Chapter 11
Lifelong Learning: A Post-human Condition?*

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Introduction

> The approach I am trying to work for is rigourously committed to testing and attesting. To engage in and understand that this is always an interpretative, engaged, contingent, fallible engagement. It is never a disengaged account (Haraway 2000: 160).

> The crucial philosophical question pertaining to reality was; *how can we be sure*? Now, after the turn to practice, we confront another question; *how to live with doubt*? (Mol 2002: 165, emphasis in original).

This chapter is a thing, a gathering around a matter of concern. There is a gathering in the writing of the text, its editing and publication and its reading. It is therefore a gathering across space and time, a thing which changes, translates and betrays (Latour 1996) in the process of its gathering, of thinging.

A strange beginning for a chapter on lifelong learning perhaps… One that may not encourage gathering – you may skip to the next chapter. However, I hope by the end of this experiment that the concerning matter has become a gathering, a thing to be referenced perhaps.

Freud once wrote that education is an impossible profession as it is unable to mandate the future. This inability is now manifested in some of the contemporary discourses of lifelong learning as a constant form of apprenticeship (Edwards 2008). While, for some, lifelong learning is integrally linked to the now seemingly failed project of neo-liberalism, this chapter will explore lifelong learning as possibly a

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post-human condition. It is important that the 'post-' is not read as 'anti-', but that will depend on what and who are gathered in the writing and reading of this chapter. This then is my matter of concern.

The chapter will suggest that, while Lyotard (1984) argued that the post-modern condition of knowledge was one of incredulity to grand narratives, this could be extended to an ontological condition, the lifelong learning condition. Here, even as they continue to be articulated ever more stridently, there is an incredulity to the notion that there are over-arching justifications for human existence – we need to learn to exist. This arises not least because of the ecological and material uncertainties to which worldly – human and non-human – existence is subject, what Beck (1992) referred to as a risk society. What I want to suggest is that Lyotard's argument for the post-modern condition of knowledge points to the collapse of representationalism as an a priori worldliness and signifies a post-human condition of existence, wherein lifelong learning could be a conditional set of ontological practices *within* the world, rather than a set of meanings or understandings *about* the world.

Here I am not using post-humanism as simply referring to a gathering after-humanism and the death of the Renaissance subject. Nor am I using it to refer to those who advocate a dys/u-topian future of genetically modified embodied technologies, although both have resonances in what follows. In this chapter, post-humanism refers to an enactment that deconstructs the separation of subjects and objects, the human and the material and with that the focus on the human subject as either a representative of an essentialised human nature or in a state of constant becoming. However, it is also the case that the deconstruction requires a subject and object to deconstruct. As with Lyotard's (1992) reflections on the 'post-' in post-modernism therefore, the 'post-' in post-humanism is constantly at play with precisely that which it deconstructs. It is not 'after' in terms of going beyond, but in terms of offering a constant experimentation with (Badmington 2003). In one sense then, I am engaging in a form of science fiction that has prefigured much of the contemporary discussion of post-humanism.

This argument follows work derived from and which gathers together aspects of pragmatist philosophy, the work of Heidegger, post-structuralism, actor-network theory and feminism. It is an argument that, in attempting to gather many actants seeks to engender a solidity and stability to the thing to be enacted. Too simply, it is an argument that follows from a focus on ontology – be(com)ing – rather than representation – know(legd)ing. However, the focus on ontology is not human- or subject-centric, but points to lifelong learning as a condition of the entanglement of the human and non-human, as without the non-human, humans would neither exist nor be able to act as part of world existence. People are always already in assemblage within worlds. As Haraway (2003: 54) puts it, 'humans are already congeries of things that are not us. We are not self-identical'. In our age of ubiquitous digitalisation, this is sometimes referred to as a cyborg condition (Gough 2004), which points to the entanglement of the fleshy and technical – the materiality of things.

I will argue that central to this post-human condition could be entanglements in the world that entail practices of conditionality – what could be rather than should be – fallibility – experimentation and the possibility of failure, i.e. things falling apart – and responsibility – responding in particular ways to others and otherness. It

is these which are the practices that can be developed as a response to the incredulity there can be towards grand narratives of human existence. In gathering this discussion, I shall also make the claim that a post-human condition could point to the end of lifelong learning rather than the latter being a part of that condition. If the practices of learning have been integral to the centring of the human subject (Rose 1998), I shall argue that a post-human condition may not be one of learning as we have tended to understand it.

