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Land Metaphysics

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As Australians we are by now quite familiar with the idea of land spiritualities or spiritualities of place, since this is an idea which permeates the cultures of Aboriginal Australians. That this idea has captured the Australian imagination is evidenced by the fact that the word, 'country', as it is used in Aboriginal English, has now entered Australian English: 'country' denotes land that has a spiritual as well as a geographical dimension. Country is land which belongs to a people and to which a people belongs. As Deborah Bird Rose explains, country sees, hears, smells, feels, speaks – it is sentient and responsive to its people.¹ To accept this is to accept that such a thing as land-psyche or land-soul exists in addition to the psyche or soul of human and animal beings. Country is a communicative player in human affairs rather than a mere backdrop to the human drama.

But is there any way of making sense of this perception of land or place in Western terms of reference? Clearly such a perception cuts deeply against the metaphysical premises of Western civilisation, especially in its modern forms. The main metaphysical premise of the modern West is materialism: matter *per se* is seen as inert, as lacking any intrinsic animating principle; it is devoid of a psychic or mentalistic dimension of its own. Mentality enters the world only as a result of particular configurations of matter – the kind of configurations that occur in the central nervous systems of organisms, for instance. It therefore makes no sense, from this perspective, to attribute mind or psyche or soul or any kind of intrinsic animating principle to world at large, or to its local modalities, land and place.

If individuals in Western societies resonate with the idea of a spirituality of land or place, if we have experiences consonant with such a spirituality, how then are we to account for them? We can't just dismiss the materialist premise of modern civilisation with an airy postmodern wave of the hand. A hundred times a day we entrust our projects and our very lives to technologies that rest on this materialist premise. Whenever we board a plane or drive a car, send an email or submit to medical tests, we testify to our tacit faith in the deterministic, materialist worldview bequeathed to us by classical physics and other sciences. Our faith in these day-to-day technologies demonstrates our implicit conviction that the world lacks ends or meanings of its own that need to be taken into account in our dealings with it.

If we really want to credit the idea that land or place may be charged with a meaningful and purposeful presence of its own, a presence that can be rendered responsive to us, we are in fact faced with an immense challenge. We shall have to revise entirely our metaphysical foundations, yet this revision will have to be accomplished in a way that is consistent with the demonstrated verities of science.

Can this be done? Is it possible to see the physical world as innately present-to-itself, as endowed with a mentalistic dimension of its own, in some larger-than-usual sense of mentality? Is to suggest this to hark back to pre-theoretical animisms, according to which nature was filled with spirits and deities of various kinds? Presumably such animisms, understood literally, are today untenable. Any worldview a modern society adopts must be at least consistent with the basic categories of physics: space and time and mass,

gravitational and electromagnetic fields and so on. Humanity has now travelled into space, negotiated gravitational fields, harnessed electromagnetic ones. There is no going back, in any literal way, to the cosmologies of mythology. But can the world conform to physics yet still not be reducible to it? Is there any rational account of reality that 'saves the appearances' of physics, yet implicates mentality in reality at the most fundamental level?

Personally, being of a broadly panpsychist persuasion, I am confident that such an account can be given.ⁱⁱ 'Pan' means everything; 'psyche' means soul, or, for our purposes, mentality. 'Panpsychism' then is an old philosophical term denoting the view that there is a 'psychic' or mentalistic dimension to everything; that mentality – whether in the form of spirit, soul, purpose, agency, subjectivity or intentionality – is as primitive an aspect of reality as physicality is. Although panpsychism has been very much a minority tradition in the history of western philosophy, serious accounts of it have been advanced from time to time. (Thinkers who have developed panpsychist views include Rationalists, Spinoza and Leibniz, several Romantic philosophers of the late eighteenth century and the process philosophers of the early twentieth century.) My own account of panpsychism - which space prevents me from detailing here - represents the manifest world, as described by physics, as the outward appearance of an inner field of 'subjectivity', in an expanded sense of subjectivity. Reality is, from this point of view, both a unity and a manifold of differentia, a One and a Many. Viewed from within it is a field of subjectivity, with ends and meanings and communicative capacities of its own; from the viewpoint of its finite modes, or those of them that are capable of acting as observers, it is an order of extension, as represented by physics. As a locus of subjectivity in its own right, the universe is capable of, and actively seeks, communicative engagement with its finite modes, the Many, or, again, those of them that are capable of such engagement. Wherever this communicative engagement is actualised, it is manifest in a poetic order – an order of poetic revelation - that unfolds alongside the causal order; this poetic order, or order of meaning, exceeds the causal order but is in no way in violation of it.

