Enchantment, Modernity, and Reverence for Nature

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In this chapter, I shall sketch a philosophical genealogy of ecocidal "Western" modernity, now global, taking it as read that scientifically uncontroversial indicators confirm the dire and worsening effects on the Earth and its creatures of anthropogenic climate chaos, including global warming; biodiversity loss, including mass extinctions; and industrial agriculture and husbandry.

Without underestimating the importance of politics, economics, society or culture, I concentrate on the metaphysical dimension of this phenomenon. I don't view it as the primary cause of where we now are but as at least an integral part of the mixture, and I have no doubt that it plays a role in enabling ecocide.

I shall then describe the most basic characteristics and dynamics of enchantment as the experience of wonder, culminating in reverence, especially its rootedness in the more-than-human natural world.[1] (This term, from Abram [1997], refers to the world of nature which includes but vastly exceeds human beings.) I go on to suggest that there is an elective or inner affinity between enchantment and nature, sharing as they do the quality of wildness, which I contrast with the quality of the fundamental project of modernity: will-driven mastery. I conclude by inferring that the former has the potential to counter the latter, provided one doesn't fall into the trap of regarding wonder as a useful resource.

With such a large subject it is only possible, within the limited space available, to present the main concerns and developments, often leaving others – even when they are almost as important, and certainly of interest – to be noted in passing. But I do not think this is a good reason not to discuss the topic at all.

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In tracing the course of contemporary ecocide, I believe the single most concentratedly toxic sentiment at work was succinctly expressed by the god Silenus, as quoted by Aristotle, via Plutarch. A fragment of Aristotle which Plutarch quotes asserts: "That not to be born is the best of all, and that to be dead is better than to live." And Silenus avers that "the best thing for all men and women is not to be born; however, the next best thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as possible" (Plutarch, 1928).[2]

Notice what this worldview entails, not strictly logically but in practice and no less influentially for that: since both men and women are born of women, women are associated with—and in another very short step, blamed for—the misfortune of being alive. By the same token, birth is blamed for death, with the descent of the soul into the body at birth seen as a fall.[3] Furthermore, given the ancient and widespread association by men of women with the Earth, thanks to the latter's purported emotionality and therefore greater degree of animality, plus the fact that the Earth is the home of life, the final link in the pathological concatenation

[1]For more on this subject see Curry (2019; 2021a; 2021b) and Washington (2018).

[2]Cf. Sophocles, *Oedipusat Colonus*, 1225.

[3]For an indispensable guide to this process, see Cavarero (1985).

is that the Earth itself, the very source and sustainer of life, comes to be feared and hated. This attitude is further encouraged by Heaven supposedly being up above and Hell down below—where the Earth is.

This worldview, for want of a better word, is an amalgam of feeling or emotion plus conceptualization or theory. It readily lent itself to further development in both Gnosticism and Platonism. In both, the material and sensuous world of changing so-called appearances—in a word, nature—was condemned as inferior, untrue and, in the most extreme case, by Parmenides, nonexistent. According to the Gnostics, this world was the flawed creation of a malevolent demiurge (god), and therefore itself evil. Parmenides sacrificed life, the realm of endless becoming, which includes both birth and death, for a statically perfect, unchanging and eternal Being.

Plato softened Parmenides' conclusion to the extent of positioning the natural world as merely a flawed and inferior copy of the real (and therefore true) world of eternal and bodiless spiritual Ideas or Forms, rather than nonexistent. But in the *Phaedo* (82d) and the *Gorgias* (493a) he described the body as a prison for the soul; in the *Cratylus* (400) as a tomb and again a prison, being a place of punishment; and famously, in the *Republic* (7, 514a–515), he compared earthly life to living in a cave deprived of light and truth. But whether from tomb, prison cell or cave, one's duty is to escape, by dying; that is the definitive return to a heavenly home. Practicing philosophy is merely a rehearsal and preparation for the real thing.[4]

Although the philosophy of death did not originate with Plato, he gave it enormously influential expression. Through St. Paul, it passed directly into Christianity. Almost repeating Socrates welcoming death in the *Phaedo*, Paul said he "wanted to be loosened asunder"—"he" being entirely identified with his disembodied soul—in order "to be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23), and he bemoaned "[t]his body of death" and "these bonds" (Romans 7:24). Equally influentially, this theology of thanatos was taken up by St. Augustine. The result was a Platonizing Christianity, in the Western church especially, marked by an enduring ascetic hatred and fear of the body, sex, and women.

