



# “Even the Worms...”

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## Abstract

In this paper, we explore Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and Singapore’s Cloud Forest; two artefacts that heighten an awareness of life forms beneath the earth’s surface. We take a line from Friedrich Schiller’s poem *Ode to Joy*—“even the worms find sensuality”—and demonstrate its profundity through Beethoven’s landmark composition. Singapore’s Cloud Forest acts as a foil in our advocacy for an aesth-ethical consideration of the hitherto silenced voices of flora and fauna, noting a turn from misanthropic, revengeful tendencies, to a philanthropic call for generous inclusion. Our analytic method explores looking sideways as a means of bringing disparate artefacts into a polyphonic examination. We explore these works through a process ethics lens, operationalizing A. N. Whitehead’s process philosophy. To conclude we propose four ethical responses of lamenting, acting, reflecting, and expressing joy without borders.

**Keywords** Anthropocene · Creativity · Process ethics · Theology

## Prelude

The inspiration for this essay derives from two disparate events, one global and the other personal. The first, May 7, 2024, marked the 200th anniversary of the premier performance of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony; and the second, December 2024, a visit to Singapore’s Cloud Forest, an indoor subtropical garden housed under a large dome at the foot of the Marina Bay Sands hotel complex. Although dissimilar, both are impressive creations of human imagination and have a common motivation: enhancing life on Planet Earth.

Recent editorials of this journal encourage scholars to deepen ethical inquiry by strengthening an existing construct, and by bringing other disciplines into discussions (Greenwood & Freeman, 2018), exhorting researchers to explore studies that embrace both the past and the future, noting, “ethics has a fundamentally ‘imaginative’ character”

(Islam & Greenwood, 2021, p. 3). We respond to these stimulants by reprising and updating Alfred North Whitehead’s notions of process philosophy, pairing a work of art and an architectural form, with the aim of advancing an ethical project appropriate for twenty-first century business scholars. To this end we toggle between the “real” and “hypothetical” to “thicken” (Greenwood & Islam, 2025, p. 498) existing frames and explore imaginatively a future rich in diversity. In response to these admonishments, our intended audience includes scholars working at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics, and those interested in exploring works of art as primary source material for ethical inquiry.

In concert with Islam and Greenwood (2021) we hold imagination as central to the ethical project we discuss in this essay. Nussbaum (2001) writes of the connections between emotions and ethics, asking the question, “‘How should a human being live?’ The answer to that question is the person’s *Eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, a complete human life” (p. 32). Living such a life, argues Johnsen (2021), begins with separating ethics from morality. By creating distance from fixed moral codes, ethics brings imagination to the fore, experimenting with new ways of living, “without neglecting present practical knowledge and know-how” says Janning (2014, p. 496). The separation of ethics from morality does not require grand gestures or revolutionary change, but rather, experimenting with “new forms of acting, speaking and thinking” (Johnsen, 2021, p. 8). This

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calls for small creative measures within one's world; for, as Johnsen argues:

"New possibilities of life do not necessarily consist of dramatic interventions in established conventions or revolutionary upheavals of dominating orders, but may also involve subtle variations in everyday habits or a different approach to solving an everyday dilemma...Central to ethics is the capacity to not simply take the world for granted, but instead retain the capacity to imagine how things could be otherwise" (p. 4).

Works of art are useful guides in stimulating the imagination, by showing current practices in their stark reality and by proposing alternative, vibrant ways of living. Artworks, then, provide perceivers a caesura, a pause in the normal conduct of life; then, in the opened space, to imagine what might come.

Our ethical inquiry seeks to understand the relationship between the worlds we humans have created and the raw materials that nature has provided for us to realize our collective ambitions (Chen & Bathurst, 2026). To this end, we seek to explore how humans might partner with the natural environment, thereby mitigating the negative impacts of our unsustainable exploitation of resources. Both Beethoven's 9th Symphony and the Cloud Forest are cases which assist us address the question: "How might artefacts prompt ethical inquiry into silent yet crucial voices in creating a sustainable environment for life to flourish?" To address this question, we divide our paper into seven sections, and consistent with our arts-based approach, we use music constructs to signal each movement. Here in the Prelude, we discuss art, aesthetics, and ethics under a broad umbrella of the aesth-ethical construct. This is followed by a study of our method as Etude. In the Intermezzo we explore our process ethical focus through a discussion of Alfred North Whitehead's insights. We examine the two focal works as Variations I and II and then in the Polyphony section we present applications for the ideas we have discussed in the interim. We conclude our essay with a summary Coda.

Our discussion is framed within an authorial canvas that identifies with the Global South, and more specifically with the Pacific. As such, it serves several purposes. Our ontological focus is to highlight the enduring impacts of colonialism and coloniality on the world, particularly as they derive from the Global North. The artefacts we examine, idealized and created within a European context, evidence these forces and provide tools for reconstituting our world. A second orientation of our essay is to offer a response to Johnsen's (2021) encouragement to make small and "subtle variations in everyday habits" (p. 8) at a local, domestic level that assist in countering coloniality.

Works of art, including architectural structures, speak to the time of their creation, to the present, and foreshadow future inquiry. Žižek (2008) maintains, "Perhaps the most

elementary hermeneutic test of the greatness of a work of art is its ability to survive being torn from its original context" (p. 129). For example, Francisco Goya's 1814 painting *The Third of May 1808* in Madrid depicting the execution of a Spanish resistance fighter by members of Napoleon's forces, where faceless soldiers under the blaring light that technological superiority casts on the scene, is reprised in Pablo Picasso's 1937 mural, *Guernica* which reveals in unabashed starkness, the horrors of the wanton destruction of a town with little military significance by the German Luftwaffe bombers. Both paintings are potent reminders to us in the twenty-first century of the impact of unjustified invasions of sovereign territories by an aggressor, and of masked State officials seizing, imprisoning and deporting, migrants, citizens and students.

Paintings and literary works are often more accessible than music of the European classical tradition, because the language used to analyse and describe compositions has fallen out of common use. Yet, our task here is to show the relevance of this music to the sustainability project and the impact of climate change on populations worldwide. Passing Žižek's (2008) hermeneutic test will not be easy but given the importance of our discussion to humanity's future, it is a challenge from which we do not resile.

Considering the natural environment as a coequal partner in sustainable development is a departure from the usual human-centric approach that seeks to redress the impact of our collective actions on changing the earth's climate (Chen & Eweje, 2025). The UNs' SDGs, COP21 and its predecessors, are just several acronyms that dot the landscape of efforts to reverse climate change. There seems little political will, however, to unite across state boundaries and take the kinds of radical actions necessary for a prosperous future. In this paper we depart from this approach and invite *lumbricus terrestris* into our dialogue. Worms!

Our interest in worms is aesth-ethical and practical. We have a domestic worm farm and use its liquid and solid resources as garden nutrients. Over some ten years we have learned worms' habits and preferences, by monitoring moisture and pH levels with the food we give them. We live in a stand-alone house in an urban area with about a 2–3-m ribbon of land around it. We have turned this land into gardens where we grow vegetables for consumption, and flowering shrubs for enjoyment (consumption and enjoyment by family members, insects, and birds!). We operate under a regime of no food scraps or garden cuttings leaving the property—we do not use the term "waste" because all organic matter has its uses. Worms break down decomposing materials, and the resulting compost encourages them into garden plots where they help produce healthy plants.

