Fear and Ecological (in)Justice in Edvard Munch's *The Scream of Nature*

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Introduction

Can art help us to think critically, creatively, ethically or politically about the concepts or ideologies within international environmental law? Scholars (e.g. Baudot 2010) have argued that art contributes to international politics in instrumental, extrinsic and intrinsic ways. Certainly, art is important – both symbolically and ideologically – in helping us to understand our relationship with nature by providing a richer and alternative ontological context. Art can singularly reflect ideas about matter and the natural environment by depicting these as vibrant (Bennett 2010a) and allowing us to be enchanted by them – not so much in a romantic sense, but rather through appreciating their ontological significance for our lives.

The expression and symbolic depiction of less anthropocentric conceptions of matter and the natural world through art can also give real form and perspective to important foundational questions in international environmental law, including environmental and ecological justice. The doctrine of 'ecological justice', compared with 'environmental justice', is increasingly being used to evaluate the impact of human beings on the natural world (Bosselmann 2008, esp. Ch. 3; Schlosberg 2009). The term 'environmental justice' is more commonly used as a way to describe the distribution of interests that humans have in relation to one another regarding their use of the natural environment (Gonzalez 2012). Achieving ecological justice, on the other hand, requires that we take our presence within the natural world into account, but that it is our impact on it that has to be assessed in the context of ensuring justice in relation to the world of matter itself. Access to ecological justice, as opposed to simply environmental justice, raises important questions as we look to the future in the Anthropocene epoch, given that our impact on the natural world is no longer as benign consumers, but rather has irreversible long-term geological repercussions.

In this article, I argue that Edvard Munch's painting, *Der Schrei der Natur* (referred to in English as *The Scream of Nature*, or simply *The Scream*), can be reinterpreted as a depiction of a personality deeply enmeshed in the fear and anxiety of the natural world he is experiencing. Munch's painting provides symbolic support for and expression of the personal and embodied experiences of fear. In this paper, discussions of fear of the natural world is used to reveal the layers of emotional experiences that are important for us in appreciating and understanding ecological (in)justice in the Anthropocene epoch.

We are accustomed to thinking about fear simply in terms of immediate or significant sensorial experiences – like coming face to face with a snake – but this has simply dulled our capacity to appreciate nuanced cognitive and temporal dimensions of emotional experiences of fear. In the Anthropocene epoch, the collective impact of our experiences and their impact on the ecology of planet Earth are important. However, instead of addressing the emotional reactions to being materially embedded, we often separate ourselves from this situation – both cognitively and emotionally. This article argues that our capacity to appreciate the kind of ecological justice that is needed in the Anthropocene epoch requires us to pay closer attention to our emotional experiences – particularly fear. In this context, Munch's painting provides intrinsic symbolic support for and expression of the potential of fear to expose the reality of the impact of ecological injustice on human beings.

Part I - Fear and ecological justice

Emotions in a world of matter

Over the last few years, the idea of the Anthropocene epoch has been taken increasingly seriously (Crutzen 2002; Robin and Steffen 2007; Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill 2007). The concept of the Anthropocene epoch is used in the geological sciences to describe the end of the Holocene epoch, which was an interglacial break within a much wider geological period known as the Quaternary (Whitehead 2014). The Anthropocene epoch represents the idea that human beings are now central to determining how earth systems function (Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill 2007). For instance, carbon dioxide emissions influence the biosphere and impact climate systems. Taken alone, the idea of the Anthropocene epoch does not necessarily have ethical implications for human beings' centrality in the functioning of various earth systems; however, in scientific terms, it identifies what the social science scholars have been describing as the dramatic, catastrophic and dire impact of human beings on the natural world (e.g. McKibben 1989).

Our impact on earth Systems and the natural environment more generally has resulted in a growing number of scholars talking about establishing a robust reciprocal partnership or symbiotic relationship with the natural environment around us. These discussions are complicated and sometimes thwarted by the deployment of concepts that often simply mediate or facilitate what is desirable for human welfare. Concepts used in environmental law, like 'conservation', 'preservation' and 'protection', establish a hierarchical, controlling and normative relationship with nature, which ultimately protects and benefits human populations. Even popular concepts like ecosystem services, which seek to value nature's contribution, do so in the context of their significance for human welfare rather than for earth Systems more generally.

Concepts that have a controlling or regulating element or dimension to them traditionally have sat alongside and in opposition to notions of the 'wild' or 'wildness' (Turner 1996, 1998). Wild approaches to the natural environment are determined less by a desire to control our surroundings. However, given the current impact of climate change and other anthropogenic harms, the notion of something as wild is a mere wish or fiction rather than as existing outside the influence of earth systems that are directly and indirectly influenced by human beings (e.g. Marris 2013).