It hasn't had it all its own way, being at odds with the humbling of God incarnating as a limited and vulnerable human being, the complicating inter-relationality of the Trinity, and the stress laid on the Resurrection of the body, implying its integrality to the person. The resulting tension within Christianity is effectively unresolvable. Meanwhile, the Christian Platonic philosophy of death passed into Islam, but tracing its influence there is beyond my scope here.

The next phase of the philosophy of death, alongside its continuing career in theistic religion, was its secularization in the course of the early modern Scientific Revolution, especially the philosophy of Descartes—the implausibilities and logical failures of which proved, once again, no barrier to widespread influence—supported by Bacon's human imperialism and misogyny. Cartesianism carried forward the Platonic split between spirit and matter but arguably radicalized it by denying any subjectivity or agency whatsoever to matter—that is, nature—equating the latter with pure mechanism and reserving the former for the human mind alone, increasingly a placeholder for spirit.

Subsequent formal philosophy changed nothing of importance about this arrangement. Kant's transcendental idealism valorized human reason even while limiting it, arguing that the external world was unavoidably structured by the categories of human cognition and was therefore ultimately a world of mere appearances, rather than "things in themselves." Hegel's all-determining World Spirit was just that—spiritual—even though it manifests through and as the world, while Schopenhauer's misanthropy and misogyny returned to the values of the original root-philosophy.

[4]For Plato's foundational anti-ecocentrism, see Plumwood (1997).

Essential to the mode of the philosophy of death is a series of hierarchical and value-laden essences: spirit versus matter, mind versus body, man versus woman, culture versus nature, subject versus object, and so on. They are linked because the first and usually more valued terms of each binary are elided into one, as are those of the second set of terms.[5] Sometimes the valuing was reversed, as with Marx's materialist inversion of Hegel's spiritualism. Such reversal is widespread, but the schizoid mode remains. Against the longstanding dominance of theistic metaphysics, in particular, it was integral to the scientific naturalism that developed in the nineteenth century and which continues, putting the physical and matter (now most commonly as neurophysiology) in the place of honor. But the choice of materialism is, of course, just as metaphysical as that of supernaturalism.

It is probable that Alfred North Whitehead's organicist and non-dual "process philosophy" could be enlisted as an ally here. (It is not possible to enlist his student David Ray Griffin's *Enchantment Without Supernaturalism*, despite its promising title, since it seems to vaunt theism *and* scientific naturalism, both of which I am rejecting here for all the reasons given.)

What doesn't change in that choice is the phenomenon of "two competing monisms" (Jonas 1982: 16), as each school tries to reduce and absorb the opposite term while tacitly accepting a radical difference, a split (more than a mere distinction, which is perfectly defensible) between the two.[6] Why does this matter to us here? Because in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1979: 77e; cf. 2022: 185), "Physiological life is of course not 'life'. And neither is psychological life. Life is the world." And both "life" and "nature" can be understood as cognate with nature, as the more-than-human natural world which includes all nonhuman as well as human life.

For this reason Gregory Bateson (1987: 59) called supernaturalism and mechanism "two species of superstition," which he similarly accused of tacitly colluding in obscuring while supporting the assumed split they share.[7] And that split itself falsely legitimates an anthropocentric ascendency, whether materialist or spiritualist, which treats nature—including human nature—as something to be dominated, used, and ultimately transcended.

That indeed is how Val Plumwood (1993) described the defining project of modernity, whether in one mode or the other: *the rational mastery of nature*, including human nature, by certain humans, paradigmatically male. (A few women adopting the same mode doesn't alter its dominant gender dynamics.) This androcentrism, combined with hatred and fear of the female and the Earth, resulted in them becoming inextricably entangled such that any attempt to resist and retrieve one will sooner or later meet the other. (Hence Plumwood's self-designation as an ecofeminist.) But this point too takes us beyond what can be traced here.

