

Green Allies: Speculative Realism, Evangelical Christianity, and Political Pluralism

NICHOLAS TAMPIO

Fordham University, New York, USA

This essay addresses the question of how to build political coalitions to address global warming. For speculative realists such as Levi Bryant, responding to climate change demands materialist ontologies that recognize the efficacy of things themselves, e.g. fossil fuels. And yet, I argue, Bryant does not sufficiently address the political assignment of building political coalitions with people who endorse different ontologies. To illuminate this possibility, I show how the American evangelical David Gushee arrives at similar conclusions by a different route. The essay encourages speculative realists to fold modesty into their political thinking for the sake of building coalitions with theists about matters of common concern.

KEYWORDS Levi Bryant, speculative realism, climate change, evangelical Christianity, David Gushee

Introduction

The first month of 2014 was one of the warmest Januaries on record. According to the National Climatic Data Center, the combined average temperatures over land and ocean surfaces was 0.65°C (1.17°F) above the twentieth century average of 12.0°C (53.6°F).¹ For reasons that are by now common knowledge among scientists and laypeople, rising temperatures bring a host of problems, including erratic crop yields, a surge in mosquito-borne diseases, the evacuation of low-lying areas, and political tensions prompted by water shortages and environmental refugees. In *The Global Warming Reader*, Bill McKibben identifies the philosophical and political challenges posed by climate change. The philosophical challenge is grasping the magnitude of the situation, finding the right concepts to describe how humans have managed to (nearly) destroy the only planet that we

¹ NOAA National Climatic Data Center. State of the climate: global analysis for January 2014 (Asheville, NC: NOAA National Climatic Data Center; 2014).

have ever known. The political challenge, in turn, is creating the political will to change, for instance, human reliance on coal, gas, and oil. For years, environmentalists have tried to convince politicians and CEOs that humans are destroying the planet, but moral cajoling alone has not worked. “We need to be able to explain that their current ways will end something they actually care about, i.e. their careers.”² How is it possible to address these challenges, assuming that there is still time?³

The speculative realist movement may help provide a philosophical vocabulary to confront the problem of global warming. According to one of the movement’s founding documents, “speculative realism is not a doctrine but the umbrella term for a variety of research programmes committed to upholding the autonomy of reality, whether in the name of transcendental physicalism, object-oriented philosophy, or abstract materialism, against the depredations of anthropocentrism.”⁴ Among the differences between the leading figures in the speculative realist movement, two commonalities stand out: “1) a defense of some variant of realism or materialism, and 2) a critique of correlationism.”⁵ Speculative realist philosophers seek to overcome the Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, the appearances that humans can know and the reality that humans can only think. Speculative realists, in different ways, challenge correlationism, the Kantian doctrine that the human mind can never have unmediated access to being.⁶ In practice, philosophy since Kant has overwhelmingly been concerned with the human cognitive apparatus rather than the world as it exists out there. Speculative realism seeks to understand the real world, which means, today, a world affected by global warming.⁷

For all of its philosophic promise, however, the speculative realist movement has not adequately theorized the political problem of forging alliances to address global warming. In this essay, I focus on the work of Levi Bryant, a leading figure in the speculative realist movement who writes extensively on politics in books such as *The Democracy of Objects* and *Onto-Cartography*. Initially, I show how Bryant’s variant of speculative realism — machine-oriented ontology (MOO) — provides tools to think about global warming. Then, I argue that Bryant’s philosophical and political militancy forecloses the possibility of fruitful alliances with different existential faiths. To elaborate this thesis, I discuss Bryant’s account of a democracy of things, the lessons he draws from the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, his critique of pluralism as “First World Philosophy,” and his reflection on religion. By insisting on the truth of his position, Bryant

² McKibben B. *The global warming reader: a century of writing about climate change* (New York: Penguin; 2012), p. 255.

³ See Kolbert E., *The sixth extinction: an unnatural history* (New York: Henry Holt and Co.; 2014).

⁴ Mackay R, editor. *Collapse: philosophical research and development, volume III* (Falmouth: Urbanomic; 2007), p. 306.

⁵ Bryant L. Politics and speculative realism. *Speculations*. 2013;IV:15.

⁶ See Meillassoux Q. *After finitude: an essay on the necessity of contingency*. Translated by: Brassier R (New York: Continuum; 2008).

