

What might the work of Andreas Weber add to the notion of an ecological self?

Introduction - An ecological self

Inspired by the work of eco-philosopher Arne Naess on the concept of Deep Ecology, environmental activist, film-maker and writer John Seed observes in his article *The Ecological Self* (p. 101) that: “ecological ideas are not enough, we need an ecological identity, an ecosophic *self*”, and he cautions that “unless we find a way to regularly practice our deep ecology, the new and fragile consciousness fades...”

On his website (rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/coab.htm) Seed suggests that it is not the shaming of people to be more responsible and to behave according to moral principles that will transform them into ecologically literate and concerned beings; instead they should be encouraged to cultivate “increased sensitivity toward the richness and diversity of life, through the profound cherishing of free natural landscapes.” He goes on to describe ways of doing this, notably through a form of group experiential process work called the “Council of All Beings” that he co-invented in 1985 with Arne Naess and eco-activist, teacher and author Joanna Macy. As the “Council of All Beings” practice spread across the world, together with psychologist and social worker Pat Fleming, they later set it out in a publication: *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*.

The overall aim, according to Seed is “... a shift from the shrunken sense of self, to which our mainstream culture and its institutions have conditioned us, to a larger, more ancient and resilient sense of our true ecological Self.” In an article “The Council of All Beings” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (ed. Bron) Joanna Macy expresses this as enabling people to gather “to shed their personae as humans and give voice to the plight of the Earth. They spoke as whale and wolf and wind, aspen and marsh and any other nonhuman they felt called to represent.”

Since these early pioneers of current efforts to extend human awareness beyond purely anthropocentric considerations, many ecologically concerned activists, thinkers and writers like those quoted above have explored the notion of an “ecological self”. One whose work on this topic has particularly interested me is biologist and eco-philosopher, Andreas Weber. After delving into his thinking on “life-as-meaning” through reading his 2013 Essay *Enlivenment* and the 2017 translation into English of his latest book: *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, I attended a workshop that he led at Schumacher College in March 2018. This was an experience that I can only describe as truly “down to earth”, during which participants were invited to “hug a tree” and stick our hands and noses into a mound of soil! Some personal impressions of this are summed up at the end of this essay.

While there does not seem to be any clear definition of what “an ecological self” is, my own current take is that it has something to do with simply being in a respectful, attentive, and at times deeply reverent, relationship with natural life that may generate new forms of individual engagement, shared creativity, and embodied spirituality.

Methodology

This paper seeks to further explore the notion of “an ecological self” with particular reference to the work of Andreas Weber. The focus will not be on how to address the broader social, economic and political issues of the prevailing anthropocentric Western worldviews at the root of the ecological crises facing the planet today, but rather on how, as individuals, we can engage ourselves, beyond theories, to relate to and embody Life in more meaningful, ecologically sensitive ways.

From enlightenment to enlivenment

Weber extends awareness of various vital aspects of relationship between human beings and the “rest” of the world (i.e. the field of “all beings” as proposed by Seed *et al*) in his work on the concept of “enlivenment” and in the notion of “erotic ecology” which he develops in *Matter and Desire* (M&D). Exploring these ideas offers a pragmatic and profoundly poetic sense of what an ecological self, in intimate relationship with life, may be. In introducing Weber’s *Enlivenment* (ENL) essay, Dr. Heike Löschmann of the Heinrich Böll Foundation comments that “the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment, our individual freedom and rights, can and must be, combined with those of the coming Enlivenment, the unfolding of the relational, co-creative power of embodied, autonomous beings.”

Weber also acknowledges the unquestionable contribution that the Enlightenment brought to the world: “With the Enlightenment modern humanism was born, a way of thinking and being that has incredibly improved human life and living conditions.” (ENL p. 15). Yet, as

awareness of the gravity of current planetary ecological crises has grown, like many other thinkers in recent decades (he cites Max Hornkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno), he strongly critiques the “flaws” such as those described in the paragraph below, and underscores how damaging the “deep structural principles” of Enlightenment thinking have been - and continue to be - on our lives.

The prevailing Western culture’s egocentric perception that we are separate, superior in intelligence and stronger than any other species has been at the source of a large part of humankind’s insane conviction that we can justifiably wreak havoc with the natural world with impunity. As Caroline Merchant comments in her Preface to *The Death of Nature*: “between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its center gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstructed as dead or passive, to be dominated or controlled by humans.”

