

# It's Not Just What You Say, But How You Say It: An Exploration of the Moral Dimensions of Metaphor and the Phenomenology of Narrative

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## **Abstract**

*Although there is a more visceral and, perhaps, longer lasting influence in oral narratives than in written ones, the ethical dimensions of both imply several layers of moral responsibility due to the intersubjective nature of the acts. Through a discussion of narrative ethics and phenomenology, I assert the potential for language, in general, and metaphor, in particular, in fostering biocentric ethics. I define a particular biocentric ethics as a process of intersubjective empathy through embodied experiences with other beings, and suggest both an emphasis on spoken/written metaphor and a practice of “metaphorical imaginative embodiment” as potential ways of nurturing such an ethics.*

## **Résumé**

*Si l'influence de la narration orale est plus viscérale et, sans doute, plus durable que celle de la narration écrite, toutes deux ont néanmoins des dimensions éthiques qui comportent plusieurs niveaux de responsabilité morale en raison de la nature intersubjective des actes. Au fil d'une discussion sur l'éthique et la phénoménologie narratives, je soutiens que le langage, en général, et la métaphore, en particulier, ont le potentiel de nourrir une éthique biocentrique. Ma définition de l'éthique biocentrique est celle d'un processus d'empathie par le truchement d'expériences exprimées entre les êtres. Comme moyens possibles d'alimenter une telle éthique, je propose, d'une part, de privilégier la métaphore parlée ou écrite et, d'autre part, la pratique de la « personnification métaphorique imaginative ».*

Metaphor is everywhere. It is infused in stories, embedded in language, fundamental to one's understanding of the world. In fact, I have just illustrated several metaphors and find myself hard pressed to write a single sentence that does not contain them, especially those metaphors that I am most critical of in this paper. Some, such as “good is up” and “knowledge is a building,” are so completely assumed in everyday language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), that I am often not even aware of them. What I find most intriguing, as Lakoff and Johnson have pointed out in *Metaphors We Live By*, is the influence of these metaphors on thought and behaviour. Moreover, I am interested in the

role of metaphor in how one perceives and experiences their world, and how, ultimately, this influences one's ethics.

It is my contention that embodied experience, such that one feels their body continuous with the "flesh of the world"—as in Merleau-Ponty's (Gill, 1991) notion of "matter as flesh," "that is at once both sensible and sensitive" (Abram, 1996, p. 67)—will allow one to empathize with other embodied beings to the extent of nurturing an ethics of respect for all such beings.

I present this idea in the face of its opposition; in the face of culturally dominant languages, metaphors and stories—specifically within Western, literate culture—that disembodiment experience and foster notions of a mechanical world filled with isolated beings and automatons. I present a phenomenological understanding of the "world," as the way in which I experience my world, and participate in the world(s) of others.

Also, as one who studies environmental ethics and identifies most closely with biocentrism, I ponder why it remains so marginal an ethics and considered so radical in its practical applications? I have wondered how a dominantly anthropocentric ethical paradigm is so strongly maintained? Can a shift in language, metaphor, and the stories we tell foster a shift in ethics? As I explore all these notions, I am encouraged to practice what I propose and offer the following short story before beginning my analysis:

### Tree Story

We sit in a circle, mesmerized. The teller slowly, carefully, unwinds a tale that has been spun too tight by others. A tale, that in our rush to hear it, has snagged on our ears and stretched taut across them so that we strain to listen. It is not a tale meant solely for the ears, as we have mistakenly thought.

As the teller twists and sways, creaks and swishes, fissures and knots, our fingers twitch, our palms itch, our noses tingle, nostrils flaring, ears still straining, eyes lolling. We are invited to dance the tale along with the teller, with each other.

We plunge into the soft earth, we are Soft-Bodies wriggling through caverns, rivers, rock, where twisting roots entwine. We are Hard-Shells meandering through rich debris meals, creating possibility, enacting renewal. We are Many-Eyes climbing up spongy stalks into parasols ripe with new life between fleshy folds. We are Long-Legs, shadow hopping, flitting through sudden shards of light, momentarily dazzled. Then, leaping onto long fronds and springing up into the canopy, we are Feather-Wings, flying past a feast of plump red orbs clustered among dense branches and waxy leaves. Up we continue, we are Flutter-Wings, flitting toward the outstretched limbs that interlace an undulating roof of green. We are Tiny-Ones swimming in the dense air, moist and thick with the breath of the world. We inhale each other, deeply.