Arguably, our ability to live symbiotically with and within nature is significant for the Anthropocene epoch, but it is affected by our deep institutional, cultural and theoretical commitments to anthropocentrism, which ultimately supports the growth and prosperity of the human species. There is much scholarship on the anthropocentric nature of our approaches to the environmental governance and law (e.g. Grear 2011). Such critiques have had wide-ranging impacts on ecological thought and scholarship. For example, Neimanis (2014) has criticised how we have come to conceive of water simply in terms of its use and as a resource for human consumption. This means that we have failed to realise that, by privileging it in relation to human bodies, we have ignored the vast network of relations that also need to be sustained by water for it to benefit us as well as nature in the long run.

Over the past two decades, a range of scholars have been working on developing alternative ontological explanations and narratives of matter and the human body as materially embodied (e.g. Abram 1996). However, instead of focusing on the 'wild' in an abstract sense, approaches more generally referred to as 'new materialism' have identified the potential of matter in the light of its alternative agency as subject rather than object (e.g. Coole & Frost 2010a), in order to generate new political and ethical commitments (Bennett 2010b). This intellectual movement is still not cohesive, although its various

strands emerged from a general criticism of the Cartesian–Newtonian way of identifying matter as inert and operating mechanistically. The Cartesian–Newtonian way of seeing matter means everything in the natural world has been 'identifiably discrete' and explained through a 'linear logic of cause and effect' (Coole & Frost 2010b: 7).

In characterising matter in these narrow terms, scholarly traditions ranging from the sciences to cultural theory have come up with 'predictable, controllable, and replicable' conceptions of the natural world, which seem to 'obey fundamental and invariable laws of motion' (Coole & Frost 2010b: 8). The important point here is that seeing matter as inert has meant that 'thought' or human 'agency' has become the dominant motif for being able to claim superiority and domination over the natural world. Descartes' *cogito* (the thinking subject) has become identified as 'ontologically other than matter', and is therefore seen superior to it (Coole & Frost 2010a: 8).

Scholars challenging the orthodox view of matter as inert have also characterised its potential consequence for how we understand human beings and also the natural world in different terms.[2] For example, Coole and Frost (2010a: 7), writing from a new materialist perspective, characterize critiques of Cartesian–Newtonian views of the world as being united by their 'emphasis on materialization as a complex, pluralistic, relatively open process and their insistence that humans, including theorists themselves, be recognized as thoroughly immersed within materiality's productive contingencies'. A wide range of scholars can be identified as materialists, including Hobbes and Spinoza, Deleuze and Serres, along with the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Le Clézio. Despite their shared concern in terms of breaking down traditional dichotomies and binaries such as human/non-human and rationality/matter, they approach their subject in different and complex ways. Hobbes, for instance, has built his approach to politics from a critique of the possibility of causality – that is, he posits that uncertainty in the way that x can determine y means that one cannot rely on causality, thus undermining the determinism that is associated with the Cartesian approach to the world of matter (see Frost 2008).

More recently, Barad (2012: 16) has offered a scientifically literate account of the potential of matter to surprise us beyond the dominant mechanical and causally driven approaches to it. Writing about the idea of nothingness, suggests that nothingness 'is not absence, but the infinite plentitude of openness'. Barad's conceptualization of the world of matter as being filled with possibilities, potential and vibrancy is dependent on it being seen as

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2   This literature is wide-ranging. This work draws on engagements with this subject from those who pursue phenomenology or adopt techniques of eco-psychology. On this subject and relationship see Vakoch and Castrillon (2014).

'ontologically indeterminate', 'radically open' and with 'infinite possibilities' (2012: 16). The significance of Barad's account of what she calls 'mattering' (as a dynamic process) is becoming increasingly relevant, but it is not necessarily unique. Related views are offered by other New Materialists. Bennett (2010b), for example, argues that matter is much more complex and porous – 'lively' – exhibiting more 'agency' than we have come to assume from it. From the viewpoint of such theorists, an emphasis on matter should be on its unpredictability and the indeterminability of processes in the natural world – with profound relevance for a range of human social processes: Bennett (2010b), for instance, identifies how 'non-human materialities' have agency, alluding to the impact that this ontological viewpoint could have on politics.

This ontologically driven approach provokes and encourages us to rethink our interactions with physical and biological matter and processes, and to explore new ways of seeing them. It separates us from other significant theoretical movements, like postmodernism, by emphasising that the world does not simply revolve 'around words' (Paulson 2009: 216). An important consequence of thinking in this way is the possibilities to which it gives rise in broadening or reshaping debates about how we approach our relationship to the natural world. As an example, Michel Serres (1995), in his view on the new materialism, argues for a symbiotic partnership between human beings and the natural world. In this passage from the concluding paragraph of *The Natural Contract*, Serres contemplates his experience of what Ian Tucker (2011: 149) terms the 'materiality of the human condition':

> That's why I tasted joy during the earthquake that terrified so many people around me. All of a sudden the ground shakes off its gear: walls tremble, ready to collapse, roofs buckle, people fall, communications are interrupted, noise keeps you from hearing each other, the thin technological film tears, squealing and snapping like metal or crystal; the world, finally, comes to me, resembles me, all in distress. A thousand useless ties come undone, liquidated, while out of the shadows beneath unbalanced feet rises essential being, background noise, the rumbling world: the hull, the beam, the keel, the powerful skeleton, the pure quickwork, that which I have always clung to. I return to my familiar universe, my trembling space, the ordinary nudities, my essence, precisely to ecstasy.

