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SLOTERDIJK ON ECOLOGY

Tim Middleton

TEMPLE CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHERS FOR OUR TIME



Sloterdijk on Ecology

Tim Middleton

Temple Continental

Philosophers for our Time, Book 2

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Editors' Introduction

Philosophers for Our Time is a new series of short books from the William Temple Foundation that aims to meet two connected needs.

First, within academic theology there is a growing interest in a range of Continental thinkers, prompted, not least, by the so-called 'theological turn' that has taken place in various strands of recent philosophy. And yet, these thinkers can seem to be esoteric, voluminous and sometimes even openly hostile towards religion. *Philosophers for Our Time*, therefore, aims to demystify some of these figures by providing accessible introductions to their work: synthesising their most important ideas, defining their key terms and explaining why their work is relevant to current theology.

Second, our societies and our planet are facing some unprecedented challenges at the present time: from populist politics and technology takeovers to spiritual stagnation and climate catastrophe. And, of course, we all need to address the sort of world that is to follow the coronavirus pandemic, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaigns. The philosophers that we consider in this series all have something prescient or profound to say about one or more of these contemporary challenges. As such, each book focusses on an individual thinker and an individual topic in order to offer a focussed account, not just of the philosopher themselves, and what they might mean for theology, but also of what they can contribute to one of the key issues of our generation.

It is our hope that these new resources will encourage you to read some of these philosophers for yourself, as well as setting forth new thinking on some of the most urgent topics of our time.

Tim Howles, Series Editor

Tim Middleton, Assistant Editor

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Introduction

This series focuses on a range of Continental thinkers in relation to both theology and some of the pressing challenges of our generation. In this instalment I take up the task of introducing some of the work of the contemporary German/Dutch philosopher Peter Sloterdijk and probing what it might offer to ecological theology in the light of our current ecological breakdown.

Sloterdijk is an esoteric and prolific thinker. There is no way that this short publication can do full justice to his many voluminous works—let alone what they imply about both theology and ecology. Instead, what I hope to do here is to focus purely on one (arguably fairly central) piece of Sloterdijk’s thinking—namely, his philosophy of spheres—and suggest a few ways in which these ideas might helpfully relate to the concerns of an ecotheologian.

Before diving in, it is also worth offering a brief rationale as to why Sloterdijk is worth engaging with at all. As we shall see, he is commonly labelled as both a politically controversial and a religiously hostile thinker. Yet he is also a perceptive cultural critic, a well-known public figure (at least in Germany), and he regularly passes comment on theological issues. Theologians who want to be in dialogue with current trends and debates therefore have good reason to engage with him.

I will begin with a highly condensed sketch of Sloterdijk’s life and works (see [Chapter 1](#)). I will then aim to set out a few key features of Sloterdijk’s philosophy of spheres—articulated most extensively in his trilogy of the same name (see [Chapter 2](#))—before offering some final reflections on theology and ecology through a Sloterdijkian lens (see [Chapter 3](#)). This necessarily brief foray into the (spherical) world of Sloterdijk is undoubtedly highly limited, but hopefully it will serve as a stimulus for further and fuller interactions with his thought in the future.

Chapter 1

Who is Peter Sloterdijk?

1.1 Celebrity and Controversy

Sloterdijk is a polemicist and a provocateur. He seems to revel in esoteric speculation and political controversy in equal measure. As he says himself: “If I had to examine myself from a distance, then I would say that this Sloterdijk is a strange bastard, comprising a lyrical extremist and a damned school master. Or a mystic and a compère.”¹ There is something correct about this bizarre combination of impulses that cohere in Sloterdijk’s philosophical work, and yet even this self-description is likely to have been curated for maximum public effect.

Prior to his retirement in 2015, Sloterdijk was rector of the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design—a cutting-edge interdisciplinary arts school adjacent to the Franco-German border—where he was also a professor of philosophy and aesthetics. His status as a public intellectual was established in the 1980s when his first book, *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, became the best-selling work of German philosophy since the Second World War. From 2002 to 2012, he also co-hosted the German television show *In the Glass House: The Philosophical Quartet*.

It was in 1999 that Sloterdijk first courted controversy in the Anglophone media. He had long been critical of Jürgen Habermas and others of the ‘Frankfurt School’

¹ Peter Sloterdijk and Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun nor Death*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 297.

of critical theory, but the confrontation exploded following a lecture delivered by Sloterdijk entitled *Rules for the Human Zoo*.² Sloterdijk was primarily responding to Martin Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, but his use of words such as "selection" (*Selektion*) and "breeding" (*Züchtung*) was contentious given their close association with Nazi eugenics.³ The ensuing debate was messy, and Sloterdijk accused Habermas of circulating the original lecture in order to stir up outrage.⁴ But the upshot was to cement, rather than undermine, Sloterdijk's place in the limelight.

More recently, Sloterdijk has been criticised for failing to distance himself from Marc Jongen, one of the leading intellectual lights of the far-right, nationalist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party.⁵ Indeed, Jongen previously worked with Sloterdijk in Karlsruhe and has credited him for some of his political ideas.

None of this is to say that Sloterdijk himself necessarily holds to any especially extreme political views, merely to note that his philosophy has, at times, provided others with the inspiration to do so—and that he has not always done enough to dissociate himself from such opinions. As I hope to show below, his philosophy remains worthy of study; it just comes with a note of caution.

1.2 Rhetoric and Reception

Sloterdijk is a copious thinker. Not only has he published more than thirty books, but his writing also has an expansive, narrative quality. Indeed, his philosophy often feels more like the work of a storyteller than that of a systematic thinker. It is also peppered with academic diversions and fascinating tangents; an "oversized scrapbook" compiled by an "intellectual magpie".⁶ One critic likens it to the London underground: "easy to enter, to find your way through, and to exit, but hard to

² See Peter Sloterdijk, 'Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27 (2009), 12–28.

³ Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta, 'Being-with as Making Worlds: The "Second Coming" of Peter Sloterdijk', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27 (2009), 1–11 (p. 3).

⁴ Elden and Mendieta, p. 4.

⁵ John Gray, 'Blowing Bubbles', *New York Review of Books*, October 2017.

