

Revaluing Body and Earth

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Abstract: This paper argues for positively revaluing the body, the feminine, and the Earth as integrally linked aspects of a healthy *modus vivendi* that have been dangerously damaged by modernity. Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology is presented as a promising way to avoid retaining its positionings of mind/spirit as comprising nothing but consciousness and sentience and the body as nothing but inert matter. For the feminine dimension of the project, I rely on Irigaray and Butler. The indispensability of animist agency is then maintained, with reference to Plumwood and Abram. From here, I argue for the centrality of places (as against space) and thence of the Earth, and an understanding of it which is not just ecological but fully ecocentric. Finally, the post-secular implications of the project are noted.

‘...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.’¹

The Project of Revaluation

This paper suggests ways to begin revaluing the subjects in my title, as well as arguing that being internally linked, they cannot be revalued separately. I say ‘suggests’ for the subject is vast. Starting with the body, one could reasonably start by asking: are there any values which are not embodied? All human valuers are (or were at one time) embodied, although that does not mean, of course, that *what* they value need be restricted to the body. At the least, the embodiment of all human valuers surely suggests that the body is fully present in, and thus materially influences, not only the act of valuing but also, thereby, its outcomes. Giving recognition of this existential fact the emphasis it deserves but rarely gets, I shall refer not to ‘embodiment’ – as if someone else, or something else such as a ‘mind’, perhaps entirely different, is merely ‘in’ a body – but rather to ‘bodiment’ (Acampora 2006).²

What this ‘body’ is, then, cannot be taken for granted. In anticipation of the discussion of this question, I want to briefly note two important points. One is that

¹ Proust 1997: 25-26.

² This relatively unified ‘bodymind’, or something very like it, can be found in much East Asian philosophy, but that is a thread which cannot be taken up here.

since all human bodies are sex-gendered or sexuate,³ sex in the fullest sense also must be considered. By implication, so should the work of those feminist philosophers and psychoanalysts who have made it their particular concern. The second point is that since all human bodies are fully embedded in particular concrete places, and all those places are either primarily or secondarily natural, nature too is integral to bodymind – something which invites attention to the work of ecological philosophers and some anthropologists.

Hence, there are really four subjects in play: bodiment, sexuality, place, and nature or the Earth. Without claiming it is the only or even best way to proceed, however, I will treat sex-gender as fundamentally an aspect of *bodiment*, and will move fairly smartly from place to *nature*.

Let us consider why such a project of revaluing matters. The answer will also help us understand how best to go about it. Its most important impetus and context is the increasingly unignorable contemporary ecocrisis, both ‘inner’ or psycho-social and ‘outer’ or environmental/ ecological, whose dimensions in terms of climate change, crashing biodiversity and so on there is no need to review here. The accompanying destruction and degradation suggests the need to revalue what has been correspondingly downgraded by many discourses within Western philosophy in the last 350 years, although by no means without powerful older antecedents: the body, women and the feminine, and the natural world. Let me immediately add that by ‘philosophy’, I mean not only formalised thought, but also fundamental guiding metaphysical assumptions. By ‘nature’, I mean something other or more than an inanimate and instrumentalized resource-base: all animate life, plus the biologically inanimate elements upon which it depends, the ensemble as well as home of which is the Earth. So, it is critically important that these items are understood as politically as well as substantively linked. Indeed, we could add another aspect of the same project: recovering the connections between theory, as one particular kind of practice, and other apparently more ‘material’ practices.

Corresponding to bodiment, the feminine, and Earthy nature are three interlinked dysfunctional or pathological discourses of theory and practice: idealism, spiritualism or culturalism (positioning the body as inferior etc.), androcentrism (positioning females and the feminine as inferior) and anthropocentrism (positioning nonhuman nature as inferior). All three modes are central to the exercise and protection of privilege – ‘minds/ men/ humans are more valuable than everyone and everything else’ (except possibly a God in whose image the human is supposedly made and who therefore licences such privilege) – and to the dynamics which have such toxic ecological consequences.⁴ We could note, in addition, the determined effort by both modern science and capitalism to replace places (qualitative, plural, unique) with space, whose units are tendentially quantitative, single and interchangeable.⁵

It is thus far from simply a matter of compensation, of valuing the body, the feminine, place and the Earth more than they have been. What is at stake is precisely what these *are*. Here, we must admit the difficulty of recognizing, rethinking and

³ Irigaray argues (and I agree) that an uncritical use of the sex/ gender distinction reproduces an uncritical nature/ culture distinction. See, e.g., Whitford 1991 and Irigaray 2004. But the relationship between ‘biological’ sex and ‘cultural’ gender remains difficult. It can be posed thus: the latter does not derive directly from the former; nor, however, is it related randomly or arbitrarily...