Glancing back, we see the pattern of our movements, each moment of the tale made visible by the sinewy strings extending between ourselves. We had not noticed them before. Delicate yet tenacious threads, they are hidden in the shadows and almost invisible in the sun, save a flicker of iridescent sheen. We look closer, not with our eyes but with our skins and suddenly feel them everywhere, humming, reverberating, so many that it is difficult to single-out and follow any one strand.

Soon, we become aware that the tale has slackened about our lobes and is spiralling in the dance, in all of us, dancing. We are beginning to listen with our toes, tapping, and to see with our arms, twirling, hands clapping. And then we understand. We will no longer ask to hear the story of the tree. We will become the forest.

## Narrative Ethics

Although a seemingly passive endeavour, reading is an active pursuit whereby the story and stories within are made intelligible through the active understanding and empathy of the reader, who is then implicated in the events as they unfold. Asserting the contagious nature of stories, Adam Newton (1995) quotes Tolstoy's statement that:

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by those feelings and also experience them. (p. 65)

With this quotation Newton is suggesting a certain permeation of the author/teller's words resulting in a lingering effect on the reader/listener. This signifies a special kind of intimacy in reading and points to the potential ethical power of the "Saying" latent in the text. It serves as a reminder that authors should be mindful of the messages they may be inadvertently sending through the use of their language.

The particularity and intimacy of the "Saying" also points to the impossibility of a position of moral relativism (Newton, 1995). The sense I get from Newton is that a recognition of moral obligation in and through engagement with others is of greater import than the adoption of an external, universal normative prescription. Moreover, the immediate, particular, and obligatory implications of intersubjectivity seem to favour ethics embedded in a personally locatable and meaningful context. As by Newton's own definition:

"ethics" refers to the radicality and uniqueness of the moral situation itself, a binding claim exercised upon the self by a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding . . . the ethical subject is "assigned to morality by the appeal of the other." (p. 12)

This contextual, intersubjective, ethical nature of “Saying” in narrative is an essential point with respect to a biocentric philosophy realized through intersubjectivity—the experience of all beings as subjects of moral consideration—and is given a thorough, and quite convincing examination in David Abram’s (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

### Phenomenological Intersubjectivity

Throughout this book, Abram (1996) stresses that the effectiveness of a story depends upon an intimate relation to place, which in turn is influenced by one’s perceptual abilities. He advocates that the attunement of human senses is necessary for one to engage in a discourse with one’s other-than-human<sup>1</sup> surroundings, which is furthermore essential to the inclusion of “nature” in human ethics. Turning to the phenomenological work of Husserl, Abram embraces his notion of intersubjectivity as a way of explaining human perceptual experience of the world. By this principle, people are not self-contained subjects experiencing an outer, objective world, rather that everyone is an experiencing subject and there is reciprocity through an engagement with one another.

Abram (1996) then applies this theory to human encounters with the other-than-human realm. Contact with other beings confirms one’s own sentience as much as it asserts theirs. He describes the experience of an ant crawling upon his arm, reacting to his movement and mood and realizes the shared nature of the encounter:

In relation to the ant I feel myself as a dense and material object, as capricious in my actions as the undulating earth itself. Finally, then, why might not this “reversibility” of subject and object extend to every entity that I experience? Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive to the beings around it and to me. (p. 67)

Abram’s (1996) experience of intersubjectivity through his phenomenological engagement with the ant is exactly the kind of experience that can lead to the realization of an environmental ethics that I feel is desirable. In fact, it is Abram’s understanding of a phenomenology of language and perception, combined with Newton’s notion of narrative ethics, that has inspired my own definition of a biocentric ethics, whereby one’s ethical responsibilities are realized through the presence of and engagement with “other(s),” including other-than-human subjects, in each particular context of encounter. Language is crucial in the development of this kind of ethics, as an experience of intersubjectivity can be either fostered or hindered by dominant, culturally specific metaphors pervasive in everyday language, as we shall see in the following sections.

## Pervasive Metaphors that Impede Intersubjectivity

In their book, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) reveal just how important and influential metaphor is within whole systems of thought. Take their example of “argument is war.” The terms associated with this metaphorical concept are likely uttered countless times a day without any conscious recognition of the metaphor as such by either speaker or listener. Lakoff and Johnson provide the following expressions as examples: “Your claims are *indefensible* . . . . I’ve never *won* an argument with him . . . . He *shot down* all of my arguments” (p. 4). What effect does this way of speaking have on relationships between people and how they interact?