⁶ Gray, 'Blowing Bubbles'; Elden and Mendieta, p. 4.

conceive in groundwork or overall idea”.⁷ One can readily dip into one of Sloterdijk’s weighty tomes, follow him on a provocative and generative train of thought, and re-emerge to find that you have no greater understanding of his principal point. In Stuart Elden’s words, “it can be hard to discern an overall intention to his writings; much less a system [...] Sloterdijk privileges the literary over the structural; poesis over rigour”.⁸

Generous readers are likely to enjoy the intellectual journey. But some critics describe his work as “simplistic, faddish, and pretentious, anti-theoretical, regressively irrational and politically reactionary”.⁹ Nigel Thrift notes Sloterdijk’s “hyper-connective style of hyperbolic reasoning”.¹⁰ And more suspicious readers are entitled to wonder whether Sloterdijk is not, in fact, just exploiting a series of allusions or metaphorical slippages in the hope of constructing a grand, new philosophy. His use of “therefore” could be implying a logic in what is really nothing but wordplay. In Jean-Pierre Couture’s words, “there is nothing certain about merging entertainment and knowledge”.¹¹

But Sloterdijk’s somewhat cavalier attitude towards rigorous forms of logic is perhaps not so surprising when we consider that he has always existed on the margins of professional philosophy, remaining untenured for a large fraction of his career. He expresses concern that much contemporary academic philosophy is about mere “error avoidance” and is not properly in tune with its etymological encouragement to “love wisdom”.¹² One cannot deny that if his aim is to “irritate”, to provoke public debate, and to “generate concepts”, then his work has been remarkably successful.¹³ These concepts are not always evidenced or followed through, but they provide fertile

⁷ Quoted in Elden and Mendieta, p. 2.

⁸ Stuart Elden, ‘Worlds, Engagements, Temperaments’, in *Sloterdijk Now*, ed. by Stuart Elden (Polity, 2011), pp. 1-16 (pp. 2-3).

⁹ Quoted in Timon Beyes, ‘Peter Sloterdijk (1947b)’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Process Philosophy and Organization Studies*, ed. by Jenny Helin, Tor Hernes, Daniel Hjorth, and Robin Holt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1-21 (p. 9).

¹⁰ Quoted in Beyes, p. 2.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Couture, *Sloterdijk* (Polity Press, 2015), p. 6.

¹² Couture, p. 4.

¹³ Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens, ‘Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Acrobatics: An Exercise in Introduction’, in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Poetics of Being*, ed. by Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 7-28 (p. 8); Elden, p. 3.

ground for those on the lookout for fresh inspiration.

Despite Sloterdijk's blossoming fame, both inside and outside Germany, it has taken some time for his work to be engaged in the English-speaking literature—largely because many of his works have only been translated into English within the last decade. Furthermore, given that—as we shall see—Sloterdijk is principally a spatial thinker, his work has tended to be of most interest to geographers and architects. The journals *Cultural Politics* and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* ran special issues on Sloterdijk in 2007 and 2009 respectively.¹⁴ There are also two edited volumes in English on various aspects of Sloterdijk's thought: *In Medias Res* by Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens and *Sloterdijk Now* by Stuart Elden. Elden's *Progressive Geographies* blog also contains quite a bit of helpful introductory material on Sloterdijk.¹⁵ But perhaps the best introduction to date is Jean-Pierre Couture's 2015 book in Polity's Key Contemporary Thinkers series simply entitled *Sloterdijk*.

Nevertheless, there remain very few theological engagements with Sloterdijk's oeuvre, despite his status as a philosopher and his discussion of religious themes in many of his works. A full treatment of Sloterdijk's 'theology'—or at least the implications of his philosophy for contemporary theology—would be a major undertaking. But I hope, in this short publication, to offer a very brief flavour of how Sloterdijk's spherological philosophy can contribute to some particular discussions within ecotheology.

¹⁴ See Sjoerd van Tuinen, 'Critique Beyond Resentment: An Introduction to Peter Sloterdijk's Jovial Modernity', *Cultural Politics*, 3 (2007), 275–306 and Elden and Mendieta for introductions to these special issues.

¹⁵ Stuart Elden, 'Where to Start with Reading Peter Sloterdijk?', *Progressive Geographies*, 2016, <https://progressivegeographies.com/resources/where-to-start-with-reading-peter-sloterdijk/> [accessed 1 April 2020]

Chapter 2

What are Sloterdijk's main ideas?

2.1 Spheres

Sloterdijk's *Spheres* trilogy, running to over 2500 pages, is his *magnum opus*. Originally published in German between 1998 and 2004, the English translations were released in 2011, 2014, and 2016. What initially strikes the reader is that all three volumes are full of images, not so much as illustrations, but rather offering a “parallel narrative” alongside the main text.¹ Sloterdijk's own assessment of the *Spheres* trilogy is that it should be described as *Being and Space*, the “great unwritten book of western philosophy” and the counterpart to Heidegger's *Being and Time*.² Sloterdijk's grandiose claim to importance may be off the mark, but the influence of Heidegger cannot be doubted—and provides an important key to understanding Sloterdijk's theory of spheres.

Heidegger's central question in *Being and Time* is the question of being itself, that is, what it means to exist. But he realises that it is impossible to ask about being

¹ Bettina Funcke, ‘Against Gravity: Bettina Funcke Talks with Peter Sloterdijk’, *Book Forum*, 2005, pp. 27–29 (p. 29).

² See Elden, p. 6 and Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Spheres II*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2014), p. 971 n. 20. Note too that, in general, scholars have tended to see time as a more progressive notion than space. It is natural, therefore, that Sloterdijk's attention to space has been seen as a (politically) conservative move. It also explains why theologians—typically concerned with temporal rather than spatial metanarratives—have been comparatively slow to engage with Sloterdijk's work.

without already being-there (*Dasein*). We can only enquire about existence from the inside, namely, if we already exist. Hence, Heidegger turns to phenomenology to interrogate the question of being, since phenomenologists take ordinary experience as their point of departure and aim to uncover the wider conditions that must underpin our everyday lives. Heidegger therefore describes our primordial state as one of already being-in-the-world. He writes:

Being-in is not a 'property' which *Dasein* sometimes has and sometimes does not have, and *without* which it could *be* just as well as it could with it. It is not the case that man 'is' and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship-of-Being towards the 'world'—a world with which he provides himself occasionally.³

What Heidegger means is that we do not start out as a series of isolated subjects and objects that only later come together and interact in the world; rather, we are always already parts of the world. He gives the example of hammering.⁴ When you are completely engrossed in the act of hammering, you do not tend to be aware of yourself as a subject and the hammer as an external object. It is only if the hammer breaks, or you stop hammering to reflect, that you start to think of the hammer as a separate piece of equipment. In short, we are already embedded within, and interconnected with, the rest of the world.

Heidegger is at pains to point out that being-in-the-world is not primarily about a location in physical space.⁵ But Sloterdijk decides to take this spatial understanding of being-in-the-world and run with it. In fact, Sloterdijk specifically cites a chalkboard drawing made by Heidegger in a seminar in Switzerland around 1960—in which a series of five arrows point towards five semi-circular horizons—as the inspiration for his spatial thinking.⁶ Sloterdijk's central assertion, then, is that as human beings we are always already in spheres: from the womb onwards we are encased in a series of literal and metaphorical bubbles. He writes: "[T]he subject or *Dasein* can only be *there* if it is contained, surrounded, encompassed, disclosed, breathed-upon,

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 84.

