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Being Implicated in the World

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According to Emmanuel Levinas, ethics arise in the face of the other; as the other calls out to oneself, one is obligated to the other. To extend this beyond Levinas' focus on the interhuman, one needs a sense of ethics that does not ask who can make such calls before feeling obligated. Building on Levinas' ethical alternative to egoistic subjectivity, "the one for the other" as oneself responsible to the other human, I develop a form of ethical subjectivity responsible not only to human others, but to all others in the more than human world.¹ I call this form of ethical subjectivity "being with/in." Like Levinas' "the one for the other," being with/in provides an alternative to Cartesian subjectivity and the fragmented subjectivities of postmodern thought. Being with/in addresses the questions of "what does it mean to be a human self in a more than human world?" and "who is this 'our' in 'what are our obligations to the others?'" It explores what it means to be a person in relation, to be with/in the more than human world considering postmodern and environmentalist thought. Like Levinas, my answers to these questions are given in the first person: I am obligated, "me."

For those influenced by Levinas, and indirectly by his work through Derrida and his followers, an adequate ethic cannot be based in a Cartesian paradigm of subjects and objects; it cannot be objective or subjective. However, nor is a fragmented sense of self adequate for ethics. An adequate postmodern environmental ethic requires a rethinking of ontology and epistemology, thinking prior to the separation of self and world, subject and object, that preserves or rebuilds a sense of self as ethical subjectivity oriented by the others. Responding to, and tacking across, current streams in postmodern

thought, I posit a post-Cartesian theory of interpersonal relations and ethics, wherein the self is understood as an embodied participant embedded in the world, interdependent with others, where others are understood to include nonhuman others. Oneself, in this system, recognizes the interpenetration and overlap of categories, including self and other, and human and nonhuman persons, so that one perceives oneself as being with/in a continuum of beings, responsible to all others.

Being at Home with Itself

Being *chez soi*, usually translated as being at home with itself, is Levinas' term for unethical subjectivity. It describes the self as a unitary self-enclosed ego, separate from others, enjoying and using objects, totalizing them into one's own world. Being at home with itself is the self, or human subject, understood as one's own domain, the self as sovereign. Levinas uses the image of being at home with oneself to illustrate how the self egoistically relates to the world. Through the home, one establishes a relation with the world as possession, drawing things into oneself, one's own world.² Having a home is the condition of possession, of having oneself as a self, but also having things, bringing things to mind, as well as bringing things physically into one's own possession.³ Having a home puts the world at one's disposal.⁴

Levinas' writings about being at home with itself appear to be directed at the privileged position of one who is able to dominate others and the environment. But his criticisms of being at home with itself are self-directed—it is always “me” who is obligated to the other. His analysis of being at home with itself is directed at what he sees as a universal tendency toward egoism, the urge toward totality, to possession. His ethics do not sanction any rationalization based on one's social position, or arguments about oneself being more deserving for having suffered oppression. Justice, rather than ethics, in his view, involves hearing such claims. Levinas distinguishes between ethics and justice: ethics come to pass in relations between oneself and a single other, making an infinite demand on oneself regardless of social position, while justice involves the balancing of conflicting claims between oneself and multiple others.⁵

According to Levinas, being at home with itself is the self as naturally concerned with itself, but also corresponds to the philosophic understanding of the self,⁶ culminating in the Cartesian subject. Being at home with itself is subjectivity identified with itself, “the same,” the unified “I think.”⁷ Levinas criticizes being at home with itself for being deaf to others, wrapped up in itself, naturally egoistic, totalizing others

into it's own concerns. He identifies this with human subjectivity in general, but also links it to the philosophic notion of the subject.

In being at home with itself, the self does not extend beyond itself to encounter the other. The self in this state sees others only in terms of I-It relations,⁸ or as he and she in the third person, never meeting the other face to face.⁹ The self as being at home with itself knows the world by bringing things to mind, by drawing otherness into itself, totalizing. The self "*appropriates* and *grasps* the otherness of the known,"¹⁰ rather than meets the other face to face. It recognizes only itself, experiencing everything in its own light, through a totalizing reason. It cannot hear, or otherwise perceive, others face to face. The self cannot truly encounter others in this state.¹¹

While Levinas rejects the Cartesian notion of the self and the language of ontology (of subjects, and of being) in his criticism of being at home with itself, he still accepts the possibility of authentic selves, or at least the possibility of authentic relations with others. When asked about "the disappearance, or the demise, of the subject" discussed in postmodern philosophy, Levinas replies that he rejects the model of the self of ontology, in favour of a "meontological version of subjectivity . . . Ethical subjectivity."¹² For Levinas, "having" a self is not ethical, yet a self is necessary for ethics. As Levinas says, oneself is called upon as "me" in face-to-face relations. Who is responsible if not oneself? A self, some form of subjectivity, is necessary for responsibility and ethical action.

Subjectivity remains necessary also for mental health and the capacity to interact with others in community. Jane Flax raises an important point about the necessity of having a sense of what she calls a "core self," for one's mental health, and for participating in meaningful relationships, both in terms of parenting and participation in political movements. From her work with people suffering from borderline syndrome, she concludes that, without a sense of core self, the experience of the self as fragmented or decentred is felt as "a terrifying slide into psychosis," where common sensations of pleasure and interactions with the world "are simply not possible".¹³

The One for the Other

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1998), Levinas develops an ethical alternative to being at home with itself, as "the one for the other," oneself responsible to, and for, the other. This form of subjectivity is not constituted by a Cartesian subject, but is oneself, "me," responsible to the other. The one for the other is the one who

says “*me voici*,” or “here I am,” rather than conceiving of itself as the “I think.”¹⁴

The one for the other is an ethical subjectivity that is not fragmented but torn open, exposed to the other. The other interrupts being at home with itself, tearing one out of one’s own concern for itself. The one for the other is subjectivity in exile from being at home with itself, denucleated. For Levinas, in ethics the self is not fragmented into incoherence, but interrupted, and reoriented, by the other. Levinas’ understanding of subjectivity “grounds” itself in ethics, oriented toward the other, whereas fragmented models have not found any new centre or organizing principle.

