

## Embodiment, Alterity and Agency: Negotiating Antinomies in Divination

Patrick Curry

A draft of the paper in *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*, ed. Patrick Curry (Ashgate: 2010), pp. 85-118.

... if intellect does not deserve the crown of crowns, only intellect is able to award it. And if intellect only ranks second in the hierarchy of virtues, intellect alone is able to proclaim that the first place must be given to instinct.

(Marcel Proust)<sup>1</sup>

Our body itself is the palmary instance of the ambiguous.

(William James)<sup>2</sup>

‘Self-alienation’ (*alotriôthen*) constitutes our very essence.

(Gregory Shaw)<sup>3</sup>

We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.

(Heraclitus)<sup>4</sup>

Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering/

There is a crack in everything/ That’s how the light gets in ...

(Leonard Cohen)<sup>5</sup>

A hopeless attempt to see things whole is at least as worthy as the equally hopeless task of isolating fragments for intensive study, and much more interesting.

(Joseph Meeker)<sup>6</sup>

### Introduction

Although most of this paper is given over to issues which extend well beyond divination, my intention is to thereby offer a fruitful and insightful way of thinking about it. Of the first two subjects stated in my title, I will mainly explore their interrelationship, suggesting that it is as all-pervasive as it is complex and subtle. I will then introduce the third-named one. From time to time, vistas will open up which we shall only be able to notice before moving on. Occasionally something else will appear,

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Proust *on Art and Literature 1896-1919*, transl. Sylvia Townsend Warner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1997), pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003 [1912]), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Shaw, citing Simplicius (c.490-c.560), in ‘Living Light: Divine Embodiment in Western Philosophy’, in Angela Voss and Patrick Curry (eds), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007): 59-87, p. 74.

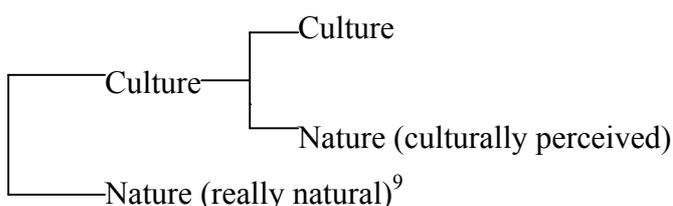
<sup>4</sup> T.M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), D-K, Frag. 49a.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), p. 373.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), p. 12.

namely the post-secular implications of the approach I am taking. Finally, anyone averse to theoretical speculation should probably pack extra provisions.

A principal purpose is to try to resolve an impasse between two intellectual positions which grow out of wider and deeper differing orientations to life: in broad terms, a participatory phenomenology and an analytical structuralism. My starting-point to this end is a passage in a series of remarkable lectures given by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in 1998 to anthropologists in Cambridge.<sup>7</sup> However, it in turn refers to an important earlier work by Tim Ingold which must therefore briefly be discussed.<sup>8</sup> Ingold convincingly argued that the claim that nature is ‘only’ a cultural construction is fatally incoherent. The problems can be summarised like this:



Thus: (1) Cultural constructionism takes as a given – that all human beings culturally construct their natural environments – what ethnographic evidence readily confirms is socio-historically contingent: aboriginal hunter-gatherer societies do not think or live in ways that conform to, or even readily comprehend, the paradigmatically ‘Western’ ontological divide between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

(2) Nature is thus illegitimately apportioned, in line with this (false) universalist assumption, between “‘really natural’ nature (the object of study for natural scientists) and “culturally perceived” nature (the object of study for social and cultural anthropologists).’

(3) If the concepts of nature and culture are themselves cultural constructs, then so is the culture that constructs them, and so on. The result is a vicious infinite regress.

Abandoning this wreck of a theoretical programme, Ingold argues instead that for the anthropologist as well as his/ her subject, ‘apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view *of* the world but of taking up a view *in* it.’<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 1998. ‘Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere’, four lectures delivered 17 February – 10 March at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. See also his paper based on these lectures, ‘Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies’, *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004): 463-84; and ‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 3 (1998): 469-88, reprinted in Michael Lambek (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 306-26.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), ‘Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment’: 40-60. Viveiros de Castro was responding to an earlier version: Tim Ingold, ‘Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment’, in Roy Ellen and Katsuyoshi Fukui (eds), *Redefining Nature* (Oxford: Berg, 1996): 117-55 (In my view, Ingold has here not only deconstructed social/ cultural constructionism but destroyed its intellectual credibility.)

<sup>9</sup> Both diagram and immediately following quotation from Ingold, *Perception*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ingold, *Perception*, p. 42.

Far from dressing up a plain reality with layers of metaphor, or representing it, map-like, in the imagination, songs, stories and designs serve to conduct the attention of performers *into* the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement. At its most intense, the boundaries between person and place, or between the self and the landscape, dissolve altogether. It is at this point that, as the people say, they become the ancestors, and discover the real meaning of things.<sup>11</sup>

We shall have reason to admire but qualify this eloquent prescription.

For his part, Viveiros de Castro finds that Ingold's 'perspicacious diagnosis of metaphorical projectionism is better than the cure he propounds.' I do not claim that the former has correctly represented the latter's position, but that is not really the point; it is, rather, the intellectual issues at stake.<sup>12</sup> Responding to what he sees as Ingold's remedy, then, Viveiros de Castro says:

My structuralist reflexes make me wince at the primacy accorded to immediate practical-experiential identification at the expense of difference, taken to be a conditioned, mediate and purely 'intellectual' (that is, theoretical and abstract) moment. There is here the debatable assumption that commonalities prevail upon distinctions, being superior and anterior to the latter; there is the still more debatable assumption that the fundamental or prototypical mode of relation is identity or sameness. At the risk of having deeply misunderstood him, I would suggest that Ingold is voicing here the recent widespread sentiment against 'difference' — a sentiment 'metaphorically projected' onto what hunter-gatherers or any available 'others' are supposed to experience — which unwarrantably sees it as inimical to immanence, as if all difference were a stigma of transcendence (and a harbinger of oppression). All difference is read as an opposition, and all opposition as the *absence* of a relation: 'to oppose' is taken as synonymous with 'to exclude' — a strange idea. I am not of this mind. As far as Amerindian ontologies are concerned, at least, I do not believe that similarities and differences among humans and animals (for example) can be ranked in terms of experiential immediacy, or that distinctions are more abstract or 'intellectual' than commonalities: both are equally concrete and abstract, practical and theoretical, emotional and intellectual, etc. True to my structuralist *habitus*, however, I persist in thinking that similarity is a type of difference; above all, I regard identity or sameness as the very negation of relatedness.<sup>13</sup>

Now, I agree with the substance of this statement. Nonetheless, Viveiros de Castro's rejection of what he portrays as Ingold's neo-phenomenology leaves us in an unsatisfactory position. It is unsatisfactory for those with an intuition, at the least, that Ingold is not entirely wrong; and for anyone aware of the wall of mutually hostile silence, within and between university departments in the humanities and social sciences, separating broadly structuralist/constructionist adherents (usually predominant) from broadly phenomenologists (usually a minority). Beyond divination studies, then, my goal is to move us on from this unhealthy impasse — not, I hasten to add, through a facile synthesis, but an uneasy resolution that denies either position complete vindication while showing that neither can be entirely excluded.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ingold, *Perception*, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, in email correspondence with me, Ingold has sharply rejected Viveiros de Castro's version of his (Ingold's) position. I therefore ask his pardon for using this account in order to clarify the theoretical issues at stake.

<sup>13</sup> See ref. 7.

### ‘Alterity’

It is time to define and refine the terms of the argument. With some degree of liberty, I am using ‘alterity’ – otherness – as shorthand for a ‘structuralist’ formation/ sensibility. The essence of alterity is *difference*, and ‘the “difference” of alterity initially takes the form of negation’.<sup>14</sup> That is, alterity points ‘back’ to difference, which marks the inherent and foundational relationality and pluralism of this and all related terms; as Viveiros de Castro remarks, ‘You do not “see a difference” — a difference is what makes you see.’<sup>15</sup> (I am reminded of how an earlier anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, characterised ‘the world of form and communication’, as distinct from force and matter, in terms of ‘differences and ideas. A difference which makes a difference is an idea. It is a “bit,” a unit of information.’)<sup>16</sup>

But note that ‘essence’, ‘inherence’ and ‘foundation’ in this context precisely cannot be thought of as single, stable, universal or any of the other terms classically associated with them; and all the more so since hermeneutics and post-structuralism conjointly deflated the fantasy, hitherto shared by structuralists and scientific positivists, that it is possible to (so to say) stand outside any phenomenon and interpret its meaning from a pre-interpretive/pre-structured point of view (equivalent to Thomas Nagel’s famous ‘view from nowhere’). Ludwig Wittgenstein’s reflections move in just the same critical direction, provided one notices the crucial point that his ‘language games’ do not float unmoored but are a function of lived life: ‘It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.’<sup>17</sup>

But do not both points – the hermeneutic/post-structuralist and Wittgensteinian – impel us toward Ingold’s neo-phenomenologist and Heideggerian ‘indwelling’? Or do they simply mark the unavoidability of such an exigency in some form, one that is not necessarily dictated by its proponents?

Another useful term in this context is ‘discourse’. Borrowing from Laclau and Mouffe, I use it to refer to both practice and theory (i.e., theoretical practice).<sup>18</sup> As such, it includes but exceeds the linguistic, and is thus equivalent to Wittgenstein’s so-called language games. This existential or pragmatic dimension is what alterity also points ‘forward’ to, as flagged by Jack Reynolds: ‘alterity is best construed as that which literally alters’.<sup>19</sup> That is, in the encounter of one perspective with another, to borrow from Viveiros de Castro again, ‘Nothing “happened”, but everything has changed.’<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Martin Holbraad, ‘Defining Anthropological Truth’, a paper given at Cambridge (24.9.04) a later version of which was published as ‘Ontography and Alterity: Defining Anthropological Truth’, *Social Analysis* 53:2 (2009): 80-93.

<sup>15</sup> See ref. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), pp. 271-72. Bateson independently discovered many of the points made by others cited in this paper, and sometimes earlier.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 75<sup>e</sup>. (As Garry Phillipson has pointed out to me, ‘way of living’ would arguably be a better translation than ‘form of life’.)

<sup>18</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens OH: Ohio UP, 2004), p. 190.

<sup>20</sup> See ref. 7.

