Parallax of Growth
The Philosophy of Ecology and Economy

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For Kathrine
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Introduction:
Lenin at the Supermarket

The answer to the dual crisis of ecology and economy is found on a commercial billboard at a Stockholm underground station. An ad for Willy:s supermarket (Figure 0.1) shows the picture of a bag of green-labelled groceries with the following text written on the bag: ‘Given the choice between ecology and economy we do not think that you should have to choose. Willy:s. Our business plan: The cheapest lunch box in Sweden.’

Of course, the immediate reading of the ad merely suggests that here is yet another option for the capitalist consumer, who wishes to save the planet from global warming and other environmental dangers without having to fundamentally change her habits of consumption. At Willy:s, the consumer can buy environmentally friendly products at a cheap price. This is green capitalism at its best.

The obvious point of the ad from Willy:s is of course that it is possible to have both ecology and economy at the same time. You don’t have to choose. However, on closer philosophical inspection, the ad offers the possibility of yet another reading. This reading may serve as a first indication of the way that this book intends to approach the growth crisis of contemporary capitalism. Slavoj Žižek may provide us with the tools to open this alternative reading of the ad in the form of an old joke from the Soviet Union. The background of the joke is that Lenin would always encourage young people to educate themselves with the slogan ‘learn, learn, learn’.

Marx, Engels, and Lenin are asked whether they would prefer to have a wife or a mistress. As expected, Marx, rather conservative in private
matters, answers, ‘A wife!’ while Engels, more of a bon vivant, opts for a mistress. To everyone’s surprise, Lenin says, ‘I’d like to have both!’ Why? Is there a hidden stripe of decadent jouisseur behind his austere revolutionary image? No, he explains: ‘So that I can tell my wife that I am going to my mistress, and my mistress that I have to be with my wife…’ ‘And then, what do you do?’ ‘I go to a solitary place to learn, learn, and learn!’

The joke shares the same initial structure as the ad since both open with a choice between two seemingly mutually exclusive options: ecology or economy, wife or mistress. The immediate point of the Willy:s ad is that it provides a third option, which allows the consumer to choose both positions. Buying cheap organic bananas, the consumer may choose ecology and economy at the same time. In comparison, the joke opens not three but four different positions:
(1) I prefer a wife. This is the position adopted by Marx; (2) I prefer a mistress. This is the position adopted by Engels. Now the third possibility branches off into two positions: (3) I’d like to have both wife and mistress because this gives me access to the decadent jous-sance of sleeping with two women. This is ‘everyone’s’ immediate interpretation of Lenin’s choice. Yet Lenin provides the final position: (4) I’d like to have both so that I can tell either one that I’m with the other, which allows me to be alone and learn, learn and learn. This fourth ‘Leninist’ option is the logical route that we are going to follow in this book in the effort to study the relation between ecology and economy within the context of contemporary capitalism. Transposing the logic of this fourth option into the domain of ecology and economy, we arrive at the theoretical approach that I shall be referring to as eco-analysis.

The dilemma between ecology and economy is not merely a choice that faces the contemporary consumer when she is filling her cart with groceries in Willy’s supermarket. The field of contemporary politics also seems to be structured around this fundamental issue. In today’s capitalism, we are facing not one but at least two fundamental crises: there is the economic crisis that is currently manifesting itself in declining growth rates and increasing levels of debt in most western and even some eastern economies; and there is the ecological crisis that is manifesting itself in climate change, natural resource depletion and pollution. Transposing the Lenin joke into this context of a dual crisis of ecology and economy allows us to provide a crude mapping of the two-plus-one options that are currently available to mainstream politicians, while at the same time carving out the position of eco-analysis:

