

# Annihilating Critique: Walter Benjamin's World Politics as the Just-Sharing of Nature

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## ABSTRACT

This article develops an outline of Walter Benjamin's idea of annihilating critique as presented in his essay fragment entitled "Theological-Political Fragment." Annihilating critique is a world politics that releases thought from thinking the good in terms of relativised values and the efficiency of means, in order to think the good as absolute value. My claim is that such a critique is needed to respond to the demand of climate change: the call to me from an immanent outside to change my relation to nature from one based on possessiveness in systems of relative value (the neoliberal market), where the good of nature becomes my own self-interest, to one based on non-possessive having of the good of nature as sharing in common. In developing this critique, the article proposes the concept of just-sharing – the common sharing of the good of nature – through a reading of Benjamin's brief notes entitled "Notes to a Study on the Category of Justice," in which a subject is retrieved as the *novum* of critique. Through just-sharing, a non-possessive subject – one capable of thinking the good of nature as just – is proposed. Such a subject takes responsibility for ends it shares with others by naming them and acting as an agent of their fulfilment. Further reading of Benjamin's essays on the task of the poet outlines how critique in the name of a non-possessive subject can become a praxis of poetizing, where the critical act itself partakes of the good of nature as just-sharing.

## KEYWORDS

Walter Benjamin, critique, the subject, environmental politics, virtue, nature, poetics, Jean-Luc Nancy, neoliberalism

## Introduction

My concern in this paper is motivated by the urgent demand that I think the justice of being-with nature in light of scientific facts relating to anthropogenic climate change (United Nations). The crisis of climate change is attributable to the overconsumption of the natural resources of the planet and their recycling as toxic waste that accelerates environmental degradation and global warming; while the *problem* of overconsumption relates to the hegemony of a style of thinking and acting that favours possessive “having” over non-possessive “sharing” on a global scale. To respond to the demand of climate change – the demand that I do something about the environmental crisis engulfing the planet – I must change my style of thinking from possessiveness to non-possessiveness; from having to sharing, and, in so doing, change the conditions under which I enact my freedom to think otherwise within the limits of critique.

The aim of what follows is to read a selection of Walter Benjamin’s essays in order to draw from them a critique based on a non-possessive relation to nature. My initial selection of essays is limited to two essay fragments: “Notes to a Study on the Category of Justice,” and “Theological-Political Fragment,” both of which concern the possibility of a world politics grounded in the non-possessive thought of nature as absolute value. I will also draw from Benjamin’s essays concerning the task of the poet-critic, especially “Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin,” as a means of developing a critical reading strategy that partakes of the poem’s power to open thought to the other. By bringing these two strands of Benjamin’s thought together, my aim is to develop a critique of the human-nature relation as an act of self-legislation based on the non-possessive partaking of the “good” of nature grounded in the critical act itself. In undertaking this task, the essay itself becomes self-legislating, in that it sets forth the condition of my own freedom in the work it does to help form a just world in being free with others.

Under the rule of *homo oeconomicus* – the subject of neoliberal market economics – my freedom is predicted on my economic self-interest within a market-based economy – a system of relativised value exchange based on “efficient means” (Ellul 19); that is, regulation for its own sake. [1] Under this regime, the other is absorbed into the system of value exchange as a possessable good. In this case, the good of the good – its intrinsic or absolute value – is denied in favour of my own self-interest. Alternatively, in a non-possessive value exchange, goods are exchanged according to a common good shared by all participants in the life of the exchange itself. My self-interest is not in possessing the good for myself, but in sharing the good of which I partake as a condition of my being free.

[1] For *homo oeconomicus* and neoliberalism see Brown (32).

The demand of climate change calls us to think of the common good in terms not only of the *socius* – the identity relation I have with other human beings – but also of the *oikeios* – the “web of life” – as the whole of the natural *organon*, including both human and non-human life (Moore). Demands of the *socius* are already part of the *oikeios* and are thus inherently ecological, while demands of the *oikeios* – those referring themselves to the “wrongs” inflicted on nature – are already political, requiring a subject

capable of both receiving and acting on the demand in terms of its universality; that is, in terms of the human relation to nature as just. A non-possessive critique of the human-nature relation would need to acknowledge the common good in terms of an *oikeios* that includes the *socius* without being determined by it, thereby framing its freedom to think otherwise in terms of justice that always exceeds human self-interest.