## Embodiment

I am not suggesting embodiment is precisely the counter-pole to alterity, but it is close to acting as one for two related reasons: first, insofar as materiality is taken to be the contrary of nonlocated difference, and second, insofar as it is as central to phenomenology as difference is to structuralist alterity, with those two discourses commonly opposed.

Embodiment obviously has an inalienable connection with the body as not only where but how we indwell. But that connection can be misleading, given the immense weight of our philosophical traditions impelling a naturalistic meaning of ‘body’ and the ‘nature’ with which it is identified. As Ricoeur remarks, ‘Certainly Greek man was far less quick than we are to identify *phusis* with some inert “given”<sup>21</sup> – as should we now be, if we are to take the contingency of such meanings seriously by availing ourselves of the (relative) freedom of interpretation it offers.

In a non-naturalistic and counter-hegemonic vein, then, to quote Thomas Csordas’s apt summary, ‘our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that end in objectification.’ (He also notes that a concern with embodiment is not identical with the anthropology of the body that, incidentally, elicits Viveiros de Castro’s scorn.)<sup>22</sup>

Our principal guide to embodiment, however – and by close association, the phenomenological pole – will be Maurice Merleau-Ponty. But before turning to him, let us briefly review some ‘structuralist’ criticisms. To a considerable extent, Viveiros de Castro has already registered these: the questionable priority accorded to identity over difference, etc. At the risk of oversimplifying, they could be said to have been summarised by Emmanuel Lévinas when he accused phenomenology of an ‘imperialism of the same’.<sup>23</sup> But I can sharpen them further by borrowing from Martin Holbraad, the originality and sophistication of whose theorising of divination makes his critique worth taking all the more seriously. (I shall return to it later.)

The basic critical idea is that, despite protestations to the contrary, phenomenological usages in anthropology simply re-inscribe Euro-American preoccupations with mind v. body onto materials which may well contravene such a distinction. Phenomenologists seek to overcome ‘dualism’ by nesting its terms within a larger ‘dualism’, namely that of ‘experience’ v. ‘reflection’ (e.g. ready-to-hand v. present-at-hand). The main conceptual tool, namely ‘intentionality’ (from Bentano through Husserl, to Heidegger and then Merleau-Ponty) purports to overcome subject-object distinctions (by saying, roughly, that the two can only be construed as correlates, i.e. as mutually constitutive), but ends up only upholding them as the ‘here’ one *must* start from ...<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: the Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ‘Introduction’, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), ‘Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity’, p. 55. For a critique of Lévinas’s critique of Merleau-Ponty, see Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 112-122, 132-33.

<sup>24</sup> From an email to the author (2.7.06). For Holbraad’s theorising of divination, see his ‘Gauging Necessity: Ifá Oracles and Truth in Havana’, *Mana* 9:2 (2003): 39-72; and ‘The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *Mana*, Again)’, in Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds), *Thinking Through Things: Theorizing Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007): 189-225.

### Merleau-Ponty and Chiasmic Flesh

My interest here is in the philosophy, especially the later philosophy, of Merleau-Ponty – not as a way to rescue phenomenology *en tout*, but in itself. Such a rescue cannot convincingly be effected because he radically altered the Husserlian character of the phenomenology he inherited and with which it is still commonly associated. In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, there is no transcendental ego, no 'bracketing', and above all no acceptance of an ontological apartheid of lived world (the domain of *Geisteswissenschaften*) and scientifically real world (that of *Naturwissenschaften*). Now it is true that his *Phenomenology of Perception* failed to break entirely with these philosophical origins; but his posthumously-published work, such as *The Visible and the Invisible*, clearly moved beyond them in a way that undercuts the objections of both Viveiros de Castro/Lévinas and Holbraad. Still more to the point, it significantly advances the whole debate.<sup>25</sup>

Merleau-Ponty asserted that relations 'internally' between 'body' and 'mind' – or rather, in his terms, between 'body-subject' both as perceived object and as perceiving subject, and 'externally' between 'self' and 'other', comprise an *écart*: a constitutive divergence or gap which is *chiasmic*: that is, criss-crossed and intersected such that each is unavoidably entwined with, but never reducible to, the other.<sup>26</sup> To quote Reynolds, *écart* 'names a divergence that is nevertheless not adequately characterised as a dualism, because the differences between the two components of an apparent dualism (e.g., mind-body and even self-other) are revealed as chiasmically intertwined.'<sup>27</sup> Divergence is limited by dependence, and vice-versa; neither complete alterity<sup>28</sup> nor complete identity is possible (for us). Thus, as Reynolds also notes, 'the body cannot be considered in any way that makes the linguistic' – or more fundamentally, in keeping with the terminology adopted here, the discursive – 'extrinsic to it', any more than discourse can be considered wholly extrinsic to embodiment.<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty also termed this reversible interdependence of subject/object, mind/body, perception/thought and self/world, 'Flesh'.<sup>30</sup> By the same token, 'inside' and 'outside' are inseparable and mutually constitutive: 'The world is wholly inside, and I am outside, myself.'<sup>31</sup>

It is just this lack of both complete identity and complete difference that makes awareness or consciousness possible at all; in the case, *per impossibile* as a way of life, of either extreme, no relations whatsoever would be possible and therefore nothing to either be aware or be aware of. Contrariwise, to quote Merleau-Ponty, 'what enables us

<sup>25</sup> On the ill-informed postmodernist dismissal of Merleau-Ponty, based on such assumptions, see M.C. Dillon, 'Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism', in Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher (eds), *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992): 129-138.

<sup>26</sup> I have drawn extensively upon the excellent analysis and discussion in Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2004). For a very good recent introduction and discussion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole, which I only discovered after writing this chapter, see Hass, *Philosophy*.

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Including that of Lévinas and latterly Derrida.

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 1968).

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 474. This was just the conclusion Gregory Bateson arrived at quite independently: *Steps*, pp. 315-20.

to center our existence is what also prevents us from centering it completely ...<sup>32</sup> As Reynolds puts it, ‘the body is that which allows for any form of perspective at all.’<sup>33</sup> As a corollary, the impossibility of self-identity is what makes possible recognition of, interaction with, and alteration by, others.

This ontological understanding was accompanied by a corresponding critique of the mutually hostile philosophical positions associated with the two extremes Merleau-Ponty rejected: *empiricism* (which seizes upon ‘the sensible’) and *rationalism* (which hypostatizes ‘the intelligible’). Neither is ultimately tenable. Certainly there can be no question of encouraging a scientific reduction of ‘mind’ to ‘body’, as in the perennially fashionable efforts of evolutionary psychology (*né* sociobiology) and cognitive psychology and anthropology. Nor, however, does Merleau-Ponty entertain a phenomenological reductionism of the kind arguably suggested by Ingold, as this striking passage makes clear:

What we propose here, and oppose to the search for essence, is not the return to the immediate, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent, the search for an original integrity, for a secret lost and to be rediscovered, which would nullify our questions and even reprehend language. If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being and no disclosure will make us comprehend it.<sup>34</sup>

Now it could perhaps still be objected that by starting with mind vs. body, etc., Merleau-Ponty unintentionally affirms those contingent antinomies as foundational. Here, however, I will impertinently cite Holbraad against himself, insofar as he has also – rightly, in my opinion – argued that it is not the anthropologist’s (and by extension, any scholar’s) duty to simply use ethnographic or other data to confirm what ‘we’ already ‘know’, even, if necessary, by ‘showing’ that informants *don’t* know what they are doing or talking about. Rather, that duty is to allow insights from the encounter with alterity to create new concepts and theories.<sup>35</sup> Holbraad terms this process ‘inventive definition’,<sup>36</sup> which, he says, ‘constitutes an appropriate transformation of our default and initially inadequate concept of truth ... All we have to go by are our misunderstandings of others’ views – our initial descriptions of their statements and practices.’<sup>37</sup>

Holbraad also contrasts common-sense causal and representational (epistemological) explanations – which tend, especially among ‘Westerners’, to be taken as the sole kind of truth – with oracular and ontological ones. In an important discussion which builds upon but carries forward those of both Lévy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard, he analyses the latter in terms of a ‘motile logic’ which always exceeds or escapes causal chains, no matter how tight.<sup>38</sup> (Crudely put, ‘why’ questions cannot be reduced to ‘how’ questions.)

At this point, however, I simply want to note the surely unexceptional point that the *fons et origo* of ‘our’ default, common-sense and representational views is the

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty*, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>35</sup> This view is very close to Giles Deleuze’s of the point of philosophy. On the overlaps and differences between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, see Hass, *Philosophy*, pp. 136-144.

<sup>36</sup> Which term he borrows from Roy Wagner (specifically *Symbols That Stand for Themselves* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986]). In subsequent work, Holbraad abbreviates this to ‘infinitions’.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Ontography and Alterity: Defining Anthropological Truth’, *Social Analysis* 53/2 (2009): 80-93.

<sup>38</sup> Holbraad, *Necessity*.

Cartesian dispensation, essentially accepted and modified by Hume and Kant in the course of forging modern philosophy, and cemented into place as a cornerstone of ‘the modern Constitution’,<sup>39</sup> which underwrites just the separation of nature and culture, body and mind, subject and object. In which case, where else could or should Merleau-Ponty – or anyone else who seeks to subvert this tyranny – start?

### More on Embodiment

Let me mention a few more points about embodiment noted by other scholars. Mark Johnson, for example, has discussed ‘embodied structures of understanding ... [which] emerge in our bodily functioning; they are recurring patterns in our dynamic experience as we move about in our world. They include containers, balance, compulsion, blockage, attraction, paths, links, scales, cycles, center-periphery ... .’ To which we could add: the up/down of verticality, the bilaterality and directions of horizontality, and declivity/acclivity, among others. The apparently most ineffable concepts and values find their footing in such proprioceptive metaphors. Whether Heaven or simply the heavens, we experience it/ them as up, and up as heavenly; it is good to be upright and upstanding, not dis-abled, prostrate or *à quatre pas*, or a species of lowlife; and so on. There is in fact no ‘physical’ parameter that cannot be experienced as a quality and even a power, and no quality or power which is unconnected with the so-called physical world.<sup>40</sup> Johnson concludes that ‘Understanding is an event – it is not merely a body of beliefs (though it includes our beliefs).’<sup>41</sup>

This point needs careful handling, however, lest it slide into the simple-minded physicalist reductionism – body/nature  $\geq$  mind/culture – that characterises most academic as well as popular programmes of evolutionary and cognitive psychology and anthropology. Such an attitude was perceptively described by Owen Barfield as ‘the fallacy of born literalness’, who made the vital point that as long as it holds sway, the ‘half-truth that many images have a bodily significance will be swallowed without leading, as it should, to the reflection that this is only possible because the body itself has an imaginal significance.’<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Thomas Csordas has criticised George Lakoff and Johnson’s philosophical handbook of embodiment<sup>43</sup> for concentrating on the ways that the body gives rise to mind/culture at the expense of the reverse: ‘Following Merleau-Ponty, I would argue that the body is always already cultural, and that rather than asking how metaphors instantiate image schemas it is more apt to begin with the lived [i.e., embodied] experience from which we derive image schemas as abstract products of analytic reflection.’ In this process, ‘*metaphor is the critical meeting ground between textuality and embodiment*’.<sup>44</sup> So although that there is much more to say on this subject, that is my cue to turn to our second main guide, Paul Ricoeur.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> See the wonderful discussion in David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 206, 209.