This chapter then is an experiment, itself fraught with conditionality, fallibility and responsibility. It is an attempt at an intervention and interruption into the practices of lifelong learning, including the practices of representing lifelong learning. It is too simplistic to suggest that it is a shift from epistemology to ontology as each entails the other. What I want to suggest is that the type of debates that have been going on *about* lifelong learning arise from positioning it solely within a representational binary that separates matter and meaning, substance and significance, object and subject, where the latter is grounded in some sense of human nature purified of other matters. I will outline this argument in the next section. I will then go on to suggest that lifelong learning could be re-positioned within a certain performative post-human ethico-epistem-onto-logy (Barad 2007), wherein there is an entanglement of things; 'things as question, as provocation, incitement, or enigma' (Grosz 2009: 125). However, insofar as it is entangled, then the practices of learning by subjects are themselves troubled. This entails approaching what we do differently in order to make a difference. It entails more gathering, less objecting – enacting a post-human condition as a thing.

Representing and Experimenting: From Objects to Things and Back Again?

There is often a tendency in the discussion of lifelong learning and education more generally to have to start from the beginning in everything that is written. Of course, origins are myths and any such requirement is itself always already part of the regulatory practices in knowledge production, placing constraints on experimentation on the basis of a rigour that can come close to 'rigor mortis' at times. I write this not out of arrogance, but out of frustration that debates in the wider intellectual environment seem mostly to be *purified* from the discussion of lifelong learning or to be marginalised to those with an interest in philosophy or theory. As a result, lifelong learning largely remains an impoverished under-theorised object. Thus, for this section of the chapter, while rehearsing some footings for my overall discussion, I claim little original or seek the origins to what I write. I gather words, discourses and concepts.

There has been sustained critique over decades now of the binaries that shape a crudely Western sensibility. These binaries are held to structure our ways of theorising and intervening, providing the conditions of possibility for how we might act in the world. A critical philosophical binary is that between epistemology and ontology, where the former, of how we can know something, has been the primary focus

of concern. Yet, such binaries already assume what they produce, insofar as the focus on knowing already presumes a relationship between matter and meaning, object and subject, which themselves are positioned as separate; this is to see them as related but in different ways from other theoretical positions from each other rather than related in specific ways.

A number of binaries can be found in the discussions of and research in lifelong learning which already assume an epistemological-ontological separation. For instance,

Epistemology	Ontology
Meaning	Matter
Significance	Substance
Ephemerality	Stability
Subject	Object
Theory	Practice
Knowing	Becoming
Apparent	Real
Reflecting	Intervening
Thinking	Doing
Representing	Experimenting

Such binaries establish the terms of debate. Insofar as matter is separated from meaning, then the question arises over how we can represent the former in a meaningful way. Anthropologists explore these issues in their studies of cultural artefacts and their significance (Henare et al. 2007). However, meaningful is not necessarily truthful in the senses we have come to associate with the practices of the sciences – natural and social. Much space has been given to pursuing the ways in which humans can establish the truthfulness of meanings representing matter. This in itself presumes a separation of subject from object with the associated issue of how to fill the gap. The world is full of attempts at such a filling, yet the gap remains. Objects object. They remain the other to the subject, separate.

From a range of positions, the assumption of foundational separations has been subject to sustained critique. This critique entails not simply an attempt to privilege ontology over epistemology, reversing the binary, but to reframe our whole entanglements within the world. Writers associated with these moves include Judith Butler, Donna Harraway, Ian Hacking, Bruno Latour and Karen Barad. Yet, these are unfamiliar names in the writings of lifelong learning. Their works are distinctive if overlapping, and I would suggest contributing to what I am calling a post-human condition insofar as the knowing human subject is decentred by a concern for ways of enacting within the world.

