Restructuring Animism: Plumwood’s Materialist Spirituality of Place and the Work of Merleau-Ponty

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In her work, the late Val Plumwood calls for a “materialist spirituality of place,” invoking indigenous animism to reshape our conceptions of materiality, commodity, and death. Turning toward animist spirituality, she argues, offers us resources to combat ecological crises by restoring facets of living on Earth that have been tacitly removed from experience – such as the fact that when we die, our material bodies are appropriated by other living things. I propose that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of structure from his first major work, The Structure of Behaviour, allows us to concretize Plumwood’s appeal to spirituality within a practice of philosophical interrogation.

To be clear, Plumwood specifies that several examples of viable animist spirituality come to us from the traditions of the indigenous peoples of Oceania, and North and South America (among other regions). I want to preface that this appeal to indigenous animism is, in part, a recognition of some of those philosophies that have been excluded from “the Western canon” – and as such, I recognize that it’s a transgression for me to speak instead about the work of a dead white Frenchman instead of directly addressing those cultures to which Plumwood appeals (and on land seized by dead white Frenchmen, no less). Nevertheless, I wish to add Merleau-Ponty’s work to the chorus of voices that should be led by the Maori, the Mi’kmaq, the Iroquois, the Hopi, among countless others.

Plumwood’s thought offers a biting critique of Western philosophy and its characteristic rejection of the non-human in favour of the human, oppression of women in favour of men, and tendency to forsake the Earth for the sake of a reductionist-modernist narrative. Plumwood claims that these differential structures – rooted in dualisms privileging spirit over matter, heaven over Earth, and life against death – are responsible for our present ecological state. As she writes,

Ecological forms of both spirituality and rationality would help us recognise the way both human and earth others nourish and support our lives, would remind us that nurturers must in turn be nurtured, and prevent us from taking from that capacity to nourish more than we put back. (Environmental Culture 240)

We must bear in mind that not every form of spirituality can address the present ecological crisis, or other significant facets of human life wherein we should seek to minimize violence. Frankly, Plumwood considers some forms of spirituality to be responsible for how the western tradition has informed the ecological crisis. As she points out,

…it is clear that very many different kinds of earth philosophies count as spiritual on this definition. But this includes some varieties that have been deeply damaging and antipathetic to the earth and its systems of life. For
examples, we can consider certain traditional forms of spirituality that are hostile to the body, to other species, to the earth, or to women, or that foster racial or religious hatred. Or we could consider certain types of ‘blood and soil’ land spiritualities that form the basis for ethnic exclusion and war. (220)

Our ecological rationality and spirituality would be better off, then, embracing those aspects of reality that have been oppressed by the various dualisms perpetuated in this tradition, specifically: matter oppressed in favour of spirit, the earth oppressed in favour of heaven, and – though I cannot sufficiently address this in the following sections – women in favour of men. These are the dualisms that Plumwood specifies in all her works; there are, of course, others.

Plumwood’s ecological spirituality would be nothing less than a concrete change in practice that takes up and celebrates the fact that a) I am my body, not spirit, b) my body is material, but not dead, inert matter, c) material is the basis for the generation and continuity of life, and d) the Earth has intrinsic value as that place where material is the cycle of life.

To briefly illustrate one facet of Plumwood’s account, I’ll turn to the food/death imaginary. The heavenist narrative of western canon assures us that after our ‘gross and fleshy bodies’ perish, our ‘true selves’ – our spirits – will depart the Earth for that place of ‘true’ value. The modernist-reductionist narrative cuts out the happy ending, assuring us that we are no more than gross, fleshy bodies made of atoms flying around in accordance with sheer luck. These narratives have ‘structured out’ a key aspect of our lives as material beings: we are made of matter that other living things appropriate in order to live. “Attention to human foodiness is tasteless,” Plumwood writes (Eye of the Crocodile 93). The notion of humans being eaten by another being is a topic reserved for horror movies. A fair illustration of this phenomenon comes to us from the season seven Simpsons episode, “Lisa the Vegetarian,” wherein a chart of the “food chain” shows animals from every phylum as inexorable prey for human predators.

Recognizing our role as food for “earth-others” is not only recognition of a basic fact that philosophy knew, but chose to forget – the notion that the matter organized to form my body will someday be matter belonging to another body necessarily involves a decentering of the self:

Seen in this embedded way, the ‘personal’ is not to be equated with the solipsistic hyperbolised individual whose essential self identity can be maintained beyond death in a separate realm, but acknowledges essential links to nations and communities of earth others, including the more-than-human ancestors of the human. Since these communities of nature live on after an individual’s death, a satisfying form of continuity for the fully embedded person may be found in the mutually life-giving flow of the self upon death back into the larger life-giving other that is nature, the earth and its communities of life. (Environmental Culture 227)

“We are not set apart,” Plumwood reminds us (226). A new ecological ethics cannot simply be an extension of human ethics to the non-human. The decentering effect of ecological materialism means that we can enter into a dialogical ethics with “more-than-human others.” What is
significant – that is, what forms a signification – for other species ought to inform our ecological ethics. When Plumwood was pulled into three deathrolls by a saltwater crocodile in the Outback, she recognized that her presence signified food to the croc – the crocodile cannot simply be considered a Disney-style antagonist (Eye of the Crocodile 5).