In answer to this question, it is perhaps fruitful to look to another dominant culturally and historically specific metaphor evident within many human practices: “animals are machines.” Take the treatment of domestic “livestock,” for example, where even the term “live-stock” itself indicates a related conception of “animals are resources.”

Whether one truly means it or not, this language reflects a conceptual metaphor and must at some level reinforce the acceptability of behaviour aligned with it. This, I believe, is evident in the factory farming of cows. Compared to beef, the dairy industry is probably not seen to be as evil. The sanctity of “mother’s milk” with its white purity stands in stark contrast to the blood red meat of murder. Photos of happy Holsteins grazing in open pasture are also far less provocative than those of cattle on the factory conveyor belt. One need look no further than at the photographs on Monsanto’s website to get this impression.<sup>2</sup> And yet an equally heinous mentality pervades this pastoral scene. The language that is used to describe Monsanto’s product “Posilac bovine somatotropin,” a growth hormone, reveals the underlying attitude of the company towards the cows:

Posilac bovine somatotropin is widely accepted and used as a *management tool* to enhance dairy cow *productivity*. (Monsanto, 2001a, Posilac 1 Step bovine somatotropin by Monsanto: General Information [Online], emphasis added)

All healthy cows, beginning during the ninth or tenth week of lactation, are good candidates for POSILAC. In addition to increasing *milk yield* immediately, *feed intake* also increases, although this may lag behind the increase in milk by several weeks. The increased *nutrient intake* is used both to support the increased *milk production* and to replenish *body reserves* in the cow. (Monsanto, 2001b, Posilac 1 Step bovine somatotropin by Monsanto: Production and Management [Online], emphasis added)

The full extent to which language, thought and action are metaphorical is often not recognized. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have demonstrated, familiar and fairly subtle metaphorical terms go practically unnoticed, and yet they fundamentally influence ethics because they reinforce a physical reality with an accepted conceptual construct, thereby reaffirming the actions,

beliefs, and values that correspond with it. This is evident in the “cow is a milk machine” example, with its language of productivity and efficiency.

Today, the language of mechanism has reached a pinnacle in mainstream speech and conceptions of reality through metaphors directly associated with computers. The human/computer “interface” is now a permeable boundary, as not only have human brains come to be described in terms of the input of information and data analysis, but the reverse has also occurred with computers said to be infected with viruses.

So what is the danger in this metaphor, if any? Well, according to Katherine Wayne (1995), there are two main types of metaphor: generative and root. Generative metaphors arise out of root metaphors, so although a generative metaphor may appear benign, it is in fact within the necessary acceptance of its root metaphor where the danger lies. For in Bowers’ words, it is the root metaphor “which is used by a cultural group as conceptual templates for bringing to human experience a moral and conceptual sense of order” (p. 98).

To demonstrate, Wayne provides the following examples:

We can see that the brain inputs data at rapid rates and can store it in virtually limitless amounts . . . (gen. met. is computers). “All you have to provide is a lecture, put in all the pertinent information, get that information out to the students, and get them to hand it back to you in some understandable form” (gen. met. is that of language as a conduit; information is a physical object being put in, gotten out, and handed back). (p. 98)

Wayne then sums up that:

These analogs (generative metaphors) only make sense because of the taken for granted nature of the root metaphor (original sin, progress, individualism, mechanistic nature of the world, a man-centered universe, etc.) that frames the choice of generative metaphors used in the process of understanding the “new.” (p. 99)

Therein lies the rub. It is the inconspicuous and insidious role these generative and root metaphors play in the participation and reinforcement of whole cultural paradigms, that in turn influence cultural belief systems and values. Not to mention the influence this has on the way that people personally experience and engage or disengage with their world.