⁴ For its exemplary critical attention to all of these modes and dynamics, see the work of the late Val Plumwood.

⁵ See Casey 1997.

revaluing embodied values, given the influences of Platonic, Christian and Cartesian or modernist values and concepts. Nor should the effects at stake be interpreted in purely metaphysical terms, insofar as the influence of imperial ‘Western’ cultural and material values have become global.

Pluralism

Still on the philosophical underlabouring that our task requires, it is worth noting that the value-laden dualisms I have already mentioned support and are supported by a dominant monism comprising both monotheism and the scientific truth that is its secular heir. In both cases, the effects begin with disenchantment and finally terminate in nihilism.⁶ The dualisms operate by pitting spirit/ mind/ culture/ humanity/ male over and against materiality/ body/ nature/ the non-human / female.⁷ ‘Culture’ continues to do the work vis-à-vis ‘nature’ that ‘spirit’ used to do; although secularised, the underlying logic has not changed. Now although reversals of valuing, in which those formerly or elsewhere subordinated or suppressed become ascendent and vice-versa, are possible, that does not change the underlying mode. It remains the case that there are two opposing and putatively exhaustive discourses each side of which aspires to become a monism: a single, universal and exhaustive truth.

Thus, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has noted, the true counter to monism, as well as to the vying dualisms that constitute and proceed from it, is pluralism. (‘True’ in the double sense of both conceptually and effectively.) Here, unfortunately, I am obliged to abbreviate a complex subject by invoking other and/or previous work: specifically, Viveiros de Castro’s ‘perspectivism’, Bruno Latour’s (1993) ‘relationism’, what Paul Feyerabend (1987) and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988, 1997) call ‘relativism’, and what I have termed ‘relational pluralism’ (2003 and 2008).⁸

As those terms imply, ‘relations are fundamentals, relata are abstractions’ (Weber 2005: 215).⁹ I do not see this as an obstacle to retaining ‘value’ (and especially ‘intrinsic value’, or some equivalent) as a particular and important kind of relational meaning. Substantively, the debate between ‘objectivist’ and ‘subjectivist’ accounts of value is often misleading. Valuing is an act and therefore involves a valuer (who need not be human, of course), but it does follow from this that value does not *also* inhere in what is valued. Nor does it follow that value is entirely subjective or voluntaristic, as if no world or others existed with their own formations, agencies and agenda. Indeed, to grant those terms of the debate is to accede to just what is being contested: dualism in the service of monism. Thus, items are intrinsically valuable when they are valued for their own sake without reference to their usefulness in realising some other end. Furthermore, strategically, it is vitally important that we retain the concept of intrinsic value. Abandoning it would leave the natural world – including that part or dimension of human beings which falls into that purview – even more defenceless than it already is against being instrumentalized, appropriated and exploited. Any approach that helps limit the dynamically destructive

⁶ As Weber, after Nietzsche, rightly perceived; see Curry 2007. (Note, however, that monotheism retains a place for ultimate mystery that the latter’s promise of ultimate mastery does not.)

⁷ See Plumwood 1993.

⁸ There is also a degree of pluralism at work in environmental pragmatism; for a brief recent discussion, see Curry 2011, ch. 10.

⁹ It is significant that this statement occurs as part of a lucid summary of William James’s philosophy.

as well as occasionally creative human tendency and ability to meddle is not to be lightly surrendered.¹⁰

Among the radical consequences of relational pluralism is a highly desirable (not to say long overdue) shift from epistemology, and *a fortiori* methodology, to ontology: or rather, since perspectives are always plural and pluralism is perspectival, a shift to *ontologies*, that is, from a putatively single knowing of one ever-retreating notional world to many particular and participatory worlds and ways of being in and of them.¹¹