> Who am I? A tremor of nothingness, living in a permanent earthquake. Yet for a moment of profound happiness, the spasmodic Earth comes to unite herself with my shaky body. Who am I, now, for several seconds? Earth

> herself. Both communing, in love she and I, doubly in distress, throbbing together, joined in a single aura. (Serres 1995: 123)

Here, Serres discusses the intense emotional experiences of being materially embodied. He describes his fears alongside the experiences of uncertainty, love and respect for the natural world. It isn't so much that that matter, objects or the natural world are vibrant, present and open to change; human emotions and senses are also central to his appraisal or description of what is being experienced. Drawing inspiration from Serres, it is arguable that the way we understand our relationship with nature or matter more generally is not just through abstract conceptions using our thoughts and language, or in terms of new materialism's extrapolation of the world as matter. Our senses, emotions and feelings are also critical to ways in which we experience and shape the world materially. Descartes' influence on science, which Serres also fights against, is his separation of the world of thought from matter. In this vein, Damasio (1994) has famously argued that it is 'emotions and feelings, along with the covert physiological machinery underlying them' that 'assist us with the daunting task of predicting an uncertain future and planning our actions accordingly'. He maintains that emotions, feelings and biological regulation all contribute to what is human reason. Serres states that certain kinds of emotions emerge from or exist only in our symbiotic integration in and with the natural world. If the world of matter is ever present, integrated, vibrant and ontologically indeterminate, as Barad (2012: 16) suggests, then our emotional makeup may also be more complex than Damasio suggests. Our emotional and sensorial makeup or experiences are therefore not as independent, isolated and capable of individualist appraisal as some cognitive theorists and psychologists describe (e.g. Prinz 2004). Abram (1996: 33) gives voice to this point when he states:

> The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn.

Abram's description of our engagement with matter suggests it can also elicit responses from us that are not just cognitive or innate, but emotionally embodied appraisals. The rest of this section discusses the emotional experiences of fear in a world of matter to help further illuminate our discussions of the connections between our experiences of the Anthropocene epoch and ecological justice.

Deep fears in eco-philosophy

The emotion of fear is commonly discussed in the context of state politics and also in relation to violence and death (Schall 1996). In our relationship with the natural world, fear is often associated with the vulnerability we feel from experiences like darkness, flooding, landslides, potentially dangerous insects, or the possible spread of a virus (Pain & Smith 2008). Traditional reactions to fear have either been to avoid or to escape an object that threatens us, and to do whatever is necessary until we become – or feel like we have become – invulnerable (Svendsen 2008: 31). We have established similar responses to fear in relation to the natural world, by damming rivers, creating forest reserves to house wild animals, getting rid of spiders and generally managing or domesticating our natural surroundings. We exclude the natural or wild world from our collective lives, and in this way enable our escape from the object of fear. What we usually fear about nature are those things that have direct impacts on us as human beings and make us vulnerable, and as such are often of the kind of objects of fear that Massumi (1993) characterises as capable of enabling high-intensity emotions. The challenge with discussions of fear in general, and also in the context of our relationship with nature, is that we presume that someone experiencing it is likely to want to escape from the circumstances or situations in which they find themselves, or they are likely to avoid it altogether (Svendsen 2008). This reaction presumes that fear is a highly negative experience, and that its consequences if the object of the fear is realized are likely to impact violently on the integrity of the individual concerned. This explains why the common synonyms for fear – such as apprehension, dread, panic, terror and trepidation – point to extremes of individual responses or feelings.

The consequences of seeing fear as a high-intensity emotion, or as distinctly separate from the ongoing presence of the world of matter in our sensorial and emotional reality and consciousness, don't acknowledge subtler, softer and more potent experiences of fear. These more nuanced emotional experiences include, for example, the likely and multifarious nature of the threats from climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and the many more huge environmental harms that are likely to emerge from breaches of what have popularly become known as planetary boundaries (see Rockstrom 2009). These harmful ecological events are different from those more sudden and impromptu events, such as a tsunami, which can immediately create victims. Their cause is also more likely to be multifarious. The idea of the Anthropocene epoch does not refer to tipping points, the loss of resilience or harm to earth systems, but it does suggest that collective human behaviour and our use of the natural environment are likely to bring us to these points more quickly.

However, the often physically, spatially and temporally distant nature of these more gradual and subtle threats of the Anthropocene epoch makes them different from the experience that we would have if we were to come face-to-face with a certain kind of threatening object, like a spider. This doesn't mean that breaches of planetary boundaries are unlikely to cause other more direct and severe natural conditions; these fears – although sometimes far removed from us – can be 'dramatic gestures' (cf. Little 2008: 94) or long-term waves of anxiety in our consciousness, and are often enlivened by smaller and localized experiences like flash flooding or the breakout of a virus. In this way, our experiences or feelings of helplessness around matter at the local level are intertwined with our responses to threats that are more distant – whether spatially or temporally. Research on fears or phobias about snakes shows they develop when someone is exposed to others who have experienced an adverse reaction to snakes at a particularly critical time (Mineka et al. 1984).

