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Scales of Wellness and Ecology

In the following essay I hope to explore neoliberal capitalist concepts of 'wellness' and how western culture has responded to the ecological crisis by viewing the earth through this ableist prism of thought. To illustrate this, I will be discussing theories of biopolitics by Michel Foucault and object-oriented philosophy by Graham Harman, as well as exploring alternatives to the concept of ecological wellness through the writing of Yve Lomax and Timothy Morton, and the performance art of Martin O'Brien.

What is 'wellness?'

In recent years the concept of wellness has become something of a buzzword, an aspirational term that conjures up images of yoga, health foods, essential oil diffusers. The crisis of physical and mental health (or perhaps simply a new level candour in speaking about these things) was caused by an unsustainable culture which, as described by Foucault in *Birth of Biopolitics*, encourages individuals to view themselves as an asset to invest in (through education, work, health, improving social status etc.), in order increase their human capital. In response to this crisis, corporations have commodified the concept of wellness, incorporating it into this system of investment.

John Berger's essay on advertising in *Ways of Seeing* highlights how advertising highlights a lack and promises a future in which the viewer is improved, living a somehow richer life that transcends the mere gaining of a possession.¹ One form of this elusive richness is the idea of 'wellness' – which one can supposedly come closer to attaining through attending an exercise class or buying a green juice. A sibling of wellness is 'self-care,' a term originally used by activists as a radical reclamation of bodies controlled by the state, now has been largely co-opted as an advertising tool, a synonym for taking part in luxury.²

This mixed rhetoric creates a paradox, in which the individual is encouraged simultaneously to view themselves both as an economic entity and as a 'self' for which they should 'care'. The conception of the modern wellness is traced back to the 1950s, at which time Halbert L. Dunn, Chief of National [American] Office of Vital Statistics, outlined the term as a state that was not just about health maintenance, but about optimisation:

“an integrated method of functioning, which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable.”³

¹ John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*. (London: Penguin Books. 2008) 131-2

² Aisha Harris. "How "Self-Care" Went From Radical to Frou-Frou to Radical Once Again." Slate Magazine. April 05, 2017. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2017/04/the_history_of_self_care.html?via=gdpr-consent.

³ Ben Zimmer. "Wellness." The New York Times. April 16, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/magazine/18FOB-onlanguage-t.html>.

This aim of 'maximising potential' highlights the fact that the neoliberal notion of wellness is not purely marketed towards the consumer, however, but also towards the worker. A perfect example of this is the Goldsmiths 'Be well, do well' campaign, which encourages students to attend individual sessions such as 'walking for wellness' rather than investing in the underfunded Wellbeing department, and structurally addressing the mental health crisis on campus. While these individual, self-led, wellness experiences are not necessarily harmful in and of themselves, they distract from the structural issues at hand and shift responsibility from the institution to the students, all of which is supposed to allow them to 'do well' i.e. get good grades. This betrays the fact that to the institution, students have become metrics, output numbers, rather than human beings.

Similarly, more and more workplaces are focussing their efforts into making themselves appear less alienating with office pets, beanbags and bright colours, without addressing the unequal power structures which make them profitable. This, in short, is because this kind of wellness is about increasing productivity, not true worker empowerment. Foucault describes this perfectly:

'The return to the enterprise is therefore at once an economic policy or a policy of the economisation of the entire social field, of an extension of the economy to the entire social field, but at the same time a policy which presents itself or seeks to be a kind of Vitalpolitik with the function of compensating for what is cold, impassive, calculating, rational, and mechanical in the strictly economic game of competition.'⁴

A final element of wellness is that it is self-regulating. There seems to be a moral value attached to one's level of wellness, both through the performance of 'wellness practices' and through outward 'signifiers of wellness', many of which coincide with hegemonic ideals, e.g. thinness, confidence, physical attractiveness. This can be seen within Instagram culture, or websites such as Gwyneth Paltrow's website *Goop*, which promotes a complex assortment of lifestyle advice (all of which require significant amounts of disposable time and money,) implying that if one simply follows these rules, one can attain Paltrow's level of success and happiness.