⁷ Many speculative realists contend that most post-Kantian philosophy has been concerned with humans rather than objects (or processes or machines), conditions of possible knowledge rather than things in themselves. For an effort to use resources within Kant’s philosophy to address global warming, see Ellis E. *Provisional politics: Kantian arguments in policy context* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 2008), Chapter 5.

antagonizes potential political allies that do not share his ontological commitments. If stopping climate change means electing certain politicians out of office, then speculative realists need to find a way to join political coalitions with theists.

To illustrate this thesis, I then show how speculative realists could make common cause about global warming with centrist evangelical Christians such as David Gushee, author of *The Future of Faith in American Politics* and *The Sacredness of Human Life*. Gushee grounds his theory of creation care in Christian teachings, and many of his truth claims are at odds with Bryant's MOO. But Gushee's work suggests a practical benefit of tempering the strong ontology of speculative realism, namely, the possibility of forging an alliance to change public policies that contribute to global warming. If the environmentalist assignment is to find allies, then speculative realists need a way to collaborate with evangelical Christians on respectful terms.

Speculative realism and climate change

The term *speculative realism* was coined at a 2007 workshop in London with Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, and Graham Harman. In 2011, Harman, Levi Bryant, and Nick Srnicek edited a volume, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, with contributions by philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Alberto Toscano, Slavoj Žižek, and John Protevi.⁸ Other names associated with the speculative realist movement include Jane Bennett, William E. Connolly, Bruno Latour, and Timothy E. Morton. These thinkers disagree about a wide range of topics, including the utility of the term *speculative realism*.⁹ In general, though, I agree with Graham Harman that the term “survives as a useful umbrella terms for many different kinds of new realist-feeling philosophies that work in a generally continental idiom.”¹⁰ In this essay, I engage the ontology and political theory of a leading speculative realist: Levi Bryant.

In *Onto-Cartography*, Bryant articulates a naïve materialism, or a MOO, which elides the traditional philosophic distinction between subjects and objects:

The world, I contend, is composed entirely of “stuff” and “stuff” comes in a variety of different forms. Even ideas and concepts have their materiality. What this stuff might turn out to be is an open question. It might turn out to be various forms of energy, strings, fundamental particles, and so on. In describing my position as unabashedly naïve, I only mean to say that the world is composed of physical things such as trees, rocks, planets, stars, wombats, and automobiles, that thought and concepts only exist in brains, on paper, and in computer data banks, and that ideas can only be transmitted through physical mediums such as fiber optic cables, smoke signals, oxygen rich atmospheres, and so on.¹¹

⁸ Bryant L, Srnicek N, Harman G. *The speculative turn: continental materialism and realism* (Melbourne: Re.Press; 2011).

⁹ For an overview of speculative realism, including the divide between epistemists (or scientists) such as Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier and anti-epistemists (or, loosely, humanists) such as Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant, see Harman G. *The current state of speculative realism*. *Speculations*. 2013;IV:22–28.

¹⁰ Harman G. *Bells and whistles: more speculative realism* (Winchester: Zero Books; 2013), p. 6.

¹¹ Bryant L. *Onto-cartography: an ontology of machines and media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2014), p. 6.

On its surface, this position seems unremarkable. What is the significance of arguing that the world is composed of trees and rocks, etc.? The issue, according to Bryant, is that critical theory has focused so much on social constructions that it has largely ignored the dynamic material systems that compose our bodies, thoughts, and feelings. Bryant acknowledges that society constructs gender norms, commodity fetishes, and the like, but he also thinks that philosophers have become so entranced by, in Lacan's words, the Symbolic that they have neglected the Real.¹²

In *Onto-Cartography*, Bryant outlines three political projects: cartography, deconstruction, and terraformation. A word about each. (1) Cartography is "the mapping of interactions and relations between machines composing assemblages or ecologies."¹³ Cartography maps how power flows throughout society, for instance, in the work of Marx in *Capital*, Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, and Latour in *The Pasteurization of France*.¹⁴ How does cartography differ from the work of geographers, political scientists, and other social scientists? Philosophers are more daring, employing a "speculative physics" to describe the nature of a reality that always partially withdraws from the human cognitive apparatus.¹⁵ Thus, in *Onto-Cartography*, Bryant dedicates a chapter to exploring how Einstein's theory of gravity complicates the Newtonian theory assumed by much social and political thought. Ontocartographers also refuse to privilege the human actants in any given formation, attentive to how an electrical grid failure encompasses human greed, meteorological heat and humidity, birds, metal wires, and many other machines.¹⁶ (2) Once a social or political assemblage is mapped, then the practical assignment of deconstruction may begin. "Deconstruction is that dimension of geographical practice that involves *severing* relations between incorporeal and corporeal machines that sustain particular ecological patterns through the gravity these interactions enact."¹⁷ Like much critical theory, onto-cartography shows that what many people take to be natural, or immutable, is constructed. The difference is that onto-cartography pays equal attention, in Deleuze's words, to the plane of content as well as the plane of expression. Thus it is not enough to show that ideology convinces workers to accept capitalism; onto-cartographers also show that the weight of the workday makes it nearly impossible for workers to muster the energy to act politically.¹⁸ (3) The third project of onto-cartography is terraformation, the "construction or building of alternatives that would allow people to escape the oppressive circumstances in which they live."¹⁹ Speculative realism endorses Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that the task of philosophy is not merely to understand the world, but to change it. Bryant's