<sup>42</sup> Owen Barfield, *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> Csordas, *Embodiment*, pp. 20 (n. 2), 16. (My emphasis.)

### Ricoeur and Tensive Truth

Out of Ricoeur's many works I shall draw only upon *The Rule of Metaphor*, but there is more than enough there to keep us occupied. Once again, to summarily summarise, he shows that metaphor, far from being merely one literary 'device' among others, is integral not only to language but to meaning or what I am calling discourse itself (that is, any meaning which we can recognise, think about, discuss, etc.). Any being is a 'being *as*' and any seeing is a 'seeing *as*', which is the very heart of metaphor.

Ricoeur's theory is of metaphor as *tensive* in three ways: 'the tension between the terms of the statement, the tension between literal interpretation and metaphorical interpretation, and the tension in the reference between is and is not.' Most important is the last: 'the "place" of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb *to be*.' The metaphorical 'is' of 'x is y' simultaneously signifies both 'is' (metaphorically) and 'is not' (literally); it preserves the latter within the former *without* cancelling it. Thus, 'we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally "tensive" sense of the word "truth".' Furthermore, 'truth' in this context is not epistemological so much as existential or ontological: 'The copula – *being-as* – is not only relational. It implies besides, by means of the predicative relationship, that *what is* is redescribed; it says *that* things really are this way.' Or as Ricoeur also puts it, 'the enigma of metaphorical discourse is that what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents.' In this way, 'the creative dimension of language is consonant with the creative aspects of reality itself.'<sup>45</sup> Such creativity is dynamic or, to invoke Holbraad, motile: 'To present men "*as acting*" and all things as "*in act*" – such could well be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse ... .'<sup>46</sup> (Similarly, it seems to me that the difference between Ricoeur's 'metaphor' and Holbraad's 'inventive definition' is also vanishingly small.)

Ricoeur argues this view against two opposing alternatives which take extreme and mutually exclusive positions but which, in his view, must be maintained in a non-exclusive albeit tensive relationship that radically qualifies both. The first such position is in direct continuity with (in Alan Tormaid Campbell's words) a 'tradition in our philosophy [which] has for centuries regarded metaphor as a scandal ... .'<sup>47</sup> It is a scandal because it breaks or ignores (or at least is strongly suspected of doing so) Aristotle's 'law' of the excluded middle: 'the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect'.<sup>48</sup> But 'Being-as means being *and* not being.'<sup>49</sup> The attempted remedy is to demythologise language by exposing metaphor ('is') as mere simile ('is like') and replacing it with scientifically licit, i.e., non-metaphorical, language. The iconoclasm and systematisation so dear to modernity thus join with the modern hypostasis of scientific reference as sole truth; let us call it '*reductionist*'.

Ricoeur elegantly shows the impossibility of this effort to domesticate, if not eliminate, the metaphorical 'is'. Simply put, because 'We cannot say what reality is, only what it seems like to us', there is no non-metaphorical language.

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, pp. 6, 292, 283, 300.

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, p. 48; emphasis in original. (Please forgive the 'men'; it was written in 1975.)

<sup>47</sup> Alan Tormaid Campbell, *To Square with Genesis: Causal Statements and Shamanic Ideas in Wayapi* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> *Metaphysics* 1005b20.

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, p. 362.

In brief, critical consciousness of the distinction between use and abuse leads not to disuse but to re-use of metaphors, in the endless search for other metaphors, namely a metaphor that would be the best one possible ... . There is no non-metaphorical standpoint ... . The theory of metaphor returns in a circular manner to the metaphor of theory, which determines the truth of being in terms of presence. If this is so, then there can be no principle for delimiting metaphor, no definition in which the defining does not contain the defined; metaphoricity is absolutely uncontrollable.<sup>50</sup>

To a characteristically modernist and scientific sensibility, that is the real scandal of which the logical offence is merely a sign. (I would also remind the reader of Barfield's point that bodily images are already also imaginal, i.e. metaphoric.)

The second and opposite view is a 'naïve and uncritical' meta-poetics in which 'the superiority of image over concept, the priority of undivided temporal flux over space, and the disinterestedness of the vision turned towards life's concerns are to be restored together.'<sup>51</sup> Against its counterpart's reductionism and abstraction, this approach is holist and exalts feelings over concepts. Exemplars include Schelling, Coleridge, Bergson, perhaps late Heidegger, and ultimately Philip Wheelwright (and, I believe, Barfield). Let us call it '*romantic*'.

Here, the attempt to realise this putative perfection and unity proceeds by trying to ignore, if not eliminate, the literal 'is not' from within the metaphorical 'is'. And as Ricoeur shows, it is equally, if oppositely, unsatisfactory. Its ultimately anti-intellectual character attempts to, but in good conscience cannot, rid metaphorical truth of its discursive dimension. In fact, although Ricoeur does not say so, it seems to me that the two approaches mirror each other in their desire for a post-discursive truth: in the one case, that of 'matter' and in the other, 'spirit' or 'Being'. Proponents of both resent equally being reminded that 'the "truth", factual or otherwise, about the being of objects is constituted within a theoretical and discursive context, and the idea of a truth outside all context is simply nonsensical.'<sup>52</sup>

The naïve and the reductionist schools also share other significant common ground: they 'oppose one another on the field of verificationist concept of truth, itself bound up with a positivist concept of reality.'<sup>53</sup> That is, both accept the non-scandalous epistemological (representationalist) version of truth as exhaustive or definitive; but where the latter accepts it, the former rejects it – and *with it*, since the two are conflated, discursivity *en tout*. Therefore, insofar as the discursive, in Ricoeur's tensive construal, is ontological and vice-versa, both in effect also reject ontology, and fail on that account.

I should also mention that there is a closely parallel contemporary analysis of the ground covertly shared by realists and relativists, both accepting 'one world' while disagreeing only as to whether the truth about that world can be had or not. Terms that have been suggested for the position which is critical of both unviable alternatives range from retaining 'relativism' (Herrnstein Smith) to 'relationism' and/or 'relative relativism' (Latour), 'perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro) and for that matter 'relational pluralism' (Curry).<sup>54</sup> In all these theories, there can be no question of concurring with

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, pp. 299, 339. On metaphor in the construction of scientific theories, see Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, pp. 294, 296.

<sup>52</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 105.

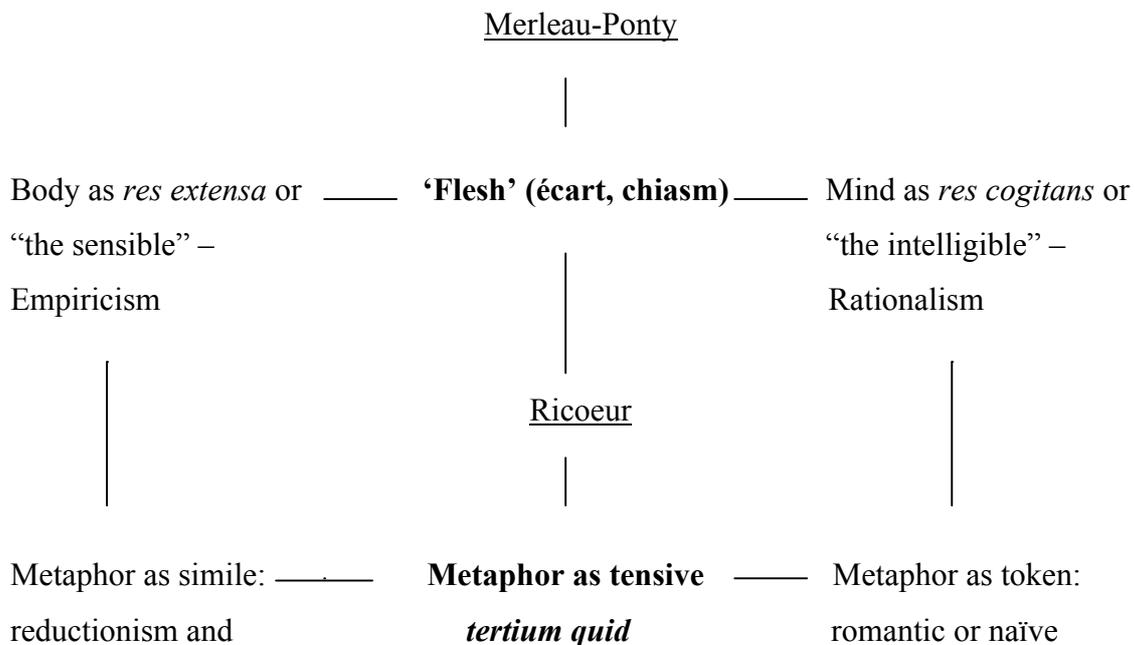
<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, p. 362.

<sup>54</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*

vulgar relativism's acceptance of simply different apprehensions of supposedly one world. From all of them, an effectively infinite number of worlds – not necessarily absolutely discrete and incommensurable, to be sure, but nonetheless distinct – follow: as many, indeed, as there are perspectives. 'One must, above all, understand perspectivism not as a theory of knowledge...but as *an alternative to epistemology itself*'<sup>55</sup>  
 ...