This connection between success and morality is resonant of Weber's theory of Protestant Work Ethic, largely based on the tenets of Calvinism, which strongly believes in predestination – that humanity is divided into the saved and the damned. Calvinists believe that, although one cannot know for sure which category one falls under, it is necessary to consider oneself to be saved, and as such, a tool of divine will. As Calvinism sees God as manifesting His will through worldly works, material success is deemed as an objective measure of God's favour. Thus, to be successful (specifically here in relation to capital) is to be blessed. The following quote from Weber, to me, resonates with Dunn's previous definition of wellness:

"The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system."⁵

Similar to success, we only have a modicum of control about how healthy or 'well' we are. In current western culture, Weber's concept of Work Ethic can be applied to wellness. If a person is

⁴ Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart. *The Birth of Biopolitics Lectures at the College De France, 1978-1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 242

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (London: Unwin University Books, 1930) 117

unwell, or lacks signifiers of wellness, they are judged to be morally lacking, and not 'looking after themselves.' There is an assumption that if they practiced wellness appropriately, then they would be healthy. In the UK notably, this leads to the idea that these individuals do not deserve healthcare, since they 'choose' to live an unhealthy lifestyle. This is especially apparent in my own experience of living with chronic illness: I am frequently recommended various fad diets, supplements and exercise regimes by people who know nothing about my condition, much less being health professionals. Another chronic condition, ME/Chronic fatigue syndrome, was colloquially referred to as 'yuppie flu' until recent years.⁶

This kind of judgement and mistrust of the unwell is disproportionately heaped upon the disabled, working class, and people of colour, who are painted as drains on society, while the visibly healthy are promoted as aspirational examples. Individuals are matriculated by the state into two categories: fit for work/not fit for work, labels which value them solely on their potential as a resource of labour. Both labels exist in a space of precarity for the unwell person – if they are unfit, they will be under constant scrutiny to assess if this is truly the case, if they are fit, they are subject to the unrealistic, harmful demands of the capitalist workplace, or they must choose unemployment and starve.

The Problem of Ecological Wellness

In recent years, the way we view the Earth has shifted. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, Martin Heidegger's theory of tools and equipment in *Being and Time* states that we can either use a tool, or simply look at it and try to understand it on an intellectual level. When we are using the tool, our focus shifts from it to the task which we are using it to perform. In the case of the Earth, humanity has attempted to do both of these things – we have used it as a resource, for food, housing etc, and we have studied its form and behaviours. Graham Harman asserts that there is yet another way of approaching a tool, which is when we are using it, but it is not functioning in the way we expect; at this time, a kind of 'breakdown' occurs, and our focus shifts from the task back to the tool. This is the shift that has occurred due to the advent of climate change. Through the industrial revolution, we used the Earth recklessly, without considering that there might be long term consequences; we were focussed on the outcome of this usage: power (steam and electrical, economic and social.) Now is the time where our tool has begun to malfunction – resources are depleting, landscapes are mutating – and we must again turn our attention back to it, to try and resolve the issues. This way of interpreting the shift is from a capitalist viewpoint.

There is however, an alternative, which is described in Yve Lomax's *Sounding the Event*, and through Timothy Morton's Mesh in *The Ecological Thought*.⁷ This could be described as 'living *as* Earth', rather than '*on* Earth'. Morton and Lomax both propose that humanity has created a false sense of separation from the rest of nature – the latter uses the metaphor of 'bridge-building' to

⁶ "Getting over 'yuppie Flu', The Guardian. October 10, 2009.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/oct/09/chronic-fatigue-syndrome-xmrv-research>.

⁷ Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.) 38

explain this, but in reality, Lomax refers to is the hierarchical structures that (particularly western) societies build to create the illusion of dominance over the environment:

‘in making connections do not bridges make the disconnected? It may be assumed that a separation exists before the construction of a bridge, but it is the bridge-building that forges the separation [...] it is the erection of the bridge that establishes the two sides and makes the vacancy of the void.’⁸

The actual situation, as argued by the two theorists, is that humanity is connected on all sides to everything in nature, on the same level, and that these relations and differences define our existence.

The problem of Ecological Wellness arises in a combination of these two approaches – eco-consumerism. This system is sympathetic to Earth, anthropomorphising, even. Viral videos of turtles with disposable straws sticking out of their noses pull at the heartstrings of many social media users, inspiring movements such as going ‘plastic free’, buying electric cars and religiously recycling. None of this can be said to be truly harmful, but it places blame on the consumer, distracting from the fact that only 100 companies are responsible for 71% of carbon emissions since 1988 – in short, the common individual’s lifestyle modifications will very little to impact climate change.⁹ In wanting to be more mindful of the Earth, we have mistakenly made it into a unified, humanised subject, one that we can separate from ourselves and project our binary concepts of illness and wellness onto.