Barad (2007: 137), a quantum physicist turned feminist philosopher, provides a succinct critique of the problem with a representationalist epistemology:

> Representationalism takes the notion of separation as foundational. It separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible… representationalism is a prisoner of the problematic metaphysics it postulates.

She is drawing upon a distinction made by previously made by Hacking (1983) between representing/theorising and intervening/experimenting as orientations in the world, where the former has been separated out and given primacy over the latter. This separation results from and in the dividing of matter from meaning and further divides the material into, for instance, the social, the human, the natural, the technological, the cultural and the economic. These distinctions are then taken to be foundational and a priori rather than themselves being forms of enactment, the manifestation of what Latour (1993) would refer to as *purifying practices*. For Barad (2007: 53), 'representationalism is a practice of bracketing out the significance of practices, that is, representationalism marks a failure to take account of the practices through which representations are produced'. Representations are taken to be objects that are then black-boxed and taken for granted.

This might look like a social constructivist view, but it is important to distinguish it from such, as realism and social constructivism are held to rely on the same representationalist separation of matter/object and meaning/subject. Meaning may be constructed rather than simply reflect reality in a mirror-like way, but it remains separated out from matter, leaving untroubled the fundamental binaries informing them. It is for this reason that both Hacking (1999) and Latour (1999) are highly critical of the supposed radicalness of social constructivist approaches to research. Both realism and social constructivism remain human/subject-centric, because of an a priori separation of meaning and matter.

By contrast, the writers I am drawing upon formulate performative or enacting framings of worldliness, a world of thinging. Within such framings, meaning is not separate from matter. Indeed, an a priori assumption is that rather than separation as foundational to enacting a purified human condition, entanglement is materially and practically fundamental to a hybridised post-human condition. Objects are not entirely separate entities, but are mixings, gatherings, things, what Latour (1993) refers to as 'quasi-objects' in his argument that we have never been modern, i.e. purified. In other words, separations are particular enactments of gathering and mixing. Thus, for instance,

> to theorise is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. *Theorising, like experimenting, is a material practice*… both theorists and experimentalists engage in the intertwined practices of theorising and experimenting… *experimenting and theorising are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning* (Barad 2007: 55–6, emphasis in original).

Similar positions have also been developed in the discussion of material culture in anthropology. For instance,

> discourse can have effects not because it 'over-determines reality', but because no ontological distinction between 'discourse' and 'reality' pertains in the first place. In other words, concepts can bring about things because concepts and things are just one and the same. (Henare et al. 2007: 13)

Things as gatherings should not be confused with a concept of separate objects with properties. The latter is seen as very much tied to a representationalist epistemology

within which the world is made up of objects 'out-there' that we try to know 'in-here' –
within the knowing subject. These objects are the 'matters of fact' of which Latour
(2004, 2005, 2008) is critical as an adequate basis for critical political action. Matters
of fact assume and enact a representationalist epistemology of separation untangled
from the practices through which they are performed. They are the property of the
human subject who knows.

By contrast, for Latour, things are gathered and negotiated as 'matters of concern'.
This argument draws upon and extends earlier work by Heidegger (2009: 118) on the
nature and etymology of things and objects: 'the Old High German word "thing"
means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under dis-
cussion, a contested matter'. Things are a mixing, an entanglement. They gather the
human and non-human in their enactments. They are material and they matter. They
cannot simply be represented as there are practices associated with their gathering or
enactment, and represented. By contrast, objects are represented as existing separate
from one another a priori, and the practices through which they have been gathered
are naturalised or lost. 'Naturalisation means stripping away the contingencies of an
object's creation and its situated nature. A naturalised object has lost its anthropo-
logical strangeness' (Bowker and Star 1999: 299).

It is this view of things that led Heidegger (2009: 122) to argue that there is a need
to 'step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is, explains – to the think-
ing that responds and recalls'. This notion of responding informs the sense of respon-
sibility that I will argue could be part of a post-human experimental condition.