For Levinas’ understanding of ethical subjectivity, the experience of being at home with itself is formative. In my life, the fragmentation resultant from the collapse of faith in the subject and in God has shaped my understanding of ethical subjectivity. For a long time, I could not see how it might be possible to hold oneself together ethically, or how to regain a sense of orientation. Cartesian subjectivity was inadequate, but I could not find a more satisfactory language of subjectivity, or way of narrating my life in a meaningful way. Levinas’ work gives a different means of orienting myself and suggests an alternative means of describing my relations with others in a way that ethically makes sense after postmodern fragmentation.

Being Lost

As Nietzsche has said, “Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. . . . One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence.”¹⁵ Like the death of God, the demise of the subject has been felt in philosophy as a decentring and disorienting experience of nihilism. Levinas recognizes this as a nostalgia for totality, saying that in “the whole trend of Western philosophy culminating in the philosophy of Hegel One can see this nostalgia for totality It is as if the totality had been lost, and that this loss were the sin of the mind.”¹⁶

Nietzsche describes the nihilism of the early stages of postmodern thought in terms of disillusion and dissolution: “Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? . . . God is dead.”¹⁷ To

fragment and fall apart is a first response to the loss of the totalizing vision of being at home with itself.

But Nietzsche also provides a clue to a way out: “We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us. Now little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean.”¹⁸ Nietzsche has a boat. But how does he navigate? How is one to plot a course without a foundation or overarching structure, without a God transcendent of the natural world, without reference to a suprasensory realm? Nietzsche’s little ship is blown around by the wind, rather than propelling himself in a chosen direction. In losing his foundation, he loses a foundation for ethics, as does Western philosophy in general. Levinas, however, does not lose his sense of God or transcendence, but nor does he continue to base his ethics in a foundational philosophy. Levinas’ understanding of oneself as ethical subjectivity is decentred, but is not without orientation. I am sympathetic to Nietzsche’s sense of being lost without the secure foundations of religious faith, but the orientation on the other that Levinas develops does not require this foundation.¹⁹

Restructuring Oneself

One still needs a sense of self after postmodern critiques of the subject, and a fragmented self will not suffice. After experiencing fragmentation, one can tack together the fragments, and build oneself anew in ethical subjectivity. We need some structure to build a self (we need a “core,” as Flax says), but it need not be a “house,” as implied in Levinas’ image of being at home with itself. One needs a place to be, but it need not be exclusively one’s own. One can range about a territory and be at home, without owning one’s home as a domain. Perhaps, then, instead of trying to avoid rebuilding the master’s house by using the master’s tools, we should try making something else, looking not to build a new house but another sort of structure, something mobile, manoeuvrable, suited to the terrain in which we find ourselves. For me this is a canoe.

A canoe is a small watercraft, usually a bit bigger than twice as long as an adult human is tall, tapered at both ends, and propelled by paddle. Canoes do not have closed decks, but are instead open on top, held open by thwarts. This structure is not a shelter, or at least not a good one. In the rain, I can crawl under my canoe, but it does little to shelter me: this is not what it is designed for. A canoe is a means of transport, more like a verb than a noun.

While a ship has a home port, a canoe has a home territory: not a place to call one’s own, but where one belongs (belongs to the land instead of

vice versa). Canoes do not need safe harbours, but can be pulled up on almost any shore. Unlike a ship, one does not pilot a canoe. To paddle a canoe, if paddling solo, one sits not in the centre, but in the stern, a bit off to one side so the canoe is angled in the water. (Canoes can hold more than one person, like I hope to, in having children. Also, I share my canoe with my spouse, but it is still my canoe.) A canoe does not drown out the sounds of others like a motorboat does, nor does it pollute the water with gas and oil. In a canoe, one travels through the land. Kneeling in a canoe at water level, one can be with/in the land, rather than the centre of a totalizing gaze of the world as one's own. Travelling by canoe, my ability to appropriate things for myself (as in being at home with itself) is restricted, because I need to be able to portage: I am limited by how much I can carry, including gear and the canoe. The canoe is designed not only to carry me, but for me to carry it.

A canoe does not need to be elaborate. It can be built with the materials one finds locally, in areas in which canoes are an appropriate means of travel. My great uncle built his first canoe with a handsaw. (He said it looked like "a sick horse with its ribs sticking out," but it was functional.) A canoe can be made as a dugout, or it can be built using birch bark and black spruce roots, or skins and driftwood. I am building a cedar strip canoe, following the techniques developed through trial and error by my great uncle. I am using lumber and tools that my great uncle left to my father when he passed on, and I am doing this with the help of my father's knowledge of his canoe building techniques.

First we cut and shaped ribs out white ash, to give the canoe strength. The gunwales are also white ash, strong enough to give the canoe structure, and, when boiled, flexible enough to be shaped. The keel, also white ash, will lend the canoe stability and manoeuvrability in the water. Strips of white cedar are glued over the ribs, to give the canoe its flexible outer form. Over this goes the waterproofing skin of the hull. This gives the canoe protection, but it is the most vulnerable to damage of all parts of the canoe, like healthy ego boundaries.