⁴ Heidegger, p. 98.

⁵ Heidegger, p. 79; Elden, p. 6.

⁶ Elden, p. 6.

resounded-through, attuned and addressed. Before a Dasein assumes the character of being-in-the-world, it already has the constitution of being-in.”⁷ For Sloterdijk, being-in-the-world means being-in-spheres.⁸

The *Spheres* trilogy seeks to unpack Sloterdijk’s basic insight across a vast range of times and scales. Volume one deals with bubbles, or what Sloterdijk calls ”micro-spherology”. This is an analysis of the human subject and the small-scale spheres we find ourselves in. In volume two, Sloterdijk expands to a ”macrospherology” by considering the figure of the globe. Sloterdijk tracks an expanding range of human spheres as our desire for power and control outgrows our individual selves and immediate communities. In essence, Sloterdijk offers a philosophy of globalisation—a project that he develops further in the accompanying work *In the World Interior of Capital*. Finally, volume three concerns foam, which serves as a kind of metaphor for our postmodern condition. In this ”plural spherology” human beings are to be found in a series of isolated yet interlocking spheres of existence. In the rest of this section I will briefly examine each volume in turn.

2.2 Bubbles

The *Spheres* trilogy opens with a meditation on the painting *Bubbles* by Sir John Everett Millais (1866). A young, curly-haired child sits, mesmerised by a bubble he has just blown (see Figure 2.1). Sloterdijk spends two pages setting the scene, including its famous and controversial use in an advertising campaign, and then comments: “For its creator, the soap bubble [...] becomes the medium of a surprising soul expansion. The bubble and its blower coexist in a field spread out through attentive involvement.”⁹ It is hard to imagine a more innocent and seemingly inconsequential pastime than a child blowing bubbles, but for Sloterdijk it encapsulates—literally as well as metaphorically—a vitally important turning point in his philosophy of spheres. Not only do we find ourselves in spheres, we also create our own; the sphere is both determining and constructed. Once this recognition is digested, one can—and

⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 541.

⁸ Beyes, p. 11.

⁹ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 18.



Figure 2.1: *Bubbles* by John Everett Millais (1886).
Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#) ([Public Domain](#)).

Sloterdijk does—begin to see spheres almost everywhere: the nest, room, cave, hut, house, hearth, hall, village, family, couple, tribe, city, polis, nation, environment, and globe are all spheres of varying shapes and sizes. Sloterdijk even goes so far as to suggest, “that life, the formation of spheres and thinking are different expressions for the same thing”.¹⁰

This proliferation of spheres is perhaps best illustrated by Hieronymus Bosch’s famous triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510)—and Sloterdijk includes numerous pictorial examples (see Figure 2.2). In one corner, lovers caress inside a translucent bubble on the back of a leafy-tailed pink fish in which another person

¹⁰ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 11.

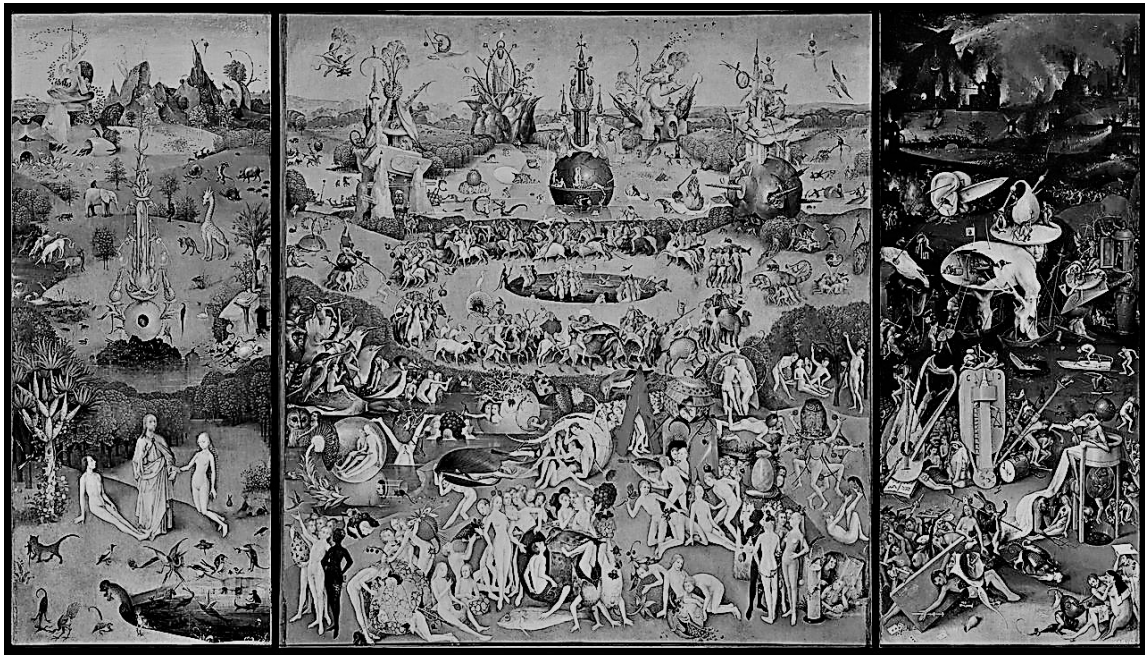


Figure 2.2: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (1490-1510). Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#) ([Public Domain](#)).

hides; elsewhere, a scratch choir emerges from a shattered eggshell to offer a serenade; in the distance, a series of naked figures emerge from a lake and seek shelter in the nearest available ovum; and when the triptych is closed, the whole is seen to be enclosed within a shimmering, glassy orb. Bosch's scenes are fantastical, but they do portray the potential omnipresence of Sloterdijk's notion of spheres. Whether we are hiding in or breaking out of these spheres, they seem to pervade our existence. Sloterdijk writes:

The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans—in so far as they succeed in becoming humans. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. Spheres are immune-systemically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside.¹¹

Two aspects of this quotation are especially important. First, Sloterdijk is emphati-

¹¹ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 28.

cally clear that every sphere is a “shared realm”. Not only are we beings-in-spheres, we are also determined by—to use the Heideggerian term—*Mitsein* (being-with or being-together). We only possess being inasmuch as we are beings-with-one-another. For Sloterdijk, then, the primal form is dyadic rather than solitary; whether we think of a hollow vase and its divine inspiration, a foetus and a placenta, or an eternal Platonic soulmate, we have never been alone in our spheres.

