

BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

The ability to think about the self in interconnection and interdependence with the surrounding world

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If we are to develop sustainable ways of interacting with, and making use of, the world's material and immaterial resources, we have to change the way we think about ourselves and to develop more sustainable ways of being-in-the-world. We have to re-orientate and re-educate ourselves as beings *in*, and *of*, the world, as embodied fields of consciousness participating in an indeterminate flux of chemical, biological and cultural interactions.

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Since at least the 17th century in the West there has been, and perhaps there still is, a tendency to view the self and its relation to the world in what might be labelled Cartesian or Newtonian terms (though this over-simplifies the thinking of both Descartes and Newton). While Newton, argues for a model of the world as a clockwork machine-like system composed of distinct and solid bodies that interact according to deterministic processes and laws, Descartes emphasises the separateness of things and the importance of rational thought as a way of understanding the world, a form of understanding that is analytical and 'objective'. Descartes believes that 'the mind is a non-physical substance' (Anon, 2000, p.217) wholly distinct from the physical body. This separation of mind and body, aligned with Christian dualisms such as, God/humanity, spirit/matter, heaven/earth, has been one of the foundations of scientific and philosophical thinking in the West.

As Margaret Midgley argues:

The notion of our selves - our minds - as detached observers or colonists, separate from the physical world and therefore from each other, watching and exploiting a lifeless mechanism, has been with us since the dawn of modern science. (Midgley, 2001, p. 19)

From this perspective the earth and the natural world become a largely inanimate resource to be exploited for the 'benefit' of mankind - a vast bank of materials to be converted into energy and goods for trade and use.

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We can look at this from another, very different, perspective. In the reductive search for the ultimate 'substance', which was once a goal for the 'hard' sciences, the atom was posited as the building block out of which the universe was built – Democritus, the Greek, (c.460-c.370BC) was one of the first to believe this. But as the atom was 'mapped' in the early part of the twentieth century, researchers realised that the atom itself was more like a cloud than a speck of dust, a cloud that was largely empty space - a tiny field of energy bounded by the shifting trajectories of electrons, neutrons, protons and other sub-atomic forces. It is this concrete emptiness which lies at the paradoxical heart of our solid world. The things we bump

into, the hammer that hits the nail (or my thumb) and the chair I sit on, are quite literally condensations of space that happen to reflect, refract or transmit light, and thus be visible to one apparatus or another, including the human eye.

The other paradoxical feature of atoms, hardly believable, is that despite their smallness and delicate cloud-like fuzziness, they are remarkably durable. It is almost certainly the case that every atom in my body, or yours, has passed through many stars and been part of millions of other organisms before becoming me or you and passing on to be part of countless other entities. In his inimitable way, Bryson (2004: 176) points out that atoms are so numerous and so enduring, that any or all of us, may now be composed of billions of atoms that were once part of Shakespeare, or Hildegard of Bingen, or, spare the thought, Attila the Hun.

These characteristics of atoms and their sub-atomic constituents raise obvious questions about our own sense of self-ownership, self-identity and solidity. We are all atomic cousins and we need to be mindful of the long dead ancestors whose atoms we may share - constituent parts of this temporary atomic structure we call 'our' body or 'our' self. And we should keep in mind that atoms are utterly indifferent to the race or religion of the so-called 'individuals' to whose lives they give form and temporary shelter. These intermingled atoms don't recognise bodily boundaries, national boundaries, political differences or any of the petty conflicts that arise from notions of 'purity', autonomy or exclusivity. The most fanatical ideas of ethnic and religious difference arise in brains that share a common and universal atomic ancestry. We are all atomic hybrids.

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Inside every apparently solid object there is an infinity of space, just as in every mind there is an imaginative infinity – though can we really speak of 'a mind' (for where are its boundaries) and can a mind (which is an indeterminate field of energies, firing at great speed and unfathomable complexity) have an 'inside'? Where is the boundary of my bodymind and how can I disentangle *my* thinking, sensing, hoping and believing from yours. Aren't we all more like a forest, a patch of brambles, or a confluence of trickles of rainwater merging into a stream, a river and a sea, or an intermingling of clouds.