A left-wing ecologist, a right-wing economist, a progressive liberal politician in the government of a small country in Northern Europe and Slavoj Žižek are asked whether they would prefer to save the planet or save capitalism. As expected, the left-wing ecologist answers, ‘I would prefer to limit my consumption of capitalism’s output of superfluous commodities in order to save the planet from global warming and other forms of ecological catastrophes.’ The right-wing economist opts for capitalism, saying, ‘I would prefer to maintain my current pattern of consumption thus propelling the growth needed to solve the economic crisis and save capitalism. Only the system of capitalism is efficient enough to provide us with resources required to solve the (alleged) ecological crisis and save the planet (if it is indeed in danger at all).’ Now the progressive liberal politician in the government of a small country in Northern Europe says: ‘I’d like to save both the planet and capitalism through technological innovations (sustain-
able energy, organic production of food, recycling, etc.) that allows capitalism to maintain its current volume of output and consumption but without the damaging effects to nature. In other words, the evolution of “green capitalism” gives me access to the decadent jouissance of both excessive consumption and the good conscience of knowing that I’m saving the planet.’ Žižek answers: ‘I would also prefer to save both the planet and capitalism.’ Obviously, everyone is surprised by this answer. ‘Why? Do you share with the progressive liberal politician in the government of a small country in Northern Europe the same decadent jouissance of capitalist consumption with a good conscience?’ ‘No,’ Žižek explains: ‘So I can tell the ecologists that I am trying to save capitalism, and tell the capitalists that I am trying to save the planet.’ And then what do you do? ‘Analyse, Analyse, Analyse!’

This fourth option is of course the position of eco-analysis. The point here is not so much that the dual crisis of ecology and economy provides us with the blueprint for a new form of society. The point is rather that, faced with the apparent choice between ecology and economy, we should refuse all of the three most apparent options: choose ecology over economy, choose economy over ecology, or find a third way that allows us to enjoy both at the same time. The ‘Leninist’ fourth option functions to break up and reconfigure the deadlock of the choice between ecology and economy. The challenge is to choose simultaneously ecology and economy but not because of their positive properties, their inherent fantasies of the good life, but rather because each of them offers the opportunity to refuse the other. By choosing both ecology and economy, we are able to refuse both. On the surface, the choice between ecology and economy presents itself as a choice between being against or for capitalism. This is why ecology is typically associated with the political left. We should be careful not to accept this premise all too readily. While it is true that ecology offers a platform from which certain aspects of capitalism may be criticized, there is still the danger that this particular platform is an inherent part of the problem rather than the solution. What if ecology is a way of being against capitalism, while still remaining within the fundamental structure of capitalism?

The refusal of identifying with any of the first three positions is also a refusal of immediate action. The real Žižek (and not only the imaginary Žižek conjured up in our rewriting of the joke) has proposed that, in the face of the impending global catastrophes of climate change and financial breakdown, the time is not for action but rather for thinking. The point is not so much that no action is needed to solve the problems of our time but rather that we should be open and
honest enough to recognize that we actually do not know what kind of action is needed. As the fourth option breaks up the deadlock of the apparent choice between ecology and economy, it opens up a space for thinking. This is why we shall be referring to this as the position of eco-analysis. It is a position of critical analytical thinking.

What is the object of eco-analysis? As the observant reader will have already figured out from the above mention of Žižek, the concept of eco-analysis is a paraphrase of the concept of psychoanalysis. Methodologically speaking, the object of eco-analysis is the application of the method of psychoanalysis on another field. Substantially speaking, the object of eco-analysis is the ‘eco’. Now, of course, this is anything but self-explanatory.