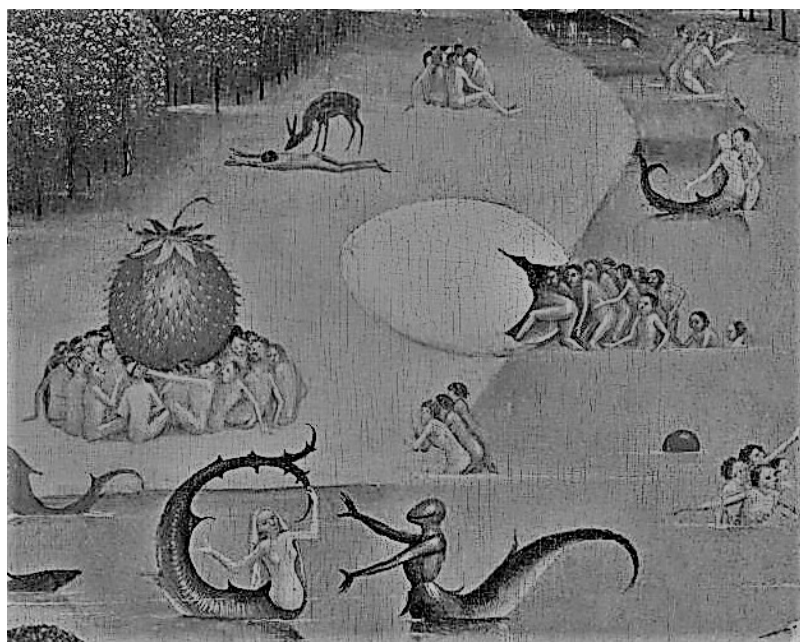


Figure 2.3: Detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. Image from [Flickr](#) (Public Domain).

The second important element of the above quotation is the reason given for building spheres: in essence, they are a form of protection, a shielding from some external danger. As Pieter Lemmens and Yuk Hui write: “En-housing means protection, like a case. It is the primary function of the sphere. The house fundamentally concerns the question of insulation and protection.”¹² Like Bosch’s naked figures filing into the egg, we seek the security of spheres (see Figure 2.3).¹³ If the safety of an initial capsule is broken, we try to replace it with a new one:

¹² Pieter Lemmens and Yuk Hui, ‘Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler’s Anthropotechnological Diagnoses of the Anthropocene’, *Krisis*, 2017, 26–41 (p. 29).

¹³ Sloterdijk draws here on a psychoanalytic reading of birth as a traumatic ejection from comfort resulting in a subsequent desire to continually recreate the relative security of the womb. As he writes, every society is a “re-creation of uterine safety”. See Sloterdijk, *Globes*, p. 194.

[W]hat is inevitably lost in each individual case is restored on the larger scale as the unlosable overall shell encompassing the world and life; the celestial domes of ancient times were set up as cosmic guarantees that isolated human existence would remain encompassed by indestructible containers beyond its exit from capsules and caves.¹⁴

This sphere-building desire leads Sloterdijk to his more general theory of spheres as “immunity techniques”—constructions designed to protect us from something exterior. Whether these spheres be financial, juridical, therapeutic, medical, technological, or symbolic, they all contribute to a “general immunology”.¹⁵ Spheres keep us safe—which is precisely why we suffer from the dual impulse of wanting to both build them and escape them.

2.3 Globes

As human beings to seek to construct ever bigger protective shells, we turn from the image of the bubble to the image of the globe. Spherical models of heaven and earth have, throughout history, been used as symbols of totality:

In the older pictures the goddesses of victory, the Fortunas, the emperors, and later the missionaries of Christ placed their feet on the sphere; scientists grouped their instruments around them, marked tropics and meridians on it and drew the equator; early on, the Catholic Church planted the cross on top of the orb and proclaimed Christ cosmocrator and lord over all spheres; in the twentieth century, finally, the globe was integrated into the logos and advertisements of countless firms operating worldwide.¹⁶

From the Greek god Atlas bearing the weight of the world, to the *globus cruciger* of the Holy Roman Emperor, to the famous painting of Elizabeth I with her hand resting

¹⁴ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 325.

¹⁵ Lemmens and Hui, p. 30. Human beings have the habit of “sanctifying the interior and demonizing the surroundings” regardless of what is inside and outside the sphere. See Sloterdijk, *Globes*, p. 178.

¹⁶ Sloterdijk, *Globes*, pp. 54-55.



Figure 2.4: *Elizabeth I (Armada Portrait)* by an anonymous artist. Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain).

on a globe (see Figure 2.4), these orbs have come to be synonymous with power.¹⁷ With the advent of modern science, domination continues in a new way, via the calculation and measurement of the earth. In Sloterdijk's analysis even a seemingly harmless desktop globe buys into the same base desire for spherical control:

On the one hand, the printed blue orb with the savannah-coloured patches initially seems no more than one thing among many things, a small body among many bodies, that statesmen and schoolchildren set in rotation with a single hand movement; at the same time, it is supposed to represent the singular totality or the geological monad that serves as the foundation for all life, thought and invention.¹⁸

¹⁷ Couture, pp. 68-69.

¹⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 6.

The same is true of our understanding of the divine. For example, the children's religious song *He's got the whole world in his hands* attributes to God an identical hunger for spherical mastery. Being able to hold, and look down on, the globe—as Google Earth now allows *us* to do—epitomises what we think of as the God's-eye view. We presume that an ability to visualise the whole globe gives us control over it. Globalisation, then, is the construction of a sphere on the grandest scale. And according to Sloterdijk it can be divided into three, distinct stages.

The first epoch is that of metaphysical globalisation and is associated with the ancient Greeks. For them, sphericity connoted intellectual and mathematical excellence: from the perfection of the superlunary realm to the music of the spheres, the good was synonymous with the round. Similar and subsequent ideas of wholeness and completeness can be found in the way that Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* is inscribed within perfect circles, and in strands of German Idealism. But the perceived perfection of this spheric metaphysics was ultimately undone, thanks to Copernicus and Kepler, by the discovery of ellipsoidal planetary orbits.

Sloterdijk's second stage is that of terrestrial globalisation, the era of European colonialism and commerce. It begins, he says, in Seville in 1492 when Magellan returned home from the first circumnavigation of the earth. By 1873, Jules Verne was talking about completing the same feat in under 80 days. During this period of sphere-conquering the chaos and danger of the open ocean was a force to be reckoned with. Seafarers, cartographers, and conquistadors were offered various miniature spheres to keep them safe away from home: a physical cabin, the divine insurance of a cleric, the backing of a rich royal client, and the scientific ideal of contributing to the all-encompassing encyclopaedia of knowledge. The epitome of this epoch of terrestrial globalisation is perhaps London's Great Exhibition of 1851, in which 17,000 exhibitors attempted to display the "Works of Industry of All Nations" under the single glass roof of the Crystal Palace. But this monumental attempt at totalisation was soon to be undone by the gradual exposure of the victims that colonialism had left in its wake in its lust for mastery and control.