A corollary of this way of subverting dualisms is to realise that distinctions between ‘the material’ and ‘the cultural’ are not foundational, through recognising the potential, and on occasion actual, subjectivity and agency of the so-called material (and not attributing these aspects to it, as if it were entirely within our remit to graciously grant or withhold them). To quote Val Plumwood, ‘materiality is already full of form, spirit, story, agency, and glory’ (2002: 226). The same point applies to the embodied and material dimension of culture’s hitherto most idealistically privileged domains, e.g., higher mathematics, advanced theorizing of all kinds, and spiritual experience and discourse.¹²

It is well to note that a double move is required, for to redefine the material as also cultural must be accompanied by a move to redefine the cultural as also material. Only thus can the twin dangers be avoided of tendentially complete naturalization on the one hand, e.g., evolutionary psychology, and tendentially complete culturalization on the other, e.g., some forms of philosophy, cultural studies, and spirituality (including much of the ‘New Age’ kind). Both positions are unwarranted essentialisms. Both, to borrow a remark of Gregory Bateson’s (1987: 51), are modern superstitions, and both support a ruinous split that must be contested and ultimately healed.

Lest the preceding remark arouse suspicions of naïve anti-Cartesianism, let me add that contingent local distinctions between spiritual or mental and material, between natural and cultural or, for that matter, between real and unreal are not the problem, any more than are either rationality or spirituality per se. It is their forced and enforced conversion into an ideology and programme (*rationalism*, *spiritualism*, etc.) which is pathological.¹³

That point has two aspects which require attention. One is that it is perfectly possible, and probably always has been, for human beings to distinguish between the mental or spiritual (hence ‘cultural’) on the one hand and the physical or material (hence ‘natural’) on the other, even if the distinctions were much more fluid and contextual than they have since, and in some places, become. The other is that, as already noted, they have become incorporated into an ideology – or rather, an ideological lineage, the most recent instance of which can reasonably be called ‘modernism’ – which urgently requires questioning and indeed subverting. Together, these two aspects raise a critical question for any such project: how do we give due weight to the first, human point without accepting the proclamations of its absolutist twin? More generally, in this project of reconceiving and revaluing, there is a double danger to avoid: succumbing to ingrained culturalist/ spiritualist misapprehensions of

¹⁰ See Kane 1998: 50.

¹¹ See Viveiros de Castro 2004, and note the resonance with later Wittgenstein. (Methodology itself, as Mary Midgley once observed, tends to morph into methodolatry.)

¹² See, e.g., Csordas 1994, Lakoff and Johnson 1999.

¹³ See Kontos 1994.

the material and natural, on the one hand, and to naturalist/ materialist misapprehensions of the spiritual and cultural, on the other.

Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

With that warning in mind, let us return to bodiment, the putative instantiation of nature and matter, and its relationship with its distinguishable but inseparable twin, and the putative bearer of culture and spirit or mind, or what we could call 'mindment'. Faced with the question of how to think intelligently about this subject, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is decisive, so it is this that I now turn.¹⁴

To oversimplify a complex and subtle philosophy, Merleau-Ponty argued that while perceiving subject or 'mind' and perceived object or 'body' (whether one's own or others') are not one and the same, neither are they completely separate. Rather these two poles of 'body-subjects' are connected by a constitutive divergence or gap ('*écart*') which is chiasmically criss-crossed, intersected, entwined, and by virtue of which both perceiving *subject* and perceived *object*, that is, both *self* and *other* are neither entirely identical nor entirely different. This means that, although we can meaningfully speak of one pole or the other, we cannot do so without reference to its complement, nor can we do so in a way that takes either pole to be self-identical. Instead, together the two poles comprise a decentred duality which is not, however, a dualism.¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty's term for this dynamic, as he developed it in his posthumously-published work, was *Flesh*. Moreover, *Flesh* is ontological, insofar as the subject-object distinction and the attendant concern with representation that characterise epistemology arise from it, and are therefore secondary to it.¹⁶

The dynamic of *Flesh*, while it prevents both pure subjectivity and pure objectivity, is also what makes these possible at all. Conversely, 'what enables us to center our existence is what also prevents us from centering it completely...' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 85) However, the key point, in the present context, is that there is a minded dimension to the body, and a bodied dimension to the mind, which in both cases is inalienable and inherent. A more promising way out of the schizogenic modernist impasse, a way that not only recognizes the distinctiveness of each but also their fundamental intertwinedness, can hardly be imagined.¹⁷

For instance, it encourages us to give due weight to the rootedness of even our most abstract thoughts and theories in bodily perceptual processes: inside (inclusion)/ outside (exclusion), up (higher)/ down (lower), centre/ periphery, attraction (sympathy)/ repulsion (antipathy), symmetry/ asymmetry, declivity/ acivity, paths, blockages, links, scales and cycles among others.¹⁸ Yet crucially, Merleau-Ponty's approach resists the scientific reduction of 'mind' to 'body', a reduction that is familiar to us as the attempt, starting from a *dualism*, to enforce a materialist monism. Thomas Csordas makes the point, in similarly non-naturalistic and counter-hegemonic vein, that 'our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that end in objectification' (1994: 7).