These prejudices that inform western culture resist our ability to think ecologically. As Plumwood points out, the ability to recognize matter and place as sacred is not something that will just fall into our laps:

Because its dominant traditions have been hostile to or remote from nature and place, locating the sacred in a transcendent higher world beyond the fallen earth, the development of a non-superficial spirituality of place that locates the sacred as immanent in particular places is highly problematic for western culture, and requires major rethinking and re-imagining. (Ecological Mastery 231)

The appeal to indigenous animism is a recognition of several cultures that are present to some degree in our lives (here in the ‘colonies’), but it is at the same time met with the same resistance accountable for the ecological crisis. I appeal to Merleau-Ponty, therefore, as an illustration of a source within the western canon that readily lends itself to Plumwood’s argument and problematizes reductionist-materialism. The Structure of Behaviour is meant to be an account of nature’s relation to consciousness given from the outside – that is, this is an account offered by initially adopting the role of the experimenter and examining various case studies. It was a direct response to the then fashionable behaviourism of the 1940s; one that is nothing other than a modernist-reductionist account of our “earth-others” offered entirely “from the outside.”

What is a structure for Merleau-Ponty? It does not refer to the definition of “structure” as found in structuralism (though the fact that these definitions share a word should be interesting, especially to structuralists). His understanding of a structure has its origin in the “Gestalt” of Gestalt psychology: a structure is a system comprising multiple orders such that one order is founded upon and integrates another, but cannot be reduced to it.

It is not a question of risking one hypothesis among others, but of introducing a new category, the category of ‘form,’ which, having its application in the inorganic as well as the organic domain, would permit bringing to light the ‘transverse functions’ in the nervous system … For the ‘forms,’ and in particular the physical systems, are defined as total processes whose properties are not the sum of those which the isolated parts would possess. (The Structure of Behaviour, 47)

A solid patch of colour on a homogeneous surface forms a figure-background structure that cannot be reduced merely to the constituent colours. If I superimpose a second patch of colour on top of the first, a “hole” is produced in the foregrounded figure:
A structure in this sense can be applied to any observation, theory, or law with some kind of evidence – for the structure belongs to perception. As an example,

... the law of falling bodies expresses the constitution of a field of relatively stable forces in the neighborhood of the earth and will remain valid only as long as the cosmological structure on which it is founded endures. Cavendish's experiment gives us an independent (en soi) law only if it is supported by the Newtonian conception of gravitation. But if the notion of gravitational field is introduced and if, instead of being an individual and absolute property of heavy bodies, gravitation is tied to certain regions of qualitatively distinct space as the theory of generalized relativity holds, the law could not express an absolute property of the world; it represents a certain state of equilibrium of the forces which determine the history of the solar system. (138)

Gravity is a physical structure. It is foregrounded against a background of various conditions of the universe that it is not reducible to. “The university” expresses the constitution of a field of relatively oppressive forces in the neighborhood of the earth and will remain viable only as long as those upon whose backs we tread – human and more-than-human – endure.

Now this is in one sense how Merleau-Ponty applies structure to animal behaviour. Animal behaviour must be considered the result of the situation as a whole – a situation that is not reducible to its constituent parts, namely stimulus, reflex, and whatever physicochemical reactions to which we try to reduce them.

An animal, incapable of seizing its food with its right member after the partial excision of the appropriate cerebral region, recovers the use of it after amputation of the left member which had been substituted for the first. If at this time the excision of the centers which govern the right member is completed, the animal remains capable of utilizing it when the situation makes it imperative, for example, when the food is located outside of the cage. It is scarcely possible to posit a new emergency device corresponding to each of the phases of this experiment, for which devices the situation of the moment would be the adequate stimulus; the hypothesis that there is an entirely novel distribution of innervations for
each phase, governed by the situation itself, is in much better agreement with the character of the phenomenon. (Trendelenburg cited in SB)

This wall of text is one of the various case studies Merleau-Ponty analyzes in the Structure of Behaviour. The point here is that nothing stops the organism from creating and operating within a situation. Remove part of the monkey’s brain so it can’t use its right hand? It’ll use its left hand. Cut off the left hand? It’ll use its right hand when the situation calls for it. The organism lives within a milieu – or Umwelt for any Uexkellians readers out there – with which it forms a structure of behaviour. This isn’t vitalism or anything magical, but rather –

We mean only that the reactions of an organism are understandable and predictable only if we conceive of them, not as muscular contractions which unfold in the body, but as acts which are addressed to a certain milieu, present or virtual: the act of taking a bait, of walking toward a goal, of running away from danger. The object of biology is evidently not to study all the reactions which can be obtained with a living body in any conditions whatsoever, but only those which are its reactions or, as one says, ‘adequate’ reactions. (151)

This understanding of structure, however, breaks from that of a Gestalt in that classical Gestalt psychology treats the Gestalt as a physical entity, subject to the same reductionism that both Plumwood and Merleau-Ponty reject.