The third and final epoch is that of electronic globalisation, a period of saturation, simultaneity and proximity where the "dignity of distance is negated".¹⁹ Space used

¹⁹ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, p. 12.

to have ontological purpose, says Sloterdijk, “creating discrete neighbourhoods, scattering particles, separating bodies, positioning agents, offering boundaries between the extended, making clusters more difficult, containing explosions and drawing multiplicities together into a unity”.²⁰ But, now that information can move at the speed of light, space is only appreciated for its conductivity and connectivity. Technological innovation is such that data, and money, can now circumnavigate the globe in fractions of a second. Yet we have also seen hints—in the form of terrorism, financial crash and, most recently, pandemic—of how this latest epoch of globalisation is also beginning to be undone.

2.4 Foam

In the final volume of *Spheres*, Sloterdijk shifts to the image of foam.²¹ Globes, he says, are now a “mausoleum for the idea of all-encompassing unity”.²² Instead, “in foam worlds, the individual bubbles are not absorbed into a single, integrative hyper-orb, as in the metaphysical conception of the-world, but rather drawn together to form irregular hills”.²³ We each exist in our own isolated bubbles and are convened not by a figure of all-encompassing unity, but as a diversity of adjacent and abutting spheres; we come together in heaps, sponges, clouds, and vortices. In fact, perhaps the best illustration of the postmodern foam world is the contemporary apartment block: self-contained but juxtaposed spheres of existence that, to some extent, rely on each other but often fail to act as a cohesive whole.²⁴ It is an isolated form of connectivity.

Such foam can easily be swept into thick drifts by the manipulative tactics of computer algorithms or social media hyperbole. As Sloterdijk writes: “by engaging in an overproduction of images and texts, societies produce a ‘foam’, that is, an uncontrolled discourse of external referents, a chronic vertigo, and an ideology of the

²⁰ Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, p. 251.

²¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres III*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (South Pasadena, California: Semiotext(e), 2016).

²² Sloterdijk, *Globes*, p. 133.

²³ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 71.

²⁴ Sloterdijk, *Foams*, pp. 604-607; Elden, p. 8.

surfer”.²⁵ Any form of shared purpose or ethic in such foam worlds becomes increasingly difficult: “discrete and polyvalent games of reason must develop that learn to live with a shimmering diversity of perspectives, and dispense with the illusion of the one lordly point of view”.²⁶ The foam world is variable, fragile, distributed, and yet interconnected.

Perhaps the most important part of volume three, however, is the section entitled *Airquake* (*Luftbeben*), which was translated and published separately as *Terror from the Air*.²⁷ Here, Sloterdijk offers a kind of philosophy of atmospheres, or a “history of the becoming-conscious of atmospheres, [and] of how the air we breathe has lost its innocence”.²⁸ Starting in 1915 with the first chlorine gas attacks in the trenches of World War One, Sloterdijk charts how human beings have learned to kill each other not only by assaulting their bodies but also by poisoning their environment.²⁹ “The art of killing with the environment,” he says, “is one of the big ideas of modern civilisation”.³⁰ In the same way, parts of the earth’s atmosphere are no longer the safety blankets they once were: our emissions of chlorofluorocarbons and now greenhouse gases are turning our planetary haven into a suffocating prison. We have, whether by accident or by design, weaponised the air, bringing our last shared orb—the very earth system itself—to the brink of collapse. Atmospheric pollution is perhaps the one sphere that still unites us all, even in our postmodern foam. There is now no option to sit back as casual observers; we must recognise that we shape the very air that protects our spherical abode.³¹ Ours is a “common home” that we can no longer take for granted.³²

²⁵ Sloterdijk and Heinrichs, p. 183.

²⁶ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 75.

²⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. by Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Semiotext(e), 2009).

²⁸ Beyes, p. 13.

²⁹ Dean Dettloff, ‘Catholic Air Conditioning: Laudato Si’ and the Overcoming of Phenomenology’, *The Heythrop Journal*, 58 (2017), 931–41 (p. 931).

³⁰ Quoted in Elden and Mendieta, p. 7.

³¹ Dettloff, p. 939.

³² Dettloff, p. 932 and see Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015).

2.5 Anthropotechnics

Before proceeding to apply Sloterdijk's spherological philosophy to contemporary ecotheology, there is one further aspect of Sloterdijk's thought that is worth highlighting: his concept of anthropotechnics. Couture defines this as, "methods of mental and physical practising by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the vague risks of living and acute certainties of death".³³ In other words, anthropotechnics is akin to the practice of sphere-building, a form of self-fashioning or "immunity technique" that seeks to protect human beings from various external threats.

Etymologically, anthropotechnics is a combination of anthropology and technology. What Sloterdijk is trying to convey with this neologism is that human beings have always used technologies to delimit and control their immediate surroundings; there has always been a "fusion of humanity and machine".³⁴ This is not a blind endorsement of some futuristic cyborg selves, but a recognition that everything from scratching on a cave wall to the latest video conferencing facility counts as a technology. We are, in a sense, "condemned to technology", whether we like it or not.³⁵ We cannot reject technology because technology has always been part of nature. Sloterdijk's spherological philosophy, then, is a grand outworking of this anthropotechnical insight. All human activities—from furnishing our living rooms to paying our taxes—are spheres that involve both certain humans and certain technologies in our search for forms of life that are resilient to certain threats. Furthermore, if Sloterdijk is right about our primordial relationship to technology, it gives us reason to pause in our assessment of current (usually digital) technologies. No ethical judgement is being made one way or the other, but a knee-jerk reaction against any particular technology for being inherently 'unnatural' does not square with Sloterdijk's understanding of humanity as always already technological.

³³ Couture, p. 45.

³⁴ Couture, p. 31.

³⁵ Lemmens and Hui, p. 32.

Chapter 3

Thinking about theology and ecology through the lens of Sloterdijk

3.1 Sloterdijk on Theology

Sloterdijk is almost uniformly hostile towards theology—to the point that he has been accused of the “most fundamental attack on religion since Feuerbach”—and yet it features regularly throughout his works.¹ There is not space here to engage in any critical dialogue with Sloterdijk’s characterisation of theology, not least because there are many aspects that one might want to query. Rather, the aim is to present just a few key features of his position to see how they might feed into a Sloterdijkian ecological theology.

One particularly clear, and uncharacteristically short, distillation of Sloterdijk’s views on religion is contained in the book *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*.² Shockingly, when Moses returns from Mount Sinai to find people worshipping the golden calf, he calls all those loyal to him to “go back and forth through the camp [...] killing [...]”

¹ Joseph S. O’Leary, ‘Peter Sloterdijk as an Ally of Theology’, *Reviews in Religion & Theology*, 25 (2018), 5–11 (p. 6).