## Ethical Dimensions of Root and Generative Metaphors

Referring to the work of David Orr, Wayne (1995) outlines the connection between environmental ethics and language as follows:

If we accept Orr’s first principle, that all education is environmental education, and we consider that moral education is the transmission of our value systems,

and that, as others suggest, our value systems are encoded in our language, it is apparent that there is a significant relationship between how we speak and what we speak. To say this another way, our responses to the environment lie embedded in the transmission of our culture through our language. *If our language embeds an ecological awareness, we should be able to tease out the metaphors which support that awareness; if not, our language embeds other cultural patterns and the metaphors expressing them should provide us with an insight into what they are and what actions they support.* (p. 2-3, emphasis added)

Through a focus upon the work of Ursula Le Guin, Wayne (1995) proposes a causal relationship between metaphor and morality stating that: “Le Guin shows us how different metaphorical underpinnings of language can lead to different knowledge, thus leading to different moral templates” (p. 134-135). My point here is not to argue for a one-directional, causal relationship, but rather a mere recognition of the reciprocal influence each element in the relationship exerts upon one another. Root and generative metaphors arise within systems of thought and then shape, sometimes even reframe, and maintain those systems.

In Le Guin’s novel *Always Coming Home*, Wayne (1995) identifies seven generative metaphors: war, lord, machine, house, animal, dance, and, the way. The languages, conceptual schemata, and morality of the two opposing cultures, the Kesh and the Condor peoples, exemplify these metaphors. For example, employing metaphors like the way, animal, and dance, the Kesh conceptualize life as a hinged spiral, which facilitates their view of life as process and relationship.

In contrast, the Condor people typify the metaphors war, lord, house, and machine through “social behaviours reflective of dominance in the form of war, enslavement, both literal and figurative, of women, conquered peoples, and other-than-human life, power hierarchies, environmental degradation, and technological/material obsession” (Wayne, 1995, p. 105). Practical examples of “animals are machines” and “argument is war” are also at play in this “fictional” culture (a thinly veiled futuristic version of 20th Century American culture) (p. 105). Ultimately, a root metaphor of progress is central to the Condor culture. Wayne adds that “this culturally and historically specific idea of progress also relies on associated concepts of rationalism, technology, autonomy, and individualism” (p. 105).

### Root Metaphors of Atomism: A Legacy of Enlightenment

This particular idea of progress is also critically examined by Mary Midgley (2001) in her discussion of the repercussions of the Western concept of atomism. She identifies two opposing yet reinforcing expressions of atomistic theory:

- the scientific reductionism between mind and matter (materialism leading to determinism and fatalism), and
- social atomism which favours the autonomous individual and free will.

The socio-political consequences of both visions are dire and are made worse by the metaphors that sustain them (Midgley, 2001).

Atomism is identified by Midgley (2001) as a concept that valorizes the individual parts over the whole, and considers discrete particles or entities as more real than the aggregate. She highlights several scientific and social applications of atomistic theory, yet stresses her purpose that:

The point that matters here is that they are modern versions of a powerful but not specially rational vision, derived from the atomists, of the natural world as somehow radically foreign to us and of ourselves as radically foreign to that world—a vision that is still influential in our thinking today. (p. 35)

It is this atomistic theory and imagery that acts as a root for machine metaphors and so influences certain imaginative visions of the world as mechanical and manipulatable. As Midgley (2001) asserts:

Machine imagery changes the world-view profoundly because machines are by definition under human control. They can in a sense be fully understood because they can be taken to pieces. And if the world is essentially a machine, then it can be taken to pieces too and reassembled more satisfactorily. It was the fusion of these two imaginative visions that made modern science look possible. And it had to look possible before anyone could actually start doing it. (p. 25)

An imaginative vision is a powerful thing, so I must turn briefly now to a discussion on cosmological conceptions of the universe, as its relevance lies in the fact that human beings tend to construct an imaginative vision of the universe upon which cultural narratives are then based, and from which we glean root and generative metaphors. Medieval European society provides an elegant example of this cultural trait, and a clear contrast with modern notions of a mechanistic and atomistic “worldview.”<sup>3</sup> In the epilogue of *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis (1964) makes the assertion that the nature of the “Model,” or cosmological master narrative, of any culture is in part determined by the psychology of the period. He states that:

in every age the human mind is deeply influenced by the accepted Model of the universe. But there is two-way traffic; the Model is also influenced by the prevailing temper of mind. . . . We can no longer dismiss the change of Models as a simple progress from error to truth. No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. (p. 222)

It would be wise to adopt the humility suggested by Lewis (1964) and resist from looking upon dominant Western master narratives as the embodiment of ultimate universal truths. True or otherwise, the story of a “Big Bang”



as the origin of an inanimate planet Earth orbiting an enormous ball of gas in a cold vacuum of meaningless space does not inspire a personal sense of meaning and connection with the world. Furthermore, this conceptual context has aided a conceptual division to occur between human society and the rest of the world through a kind of disengagement with the lived, perceptual world.