### A Meta-Metaphor

What I now want to suggest is quite simple: Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic *écart* is tensive in precisely Ricoeur's sense, and Ricoeur's tensive *tertium quid* of metaphorical truth is chiasmic in precisely Merleau-Ponty's sense.<sup>56</sup> That is, *in effect*, the one is the other. Both are relational, non-essentialist and ontological in a way that includes but doesn't eliminate the epistemological (perhaps in a way that parallels, significantly, the way the onto-metaphorical 'is' includes but doesn't cancel the epistemo-literal 'is not'). And both are both-and/neither-nor in relation to the classical or traditional dichotomies of Western philosophy, and thus pitched against the corresponding positions on either side. Greatly simplified, the analysis can be represented in this way:




---

(Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) and *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); Viveiros de Castro, *Perspectives*; Patrick Curry, 'Re-Thinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism', *Environmental Values* 12:3 (2003): 337-360 and 'Nature Post-Nature', *New Formations* 64 (2008): 51-64.

<sup>55</sup> Manuel Maria Carrilho, 'Rhetoric and Perspectivism', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2: 196 (1996): 359-373, p. 370; emphasis in original.

<sup>56</sup> I do not know if this has already been suggested. One cannot read everything (although one should of course try), and there is a constant danger of reinventing some wheel or other. As against that, it is often necessary, in some contexts, to reinvent the wheel. I would also add that Ricoeur has made some critical remarks which betray a poor grasp of Merleau-Ponty's work; see Thomas W. Busch, 'Perception, Finitude, and Transgression: A Note on Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur', in Busch and Gallagher, *Merleau-Ponty*: 25-35.

neo-positivism

unity

Nor do these commonalities exhaust the mutual elective affinity. Keeping Merleau-Ponty's point in mind that what enables us to 'center our existence' prevents us from doing so completely – and that what prevents us from attaining pure and undivided self-identity is what permits any at all – consider how Ricoeur describes the attempt at expression made by a speaker who, wanting to formulate a new experience in words, seeks something capable of carrying his intention in the network of meanings he already finds established. Thanks to the very instability of meaning, a semantic aim can find the path of its utterance . . . . [Thus] the universe of discourse as a universe kept in motion by an interplay of attractions and repulsions that ceaselessly promote the interaction and intersection of domains whose organizing nuclei are off-centred in relation to one another; and still this interplay never comes to rest in an absolute knowledge that would subsume the tensions.<sup>57</sup>

I should add here that although I cannot do justice to the subtlety of his case, Ricoeur also argues strongly for the legitimacy and irreducibility (by, for example, poetic discourse) of theoretical speculation. Here too there is a tension that needs to be maintained, and indeed borne: 'the dialectic that reigns between the experience of belonging as a whole and the power of distancing that opens up the space of speculative thought.'<sup>58</sup>

At this point, we can return to our starting-point – the dispiriting disjunction between (neo-)phenomenology and (post-)structuralism – bearing the 'uneasy resolution' I promised. By extension from the equivalence of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm and Ricoeur's tensive truth, embodiment and metaphorical discursivity *are themselves mutually implicated, imbricated, entangled*. In the same spirit, I am not suggesting an identity between embodiment and metaphor; rather, the relationship between them is meta-chiasmic and meta-tensive. That doesn't abolish either of them, nor the distinction between them – only the possibility of their absolute unity or their hyperseparation.<sup>59</sup>

### Agency

It is time to introduce the third term of my title. The point of doing so is to enrich the primary metaphorical linkage just made/discovered. The basic idea is that as part of the familiar Platonic-Christian-Cartesian philosophical trajectory, agency – the intention and capacity to act in a relatively autonomous way – has long been associated almost exclusively with subjectivity, the mind, culture and humanity and excluded from their objective, bodily and natural counterpoles. To this list of dualisms should be added male and female respectively, which raises an issue to which we shall return. (To the extent that the subject is embodiment, it can hardly be avoided!)

To a considerable extent, excellent work rescuing agency from this confinement already exists, releasing me from the need to reiterate it in detail here. Much of it has been done by Val Plumwood, who defines agency as 'active intentionality' in order to undercut the usual covertly anthropocentric criterion of agency as essentially

---

<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, pp. 352, 357.

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule*, p. 371.

<sup>59</sup> This useful term is from Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

cognitive.<sup>60</sup> (This move resonates, interestingly enough, with Merleau-Ponty's non-cognitive understanding of wonder, our proper relation to Being, as prior to and generative of consciousness.<sup>61</sup>)

Rejecting the same hegemonically-driven dualism problematised by both Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, Plumwood observes that the 'oppositional formulation of spirit versus matter renders invisible the important concept of a materialist spirituality which does not invoke a separate spirit as an extra, independent individualized ingredient but rather posits a richer, fully intentional non-reductionist concept of the earthly and the material.' Contesting the dominant spiritual-idealist term of the opposition, she emphasises that 'materiality is already full of form, spirit, story, agency, and glory'.<sup>62</sup> This move is not identical with my assertion of a middle ground, but I believe there is a definite sympathetic resonance. Certainly both encourage 'the reconception of nature in agentic terms as a co-actor and co-participant in the world' which, she adds, 'is perhaps the most important aspect of moving to an alternative ethical framework.'<sup>63</sup>

Highly congruent is David Abram's influential book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Of course, congruence with my work here is not surprising, insofar as Abram's primary philosophical move was to think through the implications of the fact that the body-subject (as theorised by Merleau-Ponty) is ultimately inseparable from, as well as utterly dependent on, the Earth in which it is embedded. In other words, significant aspects of the body-subject can equally be recognised in the Earth: in particular, its animacy and agency. 'Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths ... . Each place its own mind, its own psyche.'<sup>64</sup> Hence Abram's invaluable term, the 'more-than-human world'.

This insight confirms paradigmatic aboriginal apprehensions of nature, both ancient and contemporary, for which the term 'animism' has recently been recovered, by Graham Harvey among others, from its patronising and colonial lineage.<sup>65</sup> By the same token, such apprehensions are mythic, and myth, properly understood – as Sean Kane, in both broad sweep and some detail, has shown – entails a living (that is, non-naturalistic) natural world.<sup>66</sup>

Abram too traces the covert alliance between the poles of a dualism consisting of scientific-materialist discourse (privileging abstract objectivity) and New Age spiritual discourse (privileging subjectivity):

by prioritizing one or the other, both of these views perpetuate the distinction between human / 'subjects' and natural 'objects,' and hence neither threatens the common conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use. While both of these views are unstable, each bolsters the other;

---

<sup>60</sup> Val Plumwood, 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land', *Ethics and the Environment* 11:2 (2006): 115-150, p. 124.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Burke, 'Listening at the Abyss', in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds), *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990): 81-97.

<sup>62</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 222, 226.

<sup>63</sup> Plumwood, *Landscape*, p. 130.

<sup>64</sup> Abram, *Spell*, p. 262.

<sup>65</sup> Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: C. Hurst and New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). Cf. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979).

<sup>66</sup> Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998).

by bouncing from one to the other – from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again – contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate nature, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*.<sup>67</sup>

Presumably I don't need to belabour the contiguity of this Flesh (Merleau-Pontian in provenance but now ecophenomenological) with the chiasmic and tensive *tertium quid* I have already discussed. The point of adducing Plumwood's and Abram's work here is simply to ensure recognition that agency, active intentionality, is not an optional add-on but integral, and that it acts in a wild, more-than-human way: a point which resonates, not coincidentally, with Ricoeur's description of metaphoricity, quoted above, as 'absolutely uncontrollable'.

My third witness for a post-Cartesian agency (as well as post-Christian and post-Platonic) is Bruno Latour and Actor Network Theory. Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* argued brilliantly that the 'modern constitution', keeping society, subjects and humanity absolutely distinct from nature and objects, is literally unliveable. 'We have never been modern in the sense of the Constitution ... .' Rather, 'the ancient anthropological matrix, the one we have never abandoned', consists of networks which are 'simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society.' Insofar as chiasmic Flesh is at once subjective and objective and metaphor entails what is and is not – truths which go unrecognised in our official philosophies – 'We poor subject-objects, we humble societies-natures, we modest locals-globals, are literally quartered among ontological regions that define each other mutually but no longer resemble our practices.'<sup>68</sup>

The network supporting and indeed producing this paper, for example, includes, without any arbitrarily *a priori* ranking in importance, myself (already a complex micro-network), pieces of paper and books, friends and colleagues, a computer, a chair and desk, earth, air, food, water and occasionally something stronger, a shared dog and cat, music, and so on. The implication is that, as with any network, agency cannot be plausibly restricted to the human actor; because if you took everything else away, this paper, and even 'I' as I am in this context, would assuredly instantly cease to exist, let alone produce anything. In other words, actors are not sole agents and networks do not to play the role of merely supporting social structure: 'Actor and network... designates [*sic*] two faces of the same phenomenon ... .'<sup>69</sup>

Agency is thus a property of the network *as a whole*; and as such, it can manifest anywhere in that network, on the part of any item therein. It does not discriminate between 'subjects' and 'objects', 'persons', 'animals' and 'things'. (Again, this point was anticipated by Bateson: 'mental characteristics are inherent or immanent in the ensemble as a *whole*.'<sup>70</sup>)

This point has implications, obvious but nonetheless profound, for divination, in which planets and stars, cards, stones and inky pieces of paper can and do tell people things. And why should we collaborate with modernist and scientific policing (let alone self-policing) to explain away such common experiences of non-humans, or even

<sup>67</sup> Abram, *Spell*, p. 67; emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> Latour, *Modern*, pp. 46-7, 107, 6, 122-3.

<sup>69</sup> Bruno Latour, 'On recalling ANT', in John Law and John Hassard (eds), *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 15-25, pp. 18-19.

<sup>70</sup> Bateson, *Steps*, p. 315.

officially inanimate things, as agents?<sup>71</sup> Official religion is not the only ‘vast moth-eaten musical brocade’, to borrow Larkin’s fine phrase.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, we may accept that agency is a property of mind or subjectivity, which is inherently relational and therefore discursive; and vice-versa. But given that subjectivity is entwined with objectivity in the sense of objectness or materiality, and particularly embodiment, then agency may be said to be equally a property, in practice or in effect, of materiality. And insofar as subjectivity can no longer be restricted to humans, agency too is best described, after Abram, as more-than-human.