¹² Bryant, *Politics and speculative realism*, p. 15.

¹³ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

¹⁵ Harman G. On the undermining of objects: Grant, Bruno, and radical philosophy. In: Bryant L, Srnicek N, Harman G, editors. *The speculative turn*, p. 27.

¹⁶ See Bennett J. *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 2010), Chapter 2.

¹⁷ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 267.

¹⁸ Bryant, *Politics and speculative realism*, p. 21.

¹⁹ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 12.

version of speculative realism, MOO, provides a tool kit to examine, break apart, and reconstruct social formations.

As with other philosophers associated with speculative realism, Bryant contends that climate change prompts a return to ontology after the modern focus on epistemology.²⁰ “Thinking climate change requires thinking ecologically and thinking ecologically requires us to think how we are both embedded in a broader natural world and how nonhuman things have power and efficacy of their own.”²¹ Bryant draws attention to factors in climate change that can be overlooked by scholars who focus on human agents, including

the albedo of the earth, the properties of fossil fuels, the release of frozen methane gases in the tundra into the atmosphere, the number of calories required to sustain global populations, the units of energy required to distribute those calories, produce them, and to run cities and homes, the impact of various agricultural practices, and so on.²²

Bryant shows that transportation systems, as well as advertisements, determine whether people purchase or not locally grown food. It is not fair to place the onus on individuals to buy green if the material world does not support such behavior. Terraformation also provides the impetus to change the material world to stop global warming. Bryant’s philosophy helps us envision “new technologies, new modes of travel, new agricultural practices, new forms of energy, new ways of relating to ecosystems, and the building of new sets of ideals and views about what constitutes ‘the good life’ at the level of expressive machines.”²³ By extending the range of political actants, speculative realism makes a salutary contribution to contemporary social and political thought.

Bryant on democracy, pluralism, and religion

Bryant’s insights about onto-cartography could be used for a variety of different political projects.²⁴ In this section, I argue that Bryant’s political theory impedes, rather than facilitates, the building of coalitions to address climate change. To do so, I will show that his conceptions of democracy, pluralism, and religion either overlook, or antagonize, the concerns of theists, potential allies in the fight against global warming.

The democracy of objects is an “*ontological* thesis that all objects [...] equally exist while they do not exist equally.”²⁵ The idea of a democracy of objects challenges a long-standing tradition in philosophy to focus on human beings as the subject or object of inquiry. In a striking phrase, Bryant seeks an ontology that does not install humans as the “monarchs of being.”²⁶ Different objects (systems,

²⁰ e.g. Morton T. *The ecological thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2010).

²¹ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 4.

²² Bryant, *Politics and speculative pealism*, p. 19.

²³ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 278.

²⁴ See Connolly W. *The ethos of pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; 1995), Chapter 1.

²⁵ Bryant L. *The democracy of objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press; 2011), p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

machines) affect other objects in different ways, but no one subset of being is ontologically inferior or superior to another. A flat ontology democratizes being by holding that everything, not just humans, makes a difference. Like other speculative realists, Bryant presses human beings to recognize that many objects are, in effect, political actants that deserve human scrutiny and, often enough, respect.²⁷ Bryant provides an image of a democracy of objects in his article, “Substantial powers, active affects: the intentionality of objects:”

Dungeons & Dragons introduces us to a world of actants, of substantial powers. Each entity, whether human or humanoid, animal or rational, magical, mundane or technological is an intentional entity, a power unleashed upon the world that harbours hidden capacities coiled within it with the ability to manifest surprising qualities and produce differences in other entities. And while *Dungeons & Dragons* depicts a fictional universe, it teaches us to discern entities as substantial powers.²⁸