Another kind of nuanced yet challenging experience involves us emotionally embedding ourselves in, and experiencing the uncertainty, mystery or novel nature of, matter or the natural world – whether it be in a national park, on the high seas or in our own backyard. Damasio (2006) and others unpack a more deeply complex problem with common discussions of fear: the assumption that the world is experienced sensorially and emotionally, followed by cognitive appraisal. From this perspective, fear is the first reaction that someone has to certain things in the natural environment, which is then calibrated and contextualized cognitively (see Lockwood 2013). The problem with these liberal expressions of how emotions work is their claim that cognitive experiences can ultimately separate our experiences of the world of matter from emotional ones. In other words, the world of matter remains lifeless, ontologically determinate and not symbiotic in our experiences of fear and anxiety. This is not to suggest that we cannot or remain oblivious to the mental processing and social or cultural forces that shape how we experience nature. This experience of fear is more a recognition of the community of subjects and agents that are a part of our experience of the world and deeply embedded in it.

In this example, fear comes from how we engage or experience the object that enables our fear. Not everyone would feel fearful of not knowing what's in the soil that we dig into in our backyards and, although the experience of fear is universal, our interpretation of the object of fear isn't necessarily so – see Merleau-Ponty (1989: 189), discussing the cultural relativity of fear. Whereas we may all experience fear when face to face with a polar bear, this would not necessarily be a universal stimulus for everyone's experience of fear. However, research suggests that our experiences of fear can be normalised by our

urban experiences (Little 2008). Urbanized experiences of nature or scientific approaches to objects can discipline us to avoid seeing variation, possibilities and potential in the way that matter asserts itself on our consciousness. Although Kahn and Hasbach (2013) would see this as our potential to experience the wild in everything we do and everywhere we go, the argument here is much wider, suggesting that science and rationality have also disciplined our emotions so that we avoid feeling anxious or threatened by uncertainty or the unknown because otherwise the world around us would fail to be controllable or domesticated.

In both these examples, subtle, distant and material experiences generate a kind of fear that is not commonly discussed when we talk about our fear of nature. What enables this fear and deepens its impact on us is arguably the loss of 'control' we experience from being spatially or temporally distant from the threat to us, or being uncertain about things we are likely to experience because we cannot rationally understand or analyse them. Like 'wild' experiences of nature, its arguable that fear also 'fractures the foundations of modern conservation' in that its removes our ability to control matter (Turner 2013: 35). However, in every sense, this is central to what the new materialism stands for, in that physical or physiological borders, inertness and the logic of cause and effect are all ideas that enable us to control rather than understand nature in its reciprocal relationship to us. What enables the fear we feel is the need to be completely integrated and embedded in our experiences with matter, to the extent that we appreciate rather than feel threatened by the fear we experience.

The idea that, with a broadening of our conception of matter, our emotional and fearful reaction towards the natural environment can change, is a different way of expressing what Kahn and Hasbach (2013) also argue regarding fear of the wild being primal to human beings. They maintain that fearing the wild is an important feature of rewilding us as a species (Kahn & Hasbach 2013). They don't specify whether the emotion is physically, socially or biologically determined, but some scholars would disagree that it could be biological or 'natural'. This is an important point: if certain kinds of experiences of fear are purely a cultural and social construction, then their reality is something we have to strive directly to achieve. This would be different from simply reorienting the way in which we appreciate the natural world and then expect our more subtle experiences of fear to emerge from this.

In this context, Svendsen (2008: 24) notes:

> [W]hat we fear, and how strongly, depends on our conceptions of the world, of what dangerous forces exist in it and what possibilities we have of protecting ourselves against them. Our knowledge and experience of emotions are not independent of the social context in which they occur.

Svendsen does not rule out that fear of the wild is primal or natural to the human species, but also argues that 'fear' can potentially be both biologically determined and culturally situated. It is possible, argue Coole and Frost (2010b: 27), to 'accept social constructionist arguments while also insisting that the material realm is irreducible to culture of discourse'. This is the same as suggesting that the emotion of fear may be natural, but how and why we experience it can be either biological or culturally determined. This is important because if certain types of experiences of fear are culturally or socially determined, then whether matter's vibrant force can affect our consciousness is also constructed rather than natural.

Yet, in making these points, it is easy to lose sight of the purpose behind Kahn and Hasbach's (2013) argument, which is to revive our cultural engagement with wild nature by recognizing the role of fear in that process. The only problem here is whether we prefer to be ontologically correct or epistemologically normative. What is significant for this article is that if the objects we fear don't have to have either immense or any immediate biological or real consequences for us, then we have to work out how they culturally shape the way we perceive them in such terms. Heidegger (2010: 178–83) elevated 'anxiety' to a basic or fundamental mood that recognised fear as limited, in that it was only possible with an identifiable threat. This suggests that, for Heidegger, the fears described above would be anxieties, as the immediacy of harm required by fear is much more time sensitive.