As a metaphor for this intermingling of minds and of chemical and biological processes it may be useful to think of the mycelium of a fungus: the mass of thread-like filaments that exist below the ground through which the fungus absorbs and processes nutrients. Mycelia often spread over large areas, interconnecting and interweaving with each other. The apparently *individual* mushroom or toadstool is only a part, the fruiting body, of a much larger and more indeterminate organism. Maybe *we* are only the fruiting bodies of networks of thoughts and signs, imaginations and constructions – networks that we refer to as cultures.

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Body as gathering-place, mind of the many

If we are all manifestations of the mutuality of existence, participating in the interpenetration of all things, how does this impact upon the way we think about ourselves? Our human 'skin' can be seen as both a porous zone through which we interact with everything that surrounds us, and as the 'skin of the world'. There is a unity of inside and outside. At the chemical, micro-biological and quantum levels there are no easy and obvious distinctions between one organism and another, or between organism and environment, subject and object, observer

and observed. We are all implicated in the whole of existence, participants in the web of being and becoming.

A vivid description of this interdependence is given by Lewis Thomas. He describes how each of us provides, in each of our bodies, a habitat for other organisms.

There they are, moving about in my cytoplasm... They are much less closely related to me than to each other and to the free-living bacteria out under the hill. They feel like strangers, but the thought comes that the same creatures, precisely the same, are out there in the cells of seagulls, and whales, and dune grass, and seaweed... and even in that fly on the window. (in Capra, 1990, p.294)

Given the ways in which organisms and ecosystems are woven into each other, how are we to refer to ourselves. When I say 'me' am I really referring to a whole community of organisms of which 'me' is the collective title? Am 'I' an assembly of immigrants, a place in which many organisms reside? How can I call this body 'mine' when it is a gathering-place of creatures, all of whom are tenants, residents, citizens? Aren't 'my' thoughts and feelings as much 'theirs'? Is the consciousness that arises in this body a collective consciousness? Whose is this mind I treat as if it were mine? Shouldn't the term 'I' be replaced by 'we' and 'mine' by 'ours'?

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One consequence of the coming together of these strands of thought is the realisation that incompleteness, instability and openness are characteristics of the *self as open-work*. The self as process, rather than as object, is in continuous construction. We weave and compose as we are woven and composed. There is no end to self-construction except in death, and even then we might consider the finite ego-self as being dissolved into the network of objects, memories and stories made by ourselves and by others, and into the atoms we return to the atomic storehouse. In this sense our artefacts and stories, our bodymind, are continued, revised and absorbed into the collective stories of a culture, into the unfolding communal mind. (Danvers 2006: 157).

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According to Guy Davenport (1984, p.4):

The imagination... [is] rooted in a ground, a geography. The Latin word for the sacredness of a space is *cultus*, the dwelling of a god [...] *Cultus* becomes our word *culture*...

Davenport points to the paradox that cultures, like each entity or self, are both located in a place and yet indeterminate. They are somewhere, as we are in this room, yet, at the same time, they are everywhere, in the sense that our minds or imaginations have no obvious boundaries.

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To sum up I've been trying to suggest that we are participants in the mutuality of existence, embodied manifestations of the chemical, biological and cultural processes that constitute the world we inhabit. I've suggested that there are no 'things' in the world, in the sense of objects

with separate fixed essences. What we call ‘objects’ and ‘things’, or apples, or beings like mosquitoes and John Danvers, are only conventional labels for states of relationship and interdependence. The skin of the apple, or ‘my’ skin, is as much the skin of the surrounding space. At the sub-atomic level there is no separation between apple, skin and the rest of the world. All ‘things’ are permeable and in flux. We are all endlessly exchanging energies with everything that is around us. We are transparent vessels through which pass waves of sound, cosmic radiation and light. There is no clear boundary between inside and outside. But most of the time we think and act as if there is.

The word *sustain* carries both the sense of enduring and the sense of giving nourishment to or supporting. In both these senses cultural diversity across all life forms is as important as biological and chemical diversity. Education in the arts and the sciences can help us to gain a more durable, sustainable understanding and kinship, grounded in a multi-perspectival view, a gathering of learnings from all quarters, from many minds and from many modes of being.