### Just-sharing

How does Benjamin approach the idea of justice? In brief notes Benjamin had written in conversation with Gershom Scholem in 1916 and published as “Notes to a Study on the Category of Justice,” he proposes absolute value (a category derived from Kant) in terms of justice as a non-possessable good: “[Justice] lies in the conditions of a good that cannot be possessed – a good through which all goods become propertyless” (“Notes” 166). Here Benjamin proposes the right to “a good that cannot be possessed,” or what Peter Fenves, in his reading of these notes, calls the “good-right of the good” – the right of the good to be itself – as opposed to the “possession-right of the person” (Fenves 200). In these terms, the good-right of nature would be its justice – its right to be itself as non-possessable. Fenves argues that Benjamin’s proposal in the notes “is a philosophical-juridical *novum*, which directs attention away from the character of the subject and toward that of object made into a good by virtue of the claim made upon it” (200). However, in turning to the notes again, we discover that for Benjamin, the good-right of the good is not limited to the right of nature as an object made good (as Fenves argues), but extends to the right of the subject as well. Here is the relevant passage:

There is, namely the entirely abstract right of the subject to every good on principle, a right that is not based on needs but rather on justice and whose last inclination will not possibly concern the right of possession of the individual but a right to goods of the good. (“Notes” 166)

We now see that in objectifying justice as an absolute good, Benjamin’s critique also requires a subject with a non-possessive “right to goods of the good;” that is, a right to share in the good on the basis of justice. I propose to name this right just-sharing. I argue that we need to extend Benjamin’s *novum* to include the subject as having rights to the good of nature based on just-sharing.

Just-sharing captures some of what Benjamin is driving at here: the non-possessive distribution of the good-right of justice “as the state of the world or a state of God” (“Notes” 166), where the former relates to the justice due to the “existing,” while the latter relates to the “virtue” of those whose responsibility to act is “demanded.” In environmental terms, just-sharing would be a response to the demand of nature (e.g. the injurious effects of climate change as the “existing” injustice) that seeks to form a world grounded in the good-right of nature as just through a subject acting “virtuously,” that is, non-possessively. As I will argue, such a response

becomes virtuous – for the good – when subjectivised into a political praxis of world-forming based on the non-possessiveness of just-sharing.

### **Homo oeconomicus – Homo reflectus – Homo politicus**

A critique based on the sharing of common goods in which I am both active participant and beneficiary requires a new type of subject – *homo reflectus* – whose thinking is shaped by the struggle to bring into view another world – a world whose beginnings are framed by the openness of chance. Why chance? To think as *homo oeconomicus* does – in terms of possessable goods – requires that I keep faith with a system already predicated on value exchange as the best of all possible worlds (the open “free market”), leaving no chance for other worlds to come about. Under the regime of *homo oeconomicus*, to share a common good means to share it as possessable – as relativised value – for instance in terms of consumer choice in a neoliberal market economy understood globally as the only means of achieving the good. In such a regime, where every *thing* is seen in terms of its potential for possession within the control mechanisms of the globalised market, commonality as a non-possessable absolute remains strictly unthinkable. To think the common good as absolute thus requires an *unrestricting* of thought through a shift in subjectivisation from *homo oeconomicus* to *homo reflectus*. In responding to the ethical demand of climate change, I must become *homo reflectus* by taking a chance to think otherwise in moments and spaces of opportunity opening from within the relativised values of the globalised market system.

The time of *homo reflectus* has now come. As environmental philosopher Val Plumwood has argued, this is a time to “see past” the control mechanisms of *homo oeconomicus* – the man of economic self-interest – and bring into view an emergent world of being-with: a conjunction whose value is shared amongst a plurality of others as absolute. [2] Absolute value is value *sui generis* in the praxis of work. [3] Unlike relative value, which always works on the exchange of equivalents, absolute value affirms itself in the singularity of what it does – for instance when it makes me dignified, caring or just. *Homo reflectus* is the “virtuous one” – the one who, in responding to the demand of nature, must take a chance from within the exchange of equivalents to see otherness not as a possessable good, but as a non-possessable Good whose value lies in its just-sharing.

