

Cameron Randall

the ungraspable

This is a speculation about speculation, much more a whisper than an argument, a whimper rather than a bang.¹ The *ungraspable* has many faces, guises, affirmations: *the infinite, the sublime, the uncanny*... weaving through words, it moves in the shadows, under the very fabric of the world, if we take a sneak peek beneath, it may reveal itself. The word ungraspable is defined as 'impossible to comprehend or understand'². The idea lies beyond the mind's capacity to conceive it, rendering the mind obsolete, as ineffectual. To truly get to terms with this mind-boggling, fog-clogging, cog-lodging, discombobulating problem, we must look at the etymology of the word "grasp"³.

¹ Reference to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men*. T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', in *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, ed. B. C. Southam, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 113-125.

² Oxford English Dictionary, <https://en.oxford-dictionaries.com/definition/ungraspable>

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/grasp>

⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Erik Gray (W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 10.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010) p. 53.

The Old English term "græpsan" means "to touch, feel", and descends from the Low Germanic term "grapsen" as "to grab; grasp". I highlight this to raise awareness to the bodying nature of the word. It is a physical thing, to touch, to grab. I see God reaching out to Adam in the Sistine Chapel, Tennyson 'stretch[ing] lame hands of faith'⁴ to the dead Hallam in *In Memoriam* and Neo clasping Morpheus in *The Matrix*. Many of the words mentioned earlier, such as the infinite and the uncanny, don't retain this bodied state of 'being-in-the-world'⁵. When did this idea convert from something physical to something cognitive? When did the grasp become an ungrasping? Rather than Neo clasping Morpheus, it's Amy Lee in the Evanescence music video *Bring Me To Life* dreaming of falling from a building after losing her grip.

The conversion from a physical grasp to a mental grasping is reflective of subjective conscious experience. Physical bodies interact with the world and are confronted with a subjective relationship towards things. To feel becomes an emotional sensation and to grasp becomes an intellectual understanding. Once the graspable becomes ungraspable, the very nature of the action is undone, the un'ness refutes its existence causing chaos and incredulity.

Imagine a hand extended out searching for a partner to complete it. The hand becomes a suggestion for a question that desires an answer. Yet, when considering the ungraspable, no such answer can satisfy the question. No hand can meet its touch. The question is a void, as is the image of the hand that sacrificially offers itself and ruptures. In this sense, the image deceives, it is a kind of non-image, it cannot contain the idea for which it stands. Given this, it disperses and becomes elusive, something slippery and wet. Levinas elucidates this idea well through the statement, 'infinity overflows the thought that thinks it'⁶.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.25.

the tri-infinite

The ungraspable permeates the universe, specifically through the suggestion of the tri-infinite. The tri-infinite evaluates the infinite in relation to three specific aspects: complexity, size and time.

complexity

We can think about complexity in two ways: firstly, in relation to the sublime nature of each individual thing, and secondly, through the diverse size of those things, ranging from the quantum world to black holes and dark matter.

Art struggles to represent that which is beyond representation, it requires a skin to live in. Yet, there is formlessness inherent within it. Kant outlines the sublime as a formless object. When confronted by a striking artwork something resonates: a perplexity of encounter. The form provokes a reaction that isn't explainable, it is ungraspable. Blanchot comments:

If the sculptor uses stone and if the road builder also uses stone, the first uses it in a way that it is not used, consumed, negated by usage, but affirmed, revealed in its obscurity, as a road that leads only to itself.⁷

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/752129-if-the-sculptor-uses-stone-and-if-the-road-builder>

Blanchot's elucidation of the infinite feedback loop, 'as a road that leads to itself' is telling. Much like the hand without a partner and the question without an answer, it too is not completable. The object conceals something that cannot be ascertained. The more we analyse it the more ambiguous it becomes, there is a surplus, it will never fully be exhausted and loops on itself retaining a cryptic quality.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.74.

