

## “Go Touch Grass!”: Inaugurating a Terrestrial Ethic through Planetary Dialogue

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**Abstract:** Late in his career, Bruno Latour turned to focusing his actor-network philosophy onto the topic of climate change, specifically the political arrangements that contribute to this crisis. Across multiple works, Latour analyzes how we organize along political, philosophical, and even spiritual lines to either participate in and or work against denial of this problem. This paper highlights his work between the Out-of-This-World, those with fantasies of escape of the earthly condition, and the Terrestrial, those who ground themselves in a dwelling with the earth. I highlight how dialogue studies is often situated as a detriment to climate discussions, where “dialogue” means conversations that go nowhere and produce little action. Latour, taken with dialogic ethics as theorized by Ronald C. Arnett, can be found to make productive engagements in climate-adjacent action by firmly situating our positions of where we stand and what our ethics amount to.

**Keywords:** dialogue; climate; Latour, Bruno; ethics; terrestrial; escape

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Attempts to identify a moral foundation to address the climate crisis have been multiple, with many iterations stalling in the wake of economic, technological, and political upheavals. Disinformation continues to run rampant in terms of painting a picture of scientific non-consensus and skepticism, and with more immediate, immanent risks in the present, the public conversation has detoured to these. Multiple forays have been made into fostering better dialogism between science communicators and the general public on these issues, including interventions from rhetoric (Hawhee 2023), rhetorical methods (Lynch and Rivers 2015), philosophy, (Morton 2013) and economics and degrowth (Klein 2014; Hickel 2019). While each endeavor here is useful in its own right for lending critical tactics in this historical moment, one engagement in need of further development for a discussion of ethics in the Anthropocene is the work of Bruno Latour. Latour’s corpus towards the end of his life situates his philosophical acumen with strategies for assessing the world amidst this impossible situation.

Insights found in Latour's later work, especially in *Down to Earth* (2018), *Facing Gaia* (2017), and *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose Our Souls* (2024) further address the impasses that arise in discussion of the Anthropocene, climate, and the immense tangle of subjectivities, systems, and scale that we as humans are implicated in. Across these works, Latour facilitates a grounding of morality in our shared home, calling us as a species to recognize our uniqueness but also related-ness; rather than an erasure of difference. This move privileges our non-similarity while acknowledging that there are forces seeking to continue inhibiting dialogue around shared action and responsibility. For this, Latour offers a new grounding for dialogue in the age of the Anthropocene, when climate denial runs rampant and political and social polarization continues to divide.

Latour casts the climate emergency as one in which if we truly addressed it as a crisis, like wars or pandemics, we *would* have done something about already. Instead, we are driven mad by inaction and denial. This fundamentally shifts the territory to a discourse of action (what is to be done?), whereas other climate discourse seeks to sketch out boundaries and description à la Timothy Morton (2013), who addresses the crisis as having an unknowable, undefinable character due to its scale. Latour plots our predicament along new axes in order to preserve agency and hope while also setting out immense stakes.

This is a movement away from his early work critiquing modernism and endorsing a view of the world as actants and networks (Harman 2009). Latour's Gaia-infused philosophy from 2017 on solicits an inventory of things and subjects based on relationality (Harman 2014). This relational aspect is the basis of a needed addendum for dialogue studies to approach the Anthropocene and its challenge to *relate* to so many actors. Specifically, Ronald Arnett's deployment of Levinasian philosophy and the problem of the third is, in the Anthropocene, exponentially increased to a point beyond our normal comprehensible faculties.

One of the strengths of Latour's approach is his givens for argument: he starts from the position of the Anthropocene, a contested idea stemming from the realization that humans (especially in the post-1945 time period) have been dramatically impacting the geologic and atmospheric composition of the Earth and should be treated as a geologic force in and of themselves. Latour provides a background of the conversations surrounding the term—whether or not we are truly in the Anthropocene, whether humans contribute to it, and the inner politics of academic committees—as but another layer to the base problem. This base issue is a historical period in which we are currently living through an ecological mutation, and the denial or avoidance of talking about this very obvious fact is driving everyone mad. Whether that madness is from a lack of hope in the future, manufactured doomerism, or a desire for escape, this simple observation motivates his project.