The main problem with subtle and nuanced fears, as opposed to high-intensity fear, is whether or not they are real. Although one might argue that this is more a philosophical than a real question, it is important because phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1989) would argue that the gesture expressing fear is what is real rather than the emotion behind it (1989: 184). In such instances, the forgotten or more subtle fears discussed above would not necessarily have gestures or physical embodiments that one would traditionally associate with more intense fears. This isn't an issue in relation to whether a person can feel fear, but still have care, compassion and a desire to conserve or preserve a natural environment. Kahn and Hasbach (2013) raise this in their discussion of rewilding the human species. Research on children's experiences of bats in the zoo shows that they were both fearful of them and also cared for them. Although they would

not choose to sleep near the bats, the children said they would be bothered if they could not see or experience bats in a zoo or in the wild (Kahn and Hasbach 2013: 207–32) This study suggests that some people may react rather problematically to spiders, but that doesn't mean their immediate response is to squash them or to eradicate the species completely. The significance of this point is that fear doesn't require an immediate gesture or reaction to it for us to make the argument that it is real.

In this section, the article has argued that fear is an important emotion for understanding our relationship with the natural world. Traditional approaches to fear have privileged a particularly anthropocentric and liberal approach to nature, and don't appear to have been predisposed to new materialist ontologies or interpretations of them that enable our emotions to be central to our role as the species dominating the Earth. Looking at fear from fresh perspectives directs us towards new ways of emotionally experiencing the natural world, as well as acknowledging that fear is an important way of dealing with the ecological challenges that are unique to the Anthropocene epoch. Although scholars have argued that the capacity to fear is important for rewilding the human species, this section has maintained that its importance is broader, in that it gives materiality credit in our emotional and cognitive experiences of the world around us. An understanding of why and how humans experience fear due to matter is critical for our symbiotic and integrated partnership with the natural world. The capacity to experience fear is important for understanding ecological justice, but context is also important in order to give expression to this idea. The next section explores this through the analysis of a painting.

A (re)interpretation of The Scream of Nature

In this section, the work of Edvard Munch in *The Scream of Nature* (see Figure 1) is discussed to describe the symbolic representation of fear in the context of experiences of ecological (in)justice. As will become apparent from the discussion that follows, the main character in this painting is not experiencing an immediate and high-intensity version of fear. It is therefore a useful symbolic depiction of fear, and suggests that there exists the possibility of (re)interpreting other common experiences in the natural world. Lockwood (2013) examines insects and our human relationship with them. He describes the centrality of grasshoppers and Salvador Dali's fear of them, and their expressions of this in his art (2013: 6–8). This section argues that the expression of fear of reverberations of ecological injustice in the world of matter is central to Munch's work in *The Scream of Nature.*
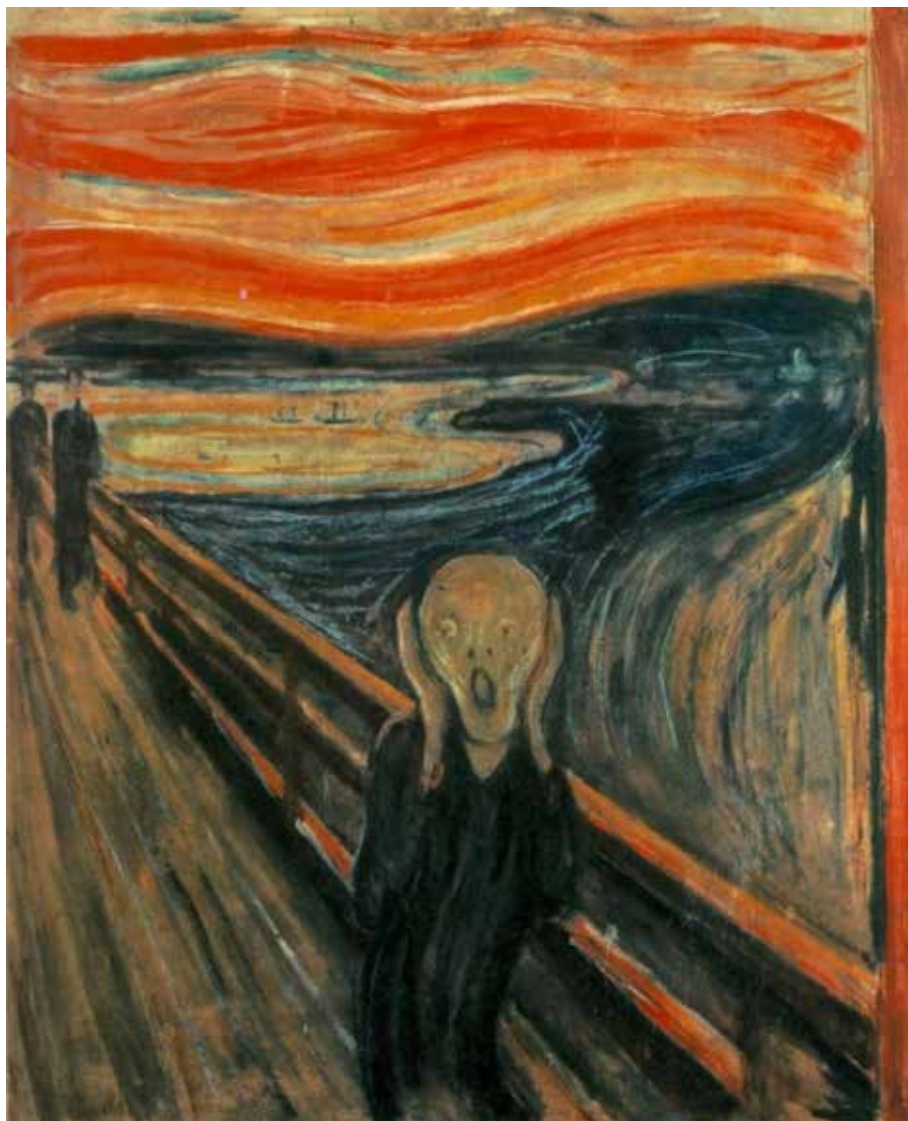
Figure 1: Edvard Munch's The Scream of Nature. This version appears in the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway.