A canoe is a well-suited craft for the land in which I grew up, the Canadian Shield. The waters of this land are not necessarily symbolic of the dissolution and the disillusion of Nietzsche's little ship tossed on the sea. Water is not only a symbol, and although the oceans have their appeal, I would prefer to stick to the interlacing rivers, lakes, and streams of the land with which I am most familiar, within the Ottawa Valley. James Raffan suggests that, "By virtue of having three oceans fed by rivers and lakes throughout the country, Canada is also a land of canoes . . . And for each river, each waterway, there is a people or

layers of people through time who are bound to the land and to the water by a canoe.”²⁰ Raffan is correct insofar as saying that this is true of “the wilderness fantasy that is Canada.”²¹ It expresses a prominent myth of Canadian identity, but it is not true to all regions or peoples of Canada. While a canoe may be “the most appropriate vehicle for travelling the greater part of this boreal country,”²² not all of Canada is boreal. Kayaks are better suited to the waters of the Arctic Ocean, and neither a canoe nor a kayak is much use in the midst of the prairies. I draw attention to this because I do not intend that this canoe narrative of subjectivity be totalizing, or all encompassing. As William C. James cautions, “Perhaps as Canadians we are never more nostalgic, never more atavistic, than when we get into a canoe. But it is well to be cautious before uncritically rhapsodizing about the transformative possibilities inherent in canoe trips seen as mythic quests. The canoe has no magical properties.”²³

Canoes can take advantage of variable winds to move across streams, changing tacks, but can also paddle against the wind or current when necessary, like when ethics require going against the mainstream. But perhaps I am getting carried away with myself in developing this canoe metaphor. Are we all in the same boat? In the sense conveyed by Haida artist Bill Reid’s *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, we are all in the same boat when it comes to “the environment” in general. We are all in the same boat in the sense that we all, different groups of humans and other species, share this planet. All waters flow into the sea, and all are connected, but they are not the same, and the crafts we use to navigate the waters are not all the same, nor should they be. Navigation and crafts need to be appropriate to the lands and waters in which one finds oneself. (I mean finding oneself in a place also literally, as one’s sense of self develops in response to all the others of the place.) Others might find coracles, umiaks, or kayaks better than canoes, or maybe rafts, sailboats, even a *quffa*, or curagh.²⁴ We do not all need to live in the same way, but all need to live in ways that are appropriate to where we live, and that will not spoil the waters and atmosphere that form the larger part of our shared context and global environment.

Perhaps we are not all in the same boat, so much as in the same (figuratively speaking) hot water. Then again, the rich do not feel environmental impacts to the same degree as the poor, and research into environmental justice and environmental racism indicates that class privilege is often also race privilege. Some people have ocean liners that dump tonnes of raw sewage in the seas. This is quite different from the small craft I am building, but even having the possibility of building a recreational boat locates me in a position of privilege. I am sheltered by my situation living in the Ottawa valley, as a Canadian citizen, and

further as a white Anglophone in ways not experienced by others within Canada, let alone beyond its borders.

My canoe narrative of ethical subjectivity as being with/in is situated, and embedded, not only in the more than human world, but also culturally. It is provisional, contingent, responsive, and creative. It applies to my cultural situation as I perceive it. It is necessarily respondent to other narratives of subjectivity, specifically, the Cartesian notion of the self as subject, and criticisms of this, including responses from modern Jewish philosophers and postmodernists, as well as ecofeminists and other environmentalists. There is not much that can be said about being, subjectivity, or the self, or what it is to be human, that is universal—perhaps only that it is contingent, partial, provisional, never finished, never fully thematized. What I say here about subjectivity is offered as a particular narrative of being with/in, which I hope is ethical. It is intended to be a form of ethical subjectivity, one that is more inclusive than models which focus on the thinking self, the self as a subject, or even the self as described by the boundary limits of one's body. It is a form of subjectivity as "my life," described through a narrative that includes others, a story told from my perspective, without denying that others can also tell stories from their perspectives.

The subjectivity of being with/in describes being as a verb, tacking oneself together as an ongoing process. It is also being through a range, mobile subjectivity, belonging to a place without owning it. Being with/in is being in relation, not sovereign. It describes belonging without ownership of oneself, being without the right to be, as provisional (never finished or whole), as constructed (not an essential or universal, unchanging entity), as individual (called as oneself, "me," answering the call to ethics), and as interrupted (with/in—interrupted by the others one finds oneself with, in context, in situation). The subjectivity of being with/in an interrupted conjunction, always in context, implicated in the world, always already obligated to others in ethics and justice.

Range and Permeability of Oneself as Being With/in

The move from the subject-object relations of Cartesian subjectivity to the interpersonal relations of ethical subjectivity can be understood as a change of perception in terms of domain to range. Subjectivity does not have to be a discrete entity as Descartes imagined it to be for it to be a meaningful concept. One's sense of oneself does not need to be as a static subject, but should be fluidly stable for mental health. Meaning can be perceived without ordering continuous phenomena into discrete packages with arbitrarily placed, stratified, solidified, or rigid

boundaries. The lack of rigid boundaries does not indicate the loss of the concept or thing that was rigidly defined.

The sovereign self, being at home with itself, perceives itself as the sovereign of a domain, fixed with clearly demarcated boundaries. In being with/in I perceive myself as the nexus of a variable range, a flexible area with differentially permeable boundaries, connected to various others in a variety of relations, belonging to various groups, such as neighbourhoods, voluntary associations, ecosystems, and bioregions. This nexus is not stationary, but moves as my body moves, changes as my body changes, regenerating, growing, aging, processing matter and experience. Being with/in is a dynamic nexus with a variable range, a conjunction that is always interrupted by others.