² Peter Sloterdijk, *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

brother and friend and neighbour”.³ What this “auto-genocidal drama” reveals, says Sloterdijk is that monotheism functions as a cultural mechanism by which violence can solidify communities.⁴ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are united not so much as Abrahamic faiths, but as religions that share the horror of this “Sinai schema”.

Yet, at the same time, Sloterdijk does acknowledge that religions are “important manifestations of poetic human habitation on the earth”.⁵ He did, himself, undertake something of a “spiritual pilgrimage to the east” as part of his own formation, becoming a student of the Indian guru Rajneesh (Osho) for a number of years in the late 1970s.⁶ For Sloterdijk, then, religion is a subset of anthropotechnics, a range of theopoetic and spiritual practices—much like yoga or advertising—that can contribute to personal well-being and social solidarity. In a sense, one could say that religion is yet another sphere-building activity. And this is reinforced, perhaps surprisingly, by two biblical examples.

First, Sloterdijk is particularly drawn to what has been called the “Jonah complex”.⁷ Jonah’s fear of preaching in Nineveh finds him hiding for three days in the circular belly of a large fish.⁸ Yet this spheric security comes at the expense of any form of interaction with others. The second example is the story of Noah’s ark. Sloterdijk writes: “The ark is the autonomous, absolute, context-free house, the building with no neighbourhood; it embodies the negation of the environment by the artificial construct in exemplary fashion.”⁹ The ark is the ultimate example of a single sphere that seeks (and manages) to contain everything under one roof—indeed, medieval manuscript illustrations often portray the ark in circular form (see Figure 3.1). There is no longer anything meaningful outside the ark except the waters of chaos. It is a quite literal rendition of the idea that we are all in the same boat. But there are no foundations outside the ark and the ark cannot be steered. The fear, then, is that the flood may never subside, and the ark may never find a place to land.

³ Exodus 32:27; Sloterdijk, *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*, p. 29.

⁴ Sloterdijk, *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*, p. 30. Though note that this is arguably a highly one-dimensional understanding of monotheism.

⁵ Sloterdijk, *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai*, p. 65.

⁶ Gray, ‘Blowing Bubbles’; Elden and Mendieta, p. 4.

⁷ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, pp. 86, 99.

⁸ Jonah 1:17.

⁹ Sloterdijk, *Globes*, p. 237.

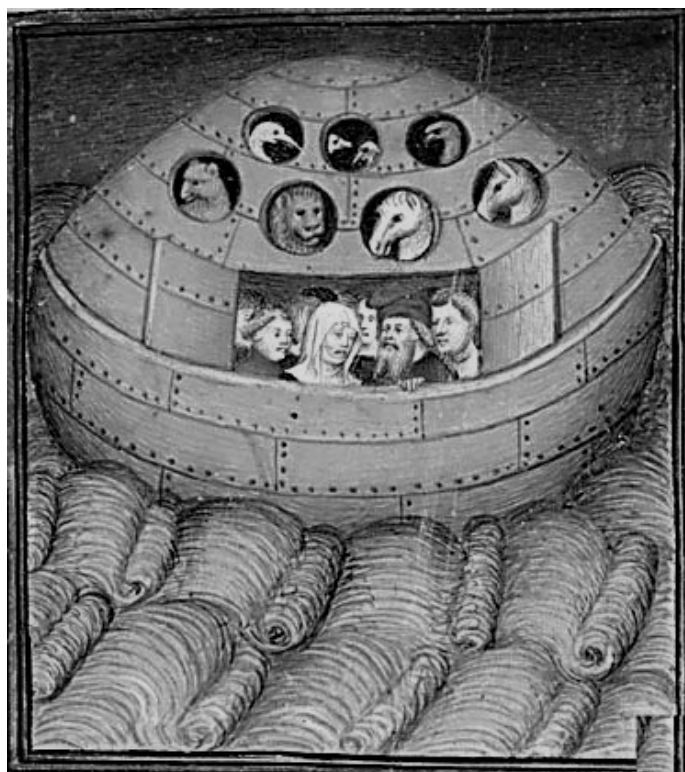


Figure 3.1: Noah's Ark in *Les Croniques de Burgues* (1373-1407) in the style of the Duke of Berry's library. Image from the British Library via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain).

But as well as whales and boats, Sloterdijk sees the whole of theology as another sphere-building activity, and one with quite drastic consequences when this sphere begins to crumble:

After the Fall, man stands naked and in need of inventing life forms that cover him, in which he can be immersed. The great metaphysical buildings of antiquity and Christianity were life forms providing existential shelter in the form of spheres of socio-spatial co-existence. But they have lost credibility, and we are back out in the open, naked.¹⁰

We might choose to disdain this rather simplistic understanding of religion as a mere comfort blanket. Yet there is also something true about the growth in existential anxiety that can accompany a decline in religion; we do still look for meaning,

¹⁰ Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, p. 7.

purpose, and security. Sloterdijk reflects on the new spheres that have attempted to fill the religious void:

Modernity is characterized by the technical production of its immunities and the increasing removal of its safety structures from the traditional theological and cosmological narratives. Industrial-scale civilization, the welfare state, the world market and the media sphere: all these large-scale projects aim, in a shell-less time, for an imitation of the now impossible, imaginary spheric security. Now networks and insurance policies are meant to replace the celestial domes; telecommunication has to re-enact the all-encompassing. The body of humanity seeks to create a new immune constitution in an electronic medial skin.¹¹

It is not entirely clear, though, as to which form of protection is to be preferred. Here, Sloterdijk seems almost mournful about the loss of spheric security provided by traditional theological narratives, whilst elsewhere he writes that “prayer is good, [but] insurance is better”.¹² For now though, at least in modern societies, it is probably safe to say that financial bureaucracy is winning out over petitions to the divine as the best safeguard against calamity.

3.2 Sloterdijk on Ecology and Ecotheology

In this final section I want to lay out five ways in which Sloterdijk’s spherological philosophy can contribute to discussions in ecology and ecotheology. The aim is to begin to show how some of Sloterdijk’s ideas might be particularly pertinent to our contemporary ecological crisis.

1. *We cannot build another bubble*

Given the current lack of global cooperation on meaningful policies to address holistically the climate and ecological emergency, one temptation might be to try to protect life as we know it—and Sloterdijk shows us how this could take a spherical form. Elon Musk’s vision of transferring civilisation to Mars or the notion of a permanent

¹¹ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 25.

¹² Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, p. 12.

spaceship existence sound ludicrously far-fetched—the stuff of dystopian science fiction rather than pragmatic reality. But, remarkably, a trial run of the attempt to build another bubble has already taken place. Between 1987 and 1994, the *Biosphere 2* research facility in Oracle, Arizona attempted to build a completely self-contained ecological system. The experiment ran a (nearly) closed system for two years with a crew of eight and the express aim of seeing if it might be possible to maintain life in outer space. But the experiment was plagued by low oxygen supply, food shortages, crew tensions, and an external political struggle about the overall direction of the project.