(WebMuseum at ibiblioPage: http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/munch/Image URL: http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/munch/munch.scream.jpg. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Scream.jpg#/media/File:The_Scream.jpg)

Munch was a Norwegian painter whose work received world acclaim, and his *Der Schrei der Natur*, which translates as *The Scream of Nature* (hereafter *The Scream*) remains one of the most famous paintings in the world. The painting is also sometimes called *The Cry* (Lentz 2014). Munch was a prolific artist, with suggestions that he created '1,008

paintings, 4,443 drawings and 15,391 prints, as well as woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, lithographic stones, woodcut blocks, copperplates and photographs' (Lentz 2014). He decided to become a painter in 1880 (Heller 1984: 11, 20). Munch's life was filled with the sorrow of the passing of his mother, sister and others around him. He suffered from serious anxiety and hallucinations, as well as a range of other related forms of mental illness, and was one of the first people in Norway to receive shock therapy for his conditions (1984: Ch. 6). Munch's life is characterised by Heller as one of 'anarchic isolation and physical fragility' (1984: 20). Isolation and deep contemplation through reading and writing also occupied much of his time, especially towards the second half of it. Munch is well known for his love of books – particularly on physics and higher mathematics (Prideaux 2005 at vii). He died in 1944 on his 80th birthday.

Munch is said to have commented that much of his works were 'fragments of a great confession', and that 'his pictures fitted together 'like the pages of a diary' (Prideaux 2005: vii). His approach to art was to recognise that sometimes a piece revealed itself more clearly after a number of efforts (2005: viii). For instance, he painted six versions of *The Sick Child*, which he saw as his best work, and he painted *The Scream* four times between 1883 and 1910. His approach to his art was therefore different from those of other artists, who recognised that a painting was the culmination of the performance of the capacity and skills of an artist. Munch celebrated the work of artists: to him, they alone were capable of 'tearing off the mask of modern man to show his true face' (2005: 81). A commonly cited note from Munch's own diary captures this: '[W]e should no longer paint interiors with people reading and women knitting, they should be people who live, breathe, feel, suffer and love.' (Eggum 1992: 15)

Munch's substantive approach to his work is also reflected in the continuous evolution of his painting style. He was not a naturalist, a realist or an impressionist, and he never consistently adopted any other popular Norwegian approach to art. Munch's abandonment of the schools of art was due to his obsession with subjectivity, or finding the 'soul' in the subject of his paintings. For instance, he abandoned realism because he saw it as being concerned only with the 'shell of nature' (Prideaux 2005: 81). His approach enabled him to make wide-ranging comparisons with artists from other schools. Whereas Leonardo da Vinci 'studied the recesses of the body and dissected human cadavers', through 'self-scrutiny', Munch sought 'to dissect what is the universal in the soul' (Munch quoted in Prideaux 2005: 83).

Munch often painted a number of works around a particular theme. *The Scream* is embedded in his depiction of anxiety and despair. Included in this range, among others,

are works titled *Despair* and *Anxiety* (Wood 1992: 95–9). Munch used the background colours and themes in *The Scream* as the foundations for *Despair* and also *Anxiety*, which is why his works around that time are often used to interpret *The Scream*, as well as others in that collection. In *The Scream*, the background of the blood-red and yellow curves and arches dominates the landscape (see Figure 1). The gender-neutral 'figure in the foreground, the landscape, and the sky all seem caught up in one great swirling motion' (1992: 96). This feature of the painting is even more enhanced in a subsequent lithograph version. Messer (1985: 72) suggests that in the lithograph, '[T]he protagonist's body contour is here dissolved and her identity remains establishable only in the negative, as the area corresponding to her presumed existence merges with that of the immediate environment.' The background of the fjord used in *The Scream* is also the same one that is used in *Despair* and *Anxiety*, as well as other paintings created around the same period, although the ways in which the background is seamlessly embedded with the characters in the paintings differ significantly. In *The Scream*, the figure is deeply embedded into the background through the swirling motion of the brush. The figure is also separated from two people who appear in the background, although in another version of the same painting the characters separated from Munch are bowing their heads, and therefore more represented in the depiction of despair and anxiety than in the version shown in Figure 1.