The outcome which we must face is that the philosophy of death condemns the natural world to servitude—e.g. "ecosystem services" and "natural capital"—when not outright slavery, as with industrial agriculture, meat and fisheries, and extermination, as the statistics concerning the plummeting numbers of wild animals confirm. Indeed, Isaac Bashevis Singer's description of our collective treatment of animals—that we are, for them, "an eternal Treblinka"—seems entirely justified.[8] Key to this process is the spell summed up in the word "resources." It magically converts living nature, with its own nonhuman subjectivities and agency which are therefore appropriate "others" for relationships and ethics, into a uniform set of lifeless objects, supposedly dead, inert, and quantitative rather than qualities, which are

[5]Another indispensable guide in this territory, along with Cavarero, is Plumwood (1993).

[6]On this doomed but destructive struggle, see Viveiros de Castro (2004).

[7]Cf. the lucid formulation of this point in Abram (1996: 67).

[8]See Patterson (2002), and cf. Coetzee (1999).

therefore morally inconsiderable and can be commodified, exploited, and extinguished without qualms.[9]

I think the current apotheosis of this program is transhumanism, that twisted neo-Gnostic hybrid of spiritual transcendence and magical thinking (promising personal immortality, no less) plus technoscientific materialism (AI, robotics, and binary code algorithms). It would be a *reductio ad absurdum* of modernity if it wasn't taken frighteningly seriously, especially by those with very big budgets. But it's not their success I fear; it's the damage resulting from their attempt.

As the accounts above by some anti-Platonic philosophers imply, there is and has been some resistance by an honorable counter-hegemonic tradition. One important member is Friedrich Nietzsche (1998: 17), whose courage in calling out the metaphysical Emperor's lack of clothes can be applauded without buying into his entire philosophy. "The 'apparent' world," he proclaimed, "is the only one: the 'true' one is merely added by a lie." (Note that Nietzsche's point applies whether the putatively true world is "spiritual" or "material.") Others not so far mentioned include William James, with his emphasis on protean experience as primary, and the agonistic value-pluralism of Isaiah Berlin. Personally, I take heart from the long strange journey of Michel Montaigne, from uncritical adherence to the Platonic practice of philosophy as merely an ascetic preparation for death to a robust and profoundly sane appreciation of life as a gift and of life's gifts, from food and sex to friendship.[10]

Make no mistake, however: these have been voices in the wilderness, proponents of a distinctly minority view. That is why in 1919, Max Weber (1991: 155) could describe "[t]he fate of our times" as "characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'."

But what of reverence? Weber (1991: 282) described the splitting we have been considering as the fundamental act of disenchantment, the paradigmatic way the world, including humans, become disenchanted. By implication, the world is *not* already, necessarily, or fundamentally disenchanted. The declaration that it is (notoriously by Descartes, after Plato) is again nothing other than the dark magic of modernist epistemology, which typically disguises as a disinterested description of the world what is actually an invention intended to bring it about. In this case, enchantment is actually more-than-human nature's natural condition, and reverence, when and where possible, is the appropriate response. (Am I guilty of *tu quoque* here, or double standards? No, because my description doesn't pretend to an impossible objectivity but admits its own involvement in part-describing, part-creating its subject-object.)

Weber continues that in the historical process of the disenchantment of nature, "[t]he unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic, has split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into 'mystic' experiences, on the other." And as Weber (1991: 282) added, "The inexpressible contents of such experiences remain the only possible 'beyond,'" when they can no longer be found in the sensuously perceptible world. They are therefore ecologically irrelevant at best.

So the reverence which I am going to advocate is not in any degree mystical or supernatural (literally, above nature), and its transcendence is immanent in and as the more-than-human natural world. But that is no undue restriction, because to borrow an *aperçu* by G. K. Chesterton (not coincidentally an acute critic of modernity), "in everything that matters, the inside is much larger than the outside" (quoted in Leys [2013: 104]).

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[9]See Curry (2019: chapters 9 and 10).

[10]See Screech (2000).

This is where enchantment comes in. I have already mentioned some important aspects of it, but let me briefly review more of its characteristics and dynamics in terms of what Wittgenstein (2001: 27e–28e) termed its family resemblances. The experience at the heart of enchantment is sheer existential wonder, and it comes, as William James (1897: 154) noticed, "as a gift or not at all." There is no place for willing, making or consciously doing here, so enchantment and activities like these are immiscible, like oil and water, even when they are circumstantially entangled. The appropriate attitude to it was therefore nicely summed up by Freya Stark (2013: 107) as "fearless receptivity."