If we take the historical moment of the Anthropocene as a major challenge to the future of the human species, then a new era of moral reasoning is required. And while there has been fantastic work done on the connections between climate and capitalism (Chakrabarty 2014; Haraway 2015), no one seems to capture the ethical importance of forming praxis-based responses to this catastrophe quite in the manner that Latour does. A cognitive dissonance inheres where indifference

to the “slow cancellation of the future”<sup>1</sup> saps motivation (Fisher 2009). This paper then seeks to salvage parts of Latour’s political project to map them to communication studies, particularly those approaches such as philosophy of communication. In an era where everything appears on fire, it appears hard to know even what to do, and a reevaluation of everything, find moral foundations for a new future, built from the ground up.

Latour’s project starts from the *literal ground* of the Earth, or returns to it, in an unsentimental way. He provides caution from becoming entrapped in the concept of nature that denies politics and conflict, or a pantheistic New Age spiritualism that leads to narcissistic inaction. Instead, he defines new agonistic poles beyond political left and right, adding to this compass a third attractor of the Out-of-This-World – “the horizon of people who no longer belong to the realities of an earth that would react to their actions” (Latour 2018, 34), and the Terrestrial – those who are tired of the denial of the problem and existing in a phantasmagoric hyperreality and who are ultimately looking “for a place to land” (2018, 11). While Latour doesn’t make entries into the world of dialogue, much of the language he uses mirrors or complements concepts inherent in the work of Arnett, particularly on dialogue and hope. Arnett takes an expansive view of dialogue in which it serves as the protector of difference (and therefore ethics) in a cynical age, keeping hope alive in dark times, and finding “grounds” or dwelling places that protect this difference.

Deploying Latour (to take his own terminology) as a mutation of this line of thought, dialogue studies can take from this work an additive perspective that effectively addresses the same questions across several different registers, including science, politics, economics, and communication. The engagement with politics is necessary for discussing Latour since his *Gaia* project and the contributions to thinking this “new climatic regime” in an ethical sense. I then describe the poles, the Terrestrial and Out-of-This-World and the connections each has to relationality and dialogue. Finally, I attach these findings to existing work from Arnett to address the climate through a philosophy of communication.

Latour’s project starts with a reconceptualization of the Earth and Nature, but at its heart it is also implicitly interested in dialogue. His central question, whether or not we can “come down to Earth; [that] we shall have to *land* somewhere,” orients his approach to action in the public sphere (Latour 2018, 9). We face an existential question of whether to continue “to nourish dreams of escaping, or [to] start seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit” (2018, 11), or to continue *hoping* for a salvation divorced from communicative action. My interpretation of Latour focuses on this imperative to *come down*, to find moral ground to stand upon. This *moral* choice, as I will argue, is not simple and involves a paradoxical demand – we must choose *which* side in the “total war” that

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<sup>1</sup> This term emanates from Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* and is used in light of neoliberal economic policies impact on culture; while not unrelated to the climate crisis, I am here directly deploying this term out of context to highlight the similarities between disparate political projects seeking to flesh out and protect a future worth having.

has been occurring in the background of the twentieth century, defining friends and enemies (Latour 2017, 9), while also establishing connections with others we disagree with. Note that Latour often casts this choice not as a deliberative one, but one in which there is a right and a wrong decision to be made—in other words, as a moral choice. Situating the moral choice in the agonistic realm seems like a reframing that occurs on the side of climate denialists and nihilism, not one born of solidarity and care.