Interpretation of *The Scream*

A variety of views exist on many aspects of this painting. Munch described the inspiration behind the painting:

> I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. The sky became a bloody red. And I felt a touch of melancholy. I stood still, leaned on the railing, dead tired. Over the blue-black fjord and city hung blood and tongues of fire. My friends walked on and I stayed behind, trembling with fright. And I felt a great unending scream passing through nature. (Heller 1984: 105) .

In a lithograph done on the motif of this painting back in 1895, Munch inscribed the following comment, which is also indicative of what he was experiencing: 'I felt a great scream pass through nature' (Wood 1992: 96).

Despite Munch's own views about the painting, a range of interpretations of this work point to the actual despair, turmoil and anxiety that he was experiencing at that time, due to his experiences with mental illness. Prideaux (2005: 137) suggests that the painting

has come to represent the 'dilemma of modern man, a visualization of Nietzsche's cry, "God is dead, and we have nothing to replace him"'. More simply, Jones (2012) describes the background and the distortion in the surroundings as representing the despair, fear and anxiety that the figure is projecting on its view of the world around it. The idea that Munch is portraying despair and anxiety, which is a personal, subjective and yet possibly universal depiction of the human condition, emerges from the suggestion that he was in fact reflecting on his sister Lara's incarceration in a mental institution on the other side of the path and the fjord. The figure, which is often suggested to be that of Munch himself, is also caught up in the experiences he had with mental illness.

An important feature of *The Scream* is the way in which Munch has managed to embed and integrate the figure into the landscape itself using a combination of swirls and the distortion in the figure, which aligns with that of the natural background. This style helps to separate the role of the figure used in *The Scream* and that in another painting of Munch's referred to as *Despair*. In *Despair*, the same background colours and structures are used, but the distinctly male figure appears markedly separate from his surroundings because this is a more traditional representation of a person. As a result, it is suggested that in *Despair*, 'the background operates as a reflection of the mood of the person in the foreground' (Wood 1992: 95). This is the case in *Despair* rather than *The Scream* because of the separation Munch has forced on the painting between the individual and the background in which he is embedded. Whereas in *Despair* nature is represented as the reflection of the figure's mood, this is not the case in *The Scream*, where the figure is completely embedded and integrated into nature itself.

Interestingly, much of the interpretation of Munch's work relates to it being a work of introspection built around his mental condition rather than a commentary on the figure's engagement in and appreciation of our experience of nature. This is surprising, given Munch's own comments, and it appears from works done on Munch that he was predisposed to critical readings of science, which is consistent with the approach of new materialism. Prideaux (2005: 81) comments that he wanted 'no part of the idea that science alone could, by revealing the nature of things, make the mechanical sequences of the universe omnipotent'. This comment sits significantly alongside Munch's more general critique of art as being concerned with the form things take rather than the soul. Echoing this point, but in the context of science, Munch commented that, '[T]hey [referring to scientists] have found bacteria, but not what they consist of' (cf. Prideaux 2005: 81).

The painting is as much a commentary on our materially embodied existence as it is about the incapacity of some to see, hear and be deeply integrated into their surroundings and the natural world. The figure of the person is embroiled in the story the natural world is seeking to tell by its representation through the swirls used to also capture the vibrant and extraordinarily colourful nature around it. The clothes on the figure are represented in the same colour as the river behind it, but in a way that suggests Munch and the river flow into one another. The distortions in the head of the figure and the opening of its mouth, which are central to the expressions on the face, capture the power of the scream of nature – not just on the mood, but on the total being of the figure. This suggests that the scream of nature and its power are not ordinary. This view is also further enhanced by the blood-red colour that appears in the sky (rather than the river, for instance), representing the stratosphere, which is the highest point on earth that human beings can visually experience.

This discussion can be extended to appreciate the normative aspect of the work. The orange and red in the sky are metaphors, and therefore suggestive of nature's blood that we have been responsible for shedding. In this painting, the disturbance, violence and sometimes chaotic presence of nature in our lives, which leads to our fearful posture and reaction to it, comes from the swirling lines, the appearance of the movement of the red colour along the railings that the figure is standing next to, and the appearance of the capacity of the noise and the acoustic forces to distort the body of the figure itself. Most significantly, the severe reaction of the figure in the painting to the scream of nature suggests that the extraordinary nature of this experience. Importantly, not everyone feels the impact of the scream of nature – in the first version of Munch's *The Scream*, the other human personalities in the image are not responding to anything. This interpretation of the painting leaves us with the distinct impression that the 'subject' in the painting is not just the figure but also the natural surroundings. Arguably, the scream 'passing through nature' is the real subject of this painting.