Where does this leave us? Crudely, we might say that, within a representationalist
enactment of the world, practices produce matters of fact through the representation
of objects with properties by the knowing subject. This arises from and contributes
to a Newtonian notion of matter. By contrast, in a post-human enactment of the
world, practices gather different things as matters of concern through their own
forms of experimentation. This arises from and contributes to a quantum notion of
matter. Of course, matters of fact might be considered a particular form of gather-
ing, a particular mattering (Law 2004), as the practices through which they are
gathered and assembled become part of the topography to be explored. Things may
be gathered and separated as objects, but, in examining their gathering, objects
become things. Thus, I am not using matters of fact and concern as a binary. Matters
of fact might be said to be a particular way of enacting concern. Here, as Latour
(2004: 232, emphasis in original) argues

> Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial
> and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only
> a subset of what could be called *states of affairs*.

Those matters of fact are based upon drawing distinctions and objectifying the
other, while matters of concern might be thought of as entailing entangling with the
other through, what Barad refers to (2007) as particular apparatuses.

> *Practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring
> the world*. Which practices we enact matter – in both senses of the word. Making knowl-
> edge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather it is about making

specific worldly configurations – not in the sense of making them ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs, or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (Barad 2007: 91, emphasis in original)

The enactment of lifelong learning as a thing, a gathering, as post-human forms of experimentation and intervention, does not necessarily sit comfortably with the hegemonic discourse we face in much educational and other research where the knowing subject is privileged. It is important therefore, in reconfiguring our entanglements of the world, to consider whether a post-human condition can be one of lifelong learning or whether, in enacting the post-human, we need less learning and more responsible experimenting.

Rather than the subject representing the object through sense data of, for instance, observation, we enter into the spatio-temporal practices of gathering and experimentation. Knowing is not separate from doing but emerges from the very matterings in which we engage. This relies on apparatuses, which *'are not mere observing instruments but boundary-drawing practices – specific material (re)configurings of the world – which come to matter'* (Barad 2007: 140, emphasis in original). To gather is also to draw boundaries, to include and exclude. Here, Barad is drawing upon and attempting to extend the performative epistemology of Judith Butler (1993). It is through the specific forms of boundary-drawing that enactments gather the world as particular things and objects. This form of work is a way of dwelling materially *within* the world and not simply another way of representing views *about* the world. Differences are not simply about matters of opinion and truth, but about ways of experimenting and gathering.

The End of Lifelong Learning?

The concept of lifelong learning has been much represented, debated, discussed and critiqued over the last 15 years. For some, it has been the ideological weapon of neo-liberalism. For others, it is a sham or an irrelevancy. For yet others, it has provided an opportunity to insert different practices into the framing of education. A lot of the discussion of lifelong learning has focussed on its political and ideological significance. Foucauldians and neo-Marxists have each in their different ways explored the exercises of power within lifelong learning. Philosophers of education have attempted to frame lifelong learning as an aspect of, or integral to, the good or worthwhile life. The terrain of lifelong learning is therefore littered with a huge biodiversity of meanings. But do any of them matter? Or matter that much? Who and what are gathered in the concerns of and for lifelong learning?

From the discussion above, we can experiment with lifelong learning as a post-human condition and the post-human condition as one of lifelong learning, but not as we currently represent it. Post-human lifelong learning can be positioned as an entanglement of the human and non-human. Gathering lifelong learning, enacting the thinginess of lifelong learning, could be a fertile mixing. It could become a matter of concern. While some, such as Gough (2004), have experimented with post-human

experiments in education, in particular, the technological extensions of the human in curriculum and pedagogy, little if any of the thinging of lifelong learning has addressed the issue beyond metaphorical uptakes of the cyborg. In this section of the chapter, I want to gather what could be some of the practices of a post-human lifelong learning. In the process, I will speculate that a post-human condition cannot be one of learning, despite what is said and the extension to education to which humans are being subject. The latter rests upon a continued humanist and representationalist separation of subjects and objects. A post-human condition could be one of experimentation, of gathering humans and non-humans. This is an educational purpose beyond the representationalism that has suffused major educational discourses and practices.