Latour's view of nature helps us define this impulse here. For Latour, the politics of the last fifty years have been, regardless of intent, framed around climate denialism (2018, 8). Despite an abundance of scientific facts and consensus, the discussion has been one of entertaining debates where audiences walk away "manipulated," thinking, "Who knows anything?" (Latour 2017, 30). This also highlights Latour's underappreciated insights in discussing dialogic communication: his insistence on ground manifests in these debates, as his conceptualization takes an indifferent public and recasts it as one unaware of the terrain. Apathy emerges not due to groundlessness, but because the public can't find "where they are" (Latour 2024, 13). Climate touches everything, and while Latour sees a positive moral virtue in returning to the Earth, it also raises serious political questions that are entirely new. He contends: what "was possible for Aristotle is no longer possible today: nature cannot unify the polity" (Latour 2017, 21). Not only is a fully holistic picture of the world impossible, but this romanticized version is also potentially self-defeating. Nature in the Latourian sense is a sensemaking operation that smooths out differences between various human and nonhuman agents in the world, removing politics and, therefore, the ability to get anything done.

Yet, this is precisely what I propose we use Latour's philosophical project to found a new organization of the public upon a sense of embeddedness in the Earth as a terrestrial home. Whereas for Aristotle this occurred in logic, here in the contemporary moment of the Anthropocene I suggest this must occur along *moral* lines, with some important considerations. For Latour, there can be no simple returning to the Earth, where recognition of planetary concerns magically erases legacies of oppression and disaster. This in turn becomes a denialism all of its own, whereby ecopolitics is substituted as a master discourse that will eventually lead us back to the same precarious moment we currently occupy. This naïve ecopolitics acts as a force that is pacifying, sentimental, and romantic, which allows us to float above the Earth and become groundless, unaffected by the moral and material challenges of our time. This disciplining function suppresses deliberative discourse by fixing a murky moral law, which works to "recall to order those who are straying from it" (Latour 2017, 24). We are all "in" nature, share common characteristics, and have common needs, but nature also differentiates and can be taken to defend hierarchy and entrenched statuses. Any discourse calling on nature in this way appeals to a natural order or natural "law" that is never defined and can be moved, twisted, and bent to serve human interests. There is no "Supreme Court of nature" (Latour 2017, 33) to appeal decisions to; that state of nature à la Hobbes is a manmade legal fiction, arising in a specific place under

specific historical circumstances. The “natural” is rotten through and through with the rhetorical.

This rubric of nature “immunizes against the risks of politics. It was conceived for the purpose” of masking the deficiencies of the social order it ultimately obfuscates (Latour 2017, 225). “Nature” creates a shared harmony that is in fact rhetorically constructed and easily crumbles under scrutiny. There is no shared story in this vision, and coalitions fall apart rather easily. It creates a shared universal that is never defined or concretized, leaving us with a dangerous primitivist myth that “if we turn toward ‘nature’ and its laws, we are necessarily going to reach agreement” — a myth that Latour shuns (2017, 226).

The ultimate moral question to ask ourselves (and one another) is *if and where* we are going to land on Earth; in the schema of nature, this central divide becomes impossible, because instead of friends and enemies we have only those we have to rehabilitate (as in: they aren’t climate deniers, they just don’t understand the science) and those we have to punish (as in: fossil pipelines are bad, but the *real* culprit is actually this other thing!). The nature perspective allows us to see the world from a false bird’s-eye view that is inaccessible, permitting delay and indifference. However, the counter to this is to advocate from a grounded place that is defined, known, and dwelled in. Latour laments that this often places a speaker in the position of being accused of apocalyptic discourse, or in a somewhat attenuated version, catastrophic discourse, which is what is *exactly* needed in order to address these questions. Communicators should not fear treading on apocalyptic undertones when that is the ground we currently inhabit—to do so is its own form of denial. Rather than scientists attempting to hide credentials and expertise, they should speak with more authority on such issues and acknowledge bias as a necessary part of existence.