Notwithstanding the scientific and technical challenges, Sloterdijk also gives us philosophical reasons to doubt our ability to build another bubble. Bubble-building is a risky business because it is characterised by our simultaneous desires both to break out of, and to seek security in, spherical forms. Sloterdijk's spheres, as we recall, are both shelters and prisons. To use theology as an example, we tend to experience a tension between the comfort provided by institutional religion and the apparent freedom for self-expression that comes with a rejection of traditional theologies. In a contemporary world of "plural spherology" it is actually very rare to be confined to a single sphere in the manner of *Biosphere 2*. Such constraints would be enormously challenging, from a sociological, political, and philosophical perspective, even if they were scientifically possible.

2. *The re-assertion of our planetary sphere*

The second relevance of spherological thought is neatly illustrated by a small toy called the *No Globe*, which was made for the United Nations Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009. In this version of the more familiar snow globe, white flecks of snow are replaced with black flecks of pollution, and the central statue comprises a fossil-fuel-burning power station. The *No Globe* reminds us of the way in which the earth system comes back to bite us. On any closed, or semi-closed, planetary orb the repercussions of our actions are ultimately felt throughout the sphere. As Sloterdijk observes in his philosophy of atmospheres, we have altered our environment to the point where our "common home" is now so under threat that it is beginning to fight back.

Bruno Latour refers to this re-assertion of the importance of the planetary sphere in our current time of crisis as the "intrusion of Gaia"—where "Gaia" is his name for



Figure 3.2: *The Great Enclosure near Dresden* by Caspar David Friedrich (c. 1832). Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain).

the interconnected earth system.¹³ At this moment in time, it is we who stand by as “witless objects” whilst the planet seems to be taking over as the “active subject”.¹⁴ This is especially evident in the cover image that Latour chose for his book *Facing Gaia*: Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Great Enclosure near Dresden* (c. 1832). This oil painting shows a wide bend in the tidal river Elba (see Figure 3.2). But, as Latour points out, the swampy foreground looks uncannily like the figure of a globe, rising out of the murky depths.¹⁵ This, in metaphorical and pictorial form, is the re-assertion of the agency of the planetary sphere in an unexpected and unsettling location.

¹³ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 223. James Lovelock even calls it the “revenge of Gaia”. See James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth Is Fighting Back - and How We Can Still Save Humanity* (Penguin, 2007).

¹⁴ Latour, p. 73.

¹⁵ Latour, p. 220.

3. *Protection from and reliance upon the earth*

My third observation is that we still want to be protected *from* the earth even as we increasingly recognise that we live *within* and rely *upon* the earth. Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens put this well when they write: “Modern humans need protective ‘spheres’ they can experience as virtual, but nonetheless meaningful and reassuring ‘spaces’ that distinguish them from, and immunise them against, the infinite, spaceless, fragmentary world in which they have to live: the globe called Earth.”¹⁶ On the one hand, there are still aspects of our environment *from* which we wish to be protected, be they geological disaster, extreme weather, or horrendous disease. This is the same urge that we saw in both Jonah and Noah. Indeed, many theological practices could be construed as protective “immunity techniques” that seek to shield us from the vicissitudes of life in a morally indeterminate natural world—from fire and famine to pestilence and plague.

Yet, on the other hand, we find ourselves unavoidably connected *with* and reliant *upon* the earth. As Heidegger insists, and Sloterdijk also emphasises, we are always already beings-in-the-world. This is part of what Latour means by the intrusion of Gaia. We must therefore try to avoid, says Sloterdijk, a “backdrop ontology” where we treat our environment as nothing more than an inert platform for the drama of life.¹⁷ He writes: “it is only when the play starts to ruin the stage that the actors are forced to take another view of both the stage and of themselves [...] it has become evident that the protection of the stage is the play itself”.¹⁸ The actors and the stage are mutually interrelated; one cannot survive without the other. Hence, however much we wish to be shielded *from* the earth we must also learn to live with the fact that we find ourselves embedded *within* and reliant *upon* the earth system. Even in terms of something as simple as oxygen—which notably ran out in *Biosphere 2*—we are utterly dependent on the natural, photosynthetic production of this vitally important resource.

Fascinatingly, and rather surprisingly, Sloterdijk thinks theology can help with this need to recognise our interdependence with the earth. He writes: “Thus, if the concern is to deal with participatory phenomena and structures of constitutive being-

¹⁶ Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, p. 22.

¹⁷ Lemmens and Hui, p. 31.

¹⁸ Sloterdijk, quoted in Lemmens and Hui, p. 31.

in-each-other and being-with-each-other at a fundamental-conceptual level, parts of theological tradition can become a surprisingly informative source for the free spirit.”¹⁹ Sloterdijk believes that “one cannot seriously speak of externality in a world that is God’s work and extension”.²⁰ We are, if you like, beings-in-God. Just as one can never fully escape an ever-present God, one is reminded that we can never become fully detached from our interconnected earth. Furthermore, says Sloterdijk, trinitarian theology provides a fundamental statement of the necessity of coinherence. In the same way that Christ says “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”, trinitarian thinking developed the idea of “never-being-able-to-fall-out-of-the-inside-position”.²¹ A theological framework, therefore, continues to remind us that we are perpetually reliant on something beyond ourselves.

4. *The ambiguous figure of the globe*

Yet there is a grave danger in capitulating to an understanding of an all-encompassing earth or an all-encompassing god, especially if this universal is policed by human violence. For Sloterdijk, monogeism is as bad as monotheism; the spectre of utopia looms large. Latour explains:

Whether we are dealing with the idea of the Anthropocene, the theory of Gaia, the notion of a historical actor such as Humanity, or Nature taken as a whole, the danger is always the same: the figure of the Globe authorizes a premature leap to a higher level by confusing the figures of connection with those of totality.²²

For Latour (and Sloterdijk), there are undoubtedly interconnections between the different parts of the earth system, but any sort of earth-holism risks a deeply problematic leap to totality. In theological terms, this is idolatry: “he who looks at the Earth as a Globe always sees himself as a God”.²³ Sloterdijk suggests that theology might be able to help us recall our reliance on something other than ourselves, but this advice must come with a warning. If our globe becomes our god, then it risks developing into an idol. And if either our globe or our god becomes a singular uni-

¹⁹ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 545.

²⁰ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 543.

²¹ John 14:11; Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, p. 615.

²² Latour, p. 130.

²³ Latour, p. 136.

versal, then it risks developing into totalitarianism. Coercion in the name of saving the planet is an ecological form of fascism. We are drawn together by the truly global nature of our climate and ecological crises, yet even this assemblage must avoid the temptation to issue top-down commands.