In short, agency – active intentionality – is wild. Let me add, though, a vital corollary: that being wild, it is unbiddable.<sup>73</sup> We are not, and no one is, in the position of being subjects who can *make* agency manifest in objects; that would be to retreat to the pathological fantasy, whether individual or collective, of Promethean/Faustian mastery. We are enmeshed and entangled in networks, or Flesh, or tensive worlds – or rather, we *are* such. In that process, certain parts thereof become identified as ‘me’ and ‘us’, and these do (as the early humanists realised) have some highly qualified and contingent degree of initiative; but I and we are certainly not ‘in control’!

So far I have pointed out and briefly discussed a significant family resemblance, or elective affinity, between certain concepts: Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic Flesh and Ricoeur’s tensive metaphoric truth, supplemented by the kind of agency entailed by Plumwood’s ecological and materialist spirituality, Abram’s more-than-human ecophenomenology and Latour’s actor-networks. The motive has been to move on from certain sterile impasses, philosophical and methodological, involving the polarised extremes which each of these closely interrelated concepts problematises. In what follows, I would like to take up some implications of the argument so far.

### **Embodiment Again**

What about apparently disembodied spirits? On at least two grounds, I am not prepared to rule them out altogether: a great deal of ethnographic and historical evidence, and an awareness of my own metaphysical ignorance. And if there are such, it would seem that not all subjectivity or agency need be embodied, or else we have an unduly restricted understanding of ‘body’.<sup>74</sup> That would be consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s tensive amalgam, at once sensible and sentient, of ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘world’: ‘The reversibility that defines the flesh exists in other fields; it is even more incomparably agile there and capable of weaving relations between bodies that this time will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible.’<sup>75</sup>

In any case, it seems incontestable that for us human beings, subjectivity is necessarily embodied; that is, we are all, *qua* human beings, embodied, and all our experiences – whether ‘astral travel’, so-called out-of-body or near-death experiences – are only experienced and reported *by* living and embodied human beings. The immediate corollary is that embodiment is a *fundamental* consideration that affects all

---

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Abram, *Spell*, p. 56: ‘to describe the animate life of particular things is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the things as we spontaneously experience them ...’

<sup>72</sup> From Philip Larkin’s late poem *Aubade*.

<sup>73</sup> With thanks to Anthony Thorley for this extremely useful term.

<sup>74</sup> In the latter case, although this may be a purely personal discomfort, it is somewhat awkward to find oneself returning to occultist discourse of ‘subtle bodies’, etc..

<sup>75</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, p. 144.

the worlds we live in (i.e., both for and through us), including whatever we know of them.

So, for example, we may have some kind of disembodied existence before birth or after death, but it is not as *humans*, nor anything we, as embodied beings, can really know; so to describe it as ‘our’ pre- or post-existence is merely a loose manner of speaking. Additionally, so far as we know, the same is true of other animals. The same, however, may not be true of gods, spirits or daimons. But as Jean-Luc Nancy has provocatively remarked, ‘all presence’ – whether that of a god, a human being or another animal – ‘is that of a body’.<sup>76</sup> Certainly that is consistent with what is argued throughout this paper, that everything discursive (meaningful, mind-like, relational) is also embodied, embedded and emplaced. In this context, then, it makes sense that if one engages with a spirit – and if that causes discomfort, one could call it a ‘more-than-human power’ – it has a profound particularity, even if more affective and cognitive than sensually perceptual, location, even if more imaginal than physical, and so on. (Conversely, a truly universal God is surely utterly unknowable *as such*.) Now are these characteristics not also hallmarks of embodiment? So perhaps even with spirits, there is at least a kind of analogue to embodiment. (Another and not necessarily mutually exclusive possibility is that although *daimones* and gods have no physical bodies, human beings involuntarily ‘give’ them one when interacting with them.)

In cultures less dominated by religions and philosophies of (attempted or putative) disembodiment, the integral place of the body in practices of the sacred is more in evidence. For example, ‘The Taoist priestly office primarily involves the learning of ritual forms, the inner truth of which can only be known by and through each person’s own body (which is, in fact, the meditative side of the liturgical art). There is no required faith in a collection of intellectual propositions or creedal “secrets”  
 ...<sup>77</sup>

I suspect, however, that such liturgical embodiment is a relatively sophisticated and formalised development of something much more primal and (consequently?) even less understood. Let me borrow this from Gregory Shaw:

Consider the remarkable testimony of Aristides who describes his experience in the presence of Socrates. He says:

By the gods, Socrates, you’re not going to believe this, but it’s true! I’ve never learned (*mathein*) anything from you, as you know. But I made progress whenever I was with you, even if I was only in the same house and not in the same room — but more when I was in the same room. And it seemed, to me at least, that when I was in the same room and looked at you when you were speaking, I made much more progress than when I looked away. And I made by far the most and greatest progress when I sat right beside you, and physically held on to you or touched you.

Like the initiates at Eleusis, Aristides does not learn (*mathein*) anything when he enters the presence of Socrates but experiences a transformation that is intensified by gazing, and even more by touching Socrates, as if he were a god. In the West, this is not our

<sup>76</sup> *The Inoperative Community*, transl. P. Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Kristopher Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, transl. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), from the Foreword by Norman Girardot, p. xv.

usual experience while attending the lecture of a philosopher; it is, however, remarkably similar to the experience of devotees who receive *darshan* in the presence of an enlightened guru.<sup>78</sup>

I hardly know what to say about this, except that because we cannot ‘explain’ something, or find it difficult to imagine how it is even possible, is certainly no reason to reject it out of hand. In this account, something that the keepers of official philosophy (including Socratic) would rather ignore is being pointed out: something important that subverts or ignores the usual apartheid between the ‘physical’ and the ‘spiritual’.

### **On Sexuality**

By ‘sexuality’, a noun cognate with Luce Irigaray’s useful adjective ‘sexuate’, I mean to include all of ‘biological’ sex, ‘cultural’ gender, and sexual orientation.<sup>79</sup> Here, thanks to the heavy freight of Platonic-Christian-Cartesian philosophy, another point which should be obvious needs to be stressed: for us, *to be embodied is to be sexuate*. Thus, although not everything or everyone need be sexuate, for us, our sexuality – potentially, at the very least – affects everything.

As testimony to the significance of our subject-matter, we find ourselves touching on yet another vast and challenging domain without the time, space, or in this case (frankly) knowledge to do it justice. Once again, I shall just make a few points.

Embodiment as construed here suggests, among many other things, that masculine and feminine experiences and worlds, analogously to male and female bodies, neither perfectly coincide nor, insofar as the one implies as much as excludes the other, utterly differ. In other words, human sexuality is also constituted in a chiasmic way – which rules out both pure identity of the sexes (whether ‘internally’ or between two or more persons) and pure alterity or hyperseparation. Furthermore, contingency, instability, etc. is just what enables any sexual relations, and thence experiences, at all. By the same token, it excludes any simple determination of gender, let alone sexual orientation, by biological sex ... just as it also means that the last cannot be excluded from those considerations!

There is a fundamental asymmetry between male and female embodiment. That follows (again taking my lead from Irigaray) from the existential fact that while both women and men are embodied, only women can give birth to both women *and* men; women thus birth embodied life itself. We might say that the female makes both itself and the male possible, although that is not what it is ‘for’. Similarly – recognising the deep commonality (theorised by Edward Casey) between body and place<sup>80</sup> – both women’s and men’s bodies are places, but only within the sexual disposition of women’s bodies is place itself emplaced.

As a result, relations between the sexes are ‘reciprocal (but asymmetrical)’,<sup>81</sup> just as psychoanalytically both develop in terms of embodiment and sexuality, but not in the same way. The asymmetrical sexuality of embodiment gives rise to different

---

<sup>78</sup> Gregory Shaw, ‘Living Light: Divine Embodiment in Western Philosophy’, in Angela Voss and Patrick Curry (eds), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge, 2007): 59-87, p. 68, quoting Plato, *Theages* 130d2-e2.

<sup>79</sup> Irigaray argues (convincingly) that an uncritical use of the sex/gender distinction reproduces an uncritical nature/culture distinction. Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), and Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>81</sup> Casey, *Place*, p. 328.

forms of metaphoric truth in relation to the perceived body itself, and by extension ‘nature’: in the female case, ‘I *am* this (even though, since I am minded, I am [also] not)’; in the male, ‘I am *not* this (even though, since I am embodied, I [also] am)’. This difference has profound implications for psycho-sexual and -social developmental, both healthy and pathological.<sup>82</sup> And not to belabour the point, once again the resonances of this kind of embodiment with metaphoricity – the same ones I have already indicated by linking Ricoeur’s metaphor with Merleau-Ponty’s *Flesh* – are unmistakable. In any case, there is much more to be said on the subject – not least the erotic, too, as sacred ... and vice-versa.

### ‘True’ Antinomies<sup>83</sup>

On the subject of antinomies which the approach I advocate reconciles and/or avoids, I want to distinguish between those which are symmetrical – that is, equal and opposite – and those which are not. A mark of the former is that they cannot be reconciled *within* the terms of the contrast between them. These include:

- mind and idealism (and spiritualism) vs. body and materialism: ‘two vying “monisms”’<sup>84</sup> constituting a pernicious dualism with which we are all too familiar, and whose resolution lies, I have suggested, in a *relational pluralism*.<sup>85</sup> Correspondingly:
- subject(ive) vs. object(ive), as against *the body-subject*, whose activities, as Merleau-Ponty argued, produce the first two as effects (just as Latour also posits in relation to networks).

Here it might be appropriate to enter a word of caution respecting Viveiros de Castro’s discussion in his brilliant ‘Exchanging Perspectives’ to the effect that (despite a disclaimer to the contrary) it might be viewed as arguing for simply a reversal of the usual ‘Western’ dominance of the objective through an assertion of the counter-truth of an Amerindian metaphysic in which, for example, ‘an object is an incompletely interpreted subject.’<sup>86</sup> From various other statements it is evident that this would be a misunderstanding; however, those statements would be even clearer in this respect if strengthened by the approach advocated here. For example, positing ‘a universe that is 100 percent relational’<sup>87</sup> would be harder to interpret idealistically if it were clearly understood that such relations are embodied (and that bodies are in turn constituted by

<sup>82</sup> See Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner, ‘Gender and Sexuality’, ch. 6 in Ethel S. Person, Arnold M. Cooper and Glen O. Gabbard (eds), *Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publications, 2005): 93-114. With thanks to Beate Süss for this source. There is a considerable relevant body of work. In addition to Irigaray and other feminist philosophers, David Tacey’s work has taught me much.