¹⁴ See Curry 2008b for a more extended discussion; I also supplement Merleau-Ponty with, and relate his work to, that of Paul Ricoeur on metaphor.

¹⁵ It is certainly not the classic Cartesian dualism of body and other as extended but inert and mind (or spirit) versus self as sentient but unlocated. For good discussions, see Reynolds 2004 and Hass 2008.

¹⁶ See Olkowska 2006: 13.

¹⁷ Although see too Latour 1993.

¹⁸ Some of which I have taken from Johnson 1987: 206.

This perspective thus encourages recognition of the extent and ways in which the body cannot be considered apart from, or *as* apart from, the discursive. It is not a question (as I believe the work of Michel Foucault implies) of the relatively passive body being molded or inscribed by the latter, even if that involves auto-inscription. The body for Merleau-Ponty is both active and alive *and* fully cultural.¹⁹

Feminist Perspectives

One of the principal concerns of feminist philosophy is bodiment, which it treats both positively (as an important subject in its own right) and negatively (reacting against the tradition of its dismissive treatment, and/or interested appropriation, in philosophy dominated by men). Hence, it is not surprising that Merleau-Ponty's work has found a receptive but critical audience amongst feminist philosophers. To evaluate all the claims involved is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will confine the discussion to some important ideas of Luce Irigaray – formed partly in response to Merleau-Ponty – as refracted in a recent paper by Judith Butler.²⁰

There is in feminist philosophy a longstanding debate over how to recognize and perhaps reconcile two potentially conflicting perspectives: first, the distinctiveness of female and male bodies and the profound psychosocial consequences that follow therefrom; and second, the valuable sceptical critique, postmodern and earlier, of essentialism. This dilemma was apparent in earlier debates on how to interpret Luce Irigaray's philosophy, perhaps especially in the argument (whether directly or indirectly) between the apparently biomystical essentialism of Irigaray herself and Judith Butler's (1994) uncompromising discursive and political anti-essentialism.²¹

Compressing the issue greatly, Irigaray suspects Merleau-Ponty's chiasm of concealing significant sexuate differences, and thereby falsely universalising a masculine mode and an anonymity over what is really the maternal-feminine. The result privileges commonality over difference in a way that borders on solipcism.²² Butler, however – and in my view, correctly – understands chiasmic intertwining as constituting both masculine and feminine, each of which is non-identical with itself thanks to its integral dependence on the other. By the same token, the bodied and chiasmic self is integrally implicated in alterity (others whom, and worlds which, it does not control); and the maternal body is equally constituted by such relations. To be intertwined in such a way rules out not only beings' absolute autonomy, and therefore solipcism, but also their reducibility one to the other.

To conclude, bodiment, for and as humans, is fully sex-gendered or sexuate. But there are some bodied human commonalities that are not sexuate; so perhaps we could say, adapting a remark by Derrida about politics, that everything about us is sexuate, but it is not *only* that. However, no account of human bodiment can claim to

¹⁹ As for how this link can best be understood, although there is no room to develop the idea here, I agree with Csordas (1994: 16) again that 'the critical meeting ground between textuality and embodiment' is metaphor; see my 2010d. (I also suspect that Michael Polanyi's 'tacit knowledge' and consequent 'post-critical' philosophy might provide fruitful insights.)

²⁰ Irigaray 1987 and Butler 2006; see also Butler 1989. For a convincing refutation of some feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty, see Stoller 2000.

²¹ See Butler 1994 and the other essays in Burke, Schor and Whitford 1994, as well as Stone 2006.