Along with other subterranean lifeforms like fungi and moulds, worms play a vital role in maintaining life in all

its manifestations; yet involving them in conversation offends a sense of modern rationality. But talk we must, for worms are stakeholders on the future of the Planet, whose interests must be considered in taking an ethical approach to achieving sustainable human life. For, as Ergene et al. (2024) advocate, in order to achieve a just society in the face of the changing climate and consequent threat to populations from rising sea levels and shifting weather patterns, researchers must turn from privileging neo-colonial practices that underpin the capitalist agenda towards hitherto silenced communities, especially, they argue, those characterized by race and colour. They promote a move away from "studying elite institutions to researching grassroots organizations concerned with climate and racial justice [towards] a perspective 'from below' producing knowledge *for and with* historically marginalized communities of colour" (Ergene et al., 2024, p. 786, emphases in the original). However, notwithstanding the metaphoric choices, their prescription stops at the feet of humans on earth, rather than reaching *below* to the *roots* of the *grass*, and the life forms that animate the natural world and that remain silenced and marginalized, literally.

The kind of prescription that Ergene et al. (2024) offer, whilst presenting a compelling critique of capitalism and its racist bias, stays fixed in a human-centred framework. We propose, therefore, to explore two artefacts that might help draw our attention to silent life forms and in so doing, take an aesthetic approach. In his seminal text on organizational aesthetics Strati (1999) notes that aesthetics embraces both an exploration of the senses and a study of the philosophy of art. Hansen et al. (2007) concur, creating their theory of leadership through the etymology of the term from its Greek origins: *aisthētikos* (perception) to the German *aesthetic* (perception by the senses). In sum, the site of aesthetic responses is the body and our sensate responses to the world moment-by-moment.

Works of art and our aesthetic responses affirm human dignity, say Pless et al. (2017), and building on this, contemporary ethical inquiry brings the animal world into partnership: in Paring's (2025) case, for example, between farmers and wolves in her French study. Further, and in service of collaboration, Huopainen et al. (2026) advocate for a "hybrid form of posthuman aesthetics" (p. 3) that gives voice to animals.

Art criticism and its associated aesthetic analyses to determine that which could be described as 'beautiful' and 'ugly' go together with ethical inquiry. Indeed, Nussbaum (1985) in her discussions of novelist Henry James argues that literary works do not exist outside ethical concerns, and in quoting James, she writes:

James's idea of creation (like Aristotle's idea of improvisation) is that it is thoroughly committed

to the real. 'Art deals with what we see ... it plucks its material ... in the garden of life'. What the artist contributes is precisely the 'squeezing out' of the value that is in this material. (Nussbaum, 1985, p. 528).

Jana Levin in her eloquent poem with its polysemous title *My Sentence* agrees. For her, the natural world and works of human creation are part of the same life sentence in which we are all embedded. We "carve the world because [we] *crave* the world", (2012, emphasis added); a world enriched with the smell of humus and "hum" of cicadas.

Although the connections between ethics and aesthetics are perhaps made obvious in literary works, what of music and its pre-linguistic emotional content? Nussbaum (2001) responds to this question by noting that the emotions which music invokes are a form of intellectual engagement, and that those same emotions are the bedrock of ethical inquiry. Aesthetic responses, therefore, give ethics potency. In sum, she claims, "there can be no adequate ethical theory without an adequate theory of the emotions" (p. 18). Thus, our discussion of several artefacts suggests the emotional and ethical adequacy Nussbaum proposes.

Certainly, art works can be used for nefarious purposes as Spotts (2003) outlines in his examination of the ways Adolph Hitler and the Nazis used art to advance their political and military agendas in the lead up to and conduct of World War II. Hitler's selective use of art were in his rejection of the avant-garde, where "for him Modernism was intolerable because it was thought-provoking, unconventional, uncomfortable, shocking, abstract, pessimistic, distorted, cynical, enigmatic, disorderly, freakish" (p. 159). Arendt (1951/2017) is similarly persuaded, noting a trend towards the aestheticization of politics in totalitarian regimes. Further, Bathurst (2025) shows this in a discussion of the political control of a performing arts organisation in the United States of America. Indeed, says Harold (2020) art and morality may be separate elements with neither informing the other. However, an ethical response to these contestations lies in the process of art criticism itself, where, in Nussbaum's (1985, p. 528) words, "the real" appears in all its destabilizing actuality, rather than being obscured for propaganda purposes.

In sum, separating aesthetics from ethics may lead to the possibilities of unethical uses of works of art. But by bringing the two together in an aesth-ethical construct (Küpers, 2026), then the two conform to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) insistence on the interconnectivity of things, and where perceptual openness (aesthetics) and responsiveness (ethics) are held within the lived body (*le corps propre*). Merleau-Ponty (1964) articulates this inrelatedness in his essay *Cezanne's Doubt*, writing:

"The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate

life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual *rebirth of existence*" (pp. 17–18, emphases added).

But how can arts works be pressed into the service of the aesth-ethical project? In the next section we outline our method.

## Etude

As authors, engaging with art and living ethically are continual processes as we seek to live mindfully in our world. For example, the first author has performed in Beethoven's 9th Symphony as an orchestral musician, attended live performances, studied it, and now uses it in lectures and seminars about management and leadership. This work forms a familiar part of his lifeworld; thus, marking the 200th anniversary of its first performance was significant. Visits to Singapore are rare, and less ordinary, though we have some familiarity with the city since at one time the first author was a resident. In December 2024, when on a family holiday in Singapore, the authors followed the usual tourist route which included a trip to Marina Sands and the Gardens by the Bay complex.

As part of our visit to that part of the City's central area, we walked through the enclosed gardens: Cloud Forest and Flower Dome. As we exited, the second author remarked to the first, "That was amazing! The two buildings and their displays blow my mind." And, after a pause, "There is something that doesn't work for me though. There are no birds!" to which the first author replied, "I agree. It seems somehow false." It was this noticed absence that began our formal work on this essay. However, there is no obvious connection between a 200-year-old symphony and the Singapore structures. Rather, both artefacts became fused, embodied in *our* lived experience.

Linking disparate elements, therefore, is the stuff of both life and scholarship. For, at every turn in our social and scholarly lives we are confronted with multiple interests that attract our attention. The specialized world of the scholar is as real as everything else that comprises the warp and weft of daily life. Indeed, our task as scholars is, as Nussbaum noted above, to squeeze out what may be of value to the improvement of life for all, and ground research in lived experience.

Our analytic method involves placing alongside each other two separate and different artefacts, allowing each to inform the other. That they connect is due to the life-fabric that is being woven, where a knot, an aporia, may unexpectedly appear that gives pause for thought. This is what occurred for us authors.

The process of comparing disparate artefacts is written in more detail elsewhere (Bathurst, 2023). However, the primary proponents are Žižek (2008) through the notion of looking sideways and Fletcher (2001, 2010) whose book *The Art of Looking Sideways* is a treasure trove of prompts that inspire inquiry.

Explore at random any page of Fletcher's (2001) book and unusual comparisons are offered. For example, take page 361 which opens out to two panels. On the left side is a naïve sketch by Gavina Johnson of three people sitting at a dining table. The view is from above but with faces drawn from the front. It has several perspectives operating together. The right page is a negative image with white text on a black background containing a statement by Georges Braque "Perspective is a ghastly mistake which has taken four centuries to redress." We readers are left with just a few hints as to how to make sense of the two images, and, as Fletcher implies, it requires sideways looking. Direct attention will not yield rich insights.

The method overcomes the potential for privileging a single point of view and brings the margins—peripheral vision—into play. This is not a trivial approach and may hold the seeds for the change in perception that precedes the radical transformation required to give the environment voice in decision-making.

