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ARTICLE

Mundification: Arguments for a New Idealism

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Abstract
Today, there is a tendency within the field of environmental education to argue that the current global metacrisis is intrinsically linked to idealist traditions in philosophy and culture. The underlying intuition appears to be that idealism ultimately relies on a Cartesian distinction between mind and body: that it privileges the mind while neglecting the body, thereby enabling a view of materiality – or "nature" – as something to be used or exploited. A similar assumption can be identified in the call for papers for this issue, where modern idealism is linked to neoliberal politics and economics. In contrast, the aim of our paper is not to reject idealism entirely but to argue that the real issue lies in particular ideas and worldviews associated with specific understandings of reality. To open up space for alternative ideas and imaginaries, we propose that educational theory and practice must engage with a process we term *mundification*: the initiation of individuals – though education and other cultural practices – into what it means for there to be something at all, that is; a world.

Keywords: Education; idealism; time; world; life-friendly

Do we have to abandon idealism?

One of the questions raised in the call for papers for this AJEE Special Issue concerns whether idealism, as a philosophical position, can be seen as a contributing factor to the current planetary crisis. The call tentatively suggests that the modern Cartesian dualism between res extensa (extended things) and res cogitans (thinking things) has led to a fundamental alienation of humans from matter. This ontological separation is posited to have fostered a perception among (certain, especially modern) humans of an inherent right to exploit material things at will – a dynamic that ultimately finds its culmination in the capitalist economy and the logic of new public management.

The aim of the present article is to argue that the problem does not lie with idealism as such, but rather with specific ideas that have contributed to the current planetary situation. Accordingly, the solution – or at least part of the solution – is not *less* idealism, but *different* ideas. Put slightly differently, we consider it both theoretically impossible and undesirable to reject idealism altogether. This is because, since the era of German Idealism, the term *idealism* has referred to the view that human perception of reality cannot be reduced to a mere function of external stimuli; rather human consciousness – or following the linguistic turn in the in twentieth-century philosophy, language and culture – always contributes something *sui generis* to this perception. Today, this perspective is more commonly referred to as *constructivism*, and few would deny that human perception of reality involves a constructive element. On this basis, we argue that what is needed in the current metacrisis is not a rejection of the human capacity for construction, but

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rather a call to hold humans accountable for their constructions and imaginations. This holds true even if, following material, multispecies and bodily-affective turns in 21st century philosophy, we must emphasize – as we will return to – that such constructions are always already interwoven with material, multi-species and bodily-affective relationships, and are therefore always co-constructions. In order to argue for and specify this constructive capacity more precisely, we draw on both the early and the late Heidegger, who in different phases describes central aspects of the human capacity to construct: the human being as being-in-the-world and the human being as world-understanding.[1] Building on this, we argue below that two competing understandings of the world, that is imaginings of totality, are currently at play: the *scenic-humanist* and the *dialogical-zoëlogical* – although the scenic-humanist remains clearly dominant today. Finally, we discuss the task of education in light of the human capacity for construction and imagination.[2]

Why a *new* idealism?

Originally, idealism was a philosophical stance that emerged in dialogue with its opposite, materialism. The disagreement between idealism and materialism is, at its core, a matter of differing metaphysical and ontological assumptions regarding the nature of reality. The central question concerns whether reality is ultimately of a spiritual or material character. In early modernity, the focus of the debate shifted from the ontological question of the nature of reality to the epistemological question of the nature of human knowledge. Rationalism held that we perceive reality as we do because of reason's innate ideas, whereas empiricism maintained that our perception of reality is shaped by sensory input – stimuli from the external world.

Already the German Idealists – and many thinkers after them – sought to overcome the dualism between materiality and ideality by combining, in various ways, receptivity (associated with empiricism) and activity (associated with rationalism). However, the various attempts to overcome this dualism had limited cultural or societal impact – at least if the intended outcome was to foster a relationship in which human beings perceive other beings as entities to which they are, in the deepest sense, intrinsically connected, rather than as something that, ontologically speaking, belongs to an entirely different order.