<sup>83</sup> Technically, an antinomy is an irresolvable contradiction. I am, of course, suggesting that the antinomies discussed in this paper are reconcilable (but without thereby disappearing altogether) from the perspective being urged.

<sup>84</sup> Jonas, Hans, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 16. Cf. Neil Evernden, *The Social Construction of Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 95.

<sup>85</sup> Curry, ‘Re-Thinking’. Cf. Viveiros de Castro, ‘Perspectives’, p. 482: ‘multiplicity, not mere duality, is the complement of ... monism ...’. Note also the affinitive resolution, between ‘spirit’ and ‘body’, adopted by James Hillman and post-Jungian metaphysics, namely ‘soul’.

<sup>86</sup> Viveiros de Castro, ‘Perspectives’, p. 470.

<sup>87</sup> Viveiros de Castro, ‘Perspectives’, p. 473. Tantalisingly, cf. Michel Weber’s excellent summary of William James’s pluralist ontology: ‘relations are fundamentals, *relata* are abstractions’. Michel Weber, ‘James’s non-rationality and its religious extremum in the light of the concept of pure experience’, in Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2005): 203-20, p. 215.

relations). Viveiros de Castro suggests as much by pointing out that bodies are the sites of perspectives; however, he contrasts that with spiritual/cultural universalism. While the latter point is undoubtedly true of Amerindian cosmologies, the ontology argued for here radically qualifies *any* putative universalism, whether idealist or materialist, together with any dualism of which a one-sided monism is inevitably a part.

Another such polarity might be:

- the Dionysian (seeking surrender to orgasmic unity, etc.) vs. the Apollonian (seeking chaste withdrawal in order to enable self-mastery, etc.), as against the *mētis*. *Mētis* is ‘cunning wisdom’, a more-than-human mode exemplified in Hellenic culture by Homer’s Odysseus and Penelope and in Chinese by Wu Ch’êng-ên’s Monkey.<sup>88</sup> First identified and analysed by (respectively) Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, and subsequently Lisa Raphals, it deserves more than an encapsulated version here.<sup>89</sup> I just want to make a couple of points. First, it is generally highly inadvisable to identify with and take up one end of *any* mutually exclusive polarity. In addition, however, the normative dimension of my argument strongly counsels against adopting either the Dionysian or Apollonian strategies as a way of life (including thought). Indeed, it is not surprising that Nietzsche arguably came to grief by doing just that.

Also, extending slightly the sexual dimension just touched upon, if the orgasmic and the chaste are the respective poles, then their liveable mediation (corresponding to embodiment, tensive truth, pluralism, *mētis* and so on) is *the erotic*.<sup>90</sup>

#### ‘False’ (Asymmetrical) Antinomies

At this point, I want to qualify the preceding discussion by arguing that both extremes of all the above-mentioned polarities are only possible as (mistaken and destructive) ideals; that is, in contrast to the third term, they cannot be actually lived. So, taken together, they make an asymmetrical counter-pole to the middle way.

We arrive at the same point taking the route of critically examining two more apparent polarities with some intellectual currency. One has been popularised within anthropological and metaphysical discourse by Stanley Tambiah, drawing directly upon Lévy-Bruhl:

- participation – e.g., ‘inside’ artistic and/or religious experience, especially of enchantment – ‘vs.’ causality, e.g., the putative objectivity from the ‘outside’ of science, especially the so-called hard sciences.<sup>91</sup>  
But, with respect both for Lévy-Bruhl’s courageously pioneering work and the considerable heuristic value of Tambiah’s synthesis, this contrast is ultimately, and importantly, a fraud. Within the parameters of this discussion and its subject-matter,

<sup>88</sup> Suitably chastened by the bodhisattva Kuan-yin, that is; Wu Ch’êng-ên, *Monkey*, transl. Arthur Waley (London: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>89</sup> Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, transl. Janet Lloyd (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1978); Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). See also my discussion in Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture* (Oxford: Berg Books, 2004), pp. 104-6.

<sup>90</sup> This corresponds loosely to Baudrillard’s idea of ‘seduction’; for a good discussion, see Nicholas Gane, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>91</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

there are only *different forms and degrees of participation*.<sup>92</sup> However, lest this point be misunderstood, let me immediately add that participation is not a matter of a foundational identity or commonality at the expense of difference; rather it proceeds by just the metaphoric logic articulated by Ricoeur, in which the ‘is’ of identity preserves rather than cancels out the ‘is not’ of difference. (Viveiros de Castro’s reservations, quoted earlier, are thus accommodated.)

Why are there only different forms and degrees of such participation? Because, simply put, in the case of either absolute identity (such as, arguably, late Heideggerian) or absolute alterity (including the onto-ethical kind extolled by Lévinas and latterly adopted by Derrida), nothing whatsoever can be known; or, more properly, nothing can be, or not be. It may still be life of some kind, but it is certainly not our life, including whoever or whatever has any presence in our life.

Another and closely related false polarity is:

- immanence ‘vs.’ transcendence.

Given immanence as effectively participatory (‘within’) and transcendence as effectively causal or meta-causal (‘outside’), the truth of the matter follows from what has just been said. As Merleau-Ponty put it, ‘Transcendence is identity within difference.’<sup>93</sup> On this point I can do no better than to add the words of the late Ronald Hepburn, who argued against despairing of being denied entry to heaven by pointing out that our values and experiences

are essentially the result of a cooperation of man and non-human nature: the universe would not contain them, were it not for our perceptual-creative efforts, and were it not equally for the contribution of the non-human world that both sustains and sets limits to our lives. To realize that there is this cooperative interdependence of man and his natural environment checks the extreme of pessimism by showing our earth-rootedness even in our aspirations. There is no wholly-other paradise from which we are excluded; *the only transcendence that can be real to us is an ‘immanent’ one*.<sup>94</sup>

A third misleading polarity is:

- the metaphorical ‘vs.’ the literal.

Again, by the same reasoning – thoroughly argued by Ricoeur, whom there is no need to repeat here – where the discursive and *a fortiori* the linguistic is concerned, there is *only* the metaphorical. Confining metaphor to a particular linguistic trope alone is the reductionist tactic of proponents of a humanly unrealisable neo-positivism. In practice, no statement can be made whose meaning, in order to be (to use William James’s usefully blunt term) cashed in, does not require metaphor. In Laclau and Mouffe’s succinct words, ‘literality is, in actual fact, the first of metaphors.’<sup>95</sup>

In this sense, by the same token, there is *only* the liminal (we do not, cannot, live in any absolute place or state, but between them) and the motile (we do not, cannot, live in absolute stasis, but only in more or less dynamic motion). The former term is well-known in anthropology, although its original anthropocentric provenance, from the work of Victor Turner, now needs correction in two related ways: first, by Edith Turner’s subsequent realisation that the ritual objects central to rites of passage are

<sup>92</sup> This point is expressed in the terms which seem to be replacing the hitherto standard emic/etic contrast in anthropological-sociological discourse: ‘distance near’ and ‘distance far’.

<sup>93</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, p. 225.

<sup>94</sup> R.W. Hepburn, *‘Wonder’ and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), p. 181-82. My emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 111. Cf. Ricoeur, *Rule*, especially ch. 7.

simultaneously and equally material *and* spiritual;<sup>96</sup> and second, by Roy Willis's observation that the *communitas* involved in such rituals is a more-than-human one, comprising animals and nature spirits as well as humans.<sup>97</sup>

The term 'motile' comes from Holbraad's theoretical move, already mentioned, beyond the valuable but purely negative position of Lévy-Bruhl (i.e., that *participation mystique* offends or ignores Aristotle's stipulation of the excluded middle).

Both liminal and motile, as construed here, accord well with Merleau-Ponty's own understanding of 'Flesh', which falls into neither of the traditional Western categories of mind-subject/ matter-object: 'To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.' And praising Proust, he adduced 'an idea that is not the contrary of the sensible, that is its lining and its depth.'<sup>98</sup>

### Post-secularism

Here I cannot resist adding something which the post-secular implications of actually moving beyond modernist Cartesianism – as opposed to stopping halfway, or claiming to do so while stopping well short (as per the late Richard Rorty) – make it legitimate to consider once again.<sup>99</sup> I am referring to the 'spiritual' dimension of liminality and motion, although it is simultaneously and equally 'biological', such that, to quote the Neo-platonist philosopher Porphyry, 'Every threshold is sacred'.<sup>100</sup> Every culture knows this in its bones, especially respecting participation in the three great rites of passage between worlds: birth, sexual intercourse, and death. But it also applies to the quotidian mysteries of social intercourse, of food, of sleep, of story. It is not only a 'physical' fact that 'a living thing acquires its energy by means of exchange across a boundary, so that the living thing remains distinct from its environment, yet interacts continuously with it'; in mythopoetic terms too, 'life happens at the boundary between two worlds where energies are transformed.'<sup>101</sup> And reverence has modulations: not only simple respect but courtesy and tact are qualities which are called for, and ideally called forth, by all liminal situations of exchange and transformation.<sup>102</sup>

There is, of course, a 'Western' (Hellenic, but pre-Olympian) deity – one of 'ours' – whose nature and domain is specifically the liminal, and descriptions of whom seem at least as to this point as any secular, let alone scientific observations: Hermes. This leads me to question, with Roberto Calasso, to what extent 'all we have done is invent, for those powers that act upon us' – whether from 'within' or 'without' –

---

<sup>96</sup> Turner, Edith, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

<sup>97</sup> Willis, Roy, *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance: A Journey into Human Selfhood in an African Village* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 118.

<sup>98</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, pp. 139, 149. For a good recent discussion, see Louise Westling, 'Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: Ecopoetics and the Problem of Humanism', in Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (eds), *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 233-47.

<sup>99</sup> See my 'Post-Secular Nature: Principles and Politics', *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 11 (2007): 284-304.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Casey, Place, p. 293.

<sup>101</sup> Kane, Wisdom, pp. 103, 111. (Bateson came this way too.)

<sup>102</sup> With thanks to Lindsay Radermacher for this point.

‘longer, more numerous, more awkward names, which are less effective ...’<sup>103</sup> In this context, it is also tantalising that Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject or body-mind as a chiasmic ‘decussation’ of crossed and intersecting lines resonates closely with the ancient mythic Indo-European metaphor of three Fates (all feminine) weaving the fabric of our individual and collective fates. I could adduce non-European recognition of how ‘the threads of life’ are woven, suggesting a pancultural phenomenon.<sup>104</sup>

It is also suggestive that Alphonso Lingis, the translator of Merleau-Ponty’s last great unfinished work, eloquently sings the praises of ‘that nocturnal, oneiric, erotic, mythogenic second space which shows through the interstices of the daylight world of praktognostic competence’, where ‘One’s vital space is an exteriority whose directions are directives ...’<sup>105</sup> But note that this second, vital space does not stand in opposition to the mundane or profane world; it is rather its reversible lining.