Dungeons & Dragons illustrates a democracy of objects because many kinds of entities — including dragons, goblins, orcs, humanoids, spiked chains, shurikens, and swords — have a capacity to make a difference or modify a state of affairs. There is no privileged entity that interprets and evaluates all of the others, certainly not a human being. Playing the game is a sort of introduction to MOO. I wonder, however, whether *Dungeons & Dragons* provides good lessons in democratic citizenship. As Bryant explains, the Character Sheet in the *Player’s Handbook* defines the powers of each object to affect and be affected by other beings. “Strength and dexterity will preside over the character’s ability to execute attacks and avoid attacks.”²⁹ In the world of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the ability to attack and defend determines whether one wins or loses the game. In Platonic terms, the game exemplifies a *timocracy*, a regime ruled by “men naturally more directed to war than to peace,” that holds “the wiles and stratagems of war in honor,” and that spends “all its time making war.”³⁰ In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant explains that the democracy of objects is not a *political* thesis that all objects ought to be treated equally but an *ontological* thesis that all objects equally exist, while they do not exist equally.³¹ The danger, however, is without further elaboration, Bryant’s ontological democracy could contravene political democracy’s requirement that citizens be treated, more or less, as political equals, even if their mental and physical powers differ dramatically. At the least, Bryant’s future political theory ought to address how it situates itself within the democratic tradition, if at all.³²

²⁷ c.f. Bennett, Vibrant matter.

²⁸ Bryant L. Substantial powers, active affects: the intentionality of objects. *Deleuze Stud.* 2012;6(4):542.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 540.

³⁰ Plato, *The republic*. Translated by: Bloom A (New York: Basic Books; 1991), p. 225 (547e).

³¹ Bryant, *The democracy of objects*, p. 19.

³² In a recent blog, Bryant explores the idea of an anomalous communism or anarchism, but admits that he is still thinking about the proper shape of an atheological politics. Bryant L. Anomalous communism/anarchism. Mar 14, 2014. In: Larval Subjects blog [Internet]. Available from: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2014/03/14/anomalousnism anarchism/>.

Likewise, Bryant's conception of pluralism raises a red flag for those who wish to build democratic coalitions.³³ In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant explains "flat ontology advocates a pluralism of types of objects at all levels of scale that are irreducible to one another."³⁴ Like Graham Harman, Bryant argues against the view — shared by Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Iain Hamilton Grant — that nature is an undifferentiated flux that momentarily contracts into objects. Rather, Bryant maintains that objects exist independently of their relations, although in reality they are always nested inside other objects. Furthermore, in *Onto-cartography*, Bryant acknowledges that machines interact with other machines in different ways: mantis shrimp, for instance, can see polarized light whereas humans cannot.³⁵ On his blog *Larval Subjects*, however, Bryant places limits on warranted forms of pluralism:

For the realist there's a way being is, there's a way that it is independent of different "theories" the Pentecostal, 19th century scientist, Greek, modern day naturalist, etc., have of the world and part of the work of realist philosophy is to figure out how the world is. This will necessarily entail that some of these pictures are mistaken. Arguing that pictures of the world are mistaken doesn't entail that people should be imprisoned or muzzled or executed, but it does entail that we shouldn't mince words in saying that these positions are wrong or false. The materialist realist can readily maintain that something profound and meaningful is going on with the Pentecostal that's speaking in tongues while also maintaining that what's going on has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit.³⁶

Pentecostals may take relief that Bryant does not think that they should be muzzled or executed, but that does not mean that Bryant's position is charitable toward different worldviews. Bryant, in Stephen K. White's words, is a "strong ontologist," a philosopher who assumes that he has a firm grasp on the real and thus, what ought to be done in political affairs.³⁷ For Bryant, strong ontology is necessary to address real-world problems, including climate change: "When we treat reality as being nothing but a discursive construction, the words of the climate scientist no longer have any greater claim to truth than any other claim."³⁸ There is a tension within speculative realism between its speculative and its realist sides, and in his political theory, Bryant goes closer to the realist side, or what is sometimes called *scientism*. The thesis of this essay, however, is that the practical exigencies of political pluralism may prompt Bryant to temper the militancy of his ontological pronouncements.

³³ On the concern that speculative realists might become as dogmatic as radical orthodox theologians such as John Milbank, see Smith G. "You turn if you want to": the questions a pragmatic political theology might ask of speculative realism. *Polit Theo.* 2102;13:217-32.

³⁴ Bryant, *The democracy of objects*, p. 280.

³⁵ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 54-55.

³⁶ Bryant L. More remarks on pluralism: first world philosophies. Jan 24, 2014. In: *Larval Subjects Blog* [Internet]. Available from: <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2014/01/24/more-remarks-on-pluralism-first-world-philosophies/>.