Thus, in the 1990s, one could observe the beginnings of what has later been termed the *material turn* in the humanities. In an interview, Karen Barad explains this shift: "'New materialism' is a term coined in the 1990s to describe a theoretical turn away from the persistent dualisms in modern and humanist traditions whose influences are present in much of cultural theory." (Barad, 2012). As such, the new materialist turn is directed against the dichotomy between the ideal and the material – a dichotomy that underpins various versions of both classical idealism and classical

[1]We could, of course, have drawn on other theorists, but we believe that Heidegger is, at the very least, a relevant and valuable point of reference.

[2]Throughout this article, we use the term *human being*. We acknowledge that this term is fraught, particularly within posthumanist and new materialist traditions (e.g., Braidotti, Haraway), which have deconstructed the universalizing and exclusionary tendencies of humanism. The critique points to how the human has historically functioned as a normative ideal – implicitly white, Western, male, rational, and able-bodied – thus marginalizing those who fall outside this construct and reinforcing structures of epistemic and material violence. From this perspective, any invocation of the human risks reinstating a problematic anthropocentrism and a bounded subject that stands apart from and above the more-than-human world. Educational theorists such as Biesta have likewise warned against ontological closures that fix the subject in advance, advocating instead for an open, dialogic conception of subjectivity. Heidegger's avoidance of der Mensch in favour of Dasein similarly reflects an effort to resist metaphysical assumptions about what it means to be human. Nevertheless, we maintain that educational theory today cannot entirely dispense with some form of anthropology –understood here as a minimal and situated account of the human as a being capable of relational meaning-making, ethical responsiveness, and imaginative co-construction. Even the call to keep the human open presupposes beings with capacities for such openness. In this article, we thus adopt a pragmatic and reflexive use of human being, not to fix or essentialize, but to enable a critical engagement with education's role in shaping responses to planetary crisis. Our usage foregrounds the human as always already relational, situated, and entangled within multispecies, material, and affective assemblages.

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materialism. Instead, it emphasizes the entanglement of the material and the discursive.[3] In line with several other posthumanist positions, it therefor posits that the human being is one among many different kinds of actors in the world – both living and non-living – that continuously affect and are affected by one another in myriads of interactions.

Accordingly, a central theme within new materialism is the critique of the notion of human exceptionalism as an autonomous and sovereign agent in the world. This critique is both motivated theoretically and politically-practically: theoretically, because it is argued that all things are entangled and that agency is not something unique to humans; and politically, because the idea of the autonomous subject is argued to have significantly contributed to a sense of human separation from all other forms of being – entities which could then be treated instrumentally and at will. This, in turn, has led to a growing disregard for, and lack of love and care for the material world, which has instead been increasingly subject to exploitation.

In many ways, we sympathize deeply with both the ideas and experiences articulated within this theoretical shift. Despite the sympathetic intentions underlying new materialism, we nonetheless insist that, in the current planetary condition, it remains crucial to uphold the possibility of attributing a particular responsibility to the human being – among all earthly creatures – for having contributed to this state of affairs (even though some individuals, cultures and societies have, of course, contributed more than others). This is, after all, why we speak today of the Anthropocene epoch: it was not the field mice, the pond turtles, or the seahorses that precipitated the present situation. For the same reason, and notwithstanding our affinities with new materialism and its posthumanist emphasis on the entanglement of all things, we wish to underscore that just as all that exists is entangled, it is likewise a defining feature of all living beings that they possess the capacity to initiate. And in our view, the human being bears a particular responsibility for its acts of initiation, insofar as it seems to be uniquely capable of reflecting on the desirability of what it can imagine and thereby maybe choose to begin.

Whether other animals or plants possess a similar capacity to relate to and reflect on their own imaginaries is, at a fundamental level, something we do not truly know. However, it is unlikely that such a capacity – if it exists – is identical to that of the human being. For this reason, we maintain, on both ontological and moral grounds, that until proven otherwise, it is reasonable to assume that the human being, in a way distinct from, for instance, the seahorse, can be held responsible for the reality it allows to come into being. One might call this an *entangled yet untangled capacity for imagination and initiation*. As a theoretical position, we will designate it as *new idealism*, insofar as we insist that imagination and deliberate initiation are decisive for the ongoing becoming of (human) reality. In this way, one could say that new materialism emphasizes human entanglement while pushing human distance into the background, whereas our aim is to highlight this distance and the responsibility it entails – without neglecting our entanglement.[4] In order to argue for the relevance of such a renewed idealism, we now turn first to the early, and then to the later Heidegger.