## The Out-of-this-World

Latour’s attempts to send us *back* to the ground of the Earth constitute a project that seeks to address the challenges of the Anthropocene while avoiding a sentimental view of nature that neuters ethical action. Latour’s climate-based works have taken a variety of subsets that continually point back to this basis of the Earth as a reconfiguration of our present predicament. In *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose Our Souls*, he discusses how even the figure of the Terrestrial (the ‘down-to-Earth’) is abstract and needs attention to the “entanglements of the beings that constitute our soil, our habitat. These are shared exercises in the description of the conditions for life” (Latour 2024, 12). Solidarity comes not from political ideology but from shared resources for the sustaining of life and ecosystems between the human and nonhuman.

In a similar register, in *The Ecological Class: A Memo*, Latour articulates how the solidarity of a future ecological society would not be based on magical thinking of economic justice but on the struggle over classification (2022, 5). While these may appear as Latour delving into subjects that he knows little about, such as

religious scholarship<sup>2</sup> or economics, they help further sketch his depiction of the climate problem as an all-encompassing one. Even though we may all indulge a doomerism that declares the future as fully calculable and fixed, this line of thinking primarily emanates from a billionaire class that has extracted unprecedented amounts of wealth from the Earth and now seeks to “cover their tracks” as they plot escape, whether that is away from Earth or into localized, fortress-type social arrangements. Latour’s critique is best suited at the individual level, dealing with the cognitive indifference and madness of the Anthropocene, from which he suggests new forms of social organization can grow.

A compelling supplement to this account comes from Luke Winslow, a communication scholar specializing in economic history. His monograph *American Catastrophe* links several competing<sup>3</sup> discourses together that I will argue also constitute this Out-of-This-World thinking. For Winslow, there is a melding of advocates of Second Amendment rights, evangelical religious movements, and climate change denialists under the banner of “catastrophe,” which “fuels an oligarchic art of governance marked by selective forms of state intervention to defend the resources of the rich and powerful” (Winslow 2020, 154). This new political force is bound by a yearning for an eschatological moment “represented by demolition-minded perverts—arsonists with Molotov cocktails seeking to burn down institutions” in order to keep in place existing social structures (2020, 16). Winslow notes that our Habermasian, deliberative social arrangement treats such conspiratorial thinking as merely an alternate rationality so long as “myth, magic, and divine revelation . . . stay in their lane” (2020, 11). What is compelling about this account is not only the linkage of such competing ideologies operating under a single rhetorical umbrella, but its inclusiveness of eschatological disasters. Whether conscious or not, this grouping poses a discursive roadblock for thinking beyond the climate crisis to a possible future. What is needed then is a counter-discourse that overcomes this initial cynicism to thinking about other possible futures.

One competing vision of the future that I would add to Latour’s Out-of-This-World are the futures promoted by the tech industry over the last decade. One might immediately think of Elon Musk, owner of SpaceX and vocal supporter of space colonization, or Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder and owner of Blue Origin; while they are tied together both through wealth and the venture funding of space programs, what primarily ties them to the Out-of-This-World is participation in what Vanis Varoufakis (2024) calls “cloud capital,” computational systems whose opaque infrastructure continually extracts digital “rent” through everyday

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<sup>2</sup> In both *Facing Gaia* and *If We Lose the Earth, We Lose our Souls*, Latour makes special note of the work of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* for connecting the “cry of the Earth” with “the cry of the poor” as an interlinking call for action and the denial of climate denialism.

<sup>3</sup> Winslow also notes, like Latour, that many of these issues are linked by climate change, which acts as “the quintessential issue of our historical moment. It engages the entire human condition. And it combines narrative elements of big business, global economies, religion, politics, science, and media—all with the possible fate of civilization itself on the line” (Winslow 2020, 63).

activities. Musk's philosophical interests, longtermism,<sup>4</sup> focuses specifically on the deployment of such systems through artificial intelligence to extend current moral values to the solar system and beyond through the funding of these projects. MacAskill (2022) works from an existential risk frame that tries to prevent catastrophe by using computational methods to assign calculative value to scenarios. While MacAskill acknowledges a risk such as climate, it is a potential risk, but not as calculably large as *not* developing artificial intelligence, which could influence society for "millions of years" (2022, 79). In this scenario, a habitable earth is *calculably worth risking* in order to advance a technology that may pose an enormous existential risk.