To respond to an ethical demand, I must break from the hegemonic formation to which, as *homo oeconomicus*, I am already committed, in a moment of chance or risk complicity with its regulatory control. The break must be a *coup* – in Benjamin’s terms, an act of “divine violence” – that releases the possibility of new life (“Critique of Violence” 248-49). For Benjamin, “there is not a moment that does not carry with it its revolutionary chance ... for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem” (“Paralipomena” 402). Chance means the opening that enables another beginning – a new life – responding to demands coming from an immanent outside. In systems design theory, chance is considered to be an “evil” as it opens the system to disorder (Franklin 180); but chance lies at the very heart of *homo politicus*, where the “act of freedom” is essential for the formation of any new political

[2] For being-with as ontological critique, see Mules, *With Nature* 29. For absolute value, see Nancy, *The Creation of the World* 38.

[3] Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is seminal for a critique of absolute value in terms of self-cultivating practical reason: a “thorough critical examination of our reason” for acting in the right way, according to principles of reason (66).

subject (Laclau 228). To bring about a new relation to nature, I must act freely within control systems in the chance of forming a subject – *homo politicus* – within myself capable of thinking the being-with of nature as just.

To act resistively yet freely within control systems requires that I take responsibility for my actions as an “agent” of the ends to which they are directed (Becker 61). To do this, I must name the ends and contribute to bringing them about. I do this resistively by thinking otherwise from within the system in terms of what it does not allow – in this case, the non-possessable good of nature – as that for which I become responsible and for which I work in a praxis of world-forming (Nancy, *Creation* 37-38). [4] World-forming is the work I need to do to *begin* the emergence of another world in the interstitial spaces of this world as its excluded possibility.

[4] Stoic philosophy offers a way of thinking resistive freedom as agency in the praxis (work) of new world formation. See Becker 59-68.

The chance for another beginning lies in the inadequacy of responses to the demand of climate change by government and corporate authorities, who routinely frame their environmental policies through the world-view of *homo oeconomicus*, defined by monetised markets and neoliberal values of individualistic ethics and responsibilities (Brown 79 ff). Indeed, such responses appear perverse in their inability to apply themselves to the task at hand, as if gripped by a self-inflicted fate of mutually assured destruction. They indicate the presence of a hidden limit already breached in their thinking, suggesting that, despite efforts by the *hegemon* – the leadership caste of the Western world – to hold on to the old ways, the struggle against nature is now over and that the work with nature is only just beginning. This work requires a critique released from thinking value in terms of relative exchange and re-oriented to the thought of absolute value as the common good of nature, on which my freedom as *homo politicus* now depends.

### Annihilating Critique

In the “Theological-Political Fragment,” a dense essay whose truncated arguments open up more questions than are answered, Benjamin proposes critique as a form of “world politics” through the exposure of radical contingency to the secular order of human experience (305). As the moment of this exposure, critique interrupts the natural attitude (the assumption of an unmediated relation between self and world) through “messianic intensity” – an excess of affect – that releases human consciousness into an abyss of non-meaning. Messianic intensity is an affect triggered by the dislocation of the order of ideals and the secular order (the order of natural life) whose synchronicity is required to maintain the promise of a life fulfilled in its own meaning. For Benjamin, life and nature are empty signifiers, the form of which becomes evident in the working through of the details of critique. [5] If life or nature are to be ascribed a particular form, for instance as *socius* or *oikeios*, then it should not be assumed that this form already exists and that the task of the critique is simply to describe its limits; rather, the form should be allowed to appear through the critique itself as one of its “manifestations.” (“The Task of the Translator” 254). As an empty signifier, life lacks the means of its own self-completion and is always wanting the life promised by the messianism built into the secular order (the promise of political and cultural salvation through self-unification). Benjamin’s aim is to break this

[5] For the concept of the empty signifier see Laclau 104-06.

cycle of self-fulfilling meaning by a tactic of interruption, thereby inducing messianic intensity – the “too much” of the promised order – which annihilates its promise and exposes its ground as groundless yet full of messianic potential.