²² Cf. Lévinas 1977: 55. For a good critique of Lévinas's criticism of Merleau-Ponty, see Hass 2008: 112-122, 132-33.

be comprehensive without engaging non-reductively with sexuality is this sense. Furthermore, such engagement renders undeniable the asymmetry of male and female natures, experiences and worlds, and the profound psychological, psychoanalytical, social, political and philosophical consequences of that fact. In a nutshell, both men and women are embodied but only the latter give birth to embodied life; so we might say that the female makes both itself and the male possible, although that is not what it, and/or she, is ‘for’. Relations between them are also reciprocal but asymmetrical, just as both proceed developmentally in terms of bodiment – but not in the same terms. Finally, it is possible, and fruitful, to understand relations between the two sexes/ genders as themselves chiasmically intertwined: neither wholly unrelated nor reducible one to the other, neither hyper-separated nor an ultimate identity, and neither one self-identical.

Agency and Animism

As his last work makes clear, Merleau-Ponty’s ontological and dynamic Flesh is both of bodies and of the world. Furthermore, what he also described (1968: 203) as ‘wild Being’ (*l’être sauvage*) is ontologically animate. These points put the body and bodiment, so conceived, squarely in the ecological domain.

Consideration of body-as-world, and world-as-body, connects directly with the pluralism and perspectivism with which we started, insofar as the body, as ‘an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a habitus’, is precisely the seat of perspectives, and as many as there are bodies; hence the pluralism. Furthermore, since ‘a perspective is not a representation’, this Merleau-Pontian meta-perspective, together with those of ecofeminism and the new animism, subverts the modernist obsession with, and fetishization of, epistemology, and its claim to be able to exhaustively represent ‘the’ world.²³ On the contrary, and counter-hegemonically, these approaches offer a recovery from ‘ontological poverty... a poverty characteristic of modern thought’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 475, 474, 482-83).

The epistemological claim to represent anything accurately and exhaustively, even in principle, presupposes the ability of humans (and in practice, only a very few of them) to be able to do so. Such a programme is embedded in a monism reiterating, however unconsciously, its monotheistic provenance; in modernist terms, ‘its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1994: 7), a role which theology used to fill. Insofar as both theistic and modernist monism assumes a fundamental difference between spirit and matter, the only outcome on offer is either a thorough-going idealist one, in which human subjectivity somehow transcends materiality (including, of course, the body) and achieves full disembodied autonomy, or a thorough-going materialist one, in which objectivity, i.e., objectness, supposedly without any vestiges even of subjectivity or agency, including that of the materialists themselves! Both idealism and materialism are on offer today, in various forms, but both suffer from what Herrnstein Smith has anatomised as ‘intellectual/ political totalitarianism (the effort to identify the presumptively universally compelling Truth and Way and to compel it universally)...’ (1988: 179). As a result, their effects are almost equally pathological, and specifically anti-ecological.²⁴

²³ Note that vulgar relativism offers no real challenge, insofar as it simply denies that truthful or accurate representation is possible; the debate thus remains on the debilitating ground of epistemology.

²⁴ On this point, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s analysis in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains hard to improve upon, even if it requires supplementing by, say, Latour 1993.

In this context, a significant struggle is to reconnect with a post-technoscientific nature which is once again – or better still, remains – a subject as well as an object. Two vital concepts are required for this effort. In explicating them, I shall call upon the work of two contemporary ecological philosophers, Val Plumwood and David Abram respectively.²⁵ *Agency*, as basically cognate with subjectivity but, crucially, a bodied subjectivity, is non-anthropocentric. I have already quoted Plumwood's recognition and revaluation of the material (and relatedly, the natural and the feminine) as fully agentic. In an explicit attempt to bypass definitions of agency which, invoking our classical Greek heritage of valorising anthropocentric as well as androcentric 'reason', emphasize cognition in order to extend human exceptionalism, Plumwood (2006: 124) defines agency simply but powerfully as 'active intentionality'. This radically non-Cartesian and non-modernist approach keeps the door open to the agency and indeed spirituality (embodied and relational) of all and any others: other animals, for example, but also, recalling Merleau-Ponty's *Flesh* as the wild Being of/as the world, places – a point to which we shall return. Such agency cannot be confined to subjects-which-are-(apparently)-not-also-objects, minds-which-are-(apparently)-not-also-bodies, or spirit-which-is-(apparently)-not-also-matter. Hence, agency is equally characteristic of what we take to be objects, bodies and matter; and is not, of course, restricted only to human bodies.²⁶