This anthropomorphising of Earth can be traced back in multiple cultures: the Greek Goddess Gaia, Mother Nature of the western middle ages, Mama Pacha of Inca Mythology, and Phra Mae Thorani of Buddhist mythology. Notably, all these figures are literal or figurative mothers, symbols of female fertility and care, making them all the more sympathetic, the sentiment being: ‘while the Earth is an entity separate to us, she is our mother, and we owe her respect for nurturing us and providing us with a home. We have made her sick with our careless behaviour and now we must heal her.’ While this approach to the ecological may have worked in earlier cultures, our current cultural model does not allow the space needed for this process of ‘healing.’

As mentioned previously, within neoliberalist capitalism, one is either sick or well, fit for work, or unfit for work. If at all possible, the former should be a temporary state which actively moves towards the latter. If this is impossible, the individual is seen as a drain on society and disregarded. Where, then, does ‘Mother Nature’ fit into this framework? Since, like Harman’s faulty tool, she is not functioning to human satisfaction, she must be diagnosed and treated. Climate change has been the diagnosis, but instead of holistic treatment, a few cells (humans) in her body have been instructed to change their behaviour in order to resolve the wider problem. Even larger scale changes, such as ‘renewable energy’ smack of capitalism – we are looking for a resource which we can use indefinitely, that will not run out, while also maintaining the habitability of the planet we live on. This would be a substantial ‘cure’ to our current climate crisis, since providing energy and shelter is one of the primary ways in which we perceive the world to ‘work’ for us.

In his talk ‘Being Ecological,’ Timothy Morton mentions another climate crisis, the Holocene, during the Mesopotamian dawn of agriculture, which he cites as being the beginning of this flawed

⁸, Yve Lomax. *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.) 10

⁹ Martin Lukacs, "Neoliberalism Has Conned Us into Fighting Climate Change as Individuals | Martin Lukacs." *The Guardian*. July 17, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/true-north/2017/jul/17/neoliberalism-has-conned-us-into-fighting-climate-change-as-individuals>.

approach to ecology. Food shortages caused humans to form cities, store food, and create a separation between humans and what is considered 'nature'. The essence of this approach is to be goal orientated, to have a plan of getting from a 'here' to a 'there.' What Morton proposes instead, is that the importance is not on *what* we do, but on *how* we do it: to be gentle, thoughtful and present in thinking ecologically.¹⁰

This projection of capitalist ideas onto nature can be seen on a smaller scale, as well as a global one. One only has to look at the common misinterpretation of the phrase 'survival of the fittest' to describe evolution. People often use this as a biological-essentialist justification for ableism, claiming that in nature, the strongest, fastest, and generally 'healthiest' animals survive to reproduce, and therefore, eugenic ideas simply follow the laws of evolution. This, as Morton points out, is untrue. The ones which survive are those which are most well adapted to their environment, which could be different depending on location, time period, etc. This may have nothing to do with strength, but to do with an ability to camouflage effectively, or being small enough to hide from predators:

'Life Forms didn't evolve holistically, and they didn't even evolve with a point (telos): there is nothing inevitable in evolution. If you could see evolution happening rapidly, you wouldn't be tempted to say something like "look at those wings: how perfectly developed for flying through the sky" Not all water birds have webbed feet. Like a horror movie, evolution is as much about disintegration as it is about things coming together.'¹¹

Mucus Factory: An Exercise in Performative Sickness

Martin O'Brien's performance piece *Mucus Factory* is a compelling illustration of the effects of wellness culture on the individual, which, I believe, also offers insight into the neoliberal approach to ecology discussed above.

In the gallery space, O'Brien has created his own environment, a collection of medical devices, which he uses in conjunction with various physical exercises, to bring mucus (a product of his Cystic Fibrosis) up out of his lungs, depositing it in small plastic sample jars.