Despite Freud's warning, in education, we are familiar with the desire for predictability and the capacity to master or mandate the future. Audit and accountability are merely contemporary enactments of those desires. At the heart of much educational policy making in Europe and elsewhere in recent years are attempts at mastery of the future, of the knowledge economy and social inclusion, with lifelong learning often positioned as the or one of the means to achieve these. The obligatory passage point for education policy becomes the knowledge economy and education in the form of lifelong learning is duly harnessed and reduced to service its production. It is through the uptake of lifelong learning to support the knowledge economy that seemingly the future can be mastered. Here, lifelong learning is the simple service response to globalised complexity and uncertainty. The more challenges and uncertainty in the world, the more one must learn. Learning here might be seen to reduce unpredictability and that is across the life course by humans. Lifelong learning is represented as a matter of fact for and by humans, a way of representing the objective world to which the separate subject must adapt. The human subject is centred as that which must learn about the world.

However, to learn, humans have to gather and experiment. Learning emerges from the entanglement with the non-human. Thus, while humanism focuses on the mind and learning as a form of reflection, contemplation, abstraction and representation to establish matters of fact, I am suggesting that a post-human condition could position learning as a gathering of the human and non-human in experimentation to establish and engage with matters of concern. However, it could also be that rather than gathering differently, we might want to do away with learning altogether as the role for education. Here, a post-human condition could position experimentation as a gathering of the human and non-human to establish matters of concern – education as practices. This provides an educational purpose different from much of that which is familiar. It is not the human subject who learns through experimenting rather than representing, but a thing that is gathered.

Here I think the works of people like Gert Biesta and Tara Fenwick are useful. Both are concerned with educational purposes and responsibilities. While they would not necessarily position their own work as post-human, the more general 'post-' thing is part of their matters of concern. Biesta draws upon pragmatic and post-structuralist theories in much of his work, and some of his ideas can be gathered to the post-human condition I am positing. For instance, in his critique of critical pedagogy's desire for a language of possibility, Biesta (1998) extends Freud's

idea of the impossibility of mandating the future to all human interactions and suggests, drawing on Derrida and Foucault, that practices need to be developed around an 'emancipatory ignorance'.

> It just is an ignorance that does not claim to know how the future will be or will have to be. It is an ignorance that does not show the way, but only issues an invitation to set out on the journey. It is an ignorance that does not say what to think of it, but only asks, 'What do you think about it?' In short it is an ignorance that makes room for the possibility of disclosure. (Biesta 1998: 505)

Biesta's argument is related specifically to critical pedagogy, but it is relevant to the reformulation of a discourse of education more generally. He and Osberg (Osberg and Biesta 2007) suggest that this calls for a pedagogy of invention. An emancipatory ignorance and a pedagogy of invention (experimentation) sit well within the post-human condition I am attempting to gather.

Similarly, in his critique of the language of learning and argument for a specifically educational discourse, Biesta (2004: 76) has argued for three interlocking principles: 'trust without ground, transcendental violence and responsibility without knowledge'. With regard to the first, his suggestion is that education involves the unexpected and that this entails trust because there is risk involved. His second principle involves challenging and confronting students with otherness and difference. This entails 'interrupting' them, what he refers to as coming into presence, and the possibility of openness to difference. This approach involves transcendental violence as it creates difficult situations, but it is only through these that coming into presence become possible. The third principle, responsibility without knowledge, is based on the notion that educators have unlimited responsibility for the subjectivities of students, but that this is not based on any practice of calculation. In later work with Osberg that draws upon complexity theory (Osberg and Biesta 2007: 47), they suggest that 'teachers are responsible *both* for the emergence of the world (the future) *and* for the emergence of human subjectivity'.

These ideas signify notions that are a far cry from any certainty about the teleological goals of education and how they are to be achieved, although they remain primarily concerned with the education of the human subject and less with the materiality of education. Nonetheless, the practices identified could be said to be enacted through practices of constant experimentation in response to others rather than aimed at fulfilling ultimate purposes as ends. While Biesta is interested in these notions as educational, it is a reconfigured understanding of education as not restricted to educational institutions. They rely on emancipatory ignorance, invention, risk, otherness, interruption and the joint enacting of worlds and subjectivities. The latter in particular points to the entanglings of the human and non-human through which matters of concern can be gathered.