Here is yet another dimension of the influence of atomism upon thought and experience. By this theory, the human senses are not able to directly perceive our world; they are merely the medium through which the raw materials pass on their way to the brain for interpretation (Mikunas & Pilotta, 1998). The idea that all things are constituted of atomic particles does not, in itself, necessarily lead to a detached view of the world. However, the abstract idea that perception is fundamentally the result of atomic particles stimulating parts of the brain is quite different from the notion that the world is full of animate perceptible entities that humans can relate to and potentially communicate with.

The latter of which may be found in Lewis' (1964) understanding of a medieval European conception of the universe, in which all matter is subject to sympathies and antipathies. The language and metaphor of this system is deliberate and effective in fostering a cosmology of order, purpose, and meaning. The words sympathy and antipathy are not simply meant to describe the physical interactions between the basic elements, such as attraction and repulsion; rather:

In medieval science the fundamental concept was that of certain sympathies, antipathies, and strivings inherent in matter itself. Everything has its right place, its home, the region that suits it, and, if not forcibly restrained, moves thither by a sort of homing instinct . . . Thus, while every falling body for us illustrates the "law" of gravitation, for them it illustrated the "kindly enclyning" of terrestrial bodies to their "kindly stede" the Earth. (p. 92)

I imagine the nature of such sympathies and antipathies as threadlike connections between beings and words, forming an intricate web of influence. Vibrations shiver along the threads as words are spoken and then radiate out from the nexus to all the other immediately connected beings and words. This metaphor is particularly evocative because it exists within language while it also expresses the nature of language itself, much like the metaphor of language found in Merleau-Ponty's writing (Gill, 1991):

Language is thus organic in two senses of the term. It consists of a vast network of tenuous yet effective relationships and connections ("tissues" and "threads"), and it continually undergoes change and development within the ongoing fabric of human life. (p. 17)

It is this way of speaking that is important in facilitating an experience of the world as interrelated, intersubjective, and ultimately meaningful on a personal

level. And, as opposed to the dubious metaphors already explored in this paper, there are many other metaphors already prevalent in the English language that can foster biocentric ethical considerations. This is also where I see the potential role for phenomenology to play in the (re)imagining of language and experience (exploding dualisms, fostering intersubjective experience, (re)contextualizing ethics).

### Metaphors that Foster Biocentric Ethics

Similar metaphors of fabric and webs are threaded throughout two of Merleau-Ponty's works in particular: *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* (Gill, 1991). Jerry Gill notes Merleau-Ponty's use of these metaphors to provide a philosophy of phenomenology by which to alleviate the atomistic separation of people from the rest of the world:

The notion of threads through which we interactively know and alter the world stands in stark contrast both to traditional philosophical models according to which knowledge is passively yet unerringly received, and to modern philosophy, which begins by completely separating the knower from the world and ends up desperately seeking some way to overcome skepticism. These "threads" connect us with the world, thereby providing reliable if incomplete knowledge, while at the same time distancing us from the world, thereby negating arrogance and complacency. (p. 4)

Through this metaphor, Merleau-Ponty both asserts a human attribute to personally perceive, and so come to know, the world by interacting with and within it, and promotes a philosophy of humility in doing so. Gill (1991) adds that:

The adjective "intentional" with which Merleau-Ponty qualifies his notion of threads serves once again to emphasize the interactive character of our existence and cognition. It is by seeking to carry out our intentions in the world that we constitute ourselves as well as our knowledge of the world. We are tied to the world in such a way as not to be able to disentangle ourselves from it, but also in such a way as not to be able to fully control or track it. Moreover, philosophical reflection cannot transcend this threadlike connection in order to know the world "as it is in itself." Only by slackening the threads, that is, by reflecting on them and the world while and as we function in the world by means of them, can we gain an understanding of the world and our own place in it. (p. 4)

As I read the above passages, I imagine the "intentional threads" connecting me to everything other than me, and manifest my total immersion in the undulating weave of life. In fact, this web/fabric metaphor enables my understanding of metaphor itself; gives it flesh, energy, and dimension.