Purser et al. (1995) argue, drawing on Rodman (1980) that "fundamental perceptual and attitudinal change is difficult but necessary, for a 'revolution in ethics' cannot occur until there is a 'revolution in perception'" (p. 1054). The perceptual revolution that Purser and colleagues advise is to discover alternatives to linear perspective.

Invented by the Renaissance architect Filippo Brunelleschi in the early fifteenth century, linear perspective drew on mathematical precision to create a vanishing point, thus giving works an illusion of depth albeit on a flat surface. Subsequent painters, Leonardo Da Vinci among them, used this to great effect. However, as Purser et al. (1995) claim, the disembodied viewer which linear perspective produced, also gave rise to scientific abstractions that produced a "spectator epistemology" (p. 1057). Further, Ladkin (2025) claims that the division of the world into manageable mathematical constructs has infected—colonized—organizational management, and, indeed, scholarly research.

The insights that Purser et al. (1995) offer square with Braque's statement above from Fletcher's *Sideways* book (p. 361). To be sure, it will take a revolution to redress the deleterious impact of linear perspective. Sideways looking may provide a tool, therefore, to overcome the pull of perspective.

Langer (1997) is persuaded about the need to look sideways, because pairing disparate elements encourages an "openness to novelty and actively noticing differences, contexts, and perspectives—sideways learning—makes us

receptive to changes in an ongoing situation" (p. 23). Thus, a visit to a museum (Singapore's Cloud Forest) and listening to a piece of music (Beethoven's 9th Symphony) may turn accidental meanderings of the flâneur into purposeful scholarly engagement; and deliberately placing them alongside each other may yield rich insights that advance the ethics of sustainable development.

Renouncing a single viewpoint and bringing multiple perspectives into the discussion requires an appropriate ethical lens. Purser et al. (1995) in their analysis settle on an "ecocentric ethics" because it "enlarges the boundary of community to include natural ecosystems" (p. 1072). To get to this position of valuing all elements of the "biotic community" (p. 1072), both living and inert, we take a process ethics approach.

## Intermezzo

The process ethics lens sees the whole of life, including the animate and inanimate, as being in a state of flux and movement. In conjunction with Purser et al. (1995), process ethics places everything on an equal footing, thereby overcoming a tendency towards anthropocentrism that besets sustainability studies. Although process ethics admits to a certain stability of things, even the most stable of objects such as a mountain or a river's course are in constant change: the more so societies, organizations, and people. Being in constant transformation carries ethical underpinnings in a heightened sense of interconnectedness with each other and the environment within which we live. As situations change, we are called to act responsibly, considering the best interests of existing and future communities, responding creatively to challenges as they occur to ensure that life is nurtured and sustained.

Process ethics embraces more than the natural world, and this opens the possibility for the spiritual. Philosophical underpinnings of this approach can be found in Whitehead (1978), particularly given his embrace of all elements of creativity, including "aesthetic, moral and religious interests" (p. xii) alongside the natural sciences. For Whitehead, creativity is the hallmark of existence, it is "the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact" (p. 27). Notwithstanding existence is disjunctive with events occurring randomly, it is also conjunctive in their coming together as a whole, "by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively" (p. 27). Ethical action, therefore, accepts the interconnectedness of everything physical and spiritual, requiring involvement in the world—*response-ability* if you will.

Two elements in Whitehead's process orientation are salient to our discussion: aesthetics and theology. Whitehead

argues that aesthetic engagement, that is the responses of the senses to artefacts, is more compelling than language symbols. He writes, "certain aesthetic experiences which are easy to produce make better symbols than do words" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 183), as, for example the use of incense in religious occasions. He claims that the smell invokes the sacred and supersedes doctrinal or dogmatic rubrics. Subjective responses link together and "have the potentiality for acquiring real unity with other entities" (p. 212), thus providing the raw materials for creativity.

Whitehead's theological language insists on the "Galilean origin of Christianity" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 343), which is at odds, he argues, with subsequent creeds and liturgies which settled on hierarchical expressions based on ancient Roman political practices. His perspective "does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells on the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world" (p. 343).

Whitehead held that God is partner in the process of creation: both a primordial abstraction which attracts a sense of order and completion, and a consequent, in being ever-present in the process of the coming together of elements into a conjunctive whole.

Herein are the ethical underpinnings of Whitehead's process philosophy. In sum, aesthetic experiences provide the rich subjective raw materials for our participation in the world, encompassed by a sense of love which has its origins in the divine. This may be at odds with current studies into sustainability. However, as once Vice President of the United States of America and environmental champion, Al Gore wrote, "The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual" (Gore, 2007, p. 12). The spiritual yearnings to which Gore alludes may have been the cause of our irresponsible use of the earth's resources and may be the prompts for kinds of radical action necessary to reverse them.

Thus, an acknowledgement of the sacred, and a spiritual vacuum seeking fulfilment, help address some of the shortcomings of a rational approach to sustainability, and call us to action regardless of the political, economic, and business flavours of the day. Aesthetic encounter and a process theology of an ever-present partner-God sets the stage for an exploration of our first thematic variation: Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Here we discuss human–nature collaboration and seek a possible pathway out of anthropocentrism by developing a sensitivity to the natural environment of which we are part.

## Variation I: Beethoven's 9th

Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125, is a landmark work and an important piece of the canon of Western music. (By "Western" we mean music in the European tradition that is grounded in diatonicism.) It is unusual in many ways, not least that it is a choral symphony, with a quartet of soloists (soprano, alto, tenor and bass) and a choir. Our purpose here is not to reprise the vast literature that the symphony has spawned, but, rather, to focus here on a few measures (also referred to as "bars") in the final movement where Schiller's *Ode to Joy* is sung. Before exploring that detail, we offer several summary comments of the work.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) is significant because he straddles both the so-called Classical and Romantic periods. He was familiar with and composed works in the Classical style cemented by his peers and predecessors Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), whilst disrupting familiar forms and pointing towards the freedoms offered by the Romantics. Beethoven was both a conformist, as Rosen (1976) asserts, and a rebel. For, as Clark (1976) writes of the Romantic rebellion, Beethoven's works "make us forget, in our emotional response to the whole, certain conventionalities" (p. 187), placing him outside the mannered symmetries of the Classical style. Beethoven's disruptions and contestations of traditions are the raw materials for an examination of the ethics of the human–nature interconnections which this essay explores.

The text Beethoven chose for the final movement of the symphony was by the German playwright, poet, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805). Titled *An die Freude* (*Ode to Joy*) the poem foreshadows elements of Whitehead's process ethics noted above in that it is a complex blend of raw human energy which brings all people together as equals ("Alle Menschen werden Brüder"—"all people become brothers") in the embrace of a numinous sense of the divine ("Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium"—"Joy, beautiful spark of divinity, Daughter from Elysium").

Beethoven's belief in the equality of all people regardless of social status was evidenced earlier in his life whilst he was preparing the final manuscript of his third symphony (Symphony No. 3 in Eb major, Op. 55, *Eroica*) in 1804. He had hoped that Napoleon would indeed usher in the promise of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité on which the French had based their revolution. Beethoven flew into a rage when he heard that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, scouring out the dedication on the front cover of the work. He rejected tyranny in all its forms, and the Schillerian phrase in the first stanza of the *Ode* reveals this sentiment ("Deine Zauber

binden wieder Was die Mode streng geteilt"—"Your magics join again What custom strictly divided").