³⁷ White S. *Sustaining affirmation: the strengths of weak ontology in political theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2000), p. 7.

³⁸ Bryant, *More remarks on pluralism*.

Finally, Bryant's account of religion insists on the falsity of onto-theological accounts grounded on the One. In "The other face of God: Lacan, theological structure, and the accursed remainder," Bryant argues that monotheisms express a masculine desire to totalize a system of signifiers, or explain and control everything. The problem is that this desire can never be satisfied, partly because of the need of a signifier outside the system to explain the system, thus leading one down a path of infinite regress. "Organizations premised on the supremacy of the One must, by virtue of their own necessity, *produce* an outside that simultaneously marks and veils the impossibility of the One."³⁹ In other words, onto-theologies ground themselves on a One that they can never quite explain, and this frustration leads to vengeance against Others, namely, weak constituencies such as women, liberals, or infidels. Feminine sexuation, by contrast, "begins from the *constitutively* withdrawn and differential nature of entities characterized by an abyssally withdrawn core that cannot ultimately be mastered."⁴⁰ Bryant qualifies his position in several ways. Masculine sexuation may be expressed by biological females, and *vice versa*. Secular doctrines may serve as onto-theologies if they place any One at the top of the ontological pyramid: it does not have to be the God of the Abrahamic religions.⁴¹ Finally, in his introduction to Adam S. Miller's *Speculative Grace*, Bryant recognizes that religious rituals may make believers appreciate the plane of immanence: "The pews, rituals, stained glass windows, rosary beads, people, prayer books, and so on employed by religion [...] are tools for practicing an immanence that calls us to gracefully attend to our relations in the here and now."⁴² And yet Bryant's qualifications still insist on the ontological falsity of monotheism. The feminine alternative to masculine sexuation bears the mark of "ontological *truth*."⁴³ A critique of secular onto-theologies does not make his attacks on religious onto-theologies any less scathing. And his appreciation of religious ritual comes with the caveat that he looks at this phenomenon in different terms than its practitioners: "if this is what religion is, why should we call this *religion*, rather than *politics*? [...]. And if this is so, why should we retain the charged word 'religion,' with all of its connotations of the transcendent, the supernatural, and the church?"⁴⁴ Consistent with his critique of pluralism above, Bryant thinks that if a philosophy is a realism, then the concomitant is that other accounts of reality, particularly onto-theological ones, are wrong.

On a pragmatic level, however, it seems counterproductive to make potential allies admit the falsity of their views.⁴⁵ And it is also questionable whether speculative realists can cleanly separate the theoretical from the practical. We

³⁹ Bryant L. The other face of God: lacan, theological structure, and the accursed remainder. *Speculations*. 2012;III:89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴¹ Bryant L. Politics of the virtual. *Psychoanal, Culture Soc.* 2004;9(3).

⁴² Bryant L. Foreword. In: Miller A, editor. *Speculative grace: Bruno Latour and object-oriented theology* (New York: Fordham University Press; 2013), p. xvii.

⁴³ Bryant, *Other face of God*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ Bryant, *Foreword*, p. xix.

⁴⁵ "Pride, or an overweening conceit of ourselves, must be vicious; since it causes uneasiness in all men, and presents them every moment with a disagreeable comparison." Hume D. *A treatise of human nature*. Norton D, Norton M, editors (New York: Oxford University Press; 2000), p. 380.

return to these points in the conclusion. Before then, we show that there are onto-theologians willing to address climate change in their own terms, and if the goal is to address the problem, then it may make sense to find a better way to converse with them.⁴⁶

Evangelicalism and climate change

The political theorist William E. Connolly has observed the peculiar arrangement in American politics whereby capitalists and evangelical Christians disagree on doctrinal points, but share a desire for revenge against other constituencies, including environmentalists. For capitalists who wish to maximize profit while they can, and evangelicals who yearn for the Day of Judgment, people who warn against climate change are either socialists or sinister, but in either case, enemies. To combat the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine, Connolly encourages ontological naturalists — in the language of this essay: speculative realists — to seek political allies on the fringe of the evangelical community. “Today, the most viable response involves moving back and forth between diagnosing the resonance machine of the right and pursuing selective lines of connection with constituencies on the edge of it.”⁴⁷ I now wish to perform this task and show that certain evangelical Christians agree that climate change is a real problem that demands a concerted political response. The goal is to lay the foundation for a speculative realist-evangelical resonance machine to slow down, as much as possible, the destruction of the Holocene, the roughly 12 000-year-old climatic environment that has sustained human life and civilization.⁴⁸