Not only is the risk worth it for longtermism, but this calculative ethic is reflected in the move to create as much "value" as possible. This value becomes one enmeshed in capitalist profit maximalization, where the goal is the creation of as many consciousness as possible through artificial superintelligence. This digital natalism argues that through the promulgation of billions of intelligences in the far future is the highest ethical imperative to follow, with longtermism providing "a systematic ethical foundation for mitigating 'existential risk,' while also ensuring the development of artificial superintelligence (ASI)" (Gebru and Torres 2024, 98). Torres (2023), in his work, confirms that for longtermism "moral truth lies in the numbers. Morality, on this view, could be seen as an extension of economics" (387).

Rather than madness, such ideologies when amassed together are revealed to be perfectly sane. Perspectives such as longtermism that recognize the threat of climate change are ultimately culled by the drive for profit and extraction. It also helps illuminate the point Winslow goes on to make, that climate change denialists and evangelicals are not madmen unaware of the decisions they are making; some are even plotting on investing in the end of the world. For Latour, whether it be through technological engineering or religion, this mimics a "clumsy providence" (2017, 96) that engages in an algorithmic predestination. Such futures are presented as open, but upon closer inspection they present only one narrative of survival that closely resembles that status quo arrangements. Fantasies of escape presented through digital and material raptures are used to justify ignoring the call of responsibility to our habitat.

The linkage between tech oligarchs with extraterrestrial ambitions and Latour's Out-of-This-World is not accidental, as his metaphor is only partially meant as metaphor; he acknowledges that we could develop space programs at huge costs and "would succeed at best only in transporting a half-dozen encapsulated astronauts across inconceivable distances, from a living planet towards some dead ones" (2017, 81). His discussion verges on pathologizing,

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<sup>4</sup> Musk tweeted in 2022 that MacAskill's book, *What We Owe the Future*, and longtermism specifically were close matches for his own personal philosophy (Vaidhyanathan 2022). Although someone from the Effective Altruism movement might take pains which such a conflation, Musk, as well as Gebru and Torres's TESCREAL bundle, lump these philosophical positions together. Although they are different, I am also combining them here as a form of ethics centered on calculation.

describing the obsession with “*escaping* their attachments to the old Earth. Ready for detachment, they seem excessively naive when they encounter the prospect of reattachment to a new residence, of the alienation of a new *nomos*. They resemble astronauts ready to take off without space suits” (2017, 243). The economic injustice of such actions at a time of catastrophic disruption is also addressed, as Latour compares a specific founder as the new Medici:

“You can’t really take them seriously,” I’m told, “these pseudo-scientific ramblings of an independent old inventor who calmly asserts on television that seven-eighths of humanity will soon be wiped out because, like a new Malthus, he claims to have calculated the ‘carrying capacity’ of the planet Earth—about 300 million; and he says it’s all the same to him, anyway, because he’s going to die far above the earth, in a rocket, during a trip to space, thanks to a free ticket offered him as a reward, sponsored by none other than Richard Branson!” (2017, 84).

Despite the weight of the situation, and evidence of mounting tipping points and calamities, Latour focuses on a new relationality based *in* and *of* the Earth. Latour calls this a planetary confinement, not in the sense of a prison sentence, but as a call to recognize the important relations in the here and now, not in some catastrophic post-apocalypse fantasy of the future.

## Terrestrial Ethics (Ethics Must Be Defended)

While Latour situates an earthbound ethic, he does so in a manner that goes back to the problem of Nature: we must reject this sentimental version that destroys the backgrounds and story of those different from us. Latour meanwhile expands the notion of *who* and *what* counts while rejecting a sentimental and universalizing specter of nature that removes action. Between doomerism and sentimentalism, Latour opts for a language invoking war, opting for a praxis-oriented vision rather than stoicism or indifferent cynicism. Rather than defining an alien Other to be attacked, Latour instead asks of us what we cannot live without and what needs to be preserved, making a synthesis of what Crowley describes as the “ontological egalitarianism” which leads to a “...patient politics of negotiation, discussion, and compromise” (Crowley 2021, 100).