The object of biology is to grasp that which makes a living being a living being, that is, not – according to the realist postulate common to both mechanism and vitalism – the superposition of elementary reflexes or the intervention of a ‘vital force,’ but an indecomposable structure of behavior. (43)

Physicochemical reactions, to which some people are so eager to reduce the world (and I will address who “some people” are later), are only intelligible in an organism when that organism is conceived as a whole. The organism’s behaviour – its reflexes and reactions – themselves constitute a whole that is not reducible to stimulus-reflex response. And on top of all of this, we give narratives and accounts that are predicated on these reductionist explanations but not reducible to them. We have orders of structure that build upon each other, with higher structures altering lower ones in such a way that they cannot be reduced to them. Can we represent the world as these various structures? I think we can.
We have what Merleau-Ponty calls the “physical order,” which is governed by quantity. This is what reductionism aims for. The other day I was listening to another grad student here remark on the stupidity of our poster for this event (pictured above). At one point he noted, “Oh good, there are chemicals in the poster. Because there are chemicals in the environment. That’s relevant, I guess.” He’s absolutely right – chemicals qua chemistry is totally irrelevant to the environment. They make absolutely no sense unless they’re explained by the next order up.

The vital order: those structures that operate within a situation, within a milieu. It could be plants growing to follow the light of the sun, or we could refer to the animals that react to these leaves as a source of food or a poison to avoid. The vital order is where we encounter the residue that is Plumwood’s animism. We don’t want to inject a separate living causality into matter; we need to recognize that matter, or quantity, forms a structure that is not reducible to matter qua matter or qua quantity. Matter, in the form of living things, generates situations and behaviour. It authors values – things to pursue and avoid – even if these authors are not human.

Now this may sound like a gross oversimplification, and to clarify, there is indeed the human order of structure, which refers to humans as those creatures that can recognize physical
and vital structures and subordinate them to even larger wholes that are not reducible to their parts.

This is where sense, or signification, dominates. Individual components come together to form a whole that makes sense. This is where, in my opinion, we may intersect with structuralism. Language, after all, is difficult to reduce: The meaning of any phrase is not reducible to its constituent words as individuals, but rather is derived from the phrase as a potato. As Merleau-Ponty notes:

> It is here that the notion of form would permit a truly new solution. Equally applicable to the three fields which have just been defined, it would integrate them as three types of structures by surpassing the antimonies of materialism and mentalism, of materialism and vitalism. (SB 131)

Bear in mind we’re not doing away with materialism in general, but we’re getting rid of materialism conceived as dead, inert corpuscles bouncing off of each other unable to generate meaning. Matter generates meaning all the time, and if this meaning is not reducible to matter qua matter, it’s because matter as the basis of our perceptual organs forms miraculous internal connections that generate structures of meaning. Matter makes sense, in every way possible. This is, in a sense, the question that continued to occupy Merleau-Ponty until his death in 1961.

The “being” of matter, however matter is conceived, is to form structures. Structure, while not animism itself, co-exists with the animism that Plumwood’s new spirituality calls upon; it is the spirituality, or the source of meaning, that we need to refer to in order to concretize changes in our practices that allow us to be more civil with our “more-than-human-others.”:

> Place loses agency along with salience, and places themselves become interchangeable, irrelevant and instrumentalisable, neutral surfaces upon which ‘rational’ human projects can be inscribed. The dullness and dislocation that is associated with placelessness has been remarked as an impoverishing feature of rationalist culture. From inside a culture that destroys such narratives, space and time are silent, the province of experts equipped with charts and theories.” (Environmental Culture, 231)
Place is a structure; space is place reduced to the physical order. During Dr. Glazebrook’s Q&A session (Concordia University, Montreal), we brought up the distinction between the scientists we know personally – people who seem genuinely passionate about the environment – and “science,” which claims to be complete and impartial. For Plumwood, this is the distinction between what I’ll refer to as narrators (human or otherwise) and “the province of experts”; for Merleau-Ponty, this is the distinction between being-in-the-world and the pensée de survol (which is essentially a view from nowhere). Heideggerians may also recognize this as the distinction between Dasein and das Mann. Plumwood’s call to spirituality is a call to narrative; a call to partial knowledge – or rather, the recognition that all knowledge is partial.

Practicing Plumwood’s account of the Earth as a structure opens up her ecological thought to the Merleau-Pontian corpus: a body of thought that not only resonates Plumwood’s work – with themes of embodiment, the decentring of the subject, and the careful interrogation of dualisms – but already has its own concrete style and ontology.

**Bibliography**