Evangelicalism is a broad and diverse movement. Molly Worthen identifies several concerns that unite evangelicals: “how to repair the fracture between spiritual and rational knowledge; how to assure salvation and a true relationship with God; and how to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square.”⁴⁹ Roger E. Olson defines an evangelical theologian, in sociological terms, as a member of “a loose network and affinity group of relatively conservative Protestants at the core of which, for decades, stood the National Association of Evangelicals, Christianity Today and various ministries associated with or loosely identified by some kind of

⁴⁶ On a philosopher associated with speculative realism who expresses respect for religion — particularly Catholicism — see Latour B. *Rejoicing or the torments of religious speech*. Translated by: Rose J (Cambridge: Polity; 2013). At the same time, Latour assigns religion the task of self-transformation and love rather than providing a referential account of this world or an invisible one. For a critique of Latour’s effort to honor religious modes of existence, see Bryant L. *Different senses of pluralism and ontology*. Jan 25, 2014. In: *Larval Subjects Blog* [Internet]. Available from: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2014/01/25/different-senses-of-pluralism-and-ontology/>. For a more sympathetic account of Latour’s project from a theological perspective, see Reader J. *Speculative realism and public theology: explorations*. *Polit Theo*. 2012;13:156–66.

⁴⁷ Connolly W. *The evangelical-capitalist resonance machine*. *Polit Theory*. 2005;33(6):881–82.

⁴⁸ The first challenge in building an environmental assemblage is getting diverse groups to admit the reality of anthropogenic climate change; the second, perhaps harder, challenge is getting these groups to acknowledge the severity of the problem and the radical measures that must be taken to address it. On the latter challenge, see Keohane R, Lane M, Oppenheimer M. *The ethics of scientific communication under uncertainty*. *Polit Philos Econ* 2014;13(4):343–68.

⁴⁹ Worthen M. *Apostles of reason: the crisis of authority in American evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press; 2014), p. 4.

appreciation of Billy Graham.”⁵⁰ Harriet A. Harris shows that there are important differences between evangelicals in England and America, as well as between evangelicals, committed to academic study, and fundamentalists, who tend to be suspicious of scholarship and science.⁵¹ Given the diversity of the evangelical movement, I propose to engage the work of an evangelical political thinker who may serve as a counterpoint to Levi Bryant: David P. Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University (Macon, GA, USA).

There are at least two reasons that Gushee is worthy of attention. First, Gushee is a preeminent scholar and public intellectual in evangelical Christianity, a group that composes perhaps one-fourth of all Americans. Given that America is the world’s leading contributor to global warming, environmentalists must find common ground with at least some evangelicals to feasibly address this problem through the democratic process. For many years, evangelicals “considered ecology akin to paganism”⁵²; Gushee is a leading figure in the effort to bridge ecology and evangelicalism.⁵³ The next reason to engage Gushee, then, is that he rethinks evangelical commitments in a philosophically interesting way. As a centrist evangelical, Gushee holds that the kingdom of God is “both spiritual and political, both this worldly and other worldly.”⁵⁴ By itself, this is not especially novel; Gushee’s kingdom ethics resonates with the Social Gospel, the *missio dei*, holistic evangelicalism, and other Christian movements that pursue the twin goals of making disciples and transforming society.⁵⁵ Rather, Gushee rethinks evangelical commitments in light of global warming in ways that open up the possibility of political alliances.

To be clear, Gushee disagrees profoundly with the “radical atheistic materialism” at the heart of speculative realism.⁵⁶ In *The Sacredness of Human Life*, Gushee announces: “I work from a Christian theological perspective that treats the Bible as the premier context in which the record of God’s divine revelation to humanity can be found.”⁵⁷ Gushee endorses a theological realism grounded in divine revelation rather than, for the speculative realist, mathematics or science. “I am claiming firmly and foundationally here that one can say ‘human life is sacred’ and be making a truth claim rooted in trustworthy divine revelation.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, Gushee presents a pyramidal ontology where God is

⁵⁰ Olson R. Who is an “evangelical theologian?” Sept 6, 2012. Patheos Blog [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/09/who-is-an-evangelical-theologian/>.

⁵¹ Harris H. *Fundamentalism and evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2008).

⁵² McKibben, *The global warming reader*, p. 308.

⁵³ On the evangelical politics of climate change, see Gushee D. Faith, science, and climate change. In: *In the fray: contesting Christian public ethics, 1994–2013* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books; 2014), p. 127–40.

