’ (p. 23). Toadvine suggests that we should, therefore, aim to eschew the predominant narrative of the ‘eco-apocalypse-to-come’ and instead resituate our understanding and response in openness to the four ‘takeaways’ that emerge in the course of this book: the ‘constitutive lithic materiality’ (ibid) of every living thing; our obligations to the past grounded in deep temporal and eco-memorial relations (about which many indigenous philosophies have much to say); the irreplaceable singularity of the present; and an open but uncontrollable and unpredictable future, none of which can be captured entirely scientifically without great distortion.

As the foregoing indicates, this is an ambitious and profound book. Not content with an original reading of Merleau-Ponty’s ecophenomenological insights, it brims over with extensive, expert scholarship, which synthesizes insights from thinkers from Darwin to Deleuze. It is also extremely detailed and sophisticated in its exposition and arguments, making few concessions for the sake of simplicity. It will, therefore, likely keep uninitiated readers and graduate students on their toes. But the payoff will be more than worth it for the sake of a text which is not only a fine work of ecophenomenology, but also promises in turn to change what we think ecophenomenology is, and ought to be doing. Highly recommended.

**Robert Booth**

**Liverpool Hope University, UK**