[3]It is always difficult to precisely define what characterizes a particular tradition – and, by extension, who belongs to it. In the case of new materialism, we consider Barad (2007), Bennett (2010), Braidotti (2002), and Haraway (2016) to be among its central figures, as they (a) reject the traditional dichotomy between materiality and agency, and (b) attribute agency to materiality itself.

[4]We recognize that our position may be viewed – particularly from ecocentric perspectives such as those articulated by Kopnina et al. (2018) – as a form of refined or 'soft' anthropocentrism. By attributing a distinct responsibility to the human being, grounded in the capacity for reflection, imagination, and deliberate initiation, we may risk re-inscribing a moral hierarchy that centres humans as uniquely significant. Kopnina et al., argue that even compassionate or pragmatic forms of anthropocentrism sustain the very structures of speciesism and human chauvinism that have contributed to planetary degradation. From their perspective, environmental ethics must be grounded in an ecocentric recognition of the intrinsic value of all life forms – not in the capacities or interests of humans. While we take this critique seriously and share its concern with overcoming human-centred worldviews, we maintain that ethical responsibility does not necessarily follow from ontological superiority. Instead, we understand responsibility in asymmetrical terms, drawing on relational ethics (e.g., Bornemark, 2022; 2025): the ethical *giver* is one who, under specific entangled conditions, is able to take responsibility for others, while the *receiver* of ethics may include not only other humans (such as children or persons with disabilities), but also animals,

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Idealism part 1 – the human being as the entangled beginner

For those familiar with Heidegger, it may appear somewhat peculiar that we turn to him in order to explain the relevance of idealism as a philosophical position, given that the standard interpretation of Heidegger emphasizes his break with idealism – particularly through his conception of the human being as *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*). This is, in a certain sense, correct – especially if one equates idealism with the traditions of Descartes or Hegel. However, as we already anticipated and as we will argue below, despite this apparent break, one can nonetheless find in Heidegger both the notion of the human as a particular kind of beginner, and the idea that human being-in-the-world necessarily involves a form of interpretation and, consequently, idea-formation. In this sense we still take it to be fair to interpreted him as an "idealist".

If we turn to Heidegger's early project as formulated in *Being and Time* (1978/1927), his magnum opus, it may not capture the full scope of his undertaking, but we can nonetheless say that he sought to explain how human beings are able to be *in the world* in the particular way they are. His answer is that human existence is temporally structured: at any given moment, a person has always already *projected* themselves into the future, while simultaneously arriving at that moment by having been *thrown* into it from the past. From this it follows that the human being is not a neutral presence in the world. On the contrary, the world discloses itself to the human in the particular way it does precisely because of this thrown-projective mode of being.

By *thrownness*, Heidegger refers to the fact that humans are always situated within and intertangled into specific contexts – they are born into particular families, historical moments, social environments, landscapes, faunas, languages, desires, having a certain mood etc. These circumstances shape their understanding and actions. However, humans do not passively accept these conditions – we are not only re-actions; instead humans are also open to the world by projecting and understanding of what could be and what could (and might) have been – why time is not a linear flow according to Heidegger but a circular simultaneity of temporal ecstasies, as Heidegger terms it.

This brings us to the first reason for the continued relevance of idealism. Put simply, the world – and the human being itself – could not appear to the human being if it were entirely absorbed in the here and now of the present moment. Rather, the human being, as *thrown* (*Geworfenheit*), is always already entangled in the world and its things; yet at the same time, there is a certain distance within the human being, since it also *projects* itself beyond this entanglement with other beings. In this sense, thrownness represents the dimension of receptivity in the human being, whereas its projective capacity expresses its self-activity. And because beings become manifest thanks to the temporal organization of human existence – in which the projective, that is "constructive," and thereby "idealistic," dimension plays a decisive role – we argue that it is ultimately meaningless to question the relevance of idealism. Being would never appear to us as something we must relate to if it were not for this "idealistic" structure of our being, which introduces a distance from the raw materiality of the present moment, and which simultaneously makes us the beings of beginnings, of responsibility, that we are.