Annihilating critique is the opening of the messianic, but stripped of its promise: a “weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim” (“On the Concept of History” 390). The claim of the past is the claim of justice – to right past wrongs and to spread justice as a non-possessable good. Or, in environmental terms, the weak messianic power of critique is one in which nature has a claim to right the wrong of injuries inflicted by humans on the *oikeios* (nature as the “web of life”), and the injustice to both non-human and human life that depend on it. The aim of annihilating critique should be to open up a space of possibility in the messianic void – the emptiness of the messianic promise – so that justice can be spread as a non-possessable good, and that life *as such* can be renewed in a just world.

[6] Benjamin borrows the concept of annihilation from Hermann Cohen, the founder of the Marburg School of Neo-Kantian philosophy.

How does Benjamin characterise annihilation? [6] Here is the relevant passage:

For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive for such a passing away – even the passing of those stages of man that are nature – is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (“Theological-Political Fragment” 306)

Nature is that which is always “passing away” – the movement that sweeps all before it in incessant becoming (*poiesis*). As messianic movement, nature becomes a form of givenness in that it is “marked only in the very experience of the given” (Marion 60). Like a gift, nature can only *be* insofar as it gives of itself in its passing away. For its part, the human seeks to control nature for its own ends through technological means (*techné*), but at the expense of blocking the messianic force of nature – its capacity to open up (to “give”) possibilities of new life and new meaning. Human efforts to control nature are limited to repetitive attempts at self-reproduction through the control of a technical apparatus where the human sensorium is submitted to “a complex kind of training” (“On Some Motifs” 328), responding to stimuli passing through the *socius*.

In these terms, life and meaning are naturalised through the transductive effects of the apparatus (its ability to absorb and individuate stimuli), which, for Benjamin, is defined in terms of myth (“The Coming Philosophy” 103) – the myth of a natural beginning prior to the corrosive effects of time. *Techné* substitutes for the means lacking in the human to fulfil itself in mythic self-presence. The task of annihilating critique is to “strive” for the passing away of naturalised life circulating within the technical apparatus as phantasms – projections of the apparatus – through a procedure of de-mythologising (de-formation, dissolution) that breaks the phantasmic link between the human

[7] The project of demythologising phantasms is Benjamin's Arcades project: a catalogue of the projections of the phantasmagoria of commodity capitalism in nineteenth century France (*The Arcades Project*). For de-formation of phantasms see Benjamin's essay fragment "Imagination."

and nature, thereby releasing thought from technical thinking and into the non-meaning of absolute possibility. [7]

Annihilating critique contributes to the passing away of what it critiques – even the most naturalised aspects of the human – by seizing it in moments of chance as the “happiness” (both *jouissance* and happenstance) to open otherwise into the messianic void of non-meaning. In these moments, critique precipitates a “multiplicity of virtual questions” (“Theory of Criticism” 218) that points to new life and new meaning. For Benjamin, life is to be understood not in its psychic or biological sense, but in terms of the happy moment of its givenness. The life of a poem, for instance, is in the fact that it gives meaning: not any specific meaning but meaning itself in its very possibility. The task of the poet and the critic alike is to allow the poem to give meaning (its “truth”) through poetizing:

the task is derived from the poem itself.... This sphere, which for every poem has a special configuration, is characterized as the poetized. In this sphere that particular domain containing the truth of the poem shall be opened up. (“Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin” 18-19)

In his reading of Hölderlin's poetry, Benjamin's aim is to expose poetizing as a release of happy life: life “opened up” to finite possibilities in the face of human mortality, as opposed to idealised life caught in the loop of mythic nature. Through poetizing, secular life (the life facing mortality) can be seized by moments of great intensity that interrupt the cycles of mythic nature, opening it otherwise. The poem gives its reader the intensity of these moments as *jouissance* – a life of chance “accomplished as a mighty freedom [where] the poet enters life: he does not wander forth in it” (28). Poetizing seizes the moments of disjuncture between the ideal and its reality as chance saturated with freedom. Life is not something already given in the ideal world where the poet can simply “wander forth,” and where all places hold equal value, while death is faced with the “courage” of always knowing one's destiny; rather, the poet (and the critic) “enters life” carefully but with hope to begin again in the finite freedom released by the poetizing procedure; where death anticipates every step of the way and life is chanced each time in new beginnings – an earthly mortal existence grounded in what Marx, in “The German Ideology,” called “real connections” (127). New life cannot come from exhausted life – life already “used up” in mythic self-renewal – but through a poetizing procedure which interrupts the circuits of myth that sustain life as a phantasm of nature.