Given the apparent opposition between ecology and economy, it is ironic that the etymological roots of the two terms are closely related. The two words share the same prefix. ‘Eco’ is derived from the Greek oikos, which means household, house or habitat. So if we go exclusively by the etymological definition, ecology, as well as economy, is concerned with the same object. Both are concerned with the place where life takes place. And even when we look at the ending of the words, the difference does not seem to be big. In ecology, ‘logy’ is derived from the Greek logos that means ‘word’, ‘speech’, ‘discourse’ or even ‘reason’. Of course, we also recognize the affinity to ‘logic’. Along etymological lines, we may understand ecology as discourse and reasoning about the logic of places where life takes place. In economy, ‘-nomy’ is derived from the Greek nomos, meaning ‘law’ or ‘rules’. From a contemporary perspective, the notion of law is ambiguous. Law may refer to normative laws, such as legal or moral laws, but the word may also refer to laws embedded in the nature of things, for instance, the law of gravity. Nevertheless, we may summarize the etymological understanding of economy as the laws of places where life takes place.

The result of this sketchy etymological analysis shows that the difference between ecology and economy is merely that the first is concerned with the logic of habitats while the latter is concerned with the laws of habitats. If this were all we knew about ecology and economy, we would think that the two were very closely related and that knowledge in both fields was heavily influenced by the other, perhaps even to the point where they would conflate. However, few phenomena develop in strict accordance with their etymological roots, and their current meanings often point far beyond their initial definitions. This certainly applies to ecology and economy.

With Žižek, we may invoke the notion of parallax in order to unfold not only the relation between ecology and economy but also
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to uncover the underlying notion of ‘eco’, which seems to be the shared object of the two modes of inquiry. At the heart of Žižek’s thinking, we find the threefold distinction between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. This triad, that Žižek has of course inherited from Lacan, constitutes a distinction between different ontological domains. Whenever we want to understand concepts or phenomena such as subjectivity, language, love, politics, law, poker, democracy, money or the body within the framework of Žižek’s thinking, we need to analyse how the concept of phenomenon is constituted in the interplay between these three domains. In the following, we are going to see how ecology and economy fit into the ontological triad of real, symbolic and imaginary. We shall start by seeing how the eco is real.

Throughout his oeuvre, Žižek offers a number of definitions of the real, as well as a number of analytical tools by which the real may be uncovered. At some points, the real is located in a positive existence beyond the sphere of symbolization. He defines the real as ‘that which resists symbolization’ and ‘as the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles’. At other points, the real is located in a negative existence, i.e. as merely a void or an aporia inherent in the symbolic order. Žižek states: ‘the symbolic order itself, is…barré, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack.’ This lack is the real. The two ways of theorizing the real may immediately seem contradictory, and perhaps they are. Yet this contradiction is in itself a symptom of the impossibility of conceptualizing (symbolizing) the real. Žižek also provides a dynamic conceptualization of the real through the notion of parallax, which seems to combine the positive as well as the negative definitions of the real. Since the notion of parallax is key to our analysis of the eco as real, I shall be quoting Žižek at length on this issue:

The Real is thus the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted; it is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access, the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second. Recall Adorno’s well-known analysis of the antagonistic character of the notion of society; in a first approach, the split between the two notions of society (the Anglo-Saxon individualistic-nominalistic notion and the Durkheimian organicist notion of society as a totality which preexists individuals) seems irreducible; we seem to be dealing with a true Kantian antinomy which cannot be resolved via a higher ‘dialectical synthesis,’ and elevates society into an inaccessible
Thing-in-itself; in a second approach, however, we should merely take note of how this radical antinomy which seems to preclude our access to the Thing is already the Thing itself – the fundamental feature of today’s society is the irreconcilable antagonism between Totality and the individual. This means that, ultimately, the status of the Real is purely parallactic and, as such, nonsubstantial: it has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective, perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other. The parallax Real is thus opposed to the standard (Lacanian) notion of the Real as that which ‘always returns to its place’ – as that which remains the same in all possible (symbolic) universes: the parallax Real is, rather, that which accounts for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real – it is not the hard core which persists as the Same, but the hard bone of contention which pulverizes the sameness into the multitude of appearances. In a first move, the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly, but only through the lenses of a multitude of symbolic fictions, virtual formations. In a second move, this very hard core is purely virtual, actually non-existent, an X which can be reconstructed only retroactively, from the multitude of symbolic formations which are ‘all that there actually is’.