Neil Evernden develops an understanding of subjectivity as a field that is in some respects similar to my understanding of ethical subjectivity as range, building on William Barrett's interpretation of Heidegger's notion of Dasein as a field of care or concern. Barrett says that "My Being is not something that takes place inside my skin . . . my Being, rather, is spread over a field or region which is the world of its care and concern."²⁵ Evernden is intrigued by the idea of the self "not necessarily defined by the body surface . . . that there is some kind of involvement with the realm beyond the skin, and that the self is more a sense of self-potency throughout a region than a purely physical presence."²⁶ Barrett demonstrates the awareness of oneself as a field by describing how a young child recognizes himself, who can answer to his name, but when asked to point to whom the name belongs will point to his mother and father as well as himself. Barrett explains:

before he has reached that stage, he has heard his name as naming a field or region of Being with which he is concerned, and to which he responds, whether the call is to come to food, to mother, or whatever. And the child is right. His name is not the name of an existence that takes place within the envelope of his skin: that is merely the awfully abstract social convention that has imposed itself not only on his parents but on the history of philosophy. The basic meaning the child's name has for him does not disappear as he grows older; it only becomes covered over by the more abstract social convention. He secretly hears his own name called whenever he hears any region of Being named with which he is vitally involved.²⁷

Evernden uses this understanding of subjectivity to explain the behaviour of people who feel compelled to defend nonhuman nature: "Whether it is the housewife who defies the chainsaws to rescue a tree that is beyond her property yet part of her abode . . . [or] the naturalist who fears the extinction of a creature he has never seen, the phenomenon is similar: each has heard his own name called, and reacts

to the spectre of impending non-being.”²⁸ In Evernden’s interpretation, such environmental defenders’ sense of themselves is not contained by their physical bodies, but extends into a field of concern. According to Evernden, one identifies with the other in hearing one’s name called in this way.

To a Levinasian, the idea of extending oneself into the world as identification might appear to be a totalizing endeavour of being at home with itself. It seems to me more ethical to defend places as others, rather than as part of oneself, as Evernden and some other deep ecologists interpret such environmentalist responses. While Evernden’s understanding of oneself as a field of concern does have some similarities with my idea of being with/in in terms of range, in situations where “each has heard his own name called” in defence of places and nonhuman others, I find a more Levinasian approach preferable. Perhaps each hears her/his name called not in identification with the place or other, but hears her/himself called to responsibility, as Levinas describes in the ethics of face-to-face relations.

Levinas teaches that, in a face-to-face relation, the face of the other is exposed, naked. The face of the other calls “the same,” the I, into question and creates ethics. The I then recognizes itself as guilty “where, qua I, I am not innocent spontaneity but usurper and murderer.”²⁹ The face of the other is an epiphany of infinity: it cannot be encompassed by the same but instead tears the same out of its concern for itself by calling it into question, obliging one in relation, electing one to a responsibility one cannot shirk, and in which one cannot be replaced.³⁰ This tearing of the self opens it into exteriority, beyond being, to ethics.

Extending one’s identity into groups with which one identifies can shade into being at home with itself, since having an identity is somewhat tied to being “one’s own,” but groups do overlap, and one’s identity does shade into others. In being with/in, I exist in a continuum of beings, travelling trails shared with others. Perhaps this can be conceived as though I have a number of beginnings, but no specific or final endings. When I meet another, we interface, rather than confront each other as being mutually exclusive. I begin again at every meeting, moving through a range of being. I begin at a spring, where it seeps out of granite, through a thin layer of humus amidst tall pines and maples, in a hollow in the hills near my parents’ house in the Ottawa Valley. I walked there almost daily growing up, where the ground slopes up on all sides except for the south, creating a nestled place. To be there feels like being gently held in the palm of creation’s hand. It is a place of

rest, but also renewal. The spring is irrepressible, a small source of infinity.

The water of the spring trickles down the incline to the south, growing stronger as it collects and then rushes as the slope becomes steeper. It circulates underground and joins the swamp that sits in the flat that extends behind most of the length of the road where my parents live. This swamp holds all but a narrow stream of water no more than a few feet across that runs behind the land in which my parents live, and feeds into a shallow pond my father's uncle dug for testing the cedar strip canoes he built. Now it is home to countless frogs and breeds multitudes of mosquitoes. The pond drains through a narrow culvert under the dam built by my great uncle, and twists its way along the trees around below the edge of the garden. This creek winds a short way down, disappears underground again, and flows under the road into the York River.

And so I begin at the river without having ended. Starting in June, my brother Chris and I went swimming in the river every day. This continued for years, as we paddled up the river with our friends, to see the goats, and share lunch across from a clay bank. We explored every bend, nook, and depth of the river within an afternoon's leisurely travel. We learned that swans are rather fierce when you meet them eye to eye in a canoe, and we grew strong in carrying our canoe up the steep sand bank of the river, where our road begins.

One day there was a sign posted in the park when we went for our regular swim. The river is now too polluted for safe swimming. And so this became another beginning, of myself as an environmentalist. I learned another aspect of being connected: that the lack of adequate sewers up river, and on Baptiste Lake, another of the river's sources, fouls the water in the village of Bancroft, and beyond.

I grew older and for a time lived outside the watershed of my origin. I became lost in learning the ways of city living and university methods. I learned big words and the thoughts of famous people. My mind expanded, yet I seemed to become smaller in leaving my family, the spring, the multitudinous connections of home. I did not know that place, except to know that it was not home: limestone not granite. The water tasted wrong.

A few years ago, I found myself again within this watershed, on another branch that feeds the Ottawa River. I begin again on the Rideau River, in the heart of the city of Ottawa, in the neighbourhood called Sandy Hill. Here, I have begun a garden. I am rooting. I rent this bit of earth, rather than "own" it (as if such a thing were possible), but I do not grow only annuals. I am not merely a transient resident. Each year I add more

perennials, and we have planted trees. Trees, like rivers and creeks and streams, show the branching interconnections, the meetings that sustain and renew us, the multiple beginnings that constitute one's life.

In being with/in, I understand myself in terms of overlapping ranges of various types. I understand myself as being not only, or even primarily, here speaking/writing. I am also where I live, with/in the land I live, with the others with whom I share that place. The boundaries between myself and others, myself and the world are not static. For one thing, I am distributed; I am both here and there. Also, my boundaries shift depending on with whom I am interacting. In speaking professionally, my boundary is not very permeable: I like to have a fair bit of personal space, and I usually show only a restricted aspect of myself in public venues.