To inhabit a panpsychist universe is quite different from inhabiting a materialist one. To appreciate the contrast, let's perform a little thought experiment. Suppose we have not yet heard of panpsychism and we are looking at the world in the usual modern way - through our normal modern lenses. Then imagine stepping out into our garden late one evening. It's a clear night. The moon is not quite full. There are gum trees. We can hear the electric click of a few bats flitting about overhead. There is a strong perfume in the air – some night flower is shedding its scent. There are lots of stars. We look around us quietly, taking it all in.

What kind of world is it we imagine we are seeing in this thought experiment? For most of us who belong to modern Western societies it will be the familiar universe of space and time and celestial bodies such as stars, moons and planets. We are looking up at these celestial bodies from the surface of our own planet. We may feel that there are presences around us in the garden – the bats, for instance, perhaps even the trees and shrubs. But when we lift our eyes, we are gazing into a vast loneliness, an emptiness of indefinite space, a predominantly unpopulated expanse of galaxies that is pretty much the universe of physics. The way we imagine it may be more or less theoretically sophisticated – we may imagine it in simple Newtonian terms as a vast arrangement of particles in a void or we may imagine it in sophisticated Einsteinian terms as an elastic field of dynamic deformations. But either way it is empty, in the sense of being devoid of any informing presence. Some may think of it as the work of a Creator God who stands outside it and perhaps maintains it in existence. They might even think of that God as

somehow available to his Creation. But still, that Creation remains in itself empty, uninformed with any animating principle of its own.

Now let's repeat the experiment after adopting a panpsychist perspective. We step out into the night garden again. The moon has climbed higher in the sky. Bats continue to flit about and the stillness is even deeper than before. We look up at the stars. What do we see this time? We are no longer gazing out into a vast chasm of emptiness and loneliness. The stars no longer shine down with cold indifference. True, this is deep space, and the stars are indeed celestial bonfires. But all this now has something of the aspect of the inside of someone's mind. It has the filled, fieldlike qualities of awareness, and it all feels nearer somehow – as if, at a certain level, distances have collapsed, or resolved into mere appearance, as they do within consciousness. The stars and bats and other figures in the field have a new poetic status, as potential elements of meaning in a communicative exchange between ourselves and this larger subject or field of subjectivity. This universe is alive and breathing. It is a spirit-thing. We are not alone. We have stepped into a different night.

So profound is this shift from a materialist world to a psychically activated one that it could not but be expected to transform our most basic modalities, our basic ways of being in the world. How little does the average modern Westerner drawn to a sense of the spirit of land or place seem to suspect the depth of transformation that such a spirituality will require! To be inducted into this spirituality is not a matter merely of closing the office door, hopping into the four wheel drive and haring out to some charged or brooding site. Truly to engage with the 'spirit' of land or place is surely to have one's metaphysical intuitions rearranged to such a degree that it will not be possible for the seeker simply to scuttle back to town and resume her place amongst the cogs and wheels of a civilisation that rests on an incompatible metaphysical premise. It is not a coincidence, after all, that traditional indigenous people who exhibit a reverential attitude to land also appear to comport themselves, personally and socially, in every department of life, in ways profoundly counter to the temper of modernity.

To step inside a panpsychist universe then is immediately to feel the necessity for existential modalities radically at variance with those we adopt unquestioningly, as second nature, in the materialist universe of modernity. One of these new modalities may be described as a modality of *encounter* as opposed to knowledge; another as the modality of *synergy* as opposed to domination-and-control.

Let's look at encounter first. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, knowledge has been regarded, in the West, as the proper and distinctive vocation of humanity: our special virtue has been to *know* the world, objectively and rationally, in a way that no other species can. But is knowledge really the unqualified good that it has invariably been considered to be in Western civilisation? Doesn't this view of knowledge presuppose that the world we seek to know is wide open for investigation, that it can and should have no say in the matter of its investigation, that permission for investigation cannot be sought from it because it is incapable of giving such permission? In other words, doesn't this view of knowledge as an end in itself presuppose that the world is a pure object, incapable of self-presence or self-possession, and hence infinitely open to our dissection and analysis? But if this presupposition is dropped, if it is conceded that the world is a subject in its own right, or a field of subjectivity, present to itself, in possession of an interiority exclusively its own, then the question might well be asked what business we have subjecting it to our indiscriminate probe in the name of 'knowledge'.

The appropriate response to a world conceived as subject seems rather to be to seek to *encounter* it. To encounter another is to approach them as one with whom it is possible to have a relationship and from whom one can expect a response. Since encounter

involves contact with the subjectivity of the other, it can be said to have occurred only if the other has allowed us this glimpse into its interiority. Encounter is accordingly necessarily mutual; if we impose our will on the other, or ignore the fact of its subjectivity in our dealings with it, then encounter cannot occur.