The ethical project in Schiller's poem is clear: all are equal and invited to share in the wonders of life, in the presence of the divine. And it this invitation to be in the joy of life's embrace on which Beethoven dwells in the Symphony.

Beethoven's 9th continues to resonate as every beginning musician knows when they learn the central melody: the Ode itself. It is a simple tune comprising just five different notes and sits well in the fingers of a novice pianist whilst inspiring an expansive rendering both within the Symphony and beyond. The song is the official *Anthem of Europe* with rewritten lyrics, and the entire work was performed in celebration of German reunification (Spredemann, 2017), with "Freude" (joy) replacing "Freiheit" (freedom). This same effervescence generated by the humble melody exploded into life in the finale of the 1993 movie *Sister Act II* (Bound4Earth, n.d.).

For the purposes of our examination, we focus on a fragment of the final movement—measures 80 to 94 (Beethoven, 1976). The text comes from the third stanza's final two lines of Schiller's poem:

Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben ... "[Even] the worm has been granted sensuality, und der Cherub steht vor Gott." ... And the cherub stands before God!.

The stanza celebrates "alle Wesen" ("All creatures") with none being excluded from joy's generous embrace, an embrace that reaches beyond the grass to the worms. The whole of creation is invited and welcomed.

Schiller's allusion to worms is not accidental and is derived from English literature, with the proverb noted in John Heyward's 1546 *Dialogue of Proverbs* "Treade a worme on the tayle, and it must turne agayne" (in Speake, 2015, p. 353) and explained in full in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3 Act 2 Scene 2* (Shakespeare, 1591) where Lord Clifford speaks to King Henry:

The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on,  
And doves will peck in safeguard of their brood.

Taking his lead from animal behaviour, Shakespeare's Clifford notes that retribution is appropriate, especially when one is betrayed. Even the humble worm will fight back when threatened.

Schiller had an intimate knowledge of Shakespeare's plays having translated *Macbeth* into German (Schiller, 1996) and adapted others for his Weimar locale. Indeed, as Billington (2005) notes, "Shakespeare is crucial to an understanding of Schiller," and argues for the "close kinship between German romanticism and our own

[English] dramatic tradition." It is no surprise, then, that Schiller would reference Shakespeare in his works.

And yes, Schiller's worm does turn, though in a circle quite different from Shakespeare's revengeful invertebrate. Under Schiller's pen the worm shares the joy of creation as a coequal partner. And perhaps in violation of a sense of justice and retribution, "Alle Guten, alle Bösen"—"all the just and unjust," there are no exclusions. The invitation to share in partnership is offered to all, representing a high ethical standard within which to operate, for Schiller's worm turns from misanthrope to philanthrope, calling us to do likewise even in the face of injustice.

Beethoven's rendering of this third stanza is curious and ambiguous; and following Bernstein (1981), ambiguity is a necessary aesthetic element that lifts music from the banal to the sublime. As he notes, it was Beethoven that "started the ambiguity-inflation" (p. 201) that characterizes the Romantic age. Nothing remained untouched in Beethoven's oeuvre: "formal structures, harmonic procedures, instrumental colour, melody, rhythm—all of these were part of the new expanding universe" (p. 205) which Beethoven prompted with rule-breaking prowess.

The third stanza proceeds within the Theme and Variation form, where the main melody—the Ode—appears in various guises. However, when the phrase "und der Cherub steht vor Gott" enters, Beethoven changes to a hymn-like mode in standard four-part harmony (measures 85–89) and has the choir repeat "vor Gott" three times very loud (*fortissimo*). This sequence ends with a long pause which Beethoven instructs should be sung and played *molto tenuto*, literally meaning, "much held".

More curiously, the tonal centre of this "hymn" is A major, the Dominant of the home key D. However, he ends the sequence at measure 94 on F. The F chord and its following silence leaves the work hanging in suspense, because it does not belong to the A major family of primary and secondary chords. This loud chromatic dissonance (a "chromatic mediant" dissonance) is as ambiguous as the unclear opening of the entire work: it breaks with the harmonic past and presents several possible futures.

To reprise, the ambiguity of the phrase disrupts the established tonal certainties. Barenboim (2008) writes of this moment: "What happens next could never have been predicted: when the music picks up again it is in a new key, a new tempo, a new metre and a new vein, leading the movement in an entirely different direction" (p. 19). But Beethoven was not disrupting for its own sake; he had a wider political purpose with the oft-repeated "Alle menschen."

The different direction following the repeated B flat in the bassoons is a march (*Alla Marcia*) which proceeds on to a fugal section where elements of the Ode are woven into the complex texture, which then explodes into a

dramatic restatement of the main idea "Freude, schöner Götterfunken..." from measure 213.

The worm has now turned and joined the entire corpus, being embraced into the polyphonic environment that Beethoven created. This, by implication, is the mandate offered to us in the twenty-first century as we seek to understand the full implications of our current situation and chart a course out of it that is inclusive of all; for if the humble, invisible, silent worm is included, how should we respond? The long pause, the silence, surfaces the ethical project before us humans, of separating morality from ethics, as we seek to navigate a world in climate crisis. It is possible to create a new world through a process of ethical engagement, if we were to enter the silence and let the succeeding polyphony unfold. To listen to the entire sequence we recommend the Gewandhaus Leipzig performance (Beethoven, 2023) from timecode 48:00 to 55:44).

Next, we offer a second variation on our theme as a response to Beethoven's invitation. Singapore's Gardens by the Bay's Cloud Forest is a complex mix of nature and advanced technologies which come together in a celebration of life and can be described as a modern solution to the environmental degradation we face in the twenty-first century.

## Variation II: Cloud Forest

Singapore aspires to being "Smart"; a city-nation where technologies and people collaborate to achieve prosperity. As former Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loon said, "Our vision is for Singapore to be a Smart Nation—A nation where people live meaningful and fulfilled lives, enabled seamlessly by technology, offering exciting opportunities for all" (Ministry of Digital Development and Information, 2025), a vision adopted by the education sector (Foong et al., 2024) as it seeks the integration of new technologies into curricula, ensuring digitally literate graduates flowing to the general population.

Smartness embraces a growing international trend towards artificial intelligence systems (Sha & Taeihagh, 2024) that obsolesce many functions humans once performed; a developmental process that questions whether privacy can be assured in the face of potential government mission-creep (Hartley & Aldag, 2024). Wariness towards a wholehearted embrace of digital technologies is, perhaps, flagged by Ge et al. (2024) who note from their Chinese study, a linear ordering of priorities, with technology superseding sustainability efforts.

With these insights, advocacies, and admonitions as backdrop, we turn to a discussion of Cloud Forest, a domed

structure situated within the Gardens by the Bay campus. Our examination holds in our periphery the notion of socio-technological partnership which, in Lee Hsein Loon's words quoted above, would move the populace towards meaning-filled lives.

Cloud Forest is impressive. With its companion Flower Dome it is accessed through the ground level of the Marina Bay Sands hotel complex, itself an awe-inspiring collection of three inter-connected skyscrapers atop which sits a recreational facility the size of an aircraft carrier. If Beethoven asked the question, "What kind of world do we humans want to inhabit?" then Singapore offers a response: "Big, grand, majestic, green, safe, and controlled."