Latour’s negotiation in the unseen war of the twentieth century then resembles a form of dialogue, particularly one endorsed by Arnett in his philosophical call to protect difference. Arnett’s conception of an ethic stemming from dialogue focuses on human communication, acknowledging that conflict is inherent to the political animal. Grafting Latour’s work onto the study of dialogue reveals how the planetary scale necessitates a meeting between dialogue and Latour to navigate a new Anthropocene responsibility.

Even though in the Anthropocene humans act as a geological force, we are not “universifiable” (Latour 2017, 122). The Anthropocene becomes complicated because of the massive responsibility it puts on the unified category of “human action” while further splintering the notions of what the human is. We become interpellated by more and more agents, and responsibility climbs at a moment

when our ability to organize as a political group is increasingly harder. When we think of Latour, we often categorize his work under the actor-network theory umbrella or in science and technology studies; thinking through his work as that of an “accidental organization theorist” (Czarniawska, 2017) permits a vision of Latour-as-cataloguer, arranging the various human and nonhuman beings to save them best. In the Anthropocene, the act of cataloguing, or saving resembles ark imagery recalling Noah.

Latour produces a calculative argument counter to longtermism or catastrophic discourse. Latour *accounts* for other actants that help facilitate human survival, acknowledging that we are all “in it” (the “it” being the climate crisis), and that no forms of escape are truly possible. There are no saviors, whether religious or technological, coming to bail us out. We must recognize who and what we can save and continue to make dialogic alliances that help save others. Catastrophic discourse recognizes that others could be saved, but at the cost of putting oneself at risk.

We need others in order to live and exist, to continue the ecosystems that provide the delicate balance of life here on the planet. While the human (his disdainful category for those who embrace their anthropocentrism) enacts this as a top-down mastery, the Earthbound or Terrestrial do so in solidarity with other creatures who are also facing this existential threat:

To track the Terrestrials is to add conflicts of interpretation regarding what a given actor is, wants, desires, or can do, to conflicts about what other actors are, want, desire, or can do—and this applies to workers as well as to birds in the sky, to Wall Street executives as well as to bacteria in the soil, to forests as well as to animals. What do you want? What are you capable of? With whom are you prepared to cohabit? Who can threaten you? (Latour 2018, 73–74)

It is the locating of “dwelling places” —for Latour, that means more than dots on an administrative grid. Such a list is not a compendium of genus and phylum to control, but an overwhelming acknowledgment of the *lack* of care we provide, even though, for our own survival, we must preserve biodiversity and ecosystems. While catastrophic discourse puffs out its chest and declares its intention to fight for supremacy, Latour acknowledges the moral position is one that states a desire to fight for solidarity—how many can I help, how many can I save?—as the new Anthropocene virtues.

Our virtues, then, should come from the ground we walk (the Earth) and from our recognition of finitude in the acceptance that the habitable planet of our childhood is gone, but not lost. Latour recognizes that nihilism is but another false escape when there is so much still to save and protect. He squarely opposes the Out-of-This-World as a negative force which, if allowed to continue, will never relinquish the fantasy that has gotten us here in the first place. It is an agonistic view paradoxically rooted in care, seeking to move past the bad news it heralds and move onto the hard work of talking and building connections.

In this last turn, Latour dodges any fallback into a romantic sentimentality that would unite people, cultures, animals, plants, and others under some global banner and (finally) allow us to declare war on climate change. Such calls are

designed in order to dissuade us from action by catastrophists who see climate denial as the basis of political or financial projects that herald the end of one world and the opportunity for another. Although we are all “in it,” Latour situates this new political consciousness not in connection but in conflict, due to the inability to distribute responsibility to *all* things. Rather than a *kumbaya* moment of togetherness, the Anthropocene immediately invites conflicts, some from the catastrophists, but also amongst those we which we aim to save. This *scalability* (Tsing 2012) of responsibility declares predictive, purely calculative models as defunct without concern for otherness. Life itself is dialogic, based upon loops and feedback from different scales of systems that we often do not even perceive. To attempt escape from this is to float in an empty, lonely abyss.