From the point of view of panpsychism then, the primary goal is not to theorise the world, but to encounter it. Every action we take, every posture we assume, now becomes an interaction with a responsive world. A mode of *address*, rather than of representation or explanation, is thenceforth required in our approach to reality, and our ability to orient ourselves will depend as much on our familiarity with the workings of the poetic order and its protocols as on our familiarity with the workings of the causal order. In order to actualise a culture of encounter, we need practices of invocation. Most human activities, at both collective and individual levels, can be transformed into an ongoing conversation with an increasingly animated world through practices of call and response.

However, when the world is regarded as a 'spirit-thing', with a subjectivity and ends and meanings of its own, then it behoves us not only to seek to encounter it but to *let it be* – to refrain from taking charge of it and allowing it instead to unfold in its own way. Because we are a part of it, it seems safe to assume that our own self-realisation will be a function of its. In letting it realise itself then, we shall also incidentally be furthering our own richest self-realisation: we come into being, most fully and richly, in a world which is itself most fully and richly in process of self-realisation.

Letting things be means just that – not interfering unduly with the unfolding of the things around us, allowing natural cycles to take their course, letting the rivers run, the mountains mount and the beings be. At the ideal limit letting-be prescribes a scenario in which we gather our food from the wild and fashion our shelters and garments from materials at hand in such a way that these activities of ours feed back into and sustain the natural cycles that produce our livelihood. But what could letting-be mean in modern societies, in which such gathering practices have long since become impracticable?

It is true that in modern societies we can no longer just pluck food from the forests or run it to ground in ways that directly contribute to the self-realisation of the land. Some kind of proactivity on our part is generally going to be necessary if we are to meet our needs. But proactivity need not take the form of recutting the cloth of our world to suit ourselves. It need not mean manipulating and controlling that world, instrumentalising it and imposing our own designs on it. Rather, the kind of action that we cultivate, in the service of our needs, can follow lines of *synergy* rather than intervention or control or the imposition of self on other. By this I mean that we can learn to identify the patterns of energetic flow already at play in the world for the purpose of then hitching a ride with them. Instead of cutting across these flows in order to arrive at premeditated ends of our own, we need, in the first place, to nominate our ends partly in response to what is possible in the world as it is, the world as it is already unfolding, and, in the second place, to make use of existing patterns of energetic flow in order to arrive at these ends.

We shall find that much of our day-to-day praxis, at both personal and social levels, can be re-orchestrated along synergistic rather than impose-and-control lines. Instead of setting ourselves hard-to-achieve goals or harbouring exotic desires, then turning our world upside down to meet them, we can, at the personal level, work *with* the grain of the given instead of *against* it. So - to take a light-hearted example - when people seek adventure they normally do so by choosing some exotic tour package, like horse riding along the old Silk Road of China or picking wild apples with Kazakhstan nomads or having themselves lowered in a cage into the ocean to meet white sharks nose-to-nose. But we might equally well scrutinise our own immediate neighbourhood for the unknown, the offbeat, for the numinous and unpredictable elements that the neighbourhood might

contain. We might take a pilgrimage to the source of our local creek or river, for instance, or, like the 'cave clan', explore the half-forgotten labyrinth of the city's underground storm water system; or we might simply shoulder our pack and set off, without a premeditated plan. To operate in the synergistic mode requires flexibility, detachment from fixed ideas and overdetermined goals, and an eye for opportunities if and as they present. It might not get you to where you thought you wanted to be, but it *will* get you to a place that will be appropriate when it happens.

The praxis of societies as well as individuals can follow synergistic as opposed to impose-and-control lines. If economics is defined as the study of the economy of energy required for the satisfaction of human needs, as Peter Kropotkin ventured to suggest more than a century ago (though his definition has been ignored by the majority of subsequent economists)ⁱⁱⁱ, and if the world is understood in energetic terms, then it is through its economics that a society will demonstrate its basic relation to the world. In other words, the metaphysical commitments of a given society will be evident in its economics. The materialist societies of the modern West extract nonhuman energies and deploy them with scant regard for non-instrumental meanings or communicative potentials that might inhere in them. True, such societies have latterly begun to think about *conserving* energy, for the sake of human posterity or the long-term viability of the human environment. But from a panpsychist point of view it is not enough merely to conserve energy, unilaterally extracting and transforming it here and storing it there. One has to allow planetary energies to follow their own contours of flow, contours which reveal local and possibly global aspects of the world's own *telos*. In due course one conjoins one's own energies with these flows in order to create new patterns which satisfy one's material needs in ways that contribute to the further unfolding of this larger *telos*.

Contemporary Western societies have already discovered and begun to experiment with forms of praxis that appear to qualify, to some degree, as instances of synergy. These are those that fall under the rubric of sustainability. Under this rubric we are starting to explore an 'economy of energy' that is consistent with the integrity of the planetary processes that provide the energy. How are we to gain the power required to run our cities, for example? We can do so either by dynamiting and mining entire landscapes for fossil fuels and diverting and damming wild rivers for hydro-electricity, or we can gain the necessary power simply by receiving the sunlight that falls on our roofs, or inviting the wind to turn our mills: windflows and sunflows are not diminished or denatured by warming our solar panels or blowing our windmills; they can be tapped without basic meteorological and solar patterns being fractured.