The other closely-related concept is *animism*. Rescued from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'²⁷ – in this case, the teleological imperialism of early philosophical anthropologists – the new animism, breaking with the latterly modern aberration of assigning mind or soul to humans alone, is metaphysically egalitarian or democratic. It is also, crucially, non-anthropocentric or ecocentric.²⁸ Here the ecological phenomenology of David Abram comes to mind, since his influential book *The Spell of the Sensuous* is based on the fact, obvious in hindsight but momentous at the time of writing, that the Merleau-Pontian phenomenological body is metaphorically and literally inseparable from the natural world of which it is a part, and without which it cannot exist. 'Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths...' (1996: 242). Hence, we arrive at the world as more-than-human: an important reminder that an ecocentric ambit includes, but radically qualifies, a human one, and that our sanity, mental and social as well as ecological, requires just such a context.²⁹

Animism is a good term, then, for the appropriate mode of relationship to, and participation in, such a world. Notice, however, that the upshot is *not* a programme of systematic or universal animism, whether in theory or in practice. That would amount to yet another monism, lethal to the phenomenon itself *as* something or someone alive and agentic – not just notionally but experientially, that is, 'phenomenologically'.

²⁵ 'Environment' and 'environmental' are unhelpful terms, reducing as they do – in a manner closely parallel to 'embodiment' – a non-natural being merely surrounded by non-human nature. 'Ecological', while not without its problems too, is preferable.

²⁶ In terms of Latour's sometime 'Actor Network Theory', agency is a property of networks rather than any particular item as such. And such networks are fully as material as they are ideational or imaginal

²⁷ E.P. Thompson's still-resonant phrase.

²⁸ See Harvey 2006 and, for a recent discussion, Ingold 2006 and Hornburg 2006. On ecocentrism see Curry 2011.

²⁹ Here, as so often throughout this sort of discussion, Gregory Bateson comes to mind. More recently, Abram (2010: 108-109) has affirmed the important point that redefining intelligence as bodied falls far short, and courts not just inconsistency but an ugly speciesism, if it fails to recognise that bodied intelligence is not limited to human bodies. In short, it must be ecocentric.

On this point, Irving Hallowell's account of his exchange with an Ojibwe elder transcends amusing anecdote to become a salutary warning. Although well-known in some anthropological circles, it bears repeating: 'In the 1930s Irving Hallowell asked an unnamed old man among the Ojibwe of the Beren's River in Manitoba, 'Are *all* the stones we see here about us alive?' Hallowell continues, 'He reflected a long while and then replied, "No! But some are."³⁰

That answer (including its air of polite incredulity) is as correct as the unhelpful way the question was framed permits. In other words, it is not that all stones, or anything else, are necessarily *or* universally alive, but rather that *anything can* be experienced as alive and, by the same token, a subject with whom one is, as a subject oneself, in a relationship.³¹

As Graham Harvey writes, 'Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.' Furthermore, they recognize 'the aliveness of all who live *as*, as well as in, particular lands or places' (Harvey 2006: xi, 19 [my emphasis]).

Place

This last point suggests another shift of emphasis. Animist relations, as we have seen, can be with virtually anything, including places. However, in this construal, what matters is not so much places in terms of technically complex systems (i.e., congeries of smaller-but-more-fundamental items, themselves inanimate) – not even places as ecosystems – but as *beings* themselves; and as such, both, albeit chiasmically, bodied and minded.

To put it another way, there is a profound elective affinity between body and place which this perspective reveals. Bodies are not only always, necessarily, *in* places, they may also be considered *as* relatively autonomous, e.g. mobile, places themselves. Conversely, places are, in an important sense, bodies too: not the universal, abstract, quantitative, causal stuff of 'space' but particular, sensuous, qualitative, participatory beings. Moreover, insofar as beings are constituted by relations, it follows that relationships with any place, and thereby knowledge of it, are only possible by virtue of participating in them as another body-subject. As Edward S. Casey puts it, 'to be is to be in place – *bodily*' (1997: 340).³²

Knowledge of places is therefore necessarily perspectival. This is by no means a poor second-best option if complete knowledge from a view from nowhere (or what amounts to the same thing, from everywhere) is a fantasy. As Merleau-Ponty noted, spotting the modern emperor's nakedness: 'All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view' – both bodied and placed – 'or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless' (2002: ix). Rejecting this recognition, the socio-historical process of converting place into space – as part of the overarching programme to replace ambiguity and partiality with putative certainty and security – is one of the lynchpins of modernity as a dominant and hegemonic formation, albeit

³⁰ Taken from Harvey 2006: 33.