Inside and close to the entrance of Cloud Forest is a carved symbolic doorway set against a wall of ferns from Aotearoa New Zealand: *Tāne Te Waiora kūwaha*. The gate (*kūwaha*) references *Tāne* the mythological giver of life and has three faces. On the two uprights are "Rongomātāne (atua or spiritual guardian of agriculture and cultivated crops) and Haumietiketike (atua or spiritual guardian of uncultivated/wild crops)," whilst on the lintel is carved "Hina, the personification of the moon" (Te Puia, 2022). The carved structure is striking and points to the interconnections of peoples (Singapore with Aotearoa New Zealand) and the intersection of the spiritual and natural worlds. Beyond the *kūwaha* is what is claimed as one of the largest indoor waterfalls in the world.

Based on the United Kingdom's Eden Project (McNeill, 2022) which opened there in 2001, Cloud Forest is a collection of plants from seasonal climes not known in Singapore with its mono-climate. This habit of collecting and preserving certain plant species goes back to the Victorian era and the founding of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in southwest London, commonly known as Kew Gardens, which was opened in 1840, and has its origins as far back as 1759. These curated conservatories provide scientific resources for botanists and educational resources for the public. Notable too is the obvious appeal to tourists seeking to augment their Singaporean visit beyond a short stop-over.

In his thumbnail historical sketch, McNeill (2022) notes that "since the early 2000s there has been a discernible shift to *Anthropocenic* botanical gardens, which aim to create a "secure biological repository" through highly designed seedbanks, and through the *ex situ* (off-site) governance of endangered plant species" (p. 222 emphasis added). Thus, plants are assembled and kept in controlled conditions to enable their growth and propagation, whilst providing educational opportunities in a "naturalist setting" (p. 222). But, as Rutherford and Marvin (2024) argue, despite the proclaimed services to humanity in protecting natural resources, the imperialist underpinnings of conservatories

and their climate-controlled environments are often occluded.

Cloud Forest and its companion Flower Dome are architectural masterpieces made of glass which "utilize an externally fixed deployable fabric shading system" (Ito et al., 2013, p. 989) to moderate the impact of the sun's intensity and constant humidity. Diffused light allows for "approximately 65% of the incident daylight to pass through with only 35% of the solar heat" (Davey, 2011, p. 110). A network of pipes sends heat from the biomass within the conservatories to a series of concrete and steel structures shaped as super trees in the Gardens by the Bay complex—edifices topped with photovoltaic panels which generate electricity for the system. These trees are lit in the evenings and offer a stunning display for visitors.

Tan (2023) describes the political, design, and botanical processes involved in bringing the Gardens by the Bay into existence, noting the keen interest of government officials to provide recreational space for citizens and a significant destination for tourists. The resulting semi-circular structures of the Cloud Forest and Flower Dome link to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre design and by extension, spaces "in which art develops in enclosed and immunised air-conditioned bubbles" (Paterson, 2019, p. 233). Further, Paterson notes the dramaturgical context of the Flower Dome in particular, calling it a "routine theatrical space" (p. 233). But what is in play in the Cloud Forest theatre?

Although large in scale, Cloud Forest is a microcosm of an even larger world; it is a triumph of modernity in the ability of humans to wrest control of and possess space. The ribbed roof structure is prominent in the Marina Bay Sands skyline and can be viewed from the highway driving into the central business district from Changi Airport. Inside, although the base of the waterfall is impressive, the view from above is stunning. The walkway which takes visitors on a journey from the entrance up through the forest canopy is an engineering marvel. Taken as a whole, visiting the Cloud Forest is a sublime experience.

Yet there is something disturbing about the Cloud Forest. For, despite its lushness and misty atmosphere, and the remarkable spiral pathway up to the canopy, there are other elements noticeable in their absence. Birds.

Sounds of forest life are piped through a public address system, giving the allusion of life, but there are no insects or stray wildlife to bother visitors. Certainly, there must be bacteria and fungi working away among the root systems of the transplanted forest, and by implication there must be nematodes, feeding on the plant decay. But our attention was captured by the sheer ingenuity of the entire Gardens by the Bay project, and the structures that support the Cloud Forest. It is an anthropic symphony which sings of humanity's ability to partner with technologies. And that is its genius.

What is an ethical response to Cloud Forest and how to bring worms into the discussion? Barthold and Bloom (2020) note that human manipulation of environments—the “Anthropocene” by its scientific name—is a function of our current times which privileges neoliberalism and the corporatization of our world where naturalizing forces preserve existing regimes. Although we might recognise the negative impacts of human activities on the environment, they argue that we are trapped by our ideologies and unable to break free from their impacts. They advocate for a dissensus, a “radically democratic political ethics that demands firms externally preserve the environment whilst also internally resisting institutional power structures that socially naturalize organizational environments” (p. 672). And in an inadvertent nod to Schiller and Beethoven, such a process requires that we “redistribute...the sensible” (p. 672), bringing all (“alle Wesen”), even the hitherto silenced, into dialogue, worms included.

But what would prohibit worms and their counterparts in the natural world from entering the conversation about the future on humanity on Planet Earth? Clues are found in Singapore’s modern political journey from its founding by British entrepreneur Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819, its subsequent colonisation until its decolonisation in 1965, and in the same year expulsion from the Malaysian Federation. Standing alone it has become a city state, a high-tech nation of 6.04 million citizens.

Singapore is described as a post-colonial nation (McNeill, 2022) that has created its prosperity through alliances with its former colonial master, the United Kingdom, and latterly the United States of America. However, although it is now in control of its destiny, coloniality as a political force is displayed in the ways it privileges some social behaviours over others. For example, Lim (2016) describes a city that promotes its post-colonial magnificent structures, including Gardens by the Bay, yet obscures social attitudes and values that do not conform to an assumed status quo.

Shepherd (2020), in drawing on the works of decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo, distinguishes between *colonialism*, an historical/political process which may be waning, and *coloniality*, an attitude that is evident and endemic in our world. Herein is the tie that binds modernity to Cloud Forest, for, “there is no modernity without coloniality” (Mignolo in Shepherd, 2020, p. 309). Thus, coloniality in Cloud Forest is evident in the selection of trees and the elision of birds and insects, and the invisibility of nematodes and fungi.

Although the technological triumph of the Cloud Forest and its companion Flower Dome is in the ways plant waste is turned into energy to run the operation, the worms remain silent. There is evidence in the scientific literature that airborne and soil microbes exist in botanical greenhouses (Kozdrój et al., 2024; Kushwaha et al., 2024). In the absence of studies of the Cloud Forest, it could be extrapolated that

soil microbes and fungi are present given that the forest is populated with epiphytes, mosses, orchids, pitcher plants, and ferns. It is unclear, however, if nematodes are present, given it is unclear where soils were sourced and if those soils were sterilised first.

The Gardens by the Bay and its two domed conservatories are symphonic in their aesthetic, and that is their primary appeal. They are large and compelling, yet their controlled structure, which guides visitors from start to finish, is a poor realization of the joy promised by Schiller and later Beethoven.

It could be argued that Cloud Forest is exactly the thing we must do to preserve endangered species and to give access to the natural world to citizens deprived of it in their daily lives. However, the world that is offered is a poor replication of the fecundity of nature. Cloud Forest does not preserve nature; rather, it preserves the colonial capitalist order and shows that humans can indeed control the natural world so long as fearsome creatures are removed. The structural edifice and the technological systems in situ that control the environment are foregrounded, with the flora providing the rationale for their creation.

Socio-technical systems research is now exploring how artificial intelligence, or autonomous systems, interact with human users (Behymer & Flach, 2016). Cloud Forest is an artefact of these kinds of partnerships. Indeed, it could be viewed as a triumph and exemplar of a human–technological system developed for the betterment of humanity. However, whilst trumpeting the cleverness of humans to offer, in the words, again, of Lee Hsein Loon, “*exciting* opportunities for all” (Ministry of Digital Development and Information, 2025, emphasis added), worms and their subterranean colleagues remain hidden, silenced, ignored.