In a superficial reading, the conflict between ecology and economy may seem to be a rivalry between two mutually exclusive understandings of the world in which we live. As we have already touched upon in the rewritten version of the Lenin joke, the ecological view of the world proposes that we live in accordance with nature by limiting our interference with the inherent balance of natural ecosystems, while the economic view is primarily concerned with optimizing the productive output of the world in order to maximize the satisfaction of human needs and wants. The object of contestation between the two perspectives is of course the eco, i.e. the place where we live. Should this habitat be viewed as a place where plants, animals and humans live in mutually beneficial harmony or should it rather be seen as a site of production and human consumption? Again, this is where we should resist the temptation of simply choosing the easy option of ecology over economy or even the cheap compromise between the two in the form of a sustainable economy that operates on the premises of ecology. This is not because these options aren’t probably morally superior to the second option but because they constitute an analytical dead end. But of course this does not mean that we should choose the second option of simply giving in to the economic account of eco.

Starting from the bottom part of the quote, we may paraphrase Žižek to see how the parallax of the real pertains to the notion of the eco:
In a first move, eco is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly, but only through the lenses of the symbolic fictions of ecology and economy. In a second move, this very hard core is purely virtual, actually non-existent, an X which can be reconstructed only retroactively from the multitude of symbolic formations of ecology and economy which are ‘all that there actually is.’

The point is that ecology and economy are both symbolic accounts of the reality of the eco. Both accounts belong in the order of the symbolic and they each provide different systems of symbolization of the real of the eco. We shall be returning to the substantial claims of each of these systems. Neither ecology nor economy presents itself as a system of symbolization that is merely added to the existence of the eco as nature-in-itself. Instead, each of these symbolic formations claim to be recordings of the ‘logy’ and the ‘nomy’ that is already inherent in the real of the eco. Now, a crucial point in Žižek’s philosophy is that the process of symbolization is never just a neutral recording of entities and events pre-existing in the order of the real. The process of symbolization is at the same time a production of the very reality that appears in the symbolic order. In other words, we may initially conceive of the real as just the undifferentiated, chaotic matter of being. This is perhaps captured by the interpretation of eco (oikos) as habitat that is simply the place where we live. However, through processes of symbolization, the real is rendered into the ordered and regulated reality in which we ordinarily find ourselves. Oikos is inscribed into the order of logos or nomos. According to Žižek, the operation of symbolization is not determined by qualities inherent in the objects of the real. On the contrary, certain paradigms of meaning and regularity are reproduced within the symbolic order on the basis of structures inherent in this order. In this respect, Žižek is in concurrence with mainstream social constructivist thinking, which we find also in figures such as Wittgenstein, Luhmann or Foucault.

If we observe here Žižek’s distinction between the social reality and the real, we see how the symbolization of the real is a social construction of reality. The mere undifferentiated Being of oikos or eco belongs in the order of the real. The real of the eco emerges as the reality of ecology or economy when it is incorporated into the symbolic order of economic signs that render entities and events meaningful in terms of their relations to other economic signs. This means that, in the first move, the undifferentiated being of the real disappears as it is transformed into the reality of the symbolic order. It becomes ‘the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly’.
Now the point where Žižek breaks away from conventional social constructivism is in his axiomatic insistence on the ultimate incompatibility between the symbolic and the real. In any operation of symbolization, there is an excess or a lack in the correspondence between the symbolic order and the real. This means that in the second move, the real re-emerges as something that is left out in the first process of symbolization. With the notion of parallax, Žižek even distances himself from Lacan in that the real is not merely some material common denominator that ‘remains the same in all possible symbolic universes’. In turn, the parallax real is defined as ‘that which accounts for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real’. The parallax real can be discovered neither through the first, nor through the second, nor even from some third neutral perspective. The parallax real emerges only in the shift from the first to the second perspective.