When I am at home, the boundary between myself and others is more obviously multidimensional. I can see a visible map of some of my relations in my back yard in winter, when there is snow on the ground. My cat Milo's trail follows the path I make to the composter, and continues on past it under the fence into our neighbour's yard. The squirrels' paths meet and overlap with mine for only about ten feet, between the place I leave seeds for them, and the platform for the bird seeds. The birds leave footprints all over the yard within about a two-metre radius of the bird feeder.

Relationality

My thinking about the relationality of ethical subjectivity as being with/in has been influenced by ecofeminist and deep ecologist's models of the self that emphasize the deconstruction of the boundary between self and other as subject and object. The ecological self, as developed in deep ecology, tends to speak of the self as coming to identify with the world, developing an expanded understanding of Self. Joanna Macy and Freya Mathews, for example, each advocate a sense of self that includes the natural world not in oppositional terms, but as part of an interdependent whole, not separated from nature but continuous with it.

Macy presents a model of the self as "coextensive with all life on this planet."³¹ She describes this self as inseparable and continuous with the web of life, "interconnected as cells in a larger body."³² Following deep ecologist Arne Naess, she argues that recognizing oneself as being in identity with the rest of the world means ethics are unnecessary. "The world *is* our body,"³³ so the urge to self preservation protects the larger self.

Mathews also builds on Naess' work. In particular, she develops Naess' concept of ecological self-realization in which the self achieves identification with "the whole, the 'world,'" sees "the same" everywhere, and is "not alienated from anything."³⁴ To a Levinasian, this sounds too much like being at home with itself, totalizing all into one's own world. The concern of these deep ecologists is to overcome alienation from the natural world. Perhaps it would help to describe alienation as a state of not understanding or being aware of one's relations to others. To overcome this, one must recognize the relations, not merge with the others. For Mathews, and apparently Naess, "identification" indicates merging. In Mathews' and Macy's models of the ecological self, the self is extended into the world to overcome alienation from it, so that there is no longer the split of "in here" and "out there"—all become one.

Ecofeminist Marti Kheel criticizes this sort of deep ecology model of the "expanded Self" on the basis that it is not gender neutral. The ecological self, in her opinion, evidences an expansion of a masculine type of self into the world. She argues that the self is constructed differently in men and women, due to socialization,³⁵ but also suggests that there is an "original self" prior to the ego self³⁶ which is preserved in women's socialization. Kheel argues that a wider identification with nature in self-actualization such as Naess advocates does not necessarily lead to ethical interaction; for example, there is a tradition of men using hunting as a vehicle for self-actualization.³⁷ She also criticizes the deep ecological expansion of self for subsuming individual concerns.³⁸

I doubt men have any monopoly on egoism, but agree with Kheel that socialization is a key to the formation of self. If the self is expanded as a domination of ego, it seems unlikely this will solve any of our environmental problems.³⁹ Furthermore, as Kheel notes, in ecological models of the self following Naess, individual needs do seem to be subsumed in the expanded self. If we are all "cells in a larger body," who speaks for the larger body? What happens to the otherness of others, and their points of view in this expansion of self? Whose selves are we talking about here? What measures are there to ensure that this expansion of self is not accomplished as an act of totalization where others are simply subsumed? Even if the expansion of self, as Mathews indicates, is achieved as a spiritual process of self-actualization, rather than through monopolization and domination of an egoistic self, it does not seem to recognize actual differences or possible differences in point of view. Whose vision of the world is to be realized in the process of self-actualization? This model of self does not account for the possibility that a Euro-American vision of how the world should be,

and actions in defence of that vision, may not correspond to other visions of the world, and that there are ethical problems with trying to force a Euro-American vision on people in other cultures.

Ecopsychologist Sarah Conn also builds on Naess' model of the ecological self, but incorporates Arthur Koestler's idea of "holon," the self as a whole in itself but also part of a larger whole. She recognizes possible problems with individual needs being "swept away by the larger whole,"⁴⁰ and recognizes a need for semi-permeable boundaries of the self that are neither too rigid nor too diffuse. Feminist Wendy Donner, however, cautions against advocating diffuse boundaries in relational models of the self. "Distinct selves," she says, "are necessary in situations of care for others, particularly the parent-child relationship."⁴¹ Furthermore, she argues, emphasizing relatedness and diffuse boundaries in the self does not recognize how these qualities contribute to and sustain abusive situations. Donner cautions that "Abusive relations are horrifyingly sustainable and horrifying in their power to construct, define, and maintain a self's identity and undermine the well-being of that self through the power of the defining and abusive relations."⁴² Donner thus argues that "autonomy and strongly bounded selves are crucially valuable," noting that this insight is necessary to recovery processes.⁴³

Donner focuses her criticisms on Val Plumwoods' model of the self-in-relation, because she finds it to be the most promising.⁴⁴ Plumwood, Donner says, is cognizant of deep ecology's problematic approach of "identification," and thus she "argues for a 'nonholistic but relational account of the self' which does not deny the 'independence or distinguishability of the other,' whether the other is another human, the community, or nature (Plumwood 1991, 14)."⁴⁵ Selves, in Plumwood's self-in-relation model, are distinct rather than merged with others, whether those others are other individuals, communities, or the cosmos. Such selves are not fragmented, and have solid, but permeable boundaries. Donner explains that selves in Plumwood's model "have a core unity which holds their parts together . . . They are autonomous selves, and so they have the ability to rationally scrutinize their different aspects as well as their relations and connections."⁴⁶ As Donner notes, a self-in-relation must, logically, remain separated from others for self and other to be related rather than fused.⁴⁷

However, while clarifying that the self is fundamentally shaped by its relations with others, Donner argues that "the self in the self-in-relation is logically, axiologically, and metaphysically prior to its relations."⁴⁸ It makes sense to think that to be in relation, or to be shaped by anything, the self must first exist, but I see no reason to think that the self must

first be separated from others in the sense of being independent or autonomous. Donner's concerns about abusive situations are valid, but arguing for firmer boundaries does not necessarily solve the problem. The problem is not in the self of the one who is abused, but in the abuser. The point of those who advocate relational models of the self is that if everyone enacted a sense of relatedness, these abusive relations would not exist. Of course, changing only one self will not fix the system, but neither will maintaining a rigid boundary between self and other repair it.