How, then, can we move beyond the Anthropocene and bring humans back into a humble cooperating partnership with the natural world? Perhaps a turn back to the Romantics as demonstrated in Schiller and Beethoven’s oeuvres might offer a pathway.

## Polyphony: Performing Aesth-Ethics

In this section, we bring together, under the rubric of “polyphony”, the several strands we have explored. Polyphony is a music form which gives voice to multiple themes within a work; it gives space for each voice without obliterating others. Polyphony also allows for ideas to circle back, to be revisited and revised so that the complete work is developmental. To operationalise our aesth-ethics approach, we explore four themes that derive from the two focal works, Beethoven’s 9th Symphony and Singapore’s Cloud Forest, namely, Lament “for the” Loss; Acting in Haste; Reflect

and Open Space; and Joy Without Borders. These elements inform the fragment from the final movement which we discussed in Variation I.

First, however, we note the importance of rediscovering the benefits of Romanticism to fulfilling our proposed agenda of attending to nature in all her complexities, “even [to] the worms”. Our exploration returns to our beginning, noting that our ethical inquiry requires an active imagination and emotional responses to realise the potential for re-crafting our world to sustain human flourishing.

In their advocacy of an “ecocentric organization” Purser et al. (1995, p. 1083) conclude that “When pushed to their extremist positions, neither technocentric environmentalism nor romantic naturalism offers much hope for ushering in a practical ecocentric organization paradigm” (p. 1077). Their criticism of the “romantic view” is due to “imaginary idealization of nature” (p. 1058), but on this, we think them mistaken.

Critics claim that Romanticism is overwrought emotionally and focuses on the lone individual experiencing the raw power of nature, and these are valid. However, reducing Romantic ideals to these few elements is reductionist, obscuring its more relevant communitarian impetus. Berlin (1999) notes that the early Romantics were wary of Enlightenment rationality, and rejected single solutions to problems, favouring instead responses that valued diversity. In music this was evidenced in moving away from diatonicism towards polytonalities, where a single tonic or “home” key was rejected in favour of multiple tonal centres. Beethoven rejected totalitarianism, aesthetic and political, as he makes clear in the final movement of his 9th Symphony. All are welcomed into the joy’s generous embrace.

Today, we tend to look back on Romanticism through a neoliberal filter, where the individual reigns supreme. Although we see the lone individual experiencing nature’s sublimity, we fail to notice the call to community and the emotionality that accompanies collective encounters. When dealing with past eras, therefore, we need to consider the impact our epistemological context has on our readings and acknowledge that we filter ideas through our atomising lens.

Take, for example, how the lone wandering, melancholic individual, of Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–1818) is reframed by Berlioz in his second symphony, *Harold en Italie* (1834/1900/1984). Berlioz’s focal figure, rendered by the solo viola, experiences the sublimity of nature alone in the mountains, and finds himself in community with marching pilgrims, listening to a lover’s serenade, and experiencing the raw passion of the brigands. In each movement, the viola is written into the texture, by at times standing apart, and at others being intimately connected to the corpus. By the symphony’s end, the soloist is embraced into the community where the viola

and orchestra become united and indistinguishable. Berlioz achieves a parallel story of a self-actualised observer *and* community participant with each informing the other.

The dramatic ending of *Harold en Italie* offers the revolutionary change in ethics that Purser et al. (1995) advocate: a change in perception. In this final act of the symphony, Berlioz collapses the raw power of nature, the human community, and the sole individual into a complete whole (Berlioz, 2019, begin at timecode 40:33). In response, we would not then talk of humans and nature as separate entities, for humans are nature, along with *all* other animate and inanimate forms. This sense of completeness and inseparability begins perceptual change.

Our claim is that the benefits of Romanticism have not yet been realised because the underlying ethos of free subjective expression of all has been suppressed in the rational pursuit of growth and prosperity. The single vanishing point that perspective offers and which Purser et al. (1995) note is totalitarian in its aesthetic. It carries over into organisational life as we continue to privilege the *hieros* (ἱερός) *arkhe* (ἀρχή) sacred rule. We are still trying to overcome the ghastly mistake of perspective, as noted by Braque above, and deleterious impact of hierarchy on human health in our organizations. We need to reimagine a world that liberates from the constraints of the powerful who lead at the emotional and spiritual cost of the led. Thus, there is still much for us twenty-first century citizens to learn from the Romantics.

In what follows, we imagine an aesth-ethical response to the loss of species, the loss of human freedom, and the loss of subterranean life. The elements we explore are not linear but polyphonic. Although we write in a linear fashion, the following four elements happen together and in oscillation, spiralling back on each other as we attend to each. By taking an analogic approach as Barry (1994) explores in his inquiry method, we frame our theorizing by using each movement of Beethoven’s Choral Symphony which lead up the grand pause discussed in Variation I, and with sideways vision, hold Singapore’s Cloud Forest in our peripheral gaze. We note along the way how process philosophy informs our conclusions.

## Lament “For the” Loss

Beethoven instructs the first movement of the 9th Symphony to be played *Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso*, indicating his intention for a brisk speed, but not too fast, and with a majestic, noble character. The opening 16 measures are ambiguous and directionless, inviting listeners into the uncertain space between the two-note A–E chord. There is no third in the chord, and no way of determining if its character is major or minor. The lack of direction highlights

what is missing, only to learn later that it functions as a dominant of the D tonality. As the movement plays out, we hear dramatic interjections, and the return again, and again, of the "empty" chord. Despite the bravado of the maestoso instruction, it is a lament on the uncertainties of our times.

The Global South has had its treaties and alliances between colonial masters and locals, but the promises written within them remain unfulfilled. Lost lands, cultures, languages, and lifestyles, and the unwillingness of those in positions of economic and political power to acknowledge grievances, continue to trouble partnerships and efforts to collaborate.

Adding to the grief of a lost past, is the loss of biodiversity. Lands "developed" for industry, coastal areas "reclaimed" from the sea for housing, and flora "cleared" for farms have seen the destruction of habitats for fauna, and soils sterilized making them inhospitable for nematodes.

And then there is war. Bombs exploding over farms, cities and industrial sites, belching poisonous fumes into the air, adding to the greenhouse gases and their cumulative impact on the climate. As Gillian Clark's (1993) poem *Lament*, with its insistent repetition of "For the..." in response to the First Gulf War 1990–1991 invokes, lamentation does not stop at the military conflict itself. It mourns for war's impact on all creation—"alle Menschen" and "alle Wesen."

In the face of overwhelming powerlessness, lament offers catharsis. Lament surfaces grievances and allows for anger to be acknowledged and expressed. Lament is at once majestic and noble, creating a distance between what has occurred and the present moment, and in that directionless moment, opens space for something other to emerge.

And this is the genius of Cloud Forest. It began with loss; with an acknowledgement that there are endangered species that can be brought back from the brink. In this sense, the structure, like its theatre-like Flower Dome counterpart, is itself a lament. It sings of what is lost and seeks to rescue imperilled species.

Process philosophy as espoused by Whitehead may be a helpful ally in stimulating lamentation. A new future unfolds as we let go of the past and move towards what is to come, in a "creative advance into novelty" (Whitehead, 1978, p. 21). Acknowledging our own and others' suffering, invokes both lament and a call to action.