It must be granted that Žižek’s formulations here about the parallax real are rather enigmatic. The purpose of this chapter, as well as other parts of this book, is precisely to see how these formulations make sense in the context of ecology and economy. The hypothesis that we shall be proposing is that ultimately ecology is an account of the world without human subjects. In turn, economy is ultimately an account of the world where the human subject is reduced to an individual consumer that is then posed as the measure of every object in the world. In the shift between these two perspectives, the parallax real of the eco emerges as something that is simultaneously too objective and too subjective. Žižek’s reference to Adorno may help illustrate this. Instead of engaging directly in the classic sociological dispute about whether society ultimately consists of a conglomerate of individuals or whether society has its own emergent properties that ultimately shape and regulate the behaviour of individuals, Adorno opts for the fourth position by proposing to see this conflict as an inherent property of society itself. (The route of the sociological third position not taken by Adorno is of course the form of theoretical synthesis found in Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration or Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus as a ‘structured and structuring structure’.) In the context of eco-analysis, the fourth Leninist option means that the truth about the eco lies neither in the ecological account, nor in the economic account. Still, this does not mean that they are both false. It means that the very tension between these two accounts is inherent in the very being of the eco. We should refuse both because this engages us in a negative dialectic that allows us to uncover the parallax real of the eco in the very shift between perspectives. This is the purpose of eco-analysis.
The logic of the Lenin joke serves to structure the course of the book. In part I, we shall begin our analysis by looking into ecology. If ecology is a particular symbolic order, which fantasies function to sustain this order? How does ecology symbolize the real? And what is the position of the subject in the ecological conception of nature? These are some of the questions guiding our eco-analytical exploration of ecology. Part of the analysis is a genealogy of the emergence of ecology as a distinct field of knowledge but still emphasis is put on the ontological properties of the constitution of ecology.

In part II, we proceed by analysing the economy. Where does value come from? How does economics conceive of the relation between price and value? What does it mean that the economy is growing? And what is the position of money in the economic conception of the world? Again the analysis begins with a genealogical exploration of the history of economics, which distinguishes between physiocrat economics, classical economics and neo-classical economics in terms of their respective ontologies of value. This leads into a critical examination of contemporary understandings of growth, knowledge, technology, consumption, capital, labour and production.

Part III is an engagement with contemporary ideas of so-called ‘green growth’. How do contemporary policies of sustainability function to preserve an imperative of perpetual economic growth? Which are the fantasies inherent in the ideology of growth? How does our current mode of economic organization reinforce the imperative of growth? And what is the relation between money, debt and interest on the one hand and economic growth on the other? This part is organized around Žižek’s concepts of need, desire and drive in order to map out three different dimensions of the propulsion towards economic growth that characterizes contemporary growth capitalism.

The book does not offer a catalogue of solutions to the ecological or the economic crisis. There are already plenty of other books offering this. Rather, it aims to shift the inquiry from: ‘What shall we do?’ to ‘Why have we not already done it?’ In order to properly address the challenges of our contemporary times of crisis, it is not enough to point out all the different reasons why perpetual economic growth is impossible and unsustainable. We need to understand how the idea of growth is deeply ingrained in the ideology as well as the organization of our society. And we need to understand why the idea of growth is so difficult to let go of. The purpose of the book is to open up the space for philosophical thinking about this issue.
Part I