Holbraad et al. argue that motile logic amounts to a ‘method’ rather than an ontology, albeit a method for revealing ontologies.<sup>106</sup> Impelled by such considerations, however, I wonder ‘method’ is so easily separated from methodology, itself an adjunct of the modernist obsession with epistemology – and, inseparably, the impulses to secularise and (thereby) render biddable – which have brought about such ‘ontological poverty’.<sup>107</sup> At least equally plausible, it seems to me, is the possibility that ‘methods’ are better considered rituals. (One example might be, ‘You shall not suspend or overrule such major tribal injunctions as the law of the excluded middle unless there are good reasons in a particular case to do so.’) But in ritual, *how* you do it is equally if not more important than *what* you do; and that is a function not of method as such but of character, experience, wisdom and other individual embodied traits that methodology tries, *per impossibile*, to replace.

## Reflexions

The relational and perspectival ontology I have urged here, when rendered self-referential (in accordance with another hallowed ritual injunction, namely consistency) entails many worlds, and thence ontologies. We are all chiasmically embodied and we all live in tensively true worlds, but not in the same way or the same ones. What we share is our constitution by particular differences and relations.

So this ontology should indeed be apprehended as a method, or ritual, to enable their realisation. As such, it is intended to point to the way we live – liminal, motile, tensile – and who we are as such beings, suspended between the polarised antinomies to which that very way of living gives rise. But the middle ways or third things which I have identified as the processes of embodied life are precisely not things of any kind (let alone Hegelian syntheses or sublations), because to be just *is* to be between.

Here, of course, ‘the noun/verb distinction in our habits of thought allows the proliferation of hypostates – things, categories, abstract entities – which we bestow haphazardly on ourselves and others in the form of names and diagnoses. (What actually makes a thief a thief and a boxer a boxer is that they *do* something.)’ In which case, ‘Translating actions and qualities into substances (translating doing and having

<sup>103</sup> Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), p. 94.

<sup>104</sup> E.g., René Devisch, *Weaving the Threads of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>105</sup> Alphonso Lingis, ‘Phantom Equator’, in Busch and Gallagher, *Merleau-Ponty*: 227-239, pp. 227, 238.

<sup>106</sup> Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, ‘Introduction’, in their (eds), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (Routledge, 2007): 1-31, p. 23.

<sup>107</sup> Viverios de Castro, ‘Perspectives’, p. 482.

into being)’ is to start from the wrong place.<sup>108</sup> How we live will always elude capture by language restricted to putatively propositional reference; it will always be between whatever set of categories is applied to it.<sup>109</sup> The only use of language (not ‘kind’ of language – this point exists only at a pragmatic level, not a semantic or syntactic) to which lived experience will yield is consciously metaphoric, that is, participatory: a ‘way of living’ (ontological) rather than only an ‘opinion’ (epistemological), in Wittgenstein’s terms.

That applies reflexively to this analysis too. If my middle terms are taken to be representations *of* something (whose adequacy can then be analysed) rather than metaphors pointing *to* something (which they partly create, as per Ricoeur), then the point, and the opportunity, will have been entirely missed. But our language notwithstanding, this need not happen. As Wittgenstein pointed out about rules, syntax and semantics may impel particular kinds of pragmatic usages, but they cannot dictate them. There is thus nothing inevitable or necessary about such misunderstandings (essentialising, reifying, etc.). This situation was summarised in typically pithy fashion by Chuang Tzu:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of the meaning; once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?<sup>110</sup>

However, as usual, caution is necessary lest what I have just said be regarded as tacitly re-admitting a ‘romantic’ lived-unity-beyond-words. Distinctions – albeit contingent and relative ones – are essential to the ‘way we live’ that I am discussing, for without different entities relations between them (perspectives) are impossible, and without relations which constitute entities, change is impossible. It follows that any attempt to suppress or extinguish distinctions altogether – such as through a willed and therefore pseudo-mystical unity – actively inhibits real transformation, spiritual or otherwise.<sup>111</sup>

### **Morals (with Methodological Implications)**

Briefly, I would counsel colleagues in the humanities and social sciences to eschew both superstitions which Bateson identified as arising from mistaken “ways of thinking about body-mind”, in particular those which attempt to reduce the one to the other: ‘These two species of superstition, these rival epistemologies, the supernatural and the mechanical, feed each other ... and both are nonsense.’<sup>112</sup>

Against this unhealthy and damaging scenario, including its academic versions, I have argued that:

---

<sup>108</sup> Campbell, *Genesis*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Set’ arising from the term applied and its contrary upon which the meaning of the former depends (whether overtly or covertly).

<sup>110</sup> *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, transl. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 140.

<sup>111</sup> See my ‘Grizzly Man and the Spiritual Life’, forthcoming in the *Journal for Religion, Culture and Nature* (2010).

<sup>112</sup> Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987), p. 51.

(1) there is an integral and irreducible embodied, sexuate and ecological dimension to all human thought, as it is taken to be (e.g., cognition, recognition, conceptualisation, etc.);

(2) there is an integral and irreducible discursive dimension to all human physicality, as it is taken to be (e.g., sensation, perception, desires, feelings), as well as when it is more obvious that both are involved (e.g., emotions and values); and finally, that

(3) these two dimensions are themselves tensively intertwined. That they are so does not therefore mean they are unreal or non-existent, nor that they are not analytically distinguishable, of course. (To hold that would be to misunderstand chiasm and tensivity.) But that they are relatively real and distinguishable does not mean, in turn, that they are not mutually implicated and interdependent.

More generally still, in our work and what and how we seek to understand, as much as any other part of our lives, we should aspire to being better (fuller, more conscious, etc.) versions of the imperfect, conflicted, contradictory beings we already are: neither gods of pure undivided consciousness (inexplicably riven) nor particles of pure discrete matter (inexplicably conscious), but *human*.

But a human scale of values need not be exclusively a scale of human values.<sup>113</sup> It should be clear from what has been said so far that wherever there are genuine relations – that is, in which both or all parties can be altered thereby or, if you will, are vulnerable – there, *ipso facto*, is also ethics. As I have also pointed out, we participate in – we are constituted *by* – unfathomably deep, complex and rich webs, or networks, in which the inhering ‘active intentionalities’ are by no means solely human (or even necessarily embodied: at least, in the way we are). It follows that ethics cannot exclude humans; nor, however, can it be restricted to them.<sup>114</sup> In short, the appropriate religion for embodied human subjects is that of life itself, with all the limitations, contradictions and so-called imperfections that make it possible at all.

### Back to Divination

In closing, let me try to spell out a few implications for the field which was my original concern. With Chuang Tzu’s warning in mind, I shall ‘define’ divination thus: Divination is a ritual (synchronically) and a tradition (diachronically) constituted by, and constituting, an ongoing dialogue with more-than-human agents. It is enacted in order to ask them for guidance and/or discern their will in the matter at hand, to enable them to respond, and to permit intelligible interpretation of the response. An infeasible part of the ritual, following from those requirements, is an act of aleatory randomisation.<sup>115</sup>

Of this ritual/tradition, then, we may add three points. *First*, there is an irreducible embodied, sexuate and ecological dimension, no matter how ‘spiritual’ it is. That is, the diviner’s body and everything he or she ‘physically’ performs and experiences is essential to it.<sup>116</sup> Relatedly, the sex/gender of the diviner is consequential;

<sup>113</sup> Taken, almost verbatim, from David Wiggins’s excellent ‘Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCX (2000): 1-32, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> See Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

<sup>115</sup> See my earlier reflections in Willis and Curry, *Astrology*, ch. 9.

<sup>116</sup> See Dennis Tedlock, ‘Mind, Body and Cosmos in Mayan Divination’, in Angela Voss and Patrick Curry (eds), *Seeing With Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007): 295-310.

although there will be overlap, so to say – just as there are major biological commonalities between the sexes – we should not expect men and women to divine in the same way, nor with the same ‘results’.<sup>117</sup> (Not that we should expect any two individuals to do so either; but that still allows for generic differences at a ‘higher’ level.) And the animate, enminded, ensouled, non-modern natural world is at the heart of divination. Not only is this evident in the roots of ancient as well as contemporary indigenous divination in the natural metaphors, or metaphoric natural phenomena, of water, stones, wood, rustling leaves, animal behaviour and so on; divinatory spirits, when they are involved, are spirits of place. (Even when those places are imaginal ones, they are particular, not universal or anonymous; see my discussion of dis-/embodied spirits, above.)<sup>118</sup>

*Second*, correspondingly, there is an irreducible discursive, ideational and spiritual dimension, no matter how ‘practical’ it is, which is, with the provisos of late Wittgenstein and Chuang Tzu once again in mind, analysable in terms of a ‘logic’ of divination (or, in specific instances, logics).<sup>119</sup> That is, even the most pragmatic divinations, in sum or in part, cannot be separated from meanings, ideas and perspectives which – *being* differential, relational and perspectival – entail ultimate mystery and the impossibility of instrumental grounding, mastery or manipulation. No analysis of divination can therefore exhaust its meaning(s) in purely epistemological or structuralist-functionalist terms. Like any ‘system of objective relations, the acquired ideas are themselves caught up in something like a second life and perception ...’<sup>120</sup>

*Third*, divinatory rituals/traditions themselves include an understanding (itself an embodied-and-discursive way-of-life) in which any formal ‘contradiction’ between the first and second points is rendered inconsequential.

Why does the act of randomising (throwing coins or pebbles or dice, picking shuffled cards blind, mapping the current sky without foreknowledge of the planets’ or stars’ position, etc.) play such an important part? Here we may refer back to the role of agency as discussed earlier. Such an act uses human will (i.e. acts deliberately) to set aside the diviner’s or his/ her client’s own human will, desires and imperatives in order to create a window of opportunity, ‘random’ or ‘meaningless’ in human terms, allowing the relevant more-than-human agency – spirit, say – to speak and be heard. (We are so needy, greedy and noisy; and understandably, they cannot always be bothered to shout.)