While the layout appears sterile, the performance itself is entirely the opposite. The viewer watches from only a couple of meters away as the artist takes part in exercises which almost evoke sadomasochism- slapping his chest until it is bright red, jumping up and down on a trampoline while coughing violently, spitting out mucus, squatting and inserting a nebuliser into his anus while wearing seatless white briefs. He also applies

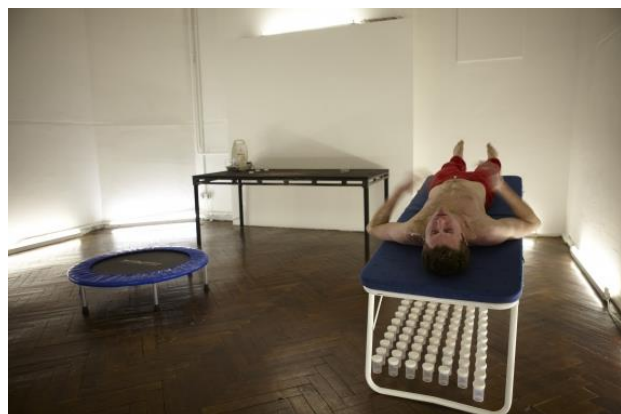


Figure 1. Martin O'Brien, *Mucus Factory*, Performance (2011)
Photograph: Manuel Vason

¹⁰ Timothy Morton, "Being Ecological." Lecture. January 29, 2018.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_5UWI-SEVE.

¹¹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 44

glitter to his bare chest with his hands, a playful interruption of a body presented as a 'medical specimen'. It is a visceral and intimate experience.¹²

In doing so, O'Brien transforms his body into an object, a literal 'factory' which functions only to improve/produce its own wellness. The mucus is simply a bi-product. This process brings questions of motive – a factory can achieve wellness but it cannot enjoy the state of wellness, it just continues to produce. The mucus keeps coming. In performing this violent routine for long periods, he is at risk of damaging and exhausting his body in the pursuit of clearing his lungs. This is the violence of neoliberalism on the body, a constant and striving for improvement and production that ultimately does more harm than good. Foucault describes this as 'biopolitics' in *Society Must be Defended*:

'control of life and the biological processes of man as species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularised'¹³

However, a key aspect of biopolitical self-regulation is that it is done in private. The unwell must not impose the spectre of their illness on the well, as this reminder of the viewer's own physical fallibility is not only disturbing, but acknowledges sickness as a common experience, not one to be ashamed of. This pursuit of wellness is not the approved, commodified version that is familiar to them: the well merely improving on their wellness. By making the abject process of his therapy a spectacle, O'Brien breaks the constructed boundary between wellness and sickness, he intrudes on healthy space by becoming visible.

This radical act is what Morton describes as a key tenet of thinking ecologically: 'intimacy with the strange stranger', in other words, embracing the connections between ourselves and those linked to us through difference. In *Mucus Factory*, O'Brien becomes the 'strange stranger', forcing the viewer to recognise the similarities to themselves in his bodily functions as well as the clear difference. Instead of a mythical figure of illness, the artist insists on exhibiting his humanity in an extremely vulnerable way.

Conclusion

While some of the parallels drawn between wellness and ecology in this essay might seem anecdotal, my hope is to unpick some of the ideological issues in both areas, turning instead to holistic viewpoints for a more nuanced way of thinking ecology. By acknowledging connections through difference between the social and the natural, one can try to undo unnecessary 'bridge-building' where there was no gap to begin with. Developing an ecological methodology involves not only deconstructing barriers between the humans and nature, but between every superfluous

¹² Martin O'Brien. "LADA Presents: Access All Areas, Live Art and Disability – Martin O'Brien, "Mucus Factory"." (Vimeo, October 3, 2013) <https://vimeo.com/76056220>.

¹³ Michel Foucault and François Ewald. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. (London: Penguin, 2008.) 246-7

barrier we encounter. We only exist through our difference to other things, and to truly progress we must embrace these connections, whenever and wherever they appear:

‘We can't ever predict who or what strange strangers are, whether they are a "who" or a "what." If we can, then we are still clinging to a reified concept of Nature, whether it's the old school version or a new and improved version'¹⁴

¹⁴ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 46

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Images

Figure 1. Martin O'Brien, Mucus Factory. Performance (Photograph: Manuel Vason, 2011) Source:
<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/restock-rethink-reflect-two-on-live-art-and-disability-2009-2012/>