There is also a second dimension to this ambiguous figure of the globe. In 1968, three NASA astronauts on the Apollo 8 mission became the first humans to orbit the moon. As they re-appeared from the lunar night, Bill Anders captured the *Earthrise* image, which has become one of the most famous photographs of all time (see Figure 3.3). On the one hand, this picture of the “pale blue dot” reinforces how fragile and precious our “common home” really is—for this reason, the image has become a touchstone for the ecological movement. But, at the same time, the photograph reveals the extent of human power and creativity: without human ingenuity, we would not have been able to capture the image at all. Maybe we do now have the “whole earth in our hands”?



Figure 3.3: *Earthrise* by Bill Anders (1968). Image from NASA via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain).

As Dean Dettloff argues with respect to our atmosphere, we have to recognise the extent of our own power in relation to the earth: “the human is produced by an environment and produces that environment”.²⁴ He continues: “Sloterdijk shows [that] we can no longer deny the designing of air”.²⁵ For Dettloff, the theological anthropology of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si’* can provide a humble way forward in the “design” of our atmospheres. But the wider point is that the advent of a global Anthropocene presents something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is our own anthropocentric attitudes that have led us to our current ecological precipice. Yet, at the same time, we must face up to the fact that we are indeed the most powerful “geological force” within the biosphere and therefore that we must assume responsibility for its maintenance.²⁶ We have already opened Pandora’s box; our only option now is to use the power wisely.

5. *Provincialism for a global era*

So, what, if anything, is the solution? The multi-faceted nature of our interlocking ecological catastrophes is such that there are no easy answers. But Sloterdijk’s pithy suggestion for a possible way forward is that we might want to cultivate a “provincialism for the global era”.²⁷ Or, to use the idiom of contemporary climate activism: *think global, act local*. This tension between the global and the local has perhaps played out most obviously in the recent Brexit debates. On the one hand, the relevant sphere is taken to be a local, largely inward-looking community. On the other hand, the relevant sphere is thought to be much bigger—it is, after all, the whole human race that must face climate change together. What Sloterdijk is saying, I think, is that there is something true in both impulses; both are relevant spheres. Practical actions can be taken locally that are in the interests of the well-being of the whole planet. Nobody should abstract from their provincial experience to dictate the global course, but, working collaboratively, we can try to steer “spaceship earth” in a healthier direction.

Interestingly, the same tension also exists in theology—where the global and the local are now mapped onto the metaphysical concepts of the transcendent and the

²⁴ Dettloff, p. 934.

²⁵ Dettloff, p. 939.

²⁶ Lemmens and Hui, p. 31.

²⁷ Quoted in Elden, p. 6.

immanent. In his critique of monotheistic religion, Sloterdijk claims that Christianity went wrong when it “infiniteised” its view of God.²⁸ If Christianity had retained a more intimate view of God as portrayed in the incarnation, he says, then perhaps it could have retained its local, immunological function. As such, Sloterdijk’s warning against monism and his advocacy of localism has a distinctly incarnational character. But Laurens ten Kate argues that Christianity has been characterised by this tension between closeness and distance since its inception.²⁹ Christianity has always been about keeping the actions of a particular, enfleshed divinity in tension with a wider understanding of the whole universe as divine creation. So, if Christians can walk this theological tightrope, then perhaps it is just possible that we can begin to see how to navigate an ecological provincialism for a global era?

²⁸ Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens, p. 22.

²⁹ Laurens ten Kate, ‘Uneasy Places. Monotheism, Christianity, and the Dynamic of the Unlikely in Sloterdijk’s Work – Context and Debate’, in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Poetics of Being*, ed. by Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 99–114 (p. 107).

Conclusion

If reading Sloterdijk really is akin to travelling the London underground, then now is the moment to re-emerge, blinking, into the sunlight. What, if anything, can Sloterdijk contribute to ecotheology? His philosophy is certainly esoteric, provocative, and (at times) controversial; but it is also (I suggest) fresh, illuminating, and generative. What I have tried to show here is how Sloterdijk's philosophy of spheres—from bubbles, to globes, to foam—helps to re-frame and re-pose important theological and ecological questions. Considering our current crisis, can we really contemplate a literal or metaphorical escape capsule? As our planet “comes back to bite us”, how might we seek protection *from* and simultaneously learn to live *within* our morally ambiguous earth? Can the dark side of monotheism teach us how to handle the threat of totality with sensitivity as monogonism looms large? And can theology help us to inhabit our local and global spheres concurrently? These are profound and challenging questions; and there are no straightforward answers. But what I hope to have shown here is that Sloterdijk's spherological thought offers a productive and fruitful resource for probing and engaging these concerns.

Questions for further consideration

- When does philosophy become politically unacceptable? Does Sloterdijk cross this line?
- What does Sloterdijk's spherological philosophy tell us about contemporary safe spaces?
- How do we do "ethics in a foam world"?
- What would a spatial (rather than a temporal) theology look like?
- Is Sloterdijk fair in his characterisation of monotheism as a way in which violence is used to solidify community?
- What can we learn from the story of Noah's ark about dealing with environmental threats and ecological catastrophe?
- What is our understanding of prayer if we think it can readily be replaced by an insurance policy?
- Considering our current crisis, can we really contemplate a literal or metaphorical escape capsule?
- As our planet "comes back to bite us", how might we seek protection from and simultaneously learn to live within our morally ambiguous earth?
- Can the dark side of monotheism teach us how to handle the threat of totality with sensitivity as monogeism looms large?
- How can "spaceship earth" face up to our ecological crisis without the violence of totalitarianism?
- Can theology help us to inhabit our local and global spheres concurrently?

Glossary

Spheres: are any shared spaces of perception and experience, whether literal or metaphorical. Everything from wombs and apartment blocks, to religious communities and welfare states are included. And we form reciprocal relationships with these spheres: they are neither entirely deterministic nor wholly constructed.

Spherology: is the name given to Sloterdijk's philosophy of spheres whereby existence is characterised by a perpetual being-in-spheres, from small-scale bubbles to the all-encompassing globe.

Immunity techniques: are ways of shielding human beings from various external dangers, including everything from physical barriers and vaccines, to insurance policies and therapeutic practices.

Sphero-immunology: describes the recognition that the spheres we inhabit offer us an array of immunity techniques. Yet, at the same time as offering protection, these spheres can also feel imprisoning. Hence, human beings paradoxically crave the security of spheres and also seek to break out to experience the world outside.

Anthropotechnics: are forms of mental and physical training in the face of ambiguous risks that human beings use to try and transcend and transform themselves. Combining anthropology and technology, anthropotechnics also recognises that human beings are always already technological beings.

Monogeism: is a belief in the one and only earth, often accompanied by the totalising political ideology of ecological fascism, in which sustainable behaviours are imposed and enforced rather than democratically chosen or agreed upon.

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