Here is where we can easily understand the hegemonically interested nature of confining discursive meaning to human language; what an effective way to deprive animate nature of its voice in the war to extend the human empire of ‘reason’!<sup>121</sup> In this context, that meant a programme to replace the countless voices of divinatory spirits of place with the single vision of the One God’s divine revelation. The imperialism was plain in the military, misogynist and sadodispassionate metaphors of Bacon, Descartes and Galileo, but its roots lie much further back; further even than the version of Christianity which provided their basic template. ‘I’m a lover of learning,’ says the Socrates of *Phaedrus*, ‘and trees and open country won’t teach me anything, whereas

<sup>117</sup> See Barbara Tedlock, *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

<sup>118</sup> See my discussion in Willis and Curry 2004: 122-24 and in Angela Voss and Jean Hinson Lall (eds), *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred* (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007), pp. 42-44; and Roy Willis, *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

<sup>119</sup> See the work of Martin Holbraad cited in note 24.

<sup>120</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Visible*, p. 153.

<sup>121</sup> See Curry, ‘Post-Secular Nature’ and ‘Nature Post-Nature’.

men in the town do.’<sup>122</sup> But this became an extremely destructive intervention against the aboriginal (and still surviving, if only just) mode of a divinatory relationship with the natural world.<sup>123</sup> As Leroy Little Bear put it to David Peat, ‘Trees talk to you, but you don’t expect them to speak in English or Blackfoot.’<sup>124</sup> Or Greek.

I hope the potentially rich relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodiment is already clear in this context. For an example respecting that of Ricoeur – and this brings in the step of interpretation alluded to in my ‘definition’ – here is Karen Blixen, reflecting on a spontaneous (and desperate) act of divination which she undertook in May 1931:

Many people think it an unreasonable thing, to be looking for a sign. This is because of the fact that it takes a particular state of mind to be able to do so, and not many people have ever found themselves in such a state. If in this mood, you ask for a sign ... it follows as the

natural consequence of the demand. In that same way an inspired card-player collects thirteen chance cards on the table, and takes up what is called a hand of cards – a unity. Where others see no call at all, he sees a grand slam staring him in the face. Is there a grand slam in the cards? Yes, to the right player.<sup>125</sup>

I think Blixen errs if, in describing the response as ‘natural’, she implies it is biddable. The important point here, however, is the question, ‘Is there a grand slam in the cards?’ – to which the correct answer is, obviously, ‘yes and no’. In other words, even without bringing in the process of metaphorical interpretation and thence re-description that is such a major part of the diviner’s work, divinatory truth is already metaphorically tensive.<sup>126</sup>

This, incidentally, is a principal and sufficient reason, if not the only one, why empirically ‘testing’ divinatory claims (including astrological ones) is such a hopeless non-starter, and one which begs to then be redefined by the testers in such a way as to exclude the diviner: a move which in turn guarantees a negative result.<sup>127</sup>

Of course, large and open questions remain. For example, what is the relationship between divination and divinisation, i.e., becoming divine? In Iamblican theurgy, the latter is virtually the whole point of the former.<sup>128</sup> But is there even some such process at work among clients of end-of-the-pier palmistry? (Again, I wouldn’t rule out the possibility.) And somewhere in between, it is possible to maintain a practice of divination which is integral to developing what Jung called ‘a symbolic attitude’.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, transl. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1982), sec. 230d. (Perhaps this is more Plato speaking than Socrates.)

<sup>123</sup> See Abram, *Spell*, Kane, *Wisdom*, and Curry in Willis and Curry, *Astrology*, ch. 7 and pp. 122-24.

<sup>124</sup> F. David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics: A Journey into the Native American Universe* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995), p. 288. (With thanks to Leslie van Gelder for bringing this book to my attention.)

<sup>125</sup> Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen], *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 368. For a fuller account and discussion see Patrick Curry, ‘Divination, Enchantment and Platonism’, in Voss and Lall, *Seeing*, pp. 35-46.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bournemouth: Wessex, 2003), p. 133: ‘Since an omen is only an omen if it is recognized as such, it is clear that its significance is dependent on the participation of those for whom it is present.’

<sup>127</sup> See my discussion in Willis and Curry, *Astrology*, ch. 8; and cf. Cornelius, *Moment*, chs. 3 and 4. (It never fails to amaze me that so many astrologers are repeatedly so naïve, or deluded, as actually to encourage such ‘testing’.)

<sup>128</sup> See Shaw, ‘Light’.

<sup>129</sup> C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, Collected Works vol. 6 (London: RKP, 1971), ch. 11 paras. 814-829, esp. 819.

an ongoing dialogic way of life in which the more-than-human world and/or its parts can symbolically answer enquiries which arise (consciously or unconsciously) in the course of living. ('Can' is important; such answers can be requested and encouraged, but again, they are not biddable.) In any case, I would suggest that in exploring these issues, the perspectives discussed above – chiasm, tensivity, and so on – could fruitfully be borne in mind.

---

## Bibliography

- Abram, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
- Barfield, Owen *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977).
- Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).
- , *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979).
- Bateson, Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: An Investigation into the Nature and Meaning of the Sacred* (London: Rider, 1987).
- Busch, Thomas W., 'Perception, Finitude, and Transgression: A Note on Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur', in Busch and Gallagher, *Merleau-Ponty: 25-35*.
- Busch, Thomas W. and Shaun Gallagher (eds), *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- Burke, Patrick, 'Listening at the Abyss', in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds), *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990): 81-97
- Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993).
- Campbell, Alan Tormaid, *To Square with Genesis: Causal Statements and Shamanic Ideas in Wayapi* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989).
- Carrilho, Manuel Maria, 'Rhetoric and Perspectivism', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 2:196 (1996): 359-373.
- Casey, Edward S., *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- Ch'êng-ên, Wu, *Monkey*, transl. Arthur Waley (London: Penguin, 1961).
- Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, transl. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).
- Cohen, Leonard, *Stranger Music* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).
- Cornelius, Geoffrey, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Bournemouth: Wessex, 2003).
- Csordas, Thomas J. (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: the Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Curry, Patrick, 'Re-Thinking Nature: Towards an Eco-Pluralism', *Environmental Values* 12:3 (2003): 337-360.
- , *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- , 'Divination, Enchantment and Platonism', in Voss and Lall: 35-46.
- , 'Post-Secular Nature: Principles and Politics', *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 11(2007) 284-304.
- , 'Nature Post-Nature', *New Formations* 64 (2008): 51-64.
- , 'Grizzly Man and the Spiritual Life', forthcoming in the *Journal for Religion, Culture and Nature* (2010).
- Curry, Patrick and Angela Voss (eds), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007).
- Detienne, Marcel and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, transl. Janet Lloyd (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1978);
- Devisch, René, *Weaving the Threads of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

- Dillon, M.C., 'Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism', in Busch and Gallagher: 129-138.
- Dimen, Muriel and Virginia Goldner, 'Gender and Sexuality', in Ethel S. Person, Arnold M. Cooper and Glen O. Gabbard (eds), *Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publications, 2005): 93-114.
- Dinesen, Isak [Karen Blixen], *Out of Africa* (New York: Random House, 1970).
- Evernden, Neil, *The Social Construction of Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- Gane, Nicholas, *Max Weber and Postmodern Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- Harvey, Graham, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: C. Hurst and New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
- Hass, Lawrence, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds), *Thinking Through Things: Theorizing Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- Hepburn, R.W., *'Wonder' and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).
- Hesse, Mary, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).
- Holbraad, Martin, 'Gauging Necessity: Ifá Oracles and Truth in Havana', *Mana* 9:2 (2003): 39-72.
- , 'The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *Mana*, Again)', in Henare et al.: 189-225.
- , 'Ontography and Alterity: Defining Anthropological Truth', *Social Analysis* 53:2 (2009): 80-93.
- Ingold, Tim, 'Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment', in Roy Ellen and Katsuyoshi Fukui (eds), *Redefining Nature* (Oxford: Berg, 1996): 117-55.
- , *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- Irigaray, Luce, *Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004).
- James, William, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003 [1912]).
- Johnson, Mark *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- Jonas, Hans, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
- Jung, C.G., *Psychological Types*, Collected Works vol. 6 (London: RKP, 1971).
- Kane, Sean, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998).
- Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1991).
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 2001).
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
- Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

- , 'On recalling ANT', pp. 15-25 in John Law and John Hassard (eds), *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
- Lévinas, Emmanuel, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).
- Lingis, Alphonso, 'Phantom Equator', in Busch and Gallagher: 227-239.
- Meeker, Joseph, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974): 12.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- , *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Inoperative Community*, transl. P. Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
- Peat, F. David, *Blackfoot Physics: A Journey into the Native American Universe* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995):
- Plato, *Phaedrus*, transl. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).
- Plumwood, Val, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- , 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land', *Ethics and the Environment* 11:2 (2006): 115-150.
- Proust, Marcel, *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature 1896-1919*, transl. Sylvia Townsend Warner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1997).
- Raphals, Lisa, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
- Reynolds, Jack, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).
- Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor. The Creation of Meaning in Language*, transl. Robert Czerny (London: Routledge, 2003): 48.
- Robinson, T.M., *Heraclitus: Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
- Schipper, Kristopher, *The Taoist Body*, transl. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- Shaw, Greg, 'Living Light: Divine Embodiment in Western Philosophy', in Curry and Voss (eds): 59-87.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- , *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997);
- Tambiah, Stanley J., *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- Tedlock, Barbara, *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).
- Tedlock, Dennis, 'Mind, Body and Cosmos in Mayan Divination', in Curry and Voss: (eds): 295-310.
- Turner, Edith, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
- Voss, Angela and Jean Hinson Lall (eds), *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred* (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007).
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo, 'Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism',

- Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 3 (1998) 469-88, reprinted in Michael Lambek (ed.), *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 306-26.
- , 'Exchanging Perspectives. The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies', *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004): 463-84.
- Wagner, Roy, *Symbols That Stand for Themselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).
- Weber, Michel, 'James's non-rationality and its religious extremum in the light of the concept of pure experience', in Jeremy Carrette (ed.), *William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2005): 203-20.
- Westling, Louise, 'Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: Eco-poetics and the Problem of Humanism', pp. 233-47 in Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford (eds), *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).
- Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- Wiggins, David, 'Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCX (2000): 1-32.
- Willis, Roy, *Some Spirits Heal, Others Only Dance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).
- Willis, Roy and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture* (Oxford: Berg Books, 2004).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).