⁵⁴ Gushee D. *The future of faith in American politics: the public witness of the evangelical center* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press; 2008), p. 10.

⁵⁵ For an analogous effort to “maintain the specificity and particularity of Christian witness, and at the same time, cooperate with religious and non-religious others in pursuit of goods in common,” see Bretherton L. *Christianity and contemporary politics: the conditions and possibilities of faithful witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell; 2010), p. 18.

⁵⁶ Hägglund M. Radical atheist materialism: a critique of Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*. In: Bryant L, Srnicek N, Harman N, editors. *The speculative turn*, p. 114–29.

⁵⁷ Gushee D. *The sacredness of human life: why an ancient biblical vision is key to the world’s future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; 2013), p. 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

at the top, followed by, in descending order, angels, humans, and animals and things. “In the ministry of Jesus Christ, in the church’s theological reflection on the meaning of the incarnation, and in the character and ministry of the early church, the incalculable value of human life gains powerful, even overwhelming affirmation.”⁵⁹ It may be impossible to bridge the ontologies of theists and atheists, evangelicals and speculative realists, Gushee and Bryant.⁶⁰

But if the salient political question for speculative realists is how to form coalitions to address climate change, then Gushee may appear as a potential ally. In *The Sacredness of Human Life*, Gushee expresses dismay at how most evangelicals have interpreted Genesis as a justification for human domination over the world. Gushee considers the argument that cruelty to animals may foment cruelty to humans, but Gushee thinks that this argument is still too anthropocentric. Though Gushee will never embrace Bryant’s flat ontology, he seeks a more egalitarian relationship between humans and other animals: “we creatures of God and earth, of spirit and humus, are somehow fellows, somehow kin, somehow morally related to and responsible to the other creatures of the earth with whom we share so much — including being beneficiaries of God’s creative and redeeming love.”⁶¹ Cognizant that any such argument risks the charge of paganism or heresy, Gushee reconstructs several scriptural passages to justify the sacredness of all of God’s creation, not just or primarily humans. For instance,

the Noahide covenant is rich with theological significance, for nowhere is divine-human-animal-creation community more clearly suggested. Most breathtakingly, God makes a covenant through Noah and “every living creature that [was] with you” to and with all human beings and “every living creature [...] for all future generations” (Genesis 9: 8–12). This means that yesterday, today, and tomorrow God chooses to stand in an ongoing covenant relationship with every creature.⁶²

In language that resonates with Bruno Latour’s call for a parliament of things, Gushee envisions “a democracy of creaturely gratitude and need” among all creatures, human and non-human, that is “entirely dependent on God’s creation, provision, and care.”⁶³

Gushee translated his theological commitments to creation care into policy prescriptions in the document that he drafted for the 2006 Evangelical Climate Initiative, “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action.” The document makes four claims, three of which, I venture, could be shared by many speculative realists. First, human-induced climate change is real, and to support this assertion, Gushee cites evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the US National Academy of Sciences. Second, climate change will have dramatic consequences for human, and nonhuman, life on this planet. Because even a small

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ On the conflict between the Abrahamic religions and philosophic naturalism (of which speculative realism is one variant), see Levenson J. *Inheriting Abraham: the legacy of the patriarch in Judaism, Christianity & Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2012), p. 127–28.

⁶¹ Gushee, *The sacredness of human life*, p. 395.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 402.

⁶³ Gushee, *The future of faith in American politics*, p. 403.

rise in global temperatures may contribute to an increase in the frequency of heat waves, droughts, floods, diseases, and food shortages, “millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors.” Third, governments, businesses, groups in civil society, and families all have a role to play in addressing climate change. “The basic task for all of the world’s inhabitants is to find ways now to begin to reduce the carbon-dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels that are the primary cause of human-induced climate change.”⁶⁴ In his own way, Gushee is doing what Bryant calls cartography, deconstruction, and terraformation — drawing upon the best available science to describe the state of affairs, showing that it did not arise naturally (or deterministically), and calling for a new political-economic arrangement that sustains, rather than destroys, life on this planet.

And yet Gushee is not a speculative realist, he is an evangelical. The final claim in the document is that evangelicals are called to address climate change because of their Christian moral convictions. “Christians must care about climate change because we love God the Creator and Jesus our Lord, through whom and for whom the creation was made. This is God’s world, and any damage that we do to God’s world is an offense against God Himself (Gen. 1; Ps. 24; Col. 1: 16).” Furthermore, “Christians must care about climate change because we are called to love our neighbors, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and to protect and care for the least of these as though each was Jesus Christ himself (Mt. 7: 12; 22: 34–40; 25: 31–46).”⁶⁵ Gushee grounds his climate care ethics on the notions of a transcendent God, human beings made in his image, and divine revelation. In his ontology, anthropology, and epistemology, Gushee disagrees with Bryant and other speculative realists, but he also wants to collaborate politically with people of different faiths to address the problem of climate change. How should speculative realists respond?