This fundamental aspect of enchantment is particularly to the point because it is the precise contrary of the will-to-power, power-knowledge, program, and system, which characterize the project of modernity, from its Platonic and earlier antecedents to its present technoscientific incarnation.

The wildness and unbiddability of enchantment is also clear in the fact that it is relational: wonder *at*, enchantment *by*. In any relationship properly so-called, no one is in charge; it is recursive, each party affecting and being affected by the other. To the extent that one party alone consistently dominates, controls or manages the other, the result lacks wildness, which discourages this quality essential to both true relationship and the special kind thereof called enchantment.

Borrowing from Weber, and with Wittgenstein's warning against one-sided "explanations" also in mind, I have described it as concrete magic, both subjective *and* objective, material *and* spiritual or ideational, natural *and* cultural, particular *and* universal, and therefore neither solely one or the other. It is, in Henri Bortoft's excellent metaphor, "upstream" of all those separations upon which the modernist project depends (Bortoft, 2012: 103). Enchantment always takes place in a precise set of circumstances, an amalgam of concrete place (not space) and moment (not time) which are nonetheless deeply, indeed inexhaustibly mysterious or "magic". Differences and distinctions remain—they do not disappear into a mystic void—but they are crossed, connected, and transcended in the moment of relational encounter.

Enchantment therefore resists being carved up according to modernist conventions according to which it must be either psychological (a state of mind) or physical, often neurophysiological (a condition of the world)—not to mention whether it is real, which they confuse with objective, or subjective, which they confuse with unreal. This is just the kind of questioning, and self-questioning, condemned by D. W. Winnicott (2005) for its destructive and specifically disenchanting effects—a point whose relevance extends well beyond psychoanalysis.

In this respect, enchantment is an ontological metonym, an intensification, an exemplar, and a lineament of life, the world, and nature itself. In other words, wonder is how we experience life when we are truest to it, which is something which happens most often in moments of enchantment. As I've said, these moments, short but deep,[11] are always relational, and what the experience reveals is the intrinsic value of the enchanting other, free from all market, utilitarian, or instrumentalist calculations—again, the very currencies of modernity. In this important respect, then, enchantment doesn't involve casting a spell or being under a spell. On the contrary, it is an awakening to reality in which a *truth* is revealed, which breaks the deadly spell of modernist banality or despair.

Now despite their variety, humans are a particular kind of animal with many shared characteristics (and limitations). So it is not surprising that they tend to find some others particularly enchanting. Among the most frequent, or at least frequently attested, are natural beings: creatures, plants, perhaps especially trees, free-flowing water, and places; and when

[11]A phrase by Etel Adnan, seen in an exhibition of her art.

this happens, it is their intrinsic value to which enchantment will have opened our eyes, most likely strengthening our resistance to their appropriation or extermination. Not without reason did Tolkien (2005: 101) define enchantment as "love: that is, a love and respect for all things, 'animate' and 'inanimate', an unpossessive love of them as 'other'."

But enchantment is natural in another way, too. It is the kind of experience that only an embodied, embedded natural being such as ourselves can have. So in that important sense, all experiences of enchantment, even the most rarified—art, music, ideas, and so on—are fully natural. Enchantment is our birthright, so to speak, and in all its incalculable, unusable, ineffable, awkward inconvenience it is finally ineliminable for humans (and, I have no doubt, for other species as well).

As such, it is a sign of the limits of modernism and its programmatic disenchantment. In fact, natural enchantment is inherently subversive of that project, with its belief that one can (in Weber's [1991: 139] words) "master all things by calculation"—of which binary-based algorithms are of course the apotheosis—and its hubristic anthropocentric and androcentric will-driven ambition for power over nature. It is an infuriating impediment to the latter, reminding modernists that their projects cannot finally be completely realized. (Hence the hatred, fear, and mockery to which modernists subject enchantment: "superstitious," "immature," "unrealistic," mere "projection," and all the rest of the hypercritical armory.) But to ecocentrics it is a blessed affirmation of life as the ultimate value, to which no figure can be attached, and which is not for sale!