This call to responsibility has deep resonances with the work of Arnett and his corpus on communication ethics and dialogue. Starting with the call of the Face from his interpretation of Levinas, Arnett (2017) works to understand relationality from a philosophical viewpoint that privileges difference but also respects that difference from being a permissive, relativistic wave that enables all action to be absolved therapeutically.<sup>5</sup> Both Arnett and Latour return to their respective areas of study with that weight of responsibility or, phrased differently, with stakes. Arnett reminds us that “dark times” have always existed; in a single page in his book on Hannah Arendt, he touches upon both her lament over the Sputnik launch (men attempting to escape the earth) as well as the major contradiction within modernity of labor being both glorified and automated away at the same time (Arnett 2013, 64). These present as similar issues to the ones we face today from Out-of-This-World projects which promise escape.

Arnett’s vision of dialogue and Latour’s vision of climate politics also have similar connective tissues in regard to this particular historical moment; while Arnett maps out the importance of identifying historical situatedness so that we may actually stake out and know our grounding, Latour sketches a political project where the act of grounding is in itself a moral endeavor. His Gaia project “is a *power of historicization*.” More simply, as its name indicates, “Gaia is the signal telling us to come back to the Earth” (Latour 2017, 219). The specter of dark times is often more terrifying on the horizon to come; in dark times, we still find joy, hope, love, and community even amidst difficulty. Being aware of living in dark times or not is central in shaping action.

Politics and dialogue mix in this search for ground. As Matt Mancino (2024) articulates in his essay on Arnett’s metaphors of ground, soil, and mud, reference to the world around us demands more than just an abstract philosophical system, which can result in what Arnett terms “existential homelessness” (2024, 116). It is the *stuff* of the everyday that makes up our communicative lives and gives us our story and meaning; this is not to say that calamities examined through existential risk studies are not pertinent, but when they eclipse the self and become the entire

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this permissive structure pertaining to Dostoyevsky’s famous quip on religious prohibition, see Slavoj Žižek, “From Politics to Biopolitics . . . and Back,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (2004): 501–21.

story, we lose our sense of place. In *To Lose the Earth* he laments this desire to drive away from the soil and muddy things that make life worth living, exasperatingly claiming that “to ‘escape’ from their grip is therefore meaningless; you might as well not want to exist at all” (Latour 2024, 29). *They* in this scenario being the worms that aerate the soil, the birds that then feast on these and help pollinate our wilds, and the greater ecosystems we participate in (Latour 2024, 29). In an era where the fantasy of escape to dead planets presumes the loss of a planet we still have, grounding ourselves, knowing our ground, becomes a profound imperative.

The terrestrial project, then, is not one in which a definitive vision of a post-climate-crisis world might look like, but the recognition of others sharing time on a planet in crisis: “there is nothing more contemporary than to negotiate landing on some ground” (Latour 2018, 49–50). It is, above all else, a dialogic project, one that acknowledges difference not as some abstract value, but as a basis for communication itself. To deny the perils of the climate crisis is madness, but to insist on a nonpolitical flattening of difference also invites chaos. We must recognize in the rhetoric of the catastrophists that there will be tough decisions, but those who, unlike them, stand terrestrially, in solidarity with the Earth and its occupants (human and nonhuman), stand a far better chance. Who I can protect and what I choose to protect do not come from some natural law that ultimately turns out to be human, all-too-human; rather, it is the dialogic decisions of who I choose to meet and what vision of the future I choose to invest in—the catastrophist, escapist one, or the one that I can walk outside this moment and touch. The Gen-Z slogan to get off the internet and to “go touch grass” rings out as a fine philosophical position.