The Logy of Eco
Balance of Nature

The paradox of radical ecology, which blames humanity for disturbing the natural homeostasis, is that, in it, a self-relating reversal of this logic of exclusion takes place: the ‘excrement,’ the destructive element which has to disappear so that the balance can be re-established, is ultimately humanity itself. As a result of its hubris, its will to dominate and exploit nature, humanity has become the stain in the picture of the natural idyll (as in those narratives in which ecological catastrophe is seen as the revenge of Mother Earth or Gaia for the wounds inflicted on her by humanity). Is this not the ultimate proof of the ideological nature of ecology? What this means is that there is nothing more distant from a truly radical ecology than the image of a pure idyllic nature cleansed of all human dirt. Perhaps, then, in order to break out of this logic, we should change the very coordinates of the relationship between humanity and pre-human nature: humanity is anti-nature, it does intervene in the natural cycle, disturbing or controlling it ‘artificially,’ postponing the inevitable degeneration, buying itself time. Nevertheless, as such, it is still part of nature, since ‘there is no nature.’ If Nature conceived as the balanced cycle of Life is a human fantasy, then humanity is (closest to) nature precisely when it brutally establishes its division from nature, imposes on it its own temporary, limited order, creating its own ‘sphere’ within the natural multiplicity.¹

Often, the notions of ecology and economy appear to be in opposition or even in direct conflict. During the years of growth and relative prosperity immediately prior to the financial crisis of 2007–8, there was a growing concern about ecological issues such as global warming and pollution, and attempts were made to mobilize a political collaboration to address these issues on a global level. However, these
efforts were immediately crushed with the onset of the crisis. Instead of ecological issues, political priorities were directed against economic issues related to growth and employment. Solving ecological problems were put on hold until allegedly more pressing economic issues had been dealt with. This was a clear example of ecology and economy being in opposition. Furthermore, it is generally the case that most of the ecological problems that we are facing are precisely caused by a one-sided focus on economic interests. The pursuit of monetary wealth, consumption opportunities and growth puts strain on natural ecosystems and threatens to throw them out of balance. In the often quoted words of one of the pioneers in ecological economics, E. F. Schumacher: ‘Infinite growth of material consumption in a finite world is an impossibility.’

As we observe the trends and prognoses of global climate change, depletion of natural resources and extinction of animal species pointing towards future natural catastrophes, the most puzzling question is not: ‘What shall we do?’ By now, most people in the western world, who are also the ones doing most of the polluting, know full well what we should do: We should stop buying and using so much stuff that we do not need anyway. We should start eating beans and vegetables rather than meat from cows, pigs and other animals that demand several times more resources to generate similar amounts of nutrition. And we should stop transporting ourselves unnecessarily in cars and aeroplanes. In terms of informing people about the right ways of living an ecological lifestyle, the environmental revolution of the past four decades has been a huge success. We pretty much know what to do in order to save the planet. In turn, this only leads us to the real puzzle: why have we not already done it?

In the above quote, Žižek points to the ideological nature of ecology. While there are good reasons to concur with Žižek’s observation, as we are going to see in the following, we may still ask whether the problem with ecology is that it is not ideological enough. If ideology is the phantasmatic frame that provides us with the coordinates of our desires, then the ideology of ecology seems to have had only marginal effects in terms of shifting us in the direction of an ecological lifestyle. Even if some progress has been made in terms of making consumers more aware of buying ecologically friendly products, such as biodynamic bananas or cars with low CO$_2$ emissions, this seems only to have been counterbalanced by increasing volumes of consumption overall.

But perhaps it is even misleading to think of ecology as an independent ideology trying to persuade us to live in greater harmony with the inherent balance of nature as opposed to the ideology of the
economy propelling us towards more and more consumption. Perhaps ecology and economy are merely two sides of the same coin and thus part of the same coherent ideology. The challenge of eco-analysis in this connection is to keep one’s eyes on the ball and not be swayed in the analysis of eco. In the following, we shall be looking into the history of ecological thinking in order to understand the genealogical relations between ecology and economy.

The Economy of Nature

A fundamental idea in ecological science, as well as in other forms of ecological thinking, is the notion of the ‘balance of nature’. The notion of the balance of nature may be traced back to ancient Greek thinking. It is derived from observations suggesting that nature is imbued with regulatory principles serving to secure stable populations of different species of animals that are balanced against each other. Herodotos (died c. 425 BC) made the following observation about the differential reproductive capabilities of predators and prey: ‘The wisdom of divine Providence... has made all creatures prolific that are timid to eat, that they be not diminished from off the earth by being eaten up, whereas but few young are born to creatures cruel and baneful.’