## Acting in Haste

Worms leave hostile environments, as we authors have learned living alongside them. Their absence in garden plots tells of deficiencies in the soil, calling for immediate action to provide a more hospitable habitat. But how does this domestic example translate into the aesth-ethical approach we discuss here?

The second movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony is marked *Molto vivace*—very fast and lively—and instructs musicians to play in an energetic, upbeat and lively fashion.

Beethoven was the master of the motif, building large structures out of minimal materials (The repeated so-called "Fate" motif of his well-known Symphony No. 5 is testament to his ability to craft material pregnant with possibility.). The second movement of the 9th Symphony comprises a phrase of three notes, and according to Grove (1962) is a "miracle of repetition without monotony" (p. 855). Grove also observes the fugal nature of the piece (we return to fugue later) and the contrapuntal melody which appears after opening flourish at measure nine flags Beethoven's intentions.

The potential for tedious repetition is overcome in part by the work never settling into a stable key. The movement traverses D minor, A major, F major, A minor, C major, G minor, E $\flat$  major, D major, concluding in D minor: a chaotic plethora of chords. Not only are the speed and character lively, but the changing tonalities also make it constantly surprising, for the chord sequence strays outside the close relations which characterise diatonicism. But how to introduce this kind of energy into systems that repeat the same dysfunctions that have brought about species loss and climate change?

The context of Žižek's (2008) "sideways" analyses of violence was a response of the United States of America and its ally the United Kingdom to the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center September 11, 2001. The tradition, then and now, is to exact punishment by acting with overwhelming force: blitzkrieg of the Nazi regime in World War II and 'shock and awe' tactics seen in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is believed that acts of terror cannot go unanswered. However, in a metaphoric adaptation of the Higgs Field, Žižek proposes that a more potent response would have been to not take any reprisal actions. He writes, "the first gesture to provoke a change in the system is to withdraw activity, to do nothing" (p. 180). This position contradicts the claim that doing nothing communicates approval and weakness.

Žižek's (2008) counterintuitive claim holds up in the second movement of the 9th Symphony with its minimal melodic material, and in Cloud Forest. In the Singaporean case the conservatory was conceived in the face of species' extinction. The potential disappearance of flora stimulated action with a large-scale building program. But, not before weighing the costs that totalled SD 1.035 billion, with an estimated operating cost of the two domes around SD 28 million. Thus, action followed absence.

Process philosophy conforms to this position, and as noted above, Whitehead's (1978) prescription for change bypasses the ancient Roman tradition of direct action. Rather, as noted above, change occurs "in quietness operate

by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world” (p. 343). Here Whitehead refers to a scene in the bible’s New Testament (John 18:36) in which Jesus of Nazareth stands before Pontius Pilate, on trial under Roman authority for sedition, following earlier accusations of blasphemy under Jewish law. In declaring that his kingdom is “not of this world,” Jesus distances himself from the violent occupation of and resistance in his homeland, using the demonstrative adjective “this” to mark that separation. In doing so, he advocates for a world that rejects violence, toward withdrawal and non-violence.

Withdrawal may be in ‘quietness’ but it is not ‘quietist’, however. While street protests have their place and are legitimate forms of action in democratic contexts, they tend to reaffirm existing power structures with one social force being pitted against the other. The goal of withdrawal is to reenergize systems to allow something novel to emerge, and this requires considerable creative endeavour as we reflect on the future that might become.

## Reflect, and Open Space

We live in a troubled world, with constant evidence of negative impacts humans have on the environment. Despair can easily take hold on the back of anger and frustration at our powerlessness to effect change sufficient to assuage these feelings. One way through despondency is to seek beauty, and as an appropriate response to withdrawal, forms part of the aesth-ethic polyphony we explore.

Merriam-Webster’s (2026) dictionary definition of aesthetics centres on conceptions of “beauty”, reflecting a general consensus on its meaning. However, Wittgenstein (1966) questions the appropriateness this definition, writing,

when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as “beautiful”, “fine”, etc., play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: “Look at this transition”, or “The passage here is incoherent”. Or you say, in a poetical criticism: “His use of images is precise” (p. 3).

Wittgenstein’s conclusion is that concepts of beauty are culturally and contextually bound. Yet, the word has salience as a prompt for reflection here. The third movement of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony is, says Grove (1962), “more calmly, purely, nobly beautiful that even this great master—who knows well how to search the heart, and try the spirit, and elevate the soul—has accomplished elsewhere in his Symphonies” (p. 362). Grove’s language may sound like puffery to our contemporary ears, but taken at face value, his words reflect a sense of repose that Beethoven achieves after the first two, more dramatic, movements. The third movement is marked *Adagio molto e cantabile*—play in a

very slow and lyrical style—an instruction that calls on the musicians to ‘sing’ beauty into existence. Repose is a sense of calm and of being present to and in this moment.

Beethoven suggests repose in the frequent use of interrupted cadences. Interruptions are musical sentences that resist full stops, where instead of the dominant resolving to the tonic in a “Perfect” V–I, full close, it moves from the Dominant to the Submediant in a V–vi comma. The interrupted cadence calls for more.

Resistance to closure opens space for dialogue, where multiple views and insights can be elicited. Dialogue, Bakhtin (1994) notes, ensures “that meaning remains in process, unfinalizable” (p. 279) and given it is “unfinalizable and interminable’...will produce still greater potential” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 310). In like fashion, Beethoven’s conception of beauty with his interruptions to formal closure, opens space for more to come.

Beauty can also be found in the Cloud Forest domed structure. It is a wondrous illustration of the socio-technological partnership: a marvel of human ingenuity. Its spiralling upward walk to the forest canopy mirrors the spiral shapes found in natural forms—an unfolding fern leaf, sunflower heads, snail shells, to name but a few. And for a time, it gives visitors a sense of repose from the business of life beyond its shell, and respite from the busy-ness and humidity that characterize Singapore.

It may be that readers may find Beethoven’s music uninteresting, and a visit to Cloud Forest unlikely, but beauty is not confined to works of art; musical or architectural. To find beauty all one needs do is pick a leaf from a plant and examine it. Closely. Look at its intricacies and observe that this simple piece of organic matter, common enough to ignore, turns sunlight into useable energy for all living beings. And at the end of its life, that same leaf will provide nurturance for the complex web of subterranean life on which the plant depends. Indeed, we humans are also dependent on decomposing leaves. For, where once they photosynthesized, now in the decomposing state, they provide worms the resources they need to give back sustenance to the trees which can carry on their work of giving breath.

How generous. How marvellous. How beautiful.

Beauty in all its forms, both simple and complex, is to be found everywhere, says Whitehead (1969).

“Thus any part of experience can be beautiful. The teleology of the Universe is directed to the production of Beauty. Thus any system of things which in any wide sense is beautiful is to that extent justified in its existence” (p. 341).

Experiencing the wonder and awe of a leaf also flows into observing the novelty all around us, including people in our communities. To be clear, seeking beauty is not a displacement exercise, nor a refusal to engage in the daily

affairs of business and life. Rather, following process philosophy, the reverse is the case: focusing on spreadsheets, the bottom line, and strategy, for example, are themselves distractions from the most important quest of creating beautiful organizations. Indeed, seeking beauty *is* the leadership task.

Having opened space for repose and experienced the beauty that moment-upon-moment offers, we turn to the final movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony and its evocation of joy.

## Joy Without Borders

The final movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony begins by reprising the former three movements, and in this way, it spirals back to what has been. In like manner, lamenting, acting, and reflecting, are but a prelude to what is to come.