Heidegger explores the 'being-in-itself'⁸ of a thing: evaluating its 'handiness'⁹; the function of a hammer to hammer nails into wood, and its 'presence-at-hand'¹⁰; the properties of the hammer (weight, material, length etc.). Yet, when the hammer breaks, the form of relationship is also splintered. It cannot complete its function and unlocks, revealing itself in an alternative state of potentiality, 'being-in-itself', receiving the world rather than objectively existing in it, a subject-object of sorts. This unlocking of an object correlates to timbre of sound, the unique frequency or 'sensual appearance of an object to another object'¹¹. We sense this in the creak of a chair in a library, or the glimmer of a double-decker bus in the glass of a sun-soaked skyscraper, the geometric design inside of a beehive or a stalactite dripping from a damp, dark cavern. The aesthetic 'is not a superficial candy coating on the real, but is instead the lubrication, the energy and the glue of causality as such'¹². It is perhaps in these moments where the universe is phenomenologically encountered and is manifested in its ungraspable form.

⁹ Note Heidegger's analogy to the hand, the desire to grasp. *Ibid*, p.69.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.70.

¹¹ Timothy Morton, "Sublime Objects", in *Speculations II*, ed. Michael Austin, Paul J. Ennis, Fabio Gironi, Thomas Gokey, (2011), pp.207-227, p.216.

¹² *Ibid*, p.216.

Things are much
closer to home.

In the human
body,

human cells are
outnumbered 9:1
by bacteria.

Let us approach this from a more literal and traditional conceptualisation of the infinite. You are on a cliff edge and you look out to the horizon, the flat line severs the space in two, the top half, a lighter, milkier blue much like my niece's onesie, adjoins with the deeper, darker blue of the pulsating ocean. The knock-off infinite threatens, an optical illusion. What is beyond the horizon? A planet? A solar system? A galaxy? Now imagine every single particle that inhabits the space between you and that galaxy, all enwrapped with a dense, intense complexity that infinitely breathes and intrigues. Flip your perception from the horizon and follow back to the shoreline where the waves tumble on to the floor, foaming like carpet cleaner. Billions and billions of tiny, golden granules glitter in the heat of the day. In each of these grains of sand, there are trillions and trillions of atoms, each consisting of a nucleus made of protons and neutrons, which are in turn, formed by quarks and many other subatomic particles. All these particles interacting and colliding in vacuous encounters and shapeless residues. Bruno Latour proposes:

The world is not a continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms.¹³

This metaphor is echoed by Deleuze when he suggests that the universe is as a 'pond of matter in which there exist different flows and waves'¹⁴. Existence as gloopy, porous and diffusive, not knowing where one entity ends and the other begins, constantly intermingling, totally ungraspable, all under one roof raving, laughing joking, spawned from stardust.

¹³ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 245.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 5.

size

Kant addresses the sublime as a form of such profoundness, such enormity, that there is no comprehensible way to contain it. Far too long has the painting of the 'Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog' by Caspar David Friedrich dictated how we see the sublime. The painting portrays the wandering male who has traversed the mountaintop, looking with awe and wonder at the beauty of nature below. Friedrich's positioning of the man romantically gorging on the beauty of the landscape creates a distinct separation between land and man. The landscape becomes a commodity, something to consume, an outlook of huge contemporary relevance.

Let us go back to the idea of the timbre of an object, the ring of the sublime. Silent shrieks that tremor and oscillate, the act of call and response between objects. All objects, entities, particles are open to themselves and everything else in an entangled state. In this sense, the sublime is not some Romantic ideal but becomes the form of the universe, a form of such ungraspable magnitude that enables the possibility to transcend reality and to conceive new ideas, new futures, new worlds. Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought* introduces the term mesh:

"Mesh" can mean the holes in a network and threading between them. It suggests both harness and delicacy. It has uses in biology, mathematics, and engineering and in weaving and computing – think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics. It has antecedents in mask and mass, suggesting both density and deception. By extension, "mesh" can mean "a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare."¹⁵

¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological thought*, (Harvard University Press, 2012), p.28.

Morton's description reminds me of a spider's web. Barely visible, it can only be perceived when sunlight catches on its sticky, shiny surface. Simultaneously enchanting and ominous. Once you're in, it's impossible to get out, much like a ball pit in a play park. 'The mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences,'¹⁶ where each point within the mesh is 'both the centre and edge of a system of points, so no absolute centre or edge'¹⁷. All is flux, all meshed, enmeshed, congealing in totality, where no thing is dominant, all dependent on a counterpart, co-existing. This polymorphic perspective is in the manufactured coke can, the pollination of bees in high summer, the photographic evidence of a black hole, the sound of whales in water, the google image search for a car, 'the wind in the trees',¹⁸ the sea pulled by the fullness of the moon.