Whether one would also claim that all living beings are, in this sense, beginners is, of course, another matter. Here, we tend toward a line of reasoning inspired by Schelling and Heidegger, who suggest that all life shares a fundamental capacity for world-relatedness or self-expression, though this capacity manifests in different modes and intensities. Heidegger, for instance, distinguishes the human mode of having a world as more articulated and deliberate than that of other living creatures – whose existence appears more immediately embedded in their

ecosystems, and other forms of life that merit ethical consideration without needing to reciprocate. In this light, our call for a particular human responsibility arises not from a claim to supremacy, but from the recognition that humans have – through both historical action and present capacity – a unique role to play in initiating other, more just and caring ways of relating. We term this position a *new idealism*, grounded not in disembodied reason but in entangled agency, imaginative foresight, and situated moral response.

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environments. Admittedly, such distinctions remain speculative: we do not, for example, know what it is like for the bat to be bat. Still, for the purposes of this article, we provisionally accept Heidegger's articulation, not to affirm a hierarchy of beings, but to underscore a distinct human responsibility – a responsibility that emerges from the human capacity to reflect upon, imagine, and begin otherwise.[5]

Understood in this way, one can argue that all living beings express a formative force or principle – what we may, for the sake of simplicity, call life or Zoë – which entails both entangled receptivity and a potential to initiate. Yet we also maintain that humans, due to their situated capacities for reflection, imagination, and deliberation (capacities which most people possess under certain conditions), can be held accountable in ways that other beings cannot. For instance, humans can be held responsible for the felling and burning of trees in ways that the trees themselves cannot be – though both are, ontologically, living participants in shared ecologies. One might suggest that trees could do more to protect themselves, but such a proposition only underscores the difference in relational, cognitive, and epistemic capacities that grounds a differentiated sense of responsibility. In this sense, we argue that while all living beings may be seen as participants in the unfolding of life – as beginners, in a broad sense – not all beings can be held equally accountable for the realities that come into being. Holding humans to a distinct standard of responsibility does not imply ontological hierarchy but rather acknowledges the ethical implications of a certain mode of responsiveness that emerges under posthuman, yet still human, conditions.[6]

Idealism part 2 – the understanding of everything there is – the world

In addition to articulating the idealist character of human existence, Heidegger offers yet another reason why it would be both mistaken and unproductive to attempt to break with idealism as a philosophical position. This second reason can most readily be explained with reference to his so-called *Kehre* – the "turn" in his thinking – which, in turn, can be elucidated through his well-known text *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger, 2013/1954).

Briefly put, we might describe Heidegger's *Kehre* as follows: In *BT* – the point of departure for the discussion above – Heidegger was concerned with how human being is characterized as a process in which the human, through its throwing-thrownness, is opened up to and thereby is in the world. However, shortly after *BT*, Heidegger came to realize that, although he had described the temporality of human existence, he had said little about how our *understanding* of *Being* itself undergoes historical transformation – how, in other words (and to put it a bit simple), the overarching semantic horizon through which we are in the world is itself subject to change over time.

[5]We are aware that the line of thinking we draw on here – particularly in Heidegger and Schelling – risks being read as reinforcing a hierarchical ontology that places the human at the top. That is not our intention. Rather, we draw on their work because it enables a differentiated account of life that affirms meaningful variation without reducing difference to dominance. Our use of Heidegger's concept of the human as a being who "has a world" is thus pragmatic and provisional: it allows us to posit the human as especially accountable in the current planetary crisis, without foreclosing the possibility that other beings, too, may possess forms of agency, world-making, or initiation. We do not claim that humans are *more* valuable than other beings, only that under current conditions, humans appear to hold a particular capacity for ethical response that must be foregrounded. The broader question of how responsibility and agency might be relationally distributed across species and systems remains open, and we regard it as a crucial field for further investigation.

[6]Our position resonates with what Gough (2016) describes as "irreducible anthropocentrism" – the idea that rejecting hierarchical human supremacy need not mean denying the specific ways in which humans experience and shape the world. Gough emphasizes that our condition is increasingly posthuman, marked by technological extensions and multispecies assemblages, yet this does not erase the ethical weight of human actions. We draw on this view to support a differentiated but non-hierarchical conception of responsibility – one that affirms human accountability without grounding it in universal superiority, but rather in what Gough (2016, p. 59) refers to as historically specific and changeable "species-specific biophysical" limitations and possibilities.