However, sustainability understood in this contemporary sense is still basically materialist. It works physically with the grain of the given but eschews creative engagement with it. In order to count as fully synergistic, in the (broadly panpsychist) sense of synergy that is consistent with spiritualities of land or place, the praxis of sustainability needs to incorporate the poetics of communicative engagement. Sources of energy – sun, wind, tides and so on – need to be mythed, storied, personified for the purposes of invocation; sources of sustenance – plants and animals – need to be sung and thanked. The transactions with the world whereby we ensure our own self-maintenance need at the same time to be invitations to conversation, to poetic collaboration. In other words, praxis is always a matter of poetics as well as pragmatics: poetic engagement helps to prefigure new pragmatic constellations and pragmatic engagement helps to enlarge poetic horizons. In this way praxis becomes a primary locus of creativity in the panpsychist culture: new psychophysical formations are added to the world via the intercourse of humanity with reality.

A spirituality which takes world *per se* as its 'object' of devotion makes no sharp divide between the living and the non-living, 'nature' and the artefactual. As a psychophysical field of ever-changing, inter-flowing configurations, reality carries rocks, apartment blocks and factories along with forests and arid shrublands into the patterns of its unfolding. We synergise with this psychically activated world not by insisting on ecology after the event, erasing suburbs to restore lost woodlands or felling mature exotics to plant indigenous seedlings, but rather by taking the pulse of the world-as-it-is, then finding within that pulse the trajectory of the world's unfolding. To raze and rearrange things according to our own designs – even our ecological designs – is just to perpetuate the cycle of domination-and-control. To break this cycle, and so enable the world in time to recover its own course, we need only to acquiesce in the given, at least to the degree necessary to enable a larger *telos* to re-form and re-emerge. When the contours of that larger unfolding are clear, we can re-align with it, allowing its purposes and poetics to provide the parameters of ours while at the same time seeking to amplify those purposes and poetics with our own.

The scope of synergy then as an existential modality is cosmological rather than merely ecological. It enjoins an address to matter *per se* and not merely to living systems. Its outcomes are accordingly in the shorter term not coextensive with those of ecologism. But the environmentalist need not fear. When synergy is our basic modality, no further harm can come to the world and the scars of harms that have already been inflicted will gradually fade and disappear in the world's embrace. The environmentalist who declines to take this cosmological step, however, who refuses the re-animation of matter *per se*, will continue to treat *things* – our artefacts and buildings, for instance, and the inanimate ground beneath our feet – as *nothing*, in the sense of being amenable of erasure, replacement, disposal. This instrumental attitude, which is implicitly an attitude of violence, will then be the environmentalist's basic way of being in the world. Anyone who assumes the stance of instrumentalism with respect to matter will be obliged to switch back and forth between this basic modality and the different, indeed opposite, one that is required for transactions with those entities that form the small, privileged islands of moral considerability in the vast expanses of inconsiderable matter. To extend consideration to these entities will require a pause, a moment of readjustment, as one changes gear into the new mode. In the unreflective haste and confusion of everyday life one is likely to revert for the most part to one's habitual mode, the mode that is second nature to materialism, and even to the ecologicistic offshoots of materialism, namely that of instrumentalisation. Once the cosmological step has been taken however, and the panpsychist outlook assumed, special modalities for our interactions with living things will no longer be required; such mutualistic modalities will already be reliably wired into us as our basic way of being in the world.

Truly to take seriously the spiritualities of land and place that have surfaced in the Western episteme in the last decade or two then would entail a metaphysical conversion that would cut deeper at the root of modernity than any of our current – ecologicistic - forms of environmentalism do. It is both the promise and the challenge of such spiritualities that they appear to entrain an existential modality, and correlative forms of praxis, that are so profoundly counter, at both personal and social levels, to the definitive tendencies of modernity.

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- i Rose, Deborah Bird (1996). *Nourishing Terrains*, Australian Heritage Commission: Canberra: Chapter 1.
- ii The present paper offers (highly abbreviated) introductions to various ideas – specifically those of panpsychism, encounter, and synergy - that are fully developed in two recent books of mine: Mathews, Freya (2003) *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism*, SUNY Press: Albany NY; and its as yet untitled sequel, also published by SUNY Press and forthcoming later in 2004. See also Mathews, Freya (1999). 'Letting the World Grow Old: an Ethos of Countermodernity', *Worldviews: Environment Culture Religion* 3, 2, 119-138.
- iii See Peter Kropotkin (1974). *Fields Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, George Allen and Unwin: London: 17.