Things are much closer to home. In the human body, human cells are outnumbered 9:1 by bacteria. The mitochondria that power your biochemical cell reactions is an imposter, an alien that infiltrated, a descendent of an external bacterium. Endosymbiosis, bodies within the body, a multi-cellular endeavour, life from co-operation and co-habitation, living together in unison. Entanglement has no definitiveness but blurs all lines, all thresholds, extending inside and out.

What was infinitely big, just got bigger. Turn inwards, what is the role of subjective experience? We have opened a can of worms. Keith Wiley discusses the attempt to understand all possible mental phenomena as:

a totality of experiences, memory, and other acquired knowledge or skill, logical or emotional in nature, from allowed intellectual to rote motor, conscious or unnoticed, that represents a mind at a given moment in its life.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid, p.30.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.29.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 15-87, p.26.

¹⁹ Keith Wiley, *A Taxonomy and Metaphysics of Mind-Uploading*, (Alautun Press, 2014), p.102.

Within each moment we recognise that this enmeshed state moves beyond the confines of the physical and is open to the infinite potential of the mind. He goes on to explain the full capacity of the imaginary, through 'literally every visual scene (picture) a person could ever witness, whether photo-realistic, cartoonish, artistically abstract, or utterly pixelated noise'²⁰. Wiley undertakes the imagination of the conscious mind strictly from the perspective of the human but I would stretch this further. What might this experience be like for a bird, a fly on the wall, a rock, artificial intelligence, or an electron?

²⁰
Ibid, p.105.

time

In the sublime ordinary moment, of each moment, silence calls us, asking us to approach it, extending its long, ethereal fingers, inviting us into the future. It is understood that the human mind quantifies the momentary to a tenth of a second, we might also want to think of this as a 'mind-state'²¹. In each mind-state the eternal future lies in silence, beckoning the next mind-state to emerge. Future worlds and future selves loom in front of us, always slightly out of reach. It's like one of those candle holders that your nan might have, where the candle recedes back into a mirror, gradually fading darker.

²¹
Ibid, p.101.

Heidegger examines this idea when thinking about the nothing, suggesting that there is an 'openedness of beings'²². When open in the singular moment, we are suspended in the sublime of the ordinary, the temporal collapses and the enormity of the entangled reality becomes evident. We notice the bacteria on the edges of our fingers, the toxic smog above the cityscape and the lines of code running behind our latest Instagram upload. We realise that we are not who we thought we were, the ego melts, an 'essential unfolding'²³, and we revert back to the atomic and subatomic, born into the next moment. Catherine

²²
Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics', in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 89-110, p. 104.

²³
Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics', in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, New York: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 89-110, p. 104.

Malabou describes this as a state of 'plasticity' where 'we are not facing pre-given difference, but a process of metamorphosis'²⁴. We can think of it as meta-metamorphosis, form forming form, a process of becoming. Much like the object that exudes an ungraspable surplus, so does temporality, our access to the future is always unknowable, always a surprise.

When passing through the momentary, we move from one moment to the next, then the next. In this process, the moment mutates, deforms, there is an eruption, a dislocation, a transition. Our mind is concerned with the infinite possibilities of the future. We can measure the point of transition when looking at the action of an electron. An electron in quantum mechanics usually has no particular position and is standardly known as being in a wave function, where it can be all positions at once, a superposition. When we measure the locality of the electron at a certain point, the wave-function collapses. The conscious act of measuring creates an inability for superposition and produces a definitive state, an observable fact, a singular moment. The future distends and becomes the past, the possible is lost and previous futures are extinguished like a candle's flame. In this sense the constantly changing moment is hesitant, it is the not yet quality of experience, fleeting and vibrating, shimmering in the future.

an inevitable ineffable ending

I have tried to articulate which in all honesty is ineffable. The ungraspable can't be constrained by the logic of language, it transcends the linguistic. Wittgenstein sums it up nicely: 'astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer'²⁵.

²⁴ Catherine Malabou, "A Conversation with Catherine Malabou", in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9 (2008), pp. 1-13.

²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein (Critical Lives)*, (Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 116.