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For this reason, Heidegger's later philosophy is particularly concerned with understanding *historicity*, and thus the inner dynamic of how our understanding of being as such and thereby the world evolves throughout history.

The question of the historicity of world-understanding led Heidegger to a number of reflections on the relationship between, on the one hand, our understanding of the world and, on the other, the human being as existing within that world. Put somewhat simply, one of the key insights of his later philosophy is that, while the human being may indeed act as a free agent in the more traditional sense at a given moment and within a given context, this freedom is nonetheless exercised within a space of possibilities that is configured by the prevailing understanding of being characteristic of a particular historical epoch. In this sense, one can say that every human being lives and unfolds their being, their personal freedom within a specific understanding of being – that is, within a particular semantic horizon.

This, of course, also applies today, where the dominant understanding of being, according to Heidegger, is that of technology. However, by "technology," Heidegger does not mean that people now walk around believing that all beings consist of wires and blinking lights. Rather, he means that beings are understood as *standing-reserve* – as resources to be used, something that humans are compelled to exploit according to their will and capabilities. As a result, modern humans, in their everyday consciousness, may indeed experience the world – and nature in particular – as something that appears in a way that is intelligible, controllable, and exploitable. This, in turn, opens an enormous space of action. At the same time, however, Heidegger insists that this technological understanding of being is not something we freely choose – it is, rather, a kind of historical destiny. For this reason, it is today exceedingly difficult *not* to understand and relate to beings in technological terms.

One might, then, be tempted to conclude that Heidegger is advocating a form of historical-semantic determinism – understood in the sense that, although the semantic horizon grants humans an open space within which they may act, humans have no freedom with regard to the horizon itself to which they are summoned. And in a certain sense, this is indeed correct. Yet not entirely. Heidegger repeatedly emphasizes that even on the semantic level, a new beginning is possible – *if* the human being learns to take what he calls a *gelassen* (letting-be, or releasement) step back. What form a new understanding of being might take, however, is not something that can be controlled or predicted.

While we will not delve into the precise meaning of *Gelassenheit* here, what matters for our present purposes is that Heidegger emphasizes the imaginative (or idealist) dimension of our understanding of the world, of the totality of what is – as constitutive of the space of possibilities within which we live out our everyday lives as so-called free beings, capable of initiating new events in the world.

Mundification?

What we can take from Heidegger, then, is firstly a double justification for why it is ultimately meaningless to attempt to abandon idealism: (a), because the human being is, in an existential sense, a beginner, thanks to the temporal character of human existence – which also explains why the human is not bound to the stake of the present moment, but is instead capable of relating to what it wishes to bring about; and (b), because the human being always stands in relation to a (historically shifting) semantic-ideal horizon, by which it is neither fully determined nor fully in control of.

Secondly, we regard Heidegger's emphasis on the human (imaginative/idealist) understanding of being as a whole – that is, of the world – as something that should be of particular relevance to the educational system in the context of the current planetary crisis. We can clarify this by drawing on Biesta's account of the purposes of education. In What is

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Education For? (2010), Biesta proposes that education serves a threefold purpose: *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification*. Qualification refers to providing individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to function in society, including within the labour market. Socialization concerns how individuals become part of existing social, cultural, and political traditions – how they learn to participate in society. Subjectification, finally, "refers to the process of becoming a subject – not in the sense of an autonomous individual, but in the sense of someone who is capable of acting, speaking and thinking with a certain degree of autonomy and responsibility" (Biesta, 2010, p. 21). Biesta emphasizes that these three functions are not mutually exclusive but must be held in tension. He argues that contemporary education often overemphasizes qualification (particularly under neoliberal agendas) and socialization (as conformity to existing orders), at the expense of subjectification – the emergence of the individual as a responsive and responsible subject. For Biesta, it is precisely this subjectification that enables education to go beyond mere reproduction and utility, allowing space for interruption, ethical judgment, and the possibility of new beginnings.

As a supplement, our argument is that, in light of the current metacrisis, it is necessary to add a fourth domain to Biesta's account of why we engage in schooling – namely, *mundification*. In this context, we are well aware that *mundification* is not a particularly elegant neologism. Nevertheless, we have chosen it for the following reasons: Heidegger was the first to create a verbal noun from *world – es weltet*, as he puts it in his first lecture series from 1919 (Heidegger, 1987, GA 56/57). With this, he pointed to the idea that the world is not merely an extremely large thing, but rather that the world and the human understanding of the world constitute an event that constantly unfolds alongside human being.