Weber’s take on this is that “science, society and politics have for the last 200 years lost their interest in understanding actual, lived and felt human existence.” (ENL p.11) and he observes quite bluntly that: “rational thinking is an ideology that focuses on dead matter.” Nevertheless, later in the essay, he cautions against the temptation for ecologically concerned beings to “substitute a nostalgic, mother-earth version of redemption for the deadening, rational dystopia of modern times” (ENL p. 62): both, he reckons, are escape mechanisms, and we must be ready to face “the mess that must constantly be negotiated.” There is no miracle solution.

A reconnection with the messiness of Life and Love

So what would it take to live as an ecological self, ready to face “the mess”, to open oneself to transformation and the emergence of new understandings and habits, after living with the legacy of the anthropocentric belief that we humans are in control of all Life?

Attempting to counter such an entrenched and powerful paradigm takes great courage, honesty and clear-mindedness. From a personal perspective, part of this is accepting to feel vulnerable, to let go of the egotistical self and understand that the fundamental nature of all life is interconnectedness. Weber provides arguments in support of this from his own experience and knowledge of the work of a growing body of scientists, philosophers and other scholars, including biologists and systems thinkers, such as Lynn Margulis, Francisco Varela (with whom Weber worked directly) and Gregory Bateson (M&D pp. 33-40).

So he is able to state emphatically that, contrary to the long-established academic positions that non-objective experiences cannot be considered reliable or scientific, “The principles made apparent by biological research show us that life is, at nearly every level, a collective concern, a shared enterprise undertaken by a wide variety of beings that arrive at a stable,

functional, and thereby beautiful ecosystem, by somehow putting up with one another and reaching agreements.” (M&D p. 35)

Such new forms of research and enquiry have opened the way to understanding that we have invaluable lessons about Life right under our eyes – indeed through all of our senses – in observing and actually experiencing the multiple ways in which nature exemplifies collaboration and connectedness as essential relationships. And, according to Weber, this connection implies much more than just a nod of agreement, a handshake or a skillfully negotiated “win-win” multilateral treaty (which today are often pathetically meaningless relationships, as the recent withdrawal of the US from the “Iran Deal” illustrates). Rather it calls for something more intimate, more personally engaged: “The world is not an aggregation of things, but rather a symphony of relationships between many participants that are altered by the interaction: a necessarily erotic occurrence.” (M&D p. 29)

Some of Weber’s most alluring and compelling messages are articulated around his exploration of the “connection between the transformative power that is part of our living experience and the imaginative power of poetry” (M&D p. 88). With sublime sensitivity and artful, personal poetic language, he describes the “erotic” nature of our potential for a relationship with life, which, he claims, can enable us to immerse ourselves in a profound, and transformative love affair that will “enliven” our being in the world.

And some of his most striking observations allude to the dysfunctional ways in which we manipulate our relationships, including how we use and abuse parental love for our children in an attempt to assuage our own unsatisfactory sense of being loved. Weber’s reflections on the work of Swiss child psychologist Alice Millar who “arrived at the insight that the trauma people suffer is the loss of their aliveness in childhood” (M&D p. 138) are a stark reminder of the need for all of us to be deeply attentive to how we respect and care for our youngsters’ real needs; as in the spirit of the words of Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran in *The Prophet* we should remember that “Your children are not your children: they are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself...”

And Weber constantly draws attention back to the importance of the embodied experience: “We do not understand love if we fail to see that it is linked to the living world, to the experience of inhabiting a living body that trembles in joy and winces in pain. Love is a practice of enlivenment.”

The fear of letting go

However, accepting to change oneself is a notoriously difficult human undertaking. It is therefore important to understand the notion of fear as one of the underlying motives for control and domination: for many humans - even if they do not consciously contribute to

plundering the planet – perpetuate their malaise as they cling to what they perceive as “safe”, comfortable and controllable.

Weber acknowledges this, including through references to the work of psychoanalysts C.J. Jung, Otto Rank and Wilhelm Reich, to the effect that, contrary to the Freudian concept of “a death drive” built into the human psyche, “modern humanity’s widespread refusal to surrender anxious self-defense in favor of aliveness (both one’s own and others’) is the true cause of evil.” (M&D p.69)

Moreover, today, many people seem to have developed what educator David Orr in *Earth in Mind* (pp. 131-137) describes as *biophobia*: “the culturally acquired urge to affiliate with technology, human artifacts, and solely with human interests regarding the natural world.” Sometimes manifesting as a morbid fear and disdain of Nature, the absence of contact with a natural environment (i.e. vegetation) has been measured in humans, at times revealing higher rates of delinquency and crime amongst those who never cast eyes on a tree or a plant compared to those who have at least some trees outside their windows (Kuo and Sullivan, *Environment and Crime in the Inner City: Does Vegetation reduce crime?*)