It follows that the only way the modernist project could succeed would be by replacing human beings, not with an "advanced" version but with something else altogether, and not with a "managed" Earth but, again, somewhere else. And that is indeed what transhumanism ultimately envisions. The murderous seduction of a revolutionary Year Zero beckons yet again. So collective suicide and ecocide proceed together in a *danse macabre*.

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But despite this inherent limitation, short of a fatally Pyrrhic victory over nature, the philosophy of death remains integral to the project of modernity, and the ecocidal damage it has done, still is doing, and will continue to do (unless stopped) is also incalculable. So does enchantment hold out any hope in this regard? I believe so, and we will come to that in a moment. But first I would ask you to notice a trap awaiting the unwary, no matter how idealistic and progressive. To put it bluntly, enchantment, and the reverence for nature's intrinsic value that it partly reveals and partly creates, can only help if it is not *used* to do so. For as soon as wonder is treated as a resource—part of a program, say, to "re-enchant" nature or the world—then even with the best of intentions, it has been sacrificed to the will-to-power and subsumed in the mind- and value-set that is a key part of the problem. From there it is a very short step to targets, outcomes, managers, corporate sponsors, Disney worlds, and all the rest of the modern bureaucratic, calculative, and instrumentalist apparatus.

In short, we must learn to love nature *for its own sake*.

Does this consign us to passivity or quietism? Not at all. We cannot create or order wild enchantment at will, but there are things we can, indeed must, do. One is to create the conditions it favors, which encourages it to happen. Those conditions include, in this case, the opportunity to experience relatively wild nature on its own terms, including encounters with nonhuman natural others as open-ended relationships between equals, accompanied by a tacit awareness that all that lives ultimately deserves not only to be respected and protected but revered. (This of course is an ideal the realization of which will not always be possible. I am talking about the difference resulting from an ecocentric horizon, so to speak, rather than a human-centered one.)

In this context, any micro-management and hypercontrol of such encounters, say, strongly discourages wonder. Nor will it survive unscathed from being restricted to the mediation of TV, film, and video; no matter how artfully orchestrated, there must be the opportunity for some relatively direct and therefore unmediated experience.

By the same token, we can resolve to work *with* enchantment, as between cooperating equals—to learn *from* it—and to make that a matter of principled openness. Note that in all these instances, there is something positive for the will to do; indeed, what I am advocating, whatever its field—education, art, public policy, and so on—requires a great deal of both will and skill. And notice too how it is attended throughout by humility, in significant contrast to the arrogance of the modernist project. *Will* here is, as it should be, in service of the other, not itself a bloated object of worship. (Not for nothing is the poison of Ayn Rand a staple in Silicon Valley.)

I would add that those taking the lead in helping open people's eyes to the wonder of nature—and, incidentally, the nature of wonder—must themselves love the natural world for its own sake, rather than merely being engaged in doing what they are told and ticking the box. Sometimes we are less easily fooled than we think.

The basic point is this: all the vital dimensions of enchantment—wonder, wildness, relationality, and concrete magic—are ones it shares with living more-than-human nature, and they are equally essential to both. In other words, their core qualities are held in common.[12] We could equally say that the moment and place of wild wonder takes in the "magic" ("inside") of its "concreteness" ("outside").

Thus even if it's only a glimpse, needing a much fuller exposition to become a view, I hope to have shown that enchantment exists in deep sympathy and resonance with the more-than-human natural world, including human beings, and in deep antipathy and repugnance with ecocidal modernity and its instruments.

By implication, the enchantment of and by nature, which culminates in reverence, offers a hopeful basis to resist the anthropocentric appropriation of the wild natural world, its exploitation and finally elimination—maybe to begin to roll it back—and even to help rewild it. To create, in this way, a successful counter-cultural movement in the direction of sanity will need a lot more than reverence alone, including scientific knowledge, public policy, political activism, and more. But I dare say that without wonder to give us the heart and courage to act, with hope or without it, then whatever else we do will fall short.

[12]For the next step, positing an identity between the two, see Curry (2019: 25–6), drawing on Bateson, himself drawing on Charles Saunder Peirce's "abduction".

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