In this light, one might object that the most obvious concept for our purposes would be *worldification*. However, this is not quite the case. Our point is that we fully agree with Heidegger that the world is constantly *worlding*, and that society and adults – often without even being aware of it – continually influence children and young people (and each other) to understand the world in a particular way. This process, we would like to refer to as *worldification*.

However, in addition to this understanding of the world, which always already asserts itself between people, there is also a pedagogically reflected and intentionally directed influence on people's understanding of the world and of beings. It is this intentional *Bildung* process that we would like to designate with the neologism *mundification*, in order to emphasize that we are aiming at a process that contains a specific pedagogical intent and is not merely something that inevitably occurs wherever there are human beings.

The aim of *mundification* as pedagogical concept is thus to develop an awareness and understanding of the human understanding of being as a whole, of the world – and, more precisely, the particular understanding of the world that the educational system implicit or explicit initiate students into. Compared to Biesta's equal weighting of the three domains, adding *mundification* as a fourth domain is, of course, not without consequence, since the domain of mundification shifts the relationship between the others. Because mundification concerns the kind of understanding of being as a whole – of the world – that the school introduces to children and young people – the world it opens up – it follows that different worldviews will have implications for the other domains as well.

For example, if nature is understood – within a given worldview – as something humans have the right to experiment with and exploit at will, this calls for an educational system that prioritizes a particular kind of knowledge and a particular set of competencies. If, on the other hand, nature is understood as something we must respect and engage in dialogue with, then this would require a different kind of knowledge and different competencies. Likewise, a different worldview will foster different social practices and traditions, just as it will outline a different space within which the individuals can unfold their subjecthood.

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Which worlds?

Given Heidegger's claim that our understanding of the world is neither fully determined nor entirely subject to our control, one may ask what humans can actually do in relation to their worldview – and, more specifically, what the educational system can do.

Our position is that human beings, to some extent, can contribute to reinforcing or weakening worldviews that already have a hold on people. Furthermore, it is often – but not always – the case that a given culture has a dominant worldview, while one or more alternative worldviews also circulate alongside it.

If one agrees, as we do, that it is part of the educational system's task to reflect on which worldview it *mundifies* children and young people with, then it also becomes a key educational and political responsibility to consider which worldview the system should contribute to strengthening, and which worldview(s) it should help to weaken. This question has become especially urgent in light of the current planetary crisis.

In this light, it becomes important to investigate and critically engage with the worldviews that are currently present among human beings. In this context, we have argued extensively in other texts that at least two distinct worldviews can be identified today "combating" – although, of course, there are virtually endless variations within these worldviews when examined more closely. The first we have called *scenic-humanist*, the second *dialogical-zoëlogical*.[7] We will briefly outline each in turn.

The *scenic-humanist* worldview is our term for the dominant Western understanding of the world, which has evolved since antiquity and has culminated in the current planetary situation. A defining feature of this worldview is that humanity is conceived as the exalted centre of being – initially placed in the centre by God's grace, and following the withdrawal of God, simply as the being that, by virtue of its particular freedom and rationality, holds the right to use all other beings at its discretion. Consequently, the world becomes a stage upon which humans perform the drama of their lives, with everything else serving as props to be employed as needed. Hence, the term *scenic-humanist*.[8]

Many today, however, tend to hold a somewhat more moderate view than this characterization might suggest. Today, it is widely acknowledged that Earth's resources are finite, and thus we must find ways to reduce our consumption so as not to destroy the planet as a habitat. Accordingly, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, certain marine and terrestrial areas have been protected; quotas have been established for fisheries; limits have been placed on CO_2 emissions; and significant investments have been made in the development of green technologies. In this sense, it can be said that contemporary modern people recognize the need to steward Earth's resources carefully – yet this does not alter the fundamental tendency to regard beings as resources and the world as a stage on which humanity occupies the leading role.