Benjamin posed these questions through many of his essays, including “Program for Literary Criticism” in which he argued that the critical faculty was in danger of becoming exhausted in generic forms of writing (289), resonating with the “end of history” scenario proposed in our own era (Fukuyama), where the levelling tendencies of the neoliberal market have led, amongst other things, to the rise of populist modes of journalism, tabloid sensationalism and social media newscasts that now substitute for professionalised critical commentary. As an antidote to such generic exhaustion, Benjamin proposed an engaged form of “annihilatory” criticism

(i.e. annihilating critique), which retrieves its “good conscience” from the exhausted forms through the *in situ* art of sketching: “critical activity [should be] based on a concrete sketch (strategic plan) that has its own logic and integrity” (289). Through a critical praxis of sketching (modelling, shaping, reforming) in which the act of criticism discovers its good conscience (i.e. its self-worth) through poetizing of the exhausted forms, a new life can emerge. This new life is not a duplication of the life already exhausted in generic forms, but one sketched according to “its own logic and integrity [i.e. its own value].” Criticism takes back its good conscience through a sketching procedure (poetizing) that works with the exhausted material, shaping it into new life.

A critically resistive politics is both self-critical and self-revising in the sense that it is receptive to otherness in the shape of the messianic “to come” – the sketched life of good conscience as a manifestation – a face – exposed in the residues of the self-exhausting oppositions played out in the polarising politics of the time (Mules, “This Face”). The full shape of the messianic promise cannot be seen in advance; however its beginnings can be experienced as a nullifying excess – messianic intensity – at the point of dislocation between the perpetually failing promises of an idealised mythic self-fulfilment and the reality of the finite life to which these promises are made. For Benjamin, this punctual intensity becomes the mainspring of radical political action, a “revolutionary discharge” that opens up a new “image space” (“Surrealism” 217-18), thereby exposing the new face of life in its possibilities.

### **World Politics**

But what of “world politics”? In Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms, world politics can be described in terms of “world-forming” as “the grasping of a concrete world that would be, properly speaking, the world of proper freedom and singularity of each and of all without claim to a world beyond-the-world or to a surplus-property” (*Creation* 37-38). For Benjamin, world-forming is a critical praxis initiated by an annihilating critique of current global formations. New world formations can only emerge through ruptures within existing globalising formations triggering the “downfall” of transcendental orders and the exposure of radical contingency to new light (“Theological-Political Fragment”). By occupying the new light – the seeing otherwise released by the exposure of radical contingency – critique discovers (chances upon) its capacity to build, to make, to create, as a retrieval of good conscience: its power to shape a world for a common good grounded in self-value. For Benjamin, this exposure does not come in passively waiting; it must be induced through the poetizing of exhausted generic forms. Through poetizing, a critical-poetic politics exposes resistive elements continuing their contact with nature – material “singulars” resistive to value exchange – with which to build another world. This other world is counter to, yet enmeshed in the globalising world of technological and economic capital – a new world grounded in self-value but whose substance has yet to find its full shape.



Through its counter-wise movement, world-forming desynchronises itself from the efficiencies of the technological-economic nexus currently driving production toward a fully automated world in which the human is threatened with eclipse by the machine, and retains a more localised yet “world-historical” connection with *techné* in a just-forming world whose affectivity awaits renewed life. The human subject is no longer understood in terms *homo oeconomicus* acting according to economic self-interest, but as *homo reflectus*, or the self-critical shaper of the common good. Unlike *homo oeconomicus*, whose first relation is with itself, *homo reflectus* is only concerned with itself insofar as it is already engaged with the world in its *other* possibilities, as part of just-sharing enabled by chance.