Metaphor can be defined as: one thing is another. This seems to be a dimension of the yogic understanding that "All is one" (Myss, 1996), for it suggests that atomism is an illusion, and seeks to uncover the integral tensions

and connections between all things,<sup>4</sup> just like the “web of influence” imagery I discussed in relation to medieval language and conceptual understandings of the world. Things include words. Words are things in the world, they do not only represent things. And just as all things are replete with energy, so too are words. Thoughts are unspoken words and are also energy.

Careless thoughts and careless words can have ill effects, just as positive thoughts and loving words can have affirmative power. Seen in this light, every thought, word, and action has an ethical dimension. If one engages in an act with the conscious and felt intentions of humility, gratitude, and respect, both the interior spirit and exterior energies of the universe in which that person is immersed will be influenced in a way very different than if the act is carried out with either malicious intent or total indifference.

As it is through language that I engage and communicate with the world, the kind of language that I use both reflects and influences how I experience the world. By “language” here, I mean to include “body language” (gesture and bearing), as well as verbal (spoken and tonal) and written. Furthermore, awareness of language is vitally important when used by someone in a leadership role, such as an educator.

Even as a teaching assistant, I am conscious of the metaphors that I employ and strive to avoid sending mixed messages and reinforcing conceptualizations of the world that do not correspond with my own biocentric ethics. Equally important, I strive to enhance my use of language to include intersubjective metaphors, like those of fabric and webs, as highlighted by Gill (1991). As opposed to the view of an isolated subjective mind looking out upon a detached, objectified, and mechanical world, I see alternative understandings of the world in the language of these metaphors. I see this as a way of speaking that embodies what is spoken, giving flesh to philosophy.

### Metaphor as Imaginative Embodiment

I give flesh to philosophy by embodying metaphor. To illustrate, I turn to yoga for an example. Each yoga pose has a name. Many are named after animals and physical other-than-human entities. For example, there is the cat pose, the cobra pose, the mountain pose, and the tree pose. Are these names used simply as imitative labels, or are they meant as deeper metaphors? The primary difference being that the metaphor invokes a sense of the being/entity named and suggests connections and meaning well beyond superficial representation. In the tree pose, I strive to become a tree: I imagine roots growing down out of the soles of my feet, tapping into the energies of the earth and providing stability (mental and physical) and grounding. I feel each cell within my body breathing and my up-stretched arms reach for the sky, for the light of the sun to enter me and reverberate within.

What is crucial to realize here, is that through the imaginative embodiment of other beings I am not solely pondering them, but aspects of myself through them. In other words, I am able to empathize with a tree, to understand and relate to it, because I am first *searching myself* for the qualities I sense and “recognize” in it. As I strive to become a tree, I do not transcend my own embodiment and believe myself to be thinking and feeling *as a tree*. I do not presume to know how a tree thinks or feels, there are mysteries of others that I may never be able to know; yet I can still appreciate their subjectivity and complexity.

When pondering this other, I must be wary, as Leesa Fawcett (2000) warns, not to project what I think a tree should be onto a tree, and imaginatively “reduce the unknown subjectivity of an “other” being to the limited range of [my] own experiences” (p. 140). As an environmental educator, Fawcett implores her students to look upon other beings with a “loving eye” (p. 139). As defined by Marilyn Frye:

the loving eye does not make the object of perception into something edible, does not try to assimilate it, does not reduce it to the size of the seer's desire, fear, imagination, and hence does not have to simplify. It knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known. (Fawcett, 2000, p. 139)

It is in this spirit that I echo Fawcett and Frye in calling for a “loving inner eye” within a practice of metaphorical imaginative embodiment. A generosity that respects the mysteries of “otherness,” yet allows for feelings of interrelation and intersubjectivity. As in the process of being a tree I am learning about *my* “tree-like” qualities, asking myself “how am *I* like a tree?” and pondering myself through an appreciation of my interrelationship with others.

Swami Sivananda Radha (1995) discusses a very similar practice in her book *Hatha Yoga: The Hidden Language: Symbols, Secrets and Metaphor*. She describes yoga as a journey or process of (self)discovery. The history of yoga is rich and varied, and it is traditionally a practice of spirituality. However, yoga has come to mean many things to many people in the West, and Radha is mildly critical of the adoption of yoga as a purely physical exercise. She stresses that the postures, or *asanas*, practiced in Hatha yoga each embody a particular biocentric philosophy and through their symbolic meaning “they are meant to remind one that the world is a place in which many living creatures have their existence. All life is sacred” (p. 6).