Formulating lifelong learning in this way may seem absurd. When outcomes, standardisation, audit and outputs are to the fore, what spaces are there for educational discourses around post-human experimentation in matters of concern? It is here that I find the concepts of fallibility and conditionality in addition to impossibility helpful. Fallibility because it points to the notion that, even if we practise upon the basis of the best available evidence we have, we know full well it is not perfect,

that we cannot mandate. This in turn results in and from a position of conditionality, that is, that we *could* do something rather than we *should* do something. Thus, my use of the conditional in relation to lifelong learning being a post-human condition or a post-human condition of after-learning or experimenting, as I am not saying it should be or is. It could be if we respond and experiment responsibly in specific ways. Our practices are only as good as we currently can establish, and they are a process of experimenting in gathering concerns, rather than any simple exercise in mandating and mastery and representing matters of fact. However, we might also consider lifelong learning as too capable of being recouped into a familiar representationalist epistemology, in which case we carry on as before.

From the above, the normative basis for what we do becomes a more modest experimental affair (Haraway 1997) of mixing matters. Fallibility and conditionality provide a basis for invention, for experimentation in practices, based upon how well and widely we enact things. It is in this spirit that I think Biesta's suggestion that we adopt an approach of 'responsibility without knowledge' seems to have resonance. This

> requires that we give up, or at least hold back, all the 'tricks of the trade,' all the wisdom of the world, all national curricula and educational strategies, all recipes for 'what works,' in order to be able to approach newcomers without an agenda or pre-conception, but in a way in which we can ask them what they are bringing to the world. It is in this way that educators take a responsibility for something that they cannot know. It is a responsibility without knowledge. (Biesta, quoted in Fenwick 2009)

Biesta is drawing upon Derrida (1992: 41), in particular, his argument that 'the condition of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the *aporia* from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention'. Invention is based in the tension in the impossibility of mandating the future. It is also based upon a decentred human subject, as to engage with the possibility of the impossible is to experiment and a subject experimenting with objects is left with a representational gap, while a post-human gathering provides practices for further experimentation.

Fenwick (2009) provides similar conclusions from her own concerns for educational responsibility. Her work is not explicitly post-human, but has become more focused on the socio-material, drawing upon actor-network theory and complexity theory. She follows the line of gathering that responsibility is about responding to others. The important thing to bear in mind is that others and otherness are not simply human subjects, but can be both human and non-human. For Fenwick (2009), educational responsibility requires that 'educators might think of doing less rather than more: focus on the immediate, open to possibility, leap into uncertainty, care without knowledge'. In other words, to be responsible is to experiment, to risk failure, including that some matters of concern may not become a thing with which to be engaged, and that things can fall apart.

For me, however unsatisfactory, the concept of lifelong learning could symbolise an educational expression of a post-human condition, precisely because it opens up possibilities for humans beyond their subjecthood. It could also gather responsible engagement with the non-human in our thingings. These provide conditions for

modesty in both the claims we might make and how we might proceed. However, in the process, I also think there could be an end to lifelong learning in such a gathering, as experimental practices around matters of concern could take precedence over learning through the representation of matters of fact. The purpose of education would not be lifelong learning but experimentation.

Experimentation: The Post-human Condition?

Post-human experimentation, fallibility, conditionality and responsibility, these seem to be ways forward from the notion of education as an impossible practice and the limits arising from the separation of subjects from objects. They open up possibilities of course, but not on the notion of mandating the future or any strong normative view about what education can achieve or how it can achieve. They put us all in a position of experimenting, whether we are engaged in policy work, teaching, leading or researching. And perhaps they are necessary if we are to sustain and develop modest democratic practices and the institutions to support them. Perhaps then some worthwhile things would be possible.

So could we then need to drop the notion of learning altogether? Perhaps, rather than a post-human condition of lifelong learning, we could enact a post-human condition of experimentation that embraces risk, responsibility and emancipatory ignorance. To suggest a future for education without learning and the knowing subject may seem strange. However, learning as a concept has evolved from the study of psychology which has at its heart precisely the centring of the human subject. In gathering lifelong learning as a post-human condition then, we could end up sacrificing the notion of lifelong learning itself, as it could be that the post-human cannot be one of learning, lifelong or otherwise. Educational purposes would be around responsible experimental gatherings of things that matter. Would that be such an irresponsible thing?

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