The term *sustainability* also implies that the use of resources “is conducted in a manner that protects the resource base for use by future generations”. (Bullock & Trombley 2000: 849) An important part of that “resource base” is the polyphony of cultures and languages, human and non-human, which speaks to us *of* ourselves and *about* the world we inhabit. Sustaining this polyphony, the cultural music of fibre, flesh and bone, becomes a necessity if our view of ourselves is rooted in a deep sense of kinship and mutuality with all forms of existence. It is this self-re-orientation that enables us to look both to our feet and to the horizon, to combine a buzzard’s eye view with a worm’s touch, to re-vision ourselves as porous and permeable, in interdependent co-relation with all entities - sensitive to the polyphony of the many, rather than to the monologues of the few. Maybe we can also extend our appreciation of human cultures to include the arts and cultures of animals and birds, of deserts and ponds – to learn from, and to help sustain, both the swallow’s pirouetting flight and the slow movement of the lichen that grows millimetre by millimetre over hundreds of years on a rough patch of Dartmoor stone.

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Learning how to realise being-in-the-world, rather than thinking of ourselves as being-apart-from-the-world, is not easy and takes time. Educators can help themselves and students begin this work of re-orientation in a number of ways. Firstly, it is important to realise that thinking in verbal terms is likely to be as much part of the problem as part of the solution. In most circumstances the use of verbal language reinforces our sense of separation from the world because we tend to use words to divide and categorise experience, disconnecting us from ourselves and from the world. Although we need to think verbally in order to develop a strategy for being-in the-world and for reflecting critically upon our progress, we need to engage directly with experience, to *enact* change rather than to *think* about change.

There are many ways to bring about change and here are two exercises that highlight some of the issues and possibilities.

Firstly, here is a suggestion in the form of a poem by the American poet, Lew Welch, from his Hermit Poems sequence, (1973: 73):

Step out onto the Planet.

Draw a circle a hundred feet round.

Inside the circle are
300 things nobody understands, and, maybe
nobody's ever really seen.

How many can you find?

This poem-as-instruction combines two important threads of being-in-the-world: on the one hand, attentiveness to the here-and-now, that is, developing a clear and unbiased awareness of our immediate surroundings – experiencing what *is*, rather than what we *think* there is; and, on the other hand, learning to live with uncertainty and not-understanding - recognising the importance of ‘unknowing’, as a complement to ‘knowing’, unknowing as a state of open ecological attention uninflected by desire, intention and linguistic categorisation.

The second exercise focuses on another aspect of awareness. Notice how, when you pay attention to a particular object or sound or feeling, other objects, sounds or feelings, recede into the background – to the point that we often forget that they are there. This can lead us to suppose that the world is broken up into separate objects, sounds and feelings. But if we shift our awareness very slightly, we can attend to objects *and* their immediate surroundings, we can see where objects *meet* their surroundings, how the apparent shape and colour of an object is always determined by the shape and colour of its surroundings. As we look at an apple in a bowl we notice how there are no edges to the apple in the shadows beneath it. We also notice, if we look very closely, that the apparently static apple and bowl are always moving very slightly as we breath in and out, and as our eyes constantly scan the field of vision. Indeed, the more carefully we observe the more we realise that the apple and bowl aren't still or separate at all, they have no fixed boundaries nor are they still. They are actually constantly shifting zones of interrelated colours, tones, surfaces and reflections that, for reasons of language and convention we treat as separate entities. If we practice this kind of attention in different contexts we become more and more aware of the fields of relationship and interconnection that constitute the world. We also notice how we are ourselves ever-changing streams of sensations, thoughts, memories and feelings interacting with everything that is about us.

Visual images can be used to overcome the limitations of linear verbal narratives and explanations. Close observation of the paintings and drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, can provide learners with a vivid manifestation of this mode of attention. The realisation that there are no boundaries around things was one of Leonardo's key insights. He used the term *sfumato* (from the Italian, *fumo*, meaning smoke) to refer to this absence of boundaries and he applied his understanding not only in paintings and drawings (in which objects are depicted as having no perceptible edge or limit) but also in highly creative, interdisciplinary thinking about the world – a world of process, change and inter-connectedness. By paying close attention to the sensual world around us, and by observing the work of artists and poets who have paid similar attention, learners can begin to grasp the unboundedness of being-in-the-world – a mode of being that will help us achieve a sustainable future.

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