Through the practice of yoga, one experiences the intimate connections between body, mind and spirit, which, as we saw above with metaphor in speech, reinforces the yogic philosophy of the first chakra that “All Is One . . . that we are connected to all life and that every choice we make and every belief we hold exerts influence upon the whole of life” (Myss, 1996, p. 104). To facilitate the process, Radha (1995) states:

it is possible to tell the body what to do by applying will power and strong imaginative desire. The power of concentration and imagination applied to the asanas and what they imply puts the body into a kind of “listening mode.” (p. 11)

As the body becomes more receptive to its own messages, the whole self becomes more receptive to its own intuitive perception and learning.<sup>5</sup> In Radha’s (1995) words, the process may go something like this:

If we look at a tree, the two things we see first are the large trunk and the crown. What comes to mind?—the alignment, the uprightness, the strength. . . . There is a balance between the spread of the branches and the crown, and the root system which expands in width and in depth, reaching to assimilate nutrients. . . . As you do this posture, questions such as these might arise in your mind: Where have my roots spread? Where do they get their nourishment? Which are mine and which belong to someone else? What competes with my roots for nourishment? (p. 105)

There is, I believe, great potential for one to both learn about oneself and experience intersubjectivity through this process. Embodying metaphors can help one realize the *reciprocity of perception*, an important concept that can be further understood through Merleau-Ponty’s (Gill, 1991) notion of “matter as flesh.” Abram (1996) provides an example of this metaphorical notion by suggesting that when one reaches out to a tree, caresses the bumps and fissures of its rough bark, they are in turn being touched by the tree itself. He explains that the ability for a hand to touch relies on the nature of the hand itself as a touchable object.

As one imaginatively embodies other beings, it becomes easier to recognize that the perceiver is also the perceived, hence the intersubjective nature of perception. The sensuous imagery evoked by Merleau-Ponty’s (Gill, 1991) metaphors of the “flesh of the world” and the “fabric of life” facilitates a meaningful experience of being a living body in the world, enabling a deeper empathy toward other embodied beings. They also enable and foster a kind of communicative engagement with other-than-human beings.

As the roots of a tree spread out in a network beneath the surface of the soil, touching and being touched by the roots of other trees, layers of humus, sand, clay, and caressed by sinewy worms and burrowing ants, so too do spoken words radiate out through the air, influencing and being influenced by the speaker, the listener(s) and the surrounding context within which they mingle. Both scenarios of engagement entail ethical dimensions. Trees do not stand alone, they participate in a forest. Words are not abstract sounds, they participate in our bodily engagement with all living beings. When one enacts a yoga posture and speaks aloud the name of the *asana*, one invokes the thing itself, through the sound, the breath that pushes it out, the metaphor it inspires as the muscles and bones and blood of one’s body work to achieve and hold the posture, and connects us through our embodiment of it. It is this kind of understanding and experience of intersubjectivity and

language, that then enables the embodiment of a biocentric environmental ethics, gives it flesh and personal meaning, a visceral and lasting respect for all living beings as subjects entitled to moral consideration.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I use this term, adapted from David Abram's (1996) phrase "more-than-human," as it inspires a sense of equality, humility and respect. Throughout this paper, I employ the term "other" for beings that are "other-than-human," as opposed to "nonhuman," which connotes negativity by defining other beings by their lack of "humanness," rather than by a neutral "otherness" in their own right. I tend not to simply use the term "animal" in opposition to "human" as it may misleadingly imply that human beings are not also animals.
- <sup>2</sup> See < <http://www.monsantodairy.com> > , 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> I have here used "worldview," in spite of and because of its accuracy in describing a distinctly modern concept of "cosmology" that is based upon a "vision is knowledge" metaphor, which dominated Enlightenment thought, and which also corresponds with the rise of written language dominating Medieval European society, to the exclusion of oral culture and non-visual ways of knowing (see Lewis, 1964; Muchembled, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> The notion that "all is one" does not deny individuality in perceptual experience. As each tree is the forest, and each leaf is the tree, I can still perceive them as parts of the whole. What is crucial is that I do not fail to recognize the integral connections that make up their wholeness, despite the scale or bias of my perception. In my understanding, "all is one" does not mean that "all are the same" or that "oneness" necessitates a lack of complexity or tensions within.
- <sup>5</sup> There are many implications here with regard to spirituality that I must set aside and allow to remain as a subtle undercurrent in this paper in order to maintain my focus on metaphor.

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## Notes on Contributor

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