The chance event enlivens the moment of opportunity as one of resistance, enabling the common good to be imagined otherwise. A chance event is a “moment of refusal” (Springer 160) that opens up alternative pathways, enabling the renewed imagining of a common good based on principles of freedom and justice by “call[ing] the limits of the existing order to question.” Not only does the chance event open up alternative pathways, it also imagines new common goods, partaking of their materiality in beginning moments of messianic potential. That is, the event is reflexively enlivened with its own praxis such that its resistance to the existing order is itself the enactment of another world beginning to come into view. As a political praxis, the chance event is located at an “interstitial distance” within/without hegemonic formations (Critchley 113); an acentric power situated at the very heart of the political process (the process whereby competing claims for the common good are resolved on behalf of the *socius*). By calling the limits of the current order to question, the chance event circumscribes this limit with a potential for counter-wise thinking-acting as a praxis of world-forming grounded in the virtue of non-possessive sharing. Responding in “good conscience” to demands of the *oikeios*, *homo reflectus* can position herself interstitially within the political process, working critically-poetically toward a shared world of being-with. An interstitially located praxis of world-forming frees itself from the restraints of the neoliberal order that limits the human relation to nature to one of *homo oeconomicus*, enabling another world to come into view; one grounded in the virtue of *homo reflectus* – the “self-critical and revising one” (Plumwood) – in the chance of a renewed beginning where value is drawn from the relation itself as self-value with respect to the common good of nature insofar we are already part of it.

## Conclusion

In *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophe*, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the contemporary capitalist-technicist world as one in which “general equivalence” modelled on money exchange

virtually absorbs, well beyond the monetary or financial sphere but thanks to it and with regard to it, all the spheres of existence of humans, and along with them all things that exist.... This absorption involves a close connection between capitalism and technological development as we know it.

More precisely, it is the connection of an equivalence and a limitless, interchangeability of forces, products, agents or actors, meanings, values – since the value of any value is its equivalence. (5-6)

Nancy concludes that the real catastrophe facing us today is not Fukushima-like disasters threatening world contamination with nuclear fallout (although, no doubt, serious enough), but the equivalence of value absorbing all spheres of human and non-human life. How does one respond to such a threat? Nancy's answer is to draw attention to the non-equivalent singularities (material singulars) that continue to populate the world; things that resist the equivalence of value in terms of their "esteem" – a sense of their dignity as singular beings in equality with all beings and things (39-40). But is this enough? Certainly, we need to become critically aware of the resistivity that refuses the equivalence of value and affirms value as such. However, we also need a clear idea of the ends toward which our critical awareness is headed; how resistivity might contribute to a non-possessive common good in the making of a just world inclusive of both human and non-human life.

Nancy's diagnosis of the catastrophe is compelling, but his solution may lead to critical quietism where the resistive things we identify are left to themselves as if they already had the capacity to transform the world through the power of their own dignity. Rather, what I am proposing – through Benjamin's *novum* of the non-possessive subject – is a critique that seeks to establish a subjectivisation of ends by claiming the latent resistivity in the human relation to value systems and the technologies that enable them, as a resource to actively "open other paths" (40). To do this, we need to name the ends of our critique – a procedure that comes to us when we respond to the call from the outside as an urgent questioning concerning catastrophes-in-the-making. In responding to this call as an imperative to act in the opening of chance – the "abyss of freedom" (Arendt 207) – we subjectivise critique: we make it stand in its resistivity to equivalent value as its own value, affirming its own right to be. That is, critique becomes an *in situ* praxis that brings into being that which it critiques – the efficiency of means in systems of relativised value exchange – but counter-wise, in a form that exceeds possessive self-interest in the exchange. To do this, critique cannot be quiet. Critique must take its chance to intervene, to open up new ground for non-possessive thought and action, while at the same time naming its ends and being justifiable to them.

Critique should not be limited to an affair of the *socius*, but expand itself into the *oikeios* – the whole of the "web of life" – in the name of just-sharing. Benjamin's annihilating critique provides a way of rethinking the human relation to the *oikeios* from the ground up. By dissolving the grounds of equivalent value, annihilating critique begins the task of seeking an end in the being-with of nature as non-equivalent value – as just-sharing. I must rethink the justice of my relation to nature not in terms of possession (how nature might be valued according to my "measure" of it), but in terms of non-possessive sharing, where nature is valued for its own good, of which I also partake (being-with nature). This rethinking requires that I act *ethically* to bring about the good in me; *politically* insofar as my freedom to act is bound

up in the freedom of others; and *poetically* in the shaping of the world to come as a creative praxis of the just-sharing of nature.

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