Again, Latour positions Gaia not as a sentimental nature or goddess but as a “simple result of such a distribution of final causes is not the emergence of a supreme Final Cause, but a fine *muddle*” (2018, 100). There is no easy, clean way out of this. This is where the Mobius strip of an Arnett-Latourian conjunction bears fruit: whereas Latour provides a diagnosis of the issues in finding ground, his agonistic vision derived from looking into the future can be tempered (but not softened) with dialogic language. The Levinasian call is also not simple, nor non-threatening; it serves as a relentless, supernatural force that stalks, even compels us to responsibility—it is the phone continuing to ring despite being turned off or its battery being removed.

Arnett’s dialogic vision (and here, I argue, Latour’s as well) appears different in that it advocates not for an “us-versus-them” interlocutor relationship but for a recognition of position based on meaning and story. As the author has attempted (poorly) to explain to his five-year-old while introducing him to card games, we are playing with the cards face up—not to *cheat* but to *learn how to play the game better*. Once this common ground is established, and once we understand clearly articulated positions, play, agile maneuvering, and political gamesmanship can all enter and enhance the experience. Without understanding the base rules or sharedness of the game, it collapses in on itself. Insisting on some playing face-up while others are in the dark allows the fantasy of different worlds (and false categorical superiority) to fester.

What makes this an especially important contribution to dialogue studies today is Latour's call to *both* a warlike defense of strong positions on issues while also fostering connectivity with those on the opposing side presents a paradox that dialogue can mediate. We are to signal who are allies and who are enemies, which seems to increase polarization; yet Latour's real adversary is not political alignments, which he sidesteps with a new set of axes based on the Earth *as ground* and the Out-of-This-World, but indifference and cynicism that rests purely in this middle position. The cynicism of unmet high expectations (Arnett and Arneson, 1999), situates the burned-out true believers on either pole who eventually end in a muddled middle. In an era of AI deepfakes, post-truth, and fractured reality, Latour's fixation on the Earth refers us back to a common ontological referent from which to address one another, one grounded (literally) in everyday experience.

This "realism" is less a realist school than a rejection of the denialist claims. After postmodernism, the rhetorical play of an unbiased commentator or neutral ombudsman that is without sin (religious, financial, or mediated) or impurity has suffered epistemic attacks in this period. Latour's own history, from actor-network theory progenitor to a champion of science, empiricism, and shared reality, highlights the need for new forms of communication on important topics. Latour as a rhetor professes his bias, dictates what is shared between him and a *global audience* (the Terrestrials), and advocates for mutual understanding and action. While the call of the Earth is incredibly inclusive (we all live here), it does create antagonists; those committed to destruction, both of the planet and of consequences of such adventures. He calls attention to what is shared and loved between one another as a species, the shared air, beauty, resources, and ground that make up the planet and serve as connective tissue for a new politics and communicative praxis.

What is special about Latour's project is that it is animated not by a call to primitivism but by a recognition of a shared world along with shared responsibilities for that world, although distributed unevenly and oftentimes unjustly. It is these details that often fracture coalitions, which is why Latour's grounding in the Earth, a thing most of us shall never leave and can touch at any time, returns over and over as a north star. It is the simplicity that resists rhetorical interventions. In the film *First Reformed* (Schrader 2017), Ethan Hawke's character Reverend Toller is a priest of a local failing parish next to a rising megachurch. Toller has a parishioner radicalized by climate politics, and the stewardship of the planet begins to weigh heavily on him. In a conversation with a local business owner who is financing the renovations to his church, he asks that Toller tone down any climate rhetoric at a lavish reconsecration ceremony. Mr. Balq insists that many climate issues are "complicated" and not easy. There are data and scientific models, political allegiances, national security, economic interests—Toller retorts that it *can* be simple. Latour's grounding gives us this foundation, not so we can become entrenched, but as a starting place to *talk* from.

We must heed Latour's call to return to the Earth while not, at the same time, revisiting a sentimental view of nature that removes our responsibility for action and that asks of us who we are willing to defend and protect. This does not necessarily frame an implicit need or desire for violence but rather protects values,

people(s), and institutions that require unending amounts of care and work to keep them going.

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