

New Metaphysics? The Earth System as Object and the Anthropocene as Event

In coming to grips with the advent of the Anthropocene, contemporary philosophers have recently pushed beyond the many physical implications (e.g. global warming, reduced biodiversity etc.) to interpret the Anthropocene metaphysically. According to such interpretations, the Anthropocene imposes a wholly new understanding of the world. It would then follow that the Anthropocene names an ontological event. This paper discusses the ontological interpretations of the Anthropocene as appearing in the work of Latour, Morton, and Hamilton, each of whom maintains that the Anthropocene is an event that necessitates dismantling the metaphysical framework of Modernity. While all these accounts correlate this eventuality with the emergence of the scientific object called the Earth System, the character of this correlation remains obscure. We elucidate this correlation by regarding the Earth System as a technoscientific object, and examine three possibilities with regards to its eventuality: (1) the Earth-system is a commonplace technoscientific object: it aids scientific understanding of the world, but the attribution of eventuality is misplaced; (2) every novel technoscientific object is eventual inasmuch as it imposes a novel understanding of the world; or (3) the Earth System must be understood as uniquely eventual. We then argue that the aforementioned ontological interpretations of the Anthropocene are committed to rejecting the first and adopting the third option, but have hitherto neglected to distinguish the second from the third. As a contradictory result, the coming into being of any scientific object (e.g., microbes) and the emergence of the Earth System would be ontologically equivalent yet inequivalent.