In contrast, we are currently witnessing the emergence – on a global scale – of an alternative worldview in which nature is not regarded merely as a resource, but as something with intrinsic value and agency. While this worldview appears in new forms today, it is not entirely without precedent. In the Western tradition, its roots can be traced at least as far back as the Romantic era, with its vision of nature as an interconnected, living whole. More importantly, many of its core elements resonate deeply with relational ontologies that have long been present in a range of Indigenous lifeways and ontologies that conceive of land, animals, plants, and elements as active participants in shared worlds. What is new, however, is that such a worldview is now gaining broader traction across a wide range of subcultures, movements, and educational contexts. No

[7]These ideas are elaborated much more extensively in Ziethen and Paulsen (2025), although unfortunately, the publication is currently only available in Danish.

[8]The idea of the world as a stage can be traced back to the Renaissance, for instance in Pico della Mirandola (1496). However, our primary inspiration for this figure is Heidegger and his notion of understanding being as a resource. That said, the idea also appears in the work of other thinkers, such as Latour (see, for example, his *Facing Gaia* from 2017).

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longer confined to intellectual or spiritual minorities, it is becoming a vital response to the global environmental crisis brought about by the dominant worldview. That said, it does not constitute a unified or homogeneous perspective; rather, it manifests across diverse practices and traditions. What unites these expressions is a shared rejection of the instrumental and anthropocentric view of nature, and a common desire to find more livable ways of being in the world. We refer to this evolving orientation as *dialogical-zoëlogical*: *zoëlogical* because it affirms that humans are but one form of life among many, each with its own claim to existence, and *dialogical* because it involves a growing human attentiveness to how other species inhabit the Earth – seeking, where possible, mutually viable ways of cohabiting. While shaped by contemporary crises, this worldview is also indebted to older, often marginalized knowledge systems. Its dialogical character lies not only in a willingness to speak, but in a renewed capacity to listen – to the more-than-human world, to other epistemologies, and to the conditions for shared life.

Given that one accepts our above attempt to capture how one today can identify both a dominant and an emerging counter-worldview – worldviews that are, in many respects, as different from one another as one could possibly imagine – the question then arises: What is the task of the school or more broadly Education today?

This is where, in our view, *mundification* becomes a vital task for the school system. At various points in history, the role of education has shifted – sometimes seen as a means of reinforcing the dominant worldview, and at other times as a way to support alternative ones. Here, we argue that the scenic-humanist worldview has had consequences that are too severe and destructive to justify its continued dominance. In this light, we maintain that the purpose of schooling cannot be to contribute to the undermining of the possibility of future life on Earth. Ergo, the educational system must, in one way or another, be oriented toward promoting life-friendly ways of inhabiting the Earth and participating in society, that is oriented toward the dialogical-zoëlogical understanding of the world.

This is not to say, however, that the scenic-humanist worldview has not also brought about many valuable achievements – from human rights and democracy to medicine and the rule of law. Nor are we arguing that turning toward the dialogical-zoëlogical worldview requires abandoning all the civilizational gains of the past. Rather, we suggest that these achievements must be rethought within the framework of a new understanding of the world.

Before proceeding, we would like to preemptively address a common objection to this position – namely, the concern that such an approach amounts to ideological indoctrination or even an anti-democratic agenda aimed at "brainwashing" students with a *dialogical-zoëlogical* worldview. Our response is that children and young people today are, almost by default, mundified – or brainwashed if one prefers that term – into the *scenic-humanist* worldview – and yet this fact rarely provokes protest. Our aim is therefore not indoctrination, but rather, at a minimum, to ensure that children and young people are introduced to an alternative to the scenic-humanist worldview – that is, they are introduced to the dialogical-zoëlogical worldview as the school's primary horizon – one we believe offers the best foundation both for our children and for life on Earth more broadly.

Mundification, imagination and education

This brings us, finally, to the didactical question of how *mundification* might be carried out in practice. We cannot offer a complete answer to that question at this point, but since *mundification* today concerns supporting the emergence of a new worldview, we will, for now, emphasize the importance of the imagination in approaching the task of *mundification*.

It seems fair to ask: what, in fact, is imagination? This, of course, is also a question we cannot answer definitively. However, drawing on the distinction introduced earlier between two levels of ideality, we would argue that – whatever imagination may be – it can operate on both an ontic and an ontological level.