As we noted earlier, this movement turns into song, the poem *Ode to Joy* by Friedrich Schiller. However, Beethoven interpolates into that text at the beginning of the sung section, with the words by the bass soloist: *O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! Sondern laßt uns angenehmere anstimmen Und freudenvollere* (Oh friends, not these sounds! But let us sing more pleasantly and more joyfully). Thus, although we have grieved, withdrawn and encountered beauty, these activities lead to something even more profound: to live with joy. And if, as noted above, Nussbaum's (2001) exhortation is valid, that "human flourishing" characterises a "complete human life" (p. 32), then Beethoven offers joy as the glue that will facilitate that completeness.

In our discussion above in the Variation I section, we explored a fragment of the movement which leads to a dramatic pause: to silence. Here Beethoven opens space for us to contemplate our human life ("alle menschen") and the rest of creation ("alle Wesen"), and in that moment consider a response.

Several issues are salient to our aesth-ethical project here. The first is that Beethoven turns from developing motific fragments in the first three movements to offering a full melody: the 'Ode to Joy'. The song reflects a classical balance of proportions with four phrases of four measures totalling a standard melody of 16 measures. Second is the explosion of life that occurs after the pause. Beethoven presents two double fugues in succession.

As a form, the fugue reached its apogee under the pen of J. S. Bach. It is a complex piece of writing that is both circular and teleological. Melodic fragments repeat in a contrapuntal web whilst moving towards an endpoint. However, the fugal form was eclipsed by the classical simplicity of composers like Haydn and Mozart. Yet despite its waning, composers through the Classical,

Romantic, and Modern eras continued to show their mastery of fugue by incorporating it into works (Berlioz begins *Harold en Italie* with a fugue). A double fugue adds to this rich tapestry by having two independent themes interweaving and playing simultaneously. All voices coexist; they are valued and heard in this complex contrapuntal writing. As if to reinforce the communitarian agenda that fugue invokes, Beethoven has written two double fugues which elevate the call to diversity and inclusion.

For our project, the two double fugues play out the proclamation sung in the first stanza of the Ode: *Deine Zauber binden wieder*, (Thy magic binds together) *Was die Mode streng geteilt*; (What tradition has strongly parted). Put in the language of the Global South, colonization has troubled our communities, and this tradition continues to divide through coloniality. But our collective sense of joy can overcome what has previously been separated. Free from walls and borders, and totalitarian gestures where one party deems its way to be superior to others, all are embraced in joy in the quest for a diverse and inclusive society.

It is not surprising that contemporary psychological research confirms that joy is not a peripheral emotion but central to human flourishing. Joy, says Fredrickson (2001), "broadens" rather than narrows our repertoire of responses, and opens the capacity "to play, push the limits, and be creative" (p. 220). Along with "interest, contentment, pride, and love," joy encompasses and builds "physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources" (p. 219). Chen et al. (2022) confirm that flourishing is not domain-specific, but traverses a full range of human activities, physical through psychological. Further, human flourishing begins with individual wellness as Keyes' (2002) notes, and spills over into the wider public sphere (Keyes, 2007). Joy in all its manifestations is both a private concern and a public experience, bringing wellness in its wake.

From the worms who are given sensuality and the cherubs who stand before God—"Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben und der Cherub steht vor Gott" intones the choir—all of creation sings together in the fugues that are a joy-filled life. And this spirals us back to the aesth-ethical project we are espousing, for Henning (2005) notes in his discussion of the ethics of creativity:

If we are to have any hope of reversing the potentially catastrophic destruction and consumption of our natural environment, we must devise an ethical theory grounded in an axiology that acknowledges *every individual*—from the most *insignificant flicker* of existence at the opposite end of the universe to complex individuals such as ourselves—has value

not only for itself, but for others, and for the whole of reality (p. 2, emphases added).

We propose that human flourishing will necessarily embrace the Planet in total along with other living and non-living forms; beginning with the seemingly insignificant worm, for as humans flourish so too might the environment within which we live.

What, then, of Cloud Forest? Our sense is that whilst it is a dramatic structure and masterpiece of socio-technical partnership, its hermetically sealed environment is but another gesture towards coloniality. Worms cannot get in, and if any are in residence, they cannot migrate out. Cloud Forest fails in elevating hidden and silent life from beneath the grass and roots and is thus a poor representation of a diverse and inclusive natural world. Whilst it is a sober reminder that many species are threatened with extinction, it fails to embrace joy without borders.

Freedom. Beauty. Leaves. Play. Joy. Worms! They all form the fabric of a post-Anthropocene where humans may live in partnership without walls and borders stifling our collective creativity.

## Coda

In this paper we have offered both ethical critique and prescription, particularly for scholars not yet acquainted with the ongoing effects of colonialism. By acknowledging these conditions, we seek to mitigate further harm and to draw the attention of those in the Global North who may remain unaware of them.

We also advocate for practices that support the work of worms, which are essential to sustaining ecological and human health. They aerate soils, help break down some toxic materials and wastes, add to soil fertility, and are themselves a food source for other animals. These multiple activities place them at the forefront of carbon sequestration efforts, so why would we not consider their input when seeking to turn around the deleterious impacts of human activities on changing climate patterns? While we recognise the practical limitations of maintaining worm farms and making garden plots, especially for those living in close quarters and apartments, we nonetheless invite community-level collaboration in establishing shared composting systems for domestic organic matter, and returning those composted materials to the earth to nurture underground life forms. Worms play a crucial role in sustaining life for all inhabitants of Planet Earth.

Businesses may be beneficiaries of our aesth-ethical insights by becoming sensitized to incremental change through working with process, rather than seeking revolutionary change. Crucial to this approach is valuing

the caesura; and seeking regular pauses in activity to reaffirm our partnership with all inhabitants, of the world, animate and inanimate, and to commit to doing good for the locale.

Empirical studies into human flourishing confirm Whitehead's (1978) notion of the integration of all into a functioning whole and Nussbaum's (2001) privileging of the emotions as central to ethical inquiry. These insights, empirical and philosophical, have been laid out already several centuries ago by Schiller and Beethoven, but perhaps we have been slow to listen. Our essay, therefore, reacquaints readers with art works from the past, and in response to Žižek's (2008) hermeneutic test, we have demonstrated that they speak in their distinctness to this generation. Whenever and wherever Beethoven's 9th Symphony is performed, it stands in front of totalitarian regimes whether they be political, ideological, or managerial, issuing its invitation to live in joy. And in support of worms with their under-earth colleagues, we suggest the symphony be performed in Singapore's Gardens by the Bay complex, perhaps promoted as a "Festival for Worms" (thanks to maestro James Judd for this suggestion—Personal Communication, February 2025). This would demonstrate a continuing exploration of socio-technical partnerships on which twenty-first century citizens rely, and highlight the necessity of worms to global health.

To conclude, when making potent aesth-ethical judgments by which we can assess the virtue of strategic decisions, we might ask, "How does this plan impact on the silent and silenced, worms included?" and "Does this proposal bring human flourishing—joy—to all implicated stakeholders?" Both these questions return enquirers to the forces of coloniality that continue to silence lifeforms that are deemed irrelevant, and dissenting voices that resist totalitarian gestures.

Our contribution is to bring worms back into our focal vision, as being crucial for the sustainability agenda. To consider their silent generosity and forgiveness as we trample them underfoot, and in the same spirit to offer our fellow citizens the invitation that Schiller, Beethoven and Whitehead initiated: to welcome all into a commonwealth of expansive creativity that celebrates the joy of life.

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