David Wood

Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human

New York: Fordham University Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-0-823-28136-1 (PB) $16.00. 176pp.

David Wood's *Deep Time, Dark Times* is a brief, speculative overview of what philosophy contributes to the pressing need to reimagine our 'matter of dwelling' in the face of climate catastrophe (p. 132). For Wood, the sobering predictions of climate science force on us a new vision of who and what we are, the moral imperative that 'we cannot go on like this', changing our conceptions of time, reality, agency, humanity and life in general (p. 81). More specifically, the Anthropocene entails a thinking of 'Deep Time' and 'geological consciousness', this deep time decentring the privilege attached to more limited, human time scales, forcing on us a recognition of our 'terrestrial responsibility' for the planet as a whole (pp. 11, 1). What would it mean, Wood asks, to take on this terrestrial responsibility, to acknowledge our destruction of the planet and change our ways? It would require, he contends, an array of transformations: from radically rethinking our 'economic system' and developing a notion of the 'human' not essentially separate from nature to harnessing our affective attachments to motivate social change, and, of particular interest to Wood, embracing 'the impossible' in order to avoid 'the unthinkable', climate catastrophe forcing on us the need for new social formations unimaginable within our current society (pp. 63, 21, 44, 107). It is, Wood argues, the ability to help us think these 'impossible' transformations that marks philosophy's potential contribution to our negotiation of the Anthropocene; Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida offering us resources for reimagining ourselves and the world.

At the heart of *Deep Time, Dark Times* is a chapter length reading of Nietzsche's 'The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'. Nietzsche's work offers an 'expansion of the "we" [of currently existing human life] into life itself', his emphasis on the 'active' and

'creative' possibilities of 'forgetting' showing how we might 'work through', and thereby

create anew, our concept of 'the human' (p. 56). Key to this creation is the recognition of

ourselves as 'the product of historical, evolutionary, and geological processes', a recognition

that entails not only a conception of the human not radically separate from nature but also

'new values', Nietzsche's critical history 'welcoming', for example, 'a wider sense of life,

one that include[s] nonhumans [...] as equal stakeholders on planet earth', as well as, 'future

generations' that will not exist if we do not change our ways (p. 56). For Wood, Nietzsche's

account of history expands the limits of what it means to be human, this expansion contesting

the violent, unsustainability of contemporary human life. Wood further develops this

broadening of humanity in his engagement with Heidegger and Derrida.

As with Nietzsche's thinking of history, Wood reads Heidegger as 'clearing the way'

for a reimagining of the human. Tying together themes from across Heidegger's corpus,

Wood argues that Heidegger's concept of 'attunement' opens up a potential harnessing of

'the rightfully magnetic power' of our 'everyday' affective relationship to the world, our

feelings of 'curiosity', 'delight' and 'wonder' helping to protect us against overly

instrumental understandings of nature, science and ourselves (p. 40). This resistance to the

instrumental and Heidegger's fundamental critique of the dualism between thought and

action 'parallels', Wood contends, the difficulty 'eco-warriors' face in trying to articulate the

move 'from thinking outside the box to acting and wanting outside the book', Heidegger

clearing the way for potentially new conceptions of action, one developed in Wood's

engagement with Derrida (p. 69).

The central ethical imperative of Wood's text is that we must think 'the impossible' in

order to avoid the 'unthinkable' (p. 107). Building on his readings of Nietzsche and

Heidegger, Wood contends that Derrida's account of the impossible, the way in which the

deconstructiblity of all systems entails the radical transformability of all systems, offers both

a resource against despair and a prod toward thinking responses to climate change (p. 107).

Wood's hope is that by showing that the impossible is, in fact, always possible, never utterly foreclosed, Derrida's work opens the potential to think radically new social formations, from the raising of children in common (p. 114) and the rethinking of consumerism (pp. 116–117) to new forms of community and information transfer made possible via the 'soft technologies' of the internet and Facebook (p. 128). Now Wood is keenly aware that none of these potential transformations is a magic pill, nor, as he reminds us more than once, do they offer a direct roadmap for turning the possible into the actual. Remaking ourselves and the world is messy business, and I think it is one of the merits of *Deep Time, Dark Times* that it does not shy away from suggesting concrete potentialities and reasons for hope. Yet while I am sympathetic to the spirit of Wood's text, sharing his conviction that philosophy ought to assist our confrontation with climate catastrophe, the book suffers from several essential drawbacks.

Deep Time, Dark Times is an expanded version of talks Wood gave as part of the *Thinking Out Loud* lectures in philosophy and society. They are meant to engage a broad audience, eschewing, in general, close readings for provocative snapshots. There is, of course, real merit to this kind of public philosophy, but the price paid here is that Wood's overview of the philosophical stakes of climate change will be familiar to folks with even a passing familiarity with environmental philosophy in the continental tradition. In addition, Wood's focus on Nietzsche's, Heidegger's and Derrida's work causes him to largely bypass discussions in the literature around the questions he raises. One of the results of this is that he ends up giving well-worn answers to many of the questions at issue. For example, while arguing that we must 'jettison' a traditional notion of humanism, and framing his account as 'posthumanist', Wood defends 'a fairly traditional sense of responsibility', one meant to justify 'small-scale environmental activism', which is to say, basically lifestyle politics such as reducing one's carbon footprint (pp. 88–89). Yet while Wood is certainly right that it cannot hurt to be more climate conscious, there is nothing new in such an argument.

Moreover, such 'traditional' answers appear odd in a text whose primary ethical thrust is an insistence on the 'impossible.'

The most disappointing aspect of *Deep Time, Dark Times* is its failure to follow through the very thinking of impossibility for which it argues. If we are going to embrace the impossible, let's go much bigger than collective families and lifestyle politics. Let's go general strikes and universal basic income just for starters. Let's reimagine our lives, but let's go crazier than 'promot[ing] new forms of employment' like 'personal trainers, counsellors, [and] dog-walkers' (pp. 125–126). Let's imagine a world without income or the commodity form, where one contributes by simply existing. Following Wood, let's utilise in our response to climate change the currents of continental philosophy that take impossible thoughts as their call, because Wood is right: 'we can't go on like this', we also cannot afford to limit the radicalism of this thought in the way Wood does.

RICK ELMORE

Appalachian State University, USA