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At the ontic level, a child might, for instance, imagine that a chair is part of a ship, assigning it a specific role within a play scenario. Whatever the imagination is, one of its effects is that there is no 1:1 correspondence between materiality and meaning; the same object can signify many different things and be used together with many different things. In this sense, imagination may be understood as a *capacity for potentiality and semantic ambiguity* – even as the child simultaneously remains aware of the "correct" or conventional meaning (i.e., the actual use) of a chair.

At the ontological level, humans can likewise imagine entirely different ways of understanding being as such –– for example, envisioning a world in which animals and plants hold the same intrinsic value as humans. In this sense, imagination may be understood as a *capacity for the potentiality and building a new semantic horizon* – even while simultaneously knowing what the "real" (actual) world is, namely the one in which humans are permitted to exploit nature at will.

Building on this account of the imagination's power to detach human beings from a given interpretation of reality, one may ask what role the imagination could ideally play in relation to ecological formation – particularly when the goal is to support the development of life-affirming citizens and, by extension, a life-affirming society. The simple answer is that, for as long as the *dialogical-zoëlogical* worldview is not the "real" one – that is, not the one from which most people and institutions derive their orientation – imaginative capacity must be employed to expose human beings, at the very least, to this alternative worldview.

This, naturally, can take many forms: from sending children into a local forest to listen for how insects prefer to live, to stories that draw children into a world in which being is understood quite differently than it is in the *scenic-humanist* framework. In short: from the perspective of ecological formation, imagination must be used to build as many bridges as possible between the *scenic-humanist* world (into which most children are born and mundified today) and the *dialogical-zoëlogical* world (emergent as a significant counter world-understanding of today and the future). The more bridges there are, the more opportunities children and young people will have to explore that other world – and perhaps, at some point, the miracle will occur that this alternative world has become the "real" one.

Lastly, to avoid misunderstandings, we want to emphasize that mundification, as we understand it, is not merely a matter of transmitting mental representations of the world, nor of instilling abstract ideas about the environment. Rather, it involves the formation of lived orientations – the shaping of how we inhabit, relate to, and make sense of being *in* the world. Mundification, in this sense, is not a transfer of worldview content but a formative initiation into a world-understanding that is always already embedded in practices – *of* language, bodily comportment, material infrastructure, and interspecies relations. Mundification, then, is about the habits we cultivate, the architectures we design, the species we live with, and the affective atmospheres we dwell in. Schools and other educational institutions are therefore not merely sites for transferring knowledge or values, but potent world-making institutions, whether or not they reflect explicitly on this task. For this reason, we contend that mundification should be recognized not only as a fourth domain of education, but perhaps as its most fundamental one – insofar as it frames and conditions how qualification, socialization, and subjectification unfold.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to introduce what we have termed *mundification*, which – compared to Biesta's three domains as an answer to why we have schooling – offers a fourth and supplementary response to the purpose of education. To explain what *mundification* entails and why we consider it important in the context of the current metacrisis, we drew on both the early and the later Heidegger. This revealed that the human being is both a beginning being in the world and, at the same time, a being capable of relating to the world as such.

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Building on this, we argued that the human is both entangled with everything else and simultaneously distanced from it thanks to its capacity for reflection, imagination and its understanding of everything there is, that is, its understanding of the world. This capacity to take a step back and relate to what might come into being, we described as the idealist aspect of the human.

We thus expressed a certain sympathy with new materialism and its emphasis on the entanglement of all things, while at the same time insisting that the human bears a particular responsibility for what it allows to come into being in the present situation. For this reason, we described our position as *new idealism*.

On that basis, we asked what characterizes the current understanding of the world. We argued that, at present, there are at least two competing worldviews: the *scenic-humanist*, which is dominant today, and the *dialogical-zoëlogical*, which is still emerging. We further claimed that the scenic-humanist worldview has significantly contributed to the current planetary crisis, while the dialogical-zoëlogical worldview points to more life-affirming ways of being Earth-dwellers.

In this light, we concluded that the task of the educational system must be to promote life-affirming modes of being, that is a specific take on mundification. Therefore, it becomes a central task for educational theory to develop concepts and methods that support the emergence of the dialogical-zoëlogical worldview. Finally, we emphasized that, from an educational perspective, it is crucial to mobilize the imagination and the power of envisioning when the school is tasked with supporting the *mundification* of a world that exists only vaguely between us.

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