In the Middle Ages, the balance of nature was conceived in purely theological terms as just another other aspect of the providential vision of an almighty God. Concurrent with the Protestant Reformation, there is an emerging effort to found the notion of the balance of nature as a natural rather than a divine principle. This effort is of course in sync with the advent of modern thought found across a wide range of fields, such as science, arts, law, politics and, most importantly in the context of the present analysis, economy. The differentiation of independent fields of thinking from the overall frame of theology is obviously a slow progression over several centuries. This is also the case with regards to ecology. As empirical data and methods in the fields that we have subsequently defined as zoology, botany, microbiology and so on improved, so there was also a gradual refinement of the balance-of-nature concept.

In 1713, William Derham was the first explicitly to use the word ‘balance’ in the context of ecology: ‘The Balance of the Animal world is, throughout all Ages, kept even, and by a curious Harmony and just Proportion between the increase of all Animals, and the length of their lives, the World is through all Ages well, but not overstored.’ This line of thinking is taken one step further by Carl Linneaus. In
1759, he published the work *Oeconomia Naturae* which begins with the following axiomatic statement:

To perpetuate the established course of nature in a continued series, the divine wisdom has thought fit, that all living creatures should constantly be employed in producing individuals, that all natural things should contribute and lend a helping hand towards preserving every species, and lastly that the death and destruction of one thing should always be subservient to the restitution of another.\(^6\)

With the coining of the phrase ‘economy of nature’, Linnaeus extends the balance of nature to include not only the animal world but also the domain of plants. Even though we still find in both Derham and Linnaeus an element of divinity in the account of the balance of nature, it should be noted how there is also an emerging sense of the balanced perpetuation of nature as being a purpose in itself for which divinity provides the necessary conditions. The purpose of nature is not only to serve as venue for the display of divine omnipotence, generosity and foresight but nature also has a value in and of itself. As already indicated, the genealogy of ecology follows the same general pattern of a gradual decoupling from theology, spanning the Middle Ages through the Reformation and into modern times, that may also be traced in other fields of knowledge and thinking. Before moving on to see how ecology evolves into becoming a science in its own right, we shall see how the balance of nature is parallel to ideas found within the field of economics during the same period.

In 1759, the same year that Linnaeus published his *Oeconomia Naturae*, Adam Smith published his book on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this work, Smith invokes for the first time the famous notion of ‘the invisible hand’ to account for the way that even the selfish behaviour of the rich landowner is part of an intricate division of labour whereby the products of society are distributed among all of its members.

The produce of the soil maintains at all times nearly that number of inhabitants which it is capable of maintaining. The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made,
had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among a few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition.  

While Linneaus provides an account of the economy of nature, one of the ambitions of Smith’s work is perhaps rather to provide an account of the nature of economy. This ambition becomes even more spelt out with the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. In this work, the notion of the invisible hand reappears more explicitly within the context of the market economy. This is the passage that is typically quoted to illustrate the point:

> As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

The parallel between the balance of nature and the invisible hand lies in the idea that every member and every part of the community is integrated into a system of mutual interdependence, where the natural behaviour of each individual, even when this behaviour is motivated by sheer survival or other individual desires, ultimately serves to benefit the reproduction of the whole. The difference between the two ideas lies of course in the scope of the unity under consideration. The simultaneous publication of Carl Linneaus’s *Oeconomia Naturae* and Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* provides an eminent genealogical example of the parallax of ecology and economy. Both works invoke the gaze of God, in the form of ‘divine wisdom’ and ‘Providence’ respectively, as the point of view from which the inherent balance in the order of the eco emanates. Still, the divine view of the world projects two different
accounts of the ordering principles of the world. For Linneaus, the balance of nature applies to the community of animals and plants in a natural habitat. For Smith, the invisible hand applies to the capitalist market, where goods and services are produced and exchanged between human agents appearing as producers and consumers. In formal terms, the eco described by Linneaus is ultimately a world of objects, while the eco described by Smith is a world where everything is ultimately measured by the standards of human subjectivity.