I do not think Donner and myself are in substantial disagreement. We disagree about the formation of self, and to what degree the self is "independent" of its relations. To me, it is fairly obvious that in physical and psychological terms, the self begins in relation, that being in relation is a condition of being, and that the self becomes an individual by differentiating itself in relation with a variety of others. I think Donner is mistaken to suppose that recognizing the relational aspects of the self need impact on the ability of a self to act in its own interest, or maintain a healthy sense of oneself. That the self is in relation, and builds an ongoing identity in the context of its relations, indicates that to remedy an abusive situation, the self must come into a healthy environment, relating with others who will not abuse the self. Someone who closes herself off from relations in general does not thereby heal herself. Healing is facilitated by recognizing that our boundaries can be differentially permeable, so that one can set firmer boundaries in relations with certain others when necessary.

Anita Barrows' work in ecopsychology suggests some useful ways of developing a model of the self that is neither too porous, nor too rigid for health. Barrows' description of her variation on the ecological self is as permeable, interconnected, and entwined with others. The self requires, she says, "enough of a membrane to function," but the membrane must be permeable to interact. Barrows associates the area between self and world with D. W. Winnicott's idea of transitional space, as a membrane that "delineates but does not divide us from the medium in which we exist."⁴⁹ She notes that the process of separation in object relations theory might also be seen as coming into a wider context of relations beyond the interhuman. Barrows also associates this with intersubjectivity and Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding of "interbeing," which suggests a rich area for further investigation.⁵⁰ However, while she gives a sense of embeddedness in the natural world, her sense of being within does not lay any stress on the "with" part, the relation with specific others as different from oneself.

My model of the self as being with/in recognizes the need for a sense of oneself as both a unique individual, and as being in relation with others, embedded within the more than human world. Similar to Barrow's ecopsychological model of the self, I understand the self as having a differentially permeable membrane, and being more or less distinct from its environs, depending on the needs of the situation. However, in my understanding of ethical subjectivity as being with/in, I recognize that the individual is always both *with* and *in*, already implicated in the world and with others.

Being Embedded in the World, Being Implicated

In the embeddedness of being with/in, oneself neither loses one's individuality nor encompasses the world. Oneself is not simply embedded in being embodied and being with/in the Earth, Nature, or "the environment," but in a specific place. As bioregional thinkers such as Gary Snyder⁵¹ and Alan Thein Durning⁵² argue, to be healthy as individuals and as a species within this world, we need a sense of place, not Gaia consciousness, but a sense of belonging to "the land" of a specific place. "The land" conjures up specific images, a place within which one is situated. It is a place where one can find oneself, being with/in. For me, "the land" is part of the Canadian Shield in the Ottawa Valley: a hilly land of small lakes laced together with swamps and rivers, interspersed with granite rock faces, enormous pine trees, and the smell of high bush cranberries where partridge live. I do not identify with the whole world, expanding my sense of self to contain all the Earth, but find myself embedded within a specific place, the Ottawa valley.

To be embedded is to participate intimately in the world: to eat, to interact with others, to grow, and to die. In being with/in I am already implicated in the world, already guilty. I eat. In being with/in, I live through consuming others. In being with/in I am implicated, and already obligated with/in the more than human world, embodied and embedded in relations with others within the natural world.

In being with/in, I am a unique nexus, but also always an interdependent constituent of larger wholes. This can be imaged similarly to J. Baird Callicott's understanding of nested communities, developed out of Mary Midgley's "mixed community" and Aldo Leopold's "biotic community."⁵³ In being with/in I belong to my family, communities of people and domestic plants and animals, the wider biotic community, and the ecosphere. The range of myself extends into the groups with/in which I participate, being with/in

multiple and frequently overlapping groups, and in relation with the other participants in these groups.

However, in being with/in, I cannot identify with the groups in which I participate. I do not acquire a sense of wholeness in being with/in. Although in being with/in I belong as an interdependent constituent of larger, overlapping wholes, I cannot ethically allow myself to become identified with a group to the extent that I feel compelled to defend other members because of injury felt to myself. I can speak on behalf of other members when I am called upon to do so, not because we are the same, but because of our differences. I can ethically speak on behalf of others only for them, not for myself. According to Levinas, one does not have the right to speak on one's own behalf, because one does not have the right to be, to claim anything for oneself as one's own, in ethical subjectivity. However, this has nothing to do with the others' right to speak on their own behalf—the point is that “I” do not have the right to be, “me.” Once another calls me to responsibility, I am obligated to the other rather than in possession of the right to be.⁵⁴

Being with/in must not become a claim for “my place in the sun,” or my place in the world, but instead must be interrupted. Levinas points to this phrase, “‘my place in the sun,’ that is how the whole usurpation of the world began,” from Pascal, in developing his understanding of being at home with itself. In claiming “my place in the sun” the self is deaf to the cries of others, egoistically wrapped up in itself. Oneself in ethical subjectivity, in contrast, is always already interrupted by the others.

Being With/in: An Interrupted Conjunction

Being with/in is not the self as a locus, but oneself as a nexus. A locus would be one's own place, being *chez soi*. Being with/in, as Levinas says of the one for the other, is in exile, denucleated. Oneself in ethical subjectivity must remain torn open by the others' questioning of oneself. While this nexus does not require a Cartesian subject, it does require a core, a point, the moment of oneself tacked together.

The moment of oneself tacked together bears some similarity to Lacan's understanding of subjectivity in terms of the *point de captation*. Critical ecofeminist theorist Catriona Sandilands explains that for Lacan the subject emerges as self aware with a fundamental lack of anything to identify with. She writes:

The subject per se (and not just the ego) emerges with the insertion of the individual into the Symbolic order, the gaze of the Other, the totality of signifiers.