³¹ The result is sometimes an experience of enchantment, with certain implications for re-enchantment. I intend to explore this in depth in a future book.

³² See also Casey 2009. Casey's work is itself influenced by Merleau-Ponty, among others.

one that is uneven, incomplete and unstable, with all the destructive consequences for the health of our body-minds, fellow-beings and places that are increasingly evident.³³

Post-Secularism

There remains one final aspect of embodied relational pluralism to emphasize, namely its *post-secularism*. This results from the coincidence of two considerations. First, a determination to be more consistent than those postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty, who have retained and protected the modernist (including scientific) commitment – itself scientifically ungroundable, without fatal question-begging – to secularism and/or atheism. Second, the considerable amount of ethnographic evidence of various kinds which is relevant to the nature and experience of the liminal and, thence, of the sacred.³⁴

Since body-minds of all kinds are constituted relationally and contextually, it follows that they are not only formed by chiasmic *écarts*, but are also themselves such places. They are gaps or thresholds (*limns*) criss-crossed by, so to speak, interacting lines of relation in motion.³⁵ That is, they unavoidably entail boundaries which both separate *and* conjoin them to other bodies and places, and which make their existence both possible and vulnerable. In this process, no one party is completely in control; indeed, if one party were in control then there would not be, by definition, a relationship.

The ‘lines’, ‘motion’, ‘boundaries’ here are metaphorical, but not thereby ‘merely’ so, there being no non-metaphorical alternatives.³⁶ One could well say that what they refer to is itself metaphor in its actual operations, although of course, one could always legitimately argue for *different* metaphors for metaphor.

Now it is hardly surprising, given the vital importance of such dynamics for all life, that, to quote the Neo-platonist Porphyry, ‘Every threshold is sacred’. The point is amply confirmed by much anthropology and the humanities, while obscured, incompletely but far too successfully, by the modernist ideology of disenchantment. Notwithstanding the latter’s emphasis on creation/production and commodity, the natural economy of the body-mind-place remains one of transformation, of exchange and the gift. Maintaining its integrity while negotiating necessary but perilous exchanges demands not only knowledge, but also skill, courtesy and humour. In short, it demands wisdom.³⁷

The creation, learning and transmission of such wisdom is integral to ritual, just as ritual is integral to both individual and collective culture, and perhaps especially so in relation to the effectively sacred. However, let me remind the reader that ‘culture’, as understood here, cannot consistently be construed as hyperseparated³⁸ from ‘nature’ (although a unity of the two is an equally misleading idea). Parallel with body-minds, there are equally chiasmic ‘nature-cultures’ (Latour 1993).

³³ As well as Casey 1997, see Toulmin 1990 for an excellent account of this and related historical processes.

³⁴ This work was, of course, begun by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.

³⁵ For a fascinating recent discussion of the importance of ‘motility’ see Holbraad 2007, as well as Ingold 2006.

³⁶ See Ricoeur 2003.

³⁷ See Curry 2010c.

³⁸ Val Plumwood’s (1993) useful term.

Both strategically and substantively, then, the understanding advocated here is post-secular.³⁹ It recognizes and admits the ultimate unmasterable mystery ‘that there is anything’, as well as the existential mysteries of birth, sex and death. But this sacred or divine is not transcendental. Rather, it is immanent in – or rather, as – everything. That is to say, everything embodied is immanent, not in a logically necessary, e.g. Spinozan sense, but instead as an unrestricted potentiality, an openness to encountering living agency – and to its numinous intensification, the sacred or divine – in any particular relation and situation. (This returns us to what Plumwood calls ‘a materialist spirituality of place’ [2002, ch. 10]).

Parenthetically, there is a politics implicit in the revaluing we have discussed here. It is not a politics based upon either the hyperseparation of self-mind-male-human and other-body-female-nature. Nor is it a politics based on their absolute unity, as some Deep Ecologists propound. Bodied and (em)bedded more-than-human sentience, or Flesh, as should be obvious by now, rules out both these options. Rather, the politics implicit in the revaluing here is one of ‘solidarity, the most fundamental of political relationships’ (Plumwood 2006b: 70), which finds relation, or recognises kinship, notwithstanding profound differences. I find this obscurely but unmistakably encouraging.

³⁹ See Curry 2007.

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