Green allies

A difference between speculative realism and much academic critical theory, according to Bryant, is that the former seeks to understand things as they are using the best available science, whereas the latter too quickly believes that any account of truth is just as legitimate as the next. Bryant accuses these critical theorists of a performative contradiction (saying something that they cannot really believe) and more importantly of weakening the political will to change the world.

The question, however, is to what degree any of us can genuinely be pluralists. I can very well *understand* another person’s or groups ontology, but that’s quite different than treating it as *true*. At the end of the day, I’m going to think that the ontology of the Christian fundamentalist or the Aztec is fundamentally mistaken as an account of reality and I’m going to side with naturalism.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Bryant L. The conundrums of pluralism. May 21, 2013. Larval Subjects Blog [Internet]. Available from: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/the-conundrums-of-pluralism/>.

The bright side of Bryant's project is that it encourages philosophers to test their theses against the latest scientific discoveries. The dark side is that it compels speculative realists to not mince words when telling onto-theologians that their views are fundamentally mistaken. At the beginning of this essay, we identified a philosophical challenge of articulating concepts to grasp global warming and a political challenge of building a coalition to address this state of affairs, including by voting bad politicians out of office. Up to now, speculative realism, as represented in this essay by Levi Bryant, is doing a better job addressing the philosophical challenge than the political one.

One problem with Bryant's political theory, I venture, is that it conflates pluralism with relativism, an acknowledgement of the contestability of one's perspective with the assertion that all cultural perspectives are equally valid. William E. Connolly differentiates the two ethicopolitical orientations as follows:

To say a basic perspective is contestable is to say that it advances presumptions and claims that can be supported but have not yet received, and are not likely to receive in the foreseeable future, such definitive support that they rule out of court every other possible perspective. To be a relativist is to discourage dialogue and debate across cultures, theories, perspectives. To adopt the theme of deep contestability is to encourage it.⁶⁷

According to Connolly, a basic perspective such as speculative realism can both proffer concepts to describe reality and acknowledge its own contestability. To acknowledge the contestability of one's position is to strike an always-tenuous balance between proffering one's worldview and listening carefully to other voices. One could argue, in fact, that this modesty is embedded in the notion of *speculative* realism, where the speculative part hints at an aspect of reality that always withdraws from our cognitive apparatus and very being.⁶⁸ Furthermore, a pluralistic stance is likely to facilitate the formation of coalitions among people who agree on political issues but disagree on ontological ones. My argument is not that speculative realists should seriously consider becoming evangelicals, or *vice versa*, but rather that ontopolitical modesty is necessary to build widespread electoral, political, economic, and cultural networks among disparate people. I have addressed this argument to my more militant speculative realist friends; my hope is that modest evangelicals such as Gushee continue to make analogous arguments to their more militant friends, including Christian fundamentalists.

Does this argument ask speculative realists to adjust the philosophical to the political, to modify their theories to better address a real world problem? Yes. In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant observes that academic philosophy still bears the traces of its origin in ancient Greece whereby aristocrats, relieved from manual labor, tended to think that reality was fundamentally still. One purpose of speculative realism is to press philosophers to do a little manual labor, as it were, to "encounter the volcanic potentials hidden within objects."⁶⁹ A purpose of speculative realism is to overcome the divide between theory and practice, eyes and

⁶⁷ Connolly W. *Neuropolitics: thinking, culture, speed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; 2002), p. 215.

⁶⁸ Harman, *On the undermining of objects*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ Bryant, *The democracy of objects*, p. 93.

hands, and make philosophers address the problems of their milieu. Cartographers “must be attentive to the ways in which our maps act on the world, circulate throughout the world, or whether or not our maps are even composed in ways conducive to producing the sort of change we aim for.”⁷⁰ If climate change threatens us with an unprecedented danger, then our task is to formulate a political theory that makes possible a proper response, including enlisting people with radically different ontologies. To make a difference in the world, speculative realists need to embrace the endless negotiations of political pluralism.

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⁷⁰ Bryant, *Onto-cartography*, p. 150.

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Notes on contributor

Nicholas Tampio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Fordham University.
Correspondence to: Nicholas Tampio. Email: nicholas.tampio@gmail.com