What is important to note in Lacan is that the Symbolic order is also marked by a fundamental lack, a core of representational impossibility; the production of meaning is, as a result, permanently contingent, as there is no fixed anchoring point to the signifier. The signifier cannot perfectly correspond to the signified; instead, meaning is partially and momentarily fixed through a retroactive process in which a *point de caption* (literally, ‘upholstery button’) temporarily halts the sliding of meaning of signifiers and signifieds. Thus, the agent is involved in a process of trying to compensate for the fundamental lack marking it through the construction of a self spoken through these sliding meanings; she or he can never completely do so, however, as ‘the subject of the signifier is precisely . . . this impossibility of finding a signifier which would be ‘its own.’⁵⁵

In being with/in, oneself as a nexus is a temporary tacking together that is interrupted so that it cannot simply identify with itself as “one’s own,” or being at home with itself. Oneself is continuously tacked together, but always only temporarily so. In being with/in one remains oneself although the groups to which one belongs, and alliances which one seeks change. There is always something tacked together, although the elements change from time to time, from moment to moment.⁵⁶ In being with/in, I am tacked together as my range overlaps with others and changes over time, but I cannot simply identify with myself. Being with/in is like a canoe, tacked together, oriented to others rather than centred on itself, an open vessel that is steered. In being with/in, oneself is a nexus point, is meaningful, and is oriented toward others rather than self-centred.

A nexus is a bond, a connection, from *nectere nex*, meaning “bind.” In ethical subjectivity, one is bound, already obligated, already interrupted by the others, an interrupted conjunction (with/in). Levinas describes something like this in saying that “Subjectivity is a node and a denouement—of essence and essences’s other.”⁵⁷ “Denouement” means both resolution and unravelling, the resolution or unravelling of the plot of a story or play. “Node” means intersection, as a vertex, a connecting point, but is from the same Latin root as “denouement,” *nodus*, which means “knot.” Thus, Levinas is saying that subjectivity is like a knot and its untying, but “denouement” is an ending, a closure. The “plot” in the denouement of subjectivity is the plot of the other in the same, the question and response pattern of thought to which Plato refers:

The silent coming and going from question to response, with which Plato characterized thought, already refers to a plot in which is tied up the node of subjectivity, by the other commanding the same. The reference is there even when, turned toward being in its manifestation, thought knows itself. Asking oneself and questioning oneself does not undo the torsion of the same and the other in subjectivity; it refers to it. There is an intrigue of the other in the same which does

not amount to an openness of the other to the same. The other to whom the petition of the question is addressed does not belong to the intelligible sphere to be explored. He stands in proximity.⁵⁸

In the knot and unravelling of ethical subjectivity, the other is in oneself as psyche, inspiration, rather than a closed object of thought. The other unravels being at home with itself while tying oneself to others in relation.

In saying “subjectivity is a node and a denouement” Levinas is also alluding to his idea of the self folded back on itself, “the torsion of the same and the other in subjectivity.”⁵⁹ The self turning back on itself in reflection does not undo the knot of subjectivity, knowing as unravelling oneself, as understanding. Rather, the self turning back on itself is the other commanding oneself. One is not unravelled in a conclusive sense that would smooth out the knot, but is at once undone and bound.

Interfaces

A visiting friend interrupts the writing of this work, and reminds me that there are things more important than finishing it by a particular date, things more important than philosophy. This essay, like myself, remains unfinished—I could edit it indefinitely, but I need to give it out to others rather than keeping it for myself. The more I become involved in this work, the more I resent interruptions in the writing, but the interruptions are necessary, and not just one interruption to break me out of my concern for myself and my work, but again and again, to remind me of my obligations to others, to live as well as write.

In the ethical subjectivity of being with/in, I am torn open in being interrupted, enabling interfaces with multiple others. Interfaces are meetings of oneself in ethical subjectivity with others. In an interface, two meet face to face, and each calls a response in the other. As Levinas has argued, it is problematic to describe such relations from the perspective of an outside observer. In ethics, the relation does not come to pass in reciprocal terms, because ethics are what the other inspires in me. What I might inspire in the other is unknown, and irrelevant to my ethical obligations for and to the other. When I meet another face to face, and interface with that other, I can speak only for myself. In interfacing, I respond to the specific other before me. That other calls up a response in me, never the same as what is called up in me by another.

My uniqueness is enhanced the greater the number of interfaces of which I become aware. In being with/in I am separated from others, but without mutual exclusion. The boundaries of the range of myself are fluid and differentially permeable. I have a sense of myself as separate, but not exclusively so. Self and other are not essentially different, but are relationally different. Differences between oneself and others are found in relating with others. The more others with whom I am in relation, the more differences I find. Relating with a variety of others, human and otherwise, allows me to find more dimensions of myself, and become a more unique person. Thus I do not lose my individual uniqueness in being embedded in a context of relations, as implied in a binary understanding of the world.⁶⁰ Rather, in being with/in I increase in complexity through participating in multiple interfaces with others.

An interface allows two entities of different types to communicate, as a point of connection enabling modulation and translation of information across a boundary. Donna Haraway⁶¹ uses the idea of interfaces in her understanding of cyborg subjectivities to demonstrate the connections between humans and machines. Cyborgs are ambiguous, and transgressive entities, both organic creatures and technological machines. In Haraway's usage, cyborgs are also not necessarily one gender or the other. Haraway invokes the image of the cyborg as an ironic tactic to disturb gender essentialism in mainstream Western and feminist discourses. The image of the cyborg demonstrates and signifies the intertwining of technology and organic bodies in humans, and undermines the grand narratives of biology, evolution, and technology as it problematizes the boundaries between living and technological systems.⁶² The cyborg has the potential to stimulate social change, Haraway argues, as an ironic image that suggests a model of the person as being connected, responsible, and heterogeneous rather than a unitary self-enclosed ego. I might be a cyborg, if my technological aspect is my canoe.