The Split Eco

Rather than debating which of these two accounts of the world should be regarded as primary and superior to the other, we need to stay on the narrow path of eco-analysis and thus interpret the duality of the perspectives of Linneaus and Smith as perhaps a founding moment in the constitution of something that we might term ‘the split eco’. This term is of course a paraphrase of Žižek’s concept of the split subject that is sometimes also designated using Lacan’s intricate system of notations by the symbol $. As the concept of the split subject provides us with another theoretical handle to understand the parallax of eco, we shall temporarily digress from the genealogy of ecology to present this concept.

The concept of the split subject refers to the subject’s position as an intermediary between the order of the real and the order of the symbolic. Žižek explains: ‘the subject is not directly included in the symbolic order: it is included as the very point at which signification breaks down. Sam Goldwyn’s famous retort when he was confronted with an unacceptable business proposition – “Include me out!” – perfectly expresses this intermediate status of the subject’s relationship to the symbolic order between direct inclusion and direct exclusion.’

The notion of the split subject can be illustrated by the way we ordinarily think of ourselves as individuals. Individuality implies that something is a unity; it is in-divisible. All the time we refer to ourselves as such a unity: ‘I don’t like cheese’, ‘I live in an apartment’, ‘I owe you $500’, and so on. We assume the existence of a self as a unitary origin of our feelings, preferences, opinions, and so forth. Now, Žižek starts from the complete opposite view of the subject. Subjectivity is not a unity but rather the product of an irreconcilable gap. A person is incorporated in the symbolic order as he or she attains a certain position in the social structure of society. The ritual of giving a name to a person signifies this incorporation. As the
person is incorporated into the structure of the symbolic order, this structure also provides the conditions of possibility for the person’s reflective self-conception. This is Foucault’s point about the social constitution of subjectivity, which is now a central component of mainstream social constructivist theories of the self.

Žižek breaks away from these theories as he insists that the incorporation of a person into the symbolic order is always incomplete. The subject will indeed identify with the symbolic designations attributed to us in the symbolic order. I will identify myself as a male, Danish, father, taxpayer, and so on. But at the same time my identification with these designations is marked by a sense of misrecognition. Even if it were possible to make a complete list of all my symbolic designations, I would still have the feeling that I am ‘more than this’. This feeling is constitutive to Žižek’s understanding of subjectivity.

The point here is not that there is beyond the sphere of our symbolic identity some external kernel of true subjectivity. This is the mistake made by neurobiological conceptions of subjectivity that locate subjectivity in the materiality of the brain. Just as the person confronted with the complete listing of his or her symbolic designations will insist on being ‘more than this’, so would a person confronted with a real-time scanner image of his or her brain. Subjectivity may neither be reduced to the order of the symbolic nor to the order of the real. Subjectivity is rather the gap separating the two.

In similar fashion, we should avoid thinking about the objectivity of the eco in terms of some real entity that is completely devoid of human symbolization or interference. The objectivity of the eco is rather the gap separating the objectivist account of Linneaus’s ecology and the subjectivist account of Smith’s economy. We may thus think of the eco as a kind of split object. The implications of this way of thinking about the eco shall be explored as we continue the genealogy.

The Polluting Animal

The nineteenth century saw a number of crucial turning points in the genealogy of ecological thinking. An intricate challenge to the balance-of-nature concept emerged as scholars of natural history, through the discovery of fossils, gradually reached the conclusion that some animal species had been exterminated. The preservation of species had hitherto been a major tenet in the balance-of-nature concept. Now the question was how to reconcile the idea of balance with the