As an ecologically aware self develops, we cannot ignore the perverse effects on health of living in an increasingly fearful, individualistic and isolationist society. Much of the sense of Andreas Weber’s arguments can only be understood through acceptance of the notion that our fundamental Western worldview is based on fear, notably “our fearful deafness to the voice of reality that demands we accept death in every moment and risk it for the sake of life.” (p. 70)

An embodied aliveness

In his Foreword to Weber’s earlier work *The Biology of Wonder*, eco-philosopher and author of *Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram comments: “Despite the power of our complex technological instruments and fine-scale monitoring, it is the sensate human body that remains – so far – our most advanced, most exquisitely-tuned instrument for feeling into the well-being (or the malaise) of the wider landscape.”

In my own experience, despite having earnestly sought how to find my purpose and place in life, and to maintain a healthy body, mind and spirit, some years ago I became painfully aware that my “Self” was holding great anger and deep grief for something - I knew not what... Eventually, a profound unraveling of my tension and a “turning point” in my perception of my relationship with Life, came in an encounter with Joanna Macy’s “Work that Reconnects”. The actual moment of this reconnection is cited in *Coming Back to Life* (pp. 128-129):

“...at Findhorn in Scotland, a ceremony (Bowl of Tears) with 250 people began with poetry and spoken reflections on the power, liberation and solidarity that comes with owning our collective grief (...) words that reminded us that the pain we feel for the world is no private pathology; it connects us with the Earth and each other.”

Yet it is often difficult to articulate and communicate this connectedness in an academic context. This is where the work of scientific and philosophical thinkers like Weber and those he references is so important in helping to validate and establish a new understanding that “Science and spirituality both demonstrate the fundamental nature of our relatedness with all life forms” as Robin Kimmerer, Professor of Environmental Biology, describes in a journal article “Returning the Gift” in *Minding Nature* May 2014, Vol 7, No. 2. And she adds: “We are governed by the same ecological and evolutionary rules.”

As a further example of our potential for embodied ecological “selfhood”, Weber likens the brain to the biosphere: “a system that constantly produces new relationships by responding to existing ones. Our brain does the very same thing. Moreover, since it resides within a body, it does not just map the relationships from the outside, but is itself a part of the relational network within an ecosystem.” (M&D p. 42)

This echoes the observations of Laura Sewall in *Reversing the world* (p. 23) on the effects of meditation on neural pathways: “Shape-shifting is essentially the power of intentionality brought to bear on a way of seeing. It is aligning one’s attention with one’s imagination and thus restructuring both neural networks and perceptual habits.”

The potential of imagination and creativity (M&D p 95-97), according to Weber, is inherent in every relationship in which we participate: “Fundamental reality is the creative wilderness in which everything interpenetrates, transforms, pushes itself into life, and carries death along with it.” So if we try to control Life and deny the inevitability of its cycles, we will constantly drive ourselves into a dead end – paradoxically the very situation we try so hard to avoid.

Weber helps open our minds to a more profoundly honest and poetic awareness of life. He does not attempt to “smooth over” the rawness of the life/death paradigm, which is always present, yet so deeply denied in most of Western mainstream culture and society today. As he says:

“Death is a reality... inevitable and even necessary as the precondition for the individual’s striving to keep intact and to grow... Against this background, enlivenment is what an organism constantly does: every organic act is an act of creation, be it unequivocally productive or “stuck” as disease with its symptoms.”

Conclusion

This consideration of the notion of an “ecological self” has drawn in particular on the remarkable insights of Andreas Weber. It seems to offer a portal to getting reacquainted with natural life, through an “enlivened” ecological sense of self that somehow dissolves and becomes transformed through awareness of being simply, but deeply, entangled in loving relationship with Life at large.

And I am reminded of Weber’s words: “It could be that the planet is not actually suffering from either an environmental crisis or an economic one. Instead, it could be that the Earth is currently suffering from a shortage of our love.” (M&D p. 3)

In closing, I offer my own small contribution:

Earth, what do I learn of you?

You are my cradle of Life and of Death
You know my longing for movement, and cycles of birth
You hear my pain and fear of loneliness
You succour my groundlessness
And you give me warmth, colour and texture, to feel myself alive
When all around is cold and wasted, I search for your warm hand.

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