Tacking Together

Haraway also discusses ethical possibilities of bonding with others through making strategic alliances and coalitions based on affinities, rather than identification. Affinity is a relation of temporary choice rather than unchanging essence. Affinity groups come together as strategic alliances in pursuit of specific goals. Within feminism, affinity groups enable different women to work together without requiring all to accept a unitary identity, even as women or being female. As Haraway explains:

gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in “essential” unity. There is nothing about being “female” that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as “being” female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.⁶³

Forming strategic alliances allows women to work together on feminist issues despite their differences. Such coalitions also bring together people working on environmental, social, and anti-globalization issues. Strategic alliances built on affinity allow a temporary tacking together, so groups of people are not fragmented but move together with others. A strategic alliance is based on a moment, the temporary working together of a play of forces around an axis, and builds a momentum of alliance through people helping each other. Strategic alliances provide a means of preserving ethical relations with others in seeking justice more broadly.

In working toward social change to better include nonhuman others in ethical relations, we need not all share the same sense of self. A variety of types of craft are suitable for treading the waters and trails in which we find ourselves, for structuring ourselves in ethical subjectivity. My narrative of being with/in as canoeing is given as a form of ethical subjectivity, a way of being in the world that is an ethical dwelling with others, including not only human others but all the others in our environments and local habitats. I intend that it be non-exclusive, held open to the questioning of others.

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Endnotes

¹ The phrase “more than human world” is from David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1996). It points to the way the world extends beyond human beings and human perceptions. There is more to the world than human beings, human categories of thought, and human perceptions of the world. The more than human world is the natural world inclusive of all living entities, including others generally not understood to be alive or part of the natural (as opposed to supernatural) world, such as rocks and spirits.

² Levinas 1969, 157.

³ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵ I discuss justice further in my dissertation, *The Ethics of Being With/in* (Davy 2003), from which this essay is drawn.

⁶ The idea that there is a single “philosophic understanding of the self” is, of course, an overgeneralization that could be easily deconstructed to find a much greater diversity of understandings of the self in Western thought, many of them much more concerned with ethics than Levinas’ writings about being at home with itself indicate. Rather than reading Western philosophy with a hermeneutic of retrieval, as Charles Taylor (1989), for example, Levinas, and perhaps most environmentalists, feel it is more important to put the Western tradition in question. I have elected to follow Levinas’ train of thought here, leaving a broader inquiry into Western writings on the self for another project.

⁷ Levinas 1989, 173.

⁸ In “I-It” relations the self, as subject, reduces the other to an object. Martin Buber develops the idea of I-It relations in contrast to I-Thou relations in *I and Thou* (Buber 1970).

⁹ Levinas 1989, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² Levinas 1986, 27.

¹³ Flax 1990, 218–219.

¹⁴ Levinas 1989, 182, 184.

¹⁵ Nietzsche 1967, 35.

¹⁶ Levinas 1985, 76.

¹⁷ Nietzsche 1974, 181.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180–181.

¹⁹ Within Levinas’ work, God is necessary for ethics to come to pass. However, God is not a foundation for these ethics; ethics are anarchic, without *arche* or foundation, for Levinas. Developing ethics out of Levinas’ work does not then require God as a

foundation, and may or may not refer to God. For Levinas, God is the only exit out of being, while for me, exiting being is not necessary for ethics.

²⁰ Raffan 1999, 2.

²¹ Ibid., ix.

²² Raffan and Horwood 1988, 1.

²³ James 1998, 99.

²⁴ A *quffa* is an Iraqi ferry woven out of withes (like wicker furniture) and caulked with bitument. A curragh or *curach* is a large Irish coracle, able to carry about twenty people (Arima 1999, 45). Other people might have a more collective notion of self, and consequently find a larger boat more suitable.

²⁵ quoted in Evernden 1985, 43.

²⁶ Evernden 1985, 43.

²⁷ Barrett quoted in Evernden 1985, 64.

²⁸ Evernden 1985, 64.

²⁹ Levinas 1969, 84.

³⁰ Ibid., 245.

³¹ Macy 1989, 201.

³² Ibid., 204.

³³ Ibid., 210.

³⁴ Naess quoted in Mathews 1995, 142.

³⁵ Kheel 1990, 129.

³⁶ Ibid., 131.

³⁷ Ibid., 131–134.

³⁸ Ibid., 136.

³⁹ Naess, and many following the tenets of deep ecology, understand the ecological self not as an expansion of ego, but as an identification with a Self that transcends the personal. However, I fear that too many people are not capable of distinguishing between an egoistic expansion of self, and a transcendent awareness of Self.

⁴⁰ Conn 1995, 164.

⁴¹ Donner 1997, 381.

⁴² Ibid., 384.

⁴³ Ibid., 385.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 379.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 381.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 382–383.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 383.

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- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 383.
- ⁴⁹ Barrows 1995, 107.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 107.
- ⁵¹ Snyder, Gary. 1990. *The Practice of the Wild*. New York: North Point Press.
- ⁵² Durning, Alan Thein. 1996. *This Place on Earth: Home and the Practice of Permanence*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books.
- ⁵³ Callicott 1989, 54–56.
- ⁵⁴ Levinas 1985, 98–99.
- ⁵⁵ Sandilands 1999, 83–84.
- ⁵⁶ I mean this in a double sense of moment. In physics, a moment is a play of forces around a pivot, a nexus of energy. Oneself as being with/in is a nexus that is temporarily tacked together in time, and in relation with others through a variety of alliances and movements.
- ⁵⁷ Levinas 1998, 10.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ As found, for example in Lévy-Bruhl’s understanding of “participation” as a loss of individuality in identification, in *How Natives Think* (1966).
- ⁶¹ Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- ⁶² Ibid., 2.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 155.