The positioning of the other two characters in the painting, who are well dressed and appear to represent the aristocracy, suggests that whatever has caused the scream or the scream itself is of no concern to them, whereas Munch's figure is distorted and experiences intense fear anxiety. The representation of wealth and the economy in the aristocracy distances the figures. The fact that the two people behind the main figure (supposedly of Munch himself) cannot hear the scream of nature is itself part of the experience of injustice that the painting depicts. Additionally, the swirls through the painting connect – literally and also metaphorically, by not imposing borders or barriers – the past and the present, the local and universal, and the mild and severe experiences of nature itself. The

scream of nature reverberating through the landscape and the figure itself is represented not just as a single incident, scream or observation, but as 'something' that has been continuously building to become the symbolic representation in the painting of injustice that the figure feels so strongly.

This section has argued that, despite alternative interpretations of *The Scream*, the work of Munch is about matter, materiality, and the human emotional engagement with it rather than cognition and the mental projections by the figure of his or her mood. Significantly, it is also about the symbiotic engagement of human beings with the natural world. As such, it can be read as a powerful depiction of the capacity of the natural world to protest about its experience of injustice. Although one could argue that the painting has nothing else to say other than the fact that the scream flows through nature, this is not the case when the various nuances in the work are analysed with an eye to justice. Munch manages to convey to the viewer the emotional experience of injustice against the natural world. Most importantly, the painting conveys the potential fear that one will experience should nature's scream emerge from the injustices we commit against the natural world.

Analysis and Conclusion

In the early 1990s, the idea of intergenerational equity defined and gave creative impetus and direction to scholarship on international environmental law and politics (Brown Weiss 1989). The concept has morphed into something larger and broader: the idea of environmental justice, which is concerned with the just access of present and future generations to environmental goods. The problem that new approaches to materialism seek to highlight is our near-universal assumption that the world of matter needs us, or its destiny is fully understood and determined by us. It is arguable that, in the Anthropocene epoch, symbiosis rather than individualism better explains what is going on. In this sense, it arguable that the concept of ecological justice is a less anthropocentric doctrine to use in understanding our symbiotic relationship with the natural world. This doesn't mean that we forget about human beings in our normative dealings with the environment, but rather that we have to assess our significance in a new light. Serres (1995: 16) refers to human beings as the 'dense tectonic plates of humanity', to distinguish us as materially embodied species from what we have come to know as 'man as an individual or subject'. Even from this simple view of human beings, we can argue that we are deeply embedded and integrated into experiences of ecological justice and injustice.

This is certainly what *The Scream* suggests, and a reinterpretation of this painting using ontologies that don't have human beings as the dominant feature in the world makes this

more apparent. *The Scream* also makes the experience of ecological injustice the subject of the painting by vividly portraying the flow of the scream through both the entire landscape and the main figure in the painting. The anomaly is the two characters on the bridge, who are at a distance from the main figure and don't experience the vibrant force of the scream. However, the discussion in the first section of this article indicated that the subtle and nuanced experiences of fear are central to the rewilding of the human species, recognizing that we occupy an 'ineluctably material world' (Coole & Frost 2010b: 1). However, Coole and Frost make the point that, 'for the most part we take … materiality for granted, or we assume that there is little of interest to say about it' (2010b: 1). The fear of someone else's loss is not always a high priority, unless it is somehow directly connected to our own experiences. We may even seek to do economic cost-benefit analysis as to whether we should protect nature for the present or future generations (Baumgartner et al. 2012). Returning to the paradox in *The Scream*, the two aristocratic and wealthier people on the bridge are not susceptible to the same experiences of matter as the main figure, who is deeply impacted by the scream to which they are witness.

Baudot (2010: 6) argues that art can have instrumental, intrinsic and extrinsic effects on international politics. This article maintains that fear in human beings is an important feature of the experiences of and concerns for achieving ecological justice. It is also important for understanding the deeply symbiotic rather than liberal relationship that we have with the natural world. A (re)interpretation of *The Scream* is an important step in this process, by drawing on its popularity as a piece of art to inspire people to reconceptualize their relationship with the natural world. Most importantly, it has intrinsic value in that the 'charismatic power of the work of art itself' can 'enoble and inspire political thinking and action' (Baudot 2010: 2). However, this article has also shown that *The Scream* makes an extrinsically valuable contribution to understanding the place of the human species in a world of matter. It helps us to explore how fear emerges not just from the individual's experience of an object that is apart from them; rather, the human is part of and integrated into the experiences of nature. This is a critical and important argument that the work of Munch describes vividly once it is reinterpreted. The painting can arguably sit alongside Serres' (1995) *The Natural Contract* as a contribution to our understanding of eco-philosophy by combining a critique of scientific rationality with a new approach to the ontological in cultural and social philosophy.

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