

Dialoguing With Nature through the *Thought of the Heart*¹

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Today's modern Western epistemology and ontology is built upon the scientific method of fragmentation of knowledge, with real world experience so fixed on this *one* position that humanity now has difficulty moving beyond rational and literal ways of relating to each other and nature as a whole (McGilchrist, 2009). This paper seeks to offer a differing perspective on, and means of engaging with, nature - aiming to illuminate an 'interconnected', heart-centred epistemology by drawing attention to the mystical traditions of Sufism and the Christian East, and the archetypal psychology of Hillman, who each highlight the heart as the place of reconnection and transformation (Cutsinger, Ware, Corbin). This paper suggests that the dynamic symbol of the heart speaks urgently to our own troubled times as the mediator between the rational and the non-rational worlds, and when embodied as metaphor, could support the development of an epistemological lens through which it may be possible to open up a long-forgotten dialogue.

We must uncentre our minds from ourselves;

We must unhumanise our views a little, and become confident

As the rock and ocean that we were made from

(Excerpt from 'Carmel Point'; Jeffers, R)

This paper has arisen from a visceral sense of urgency to explore a different mode of coming into relationship with the world beyond the purely analytical, which might support humans in developing harmonious and enabling relationships with each other and the more-than-human

¹ When I refer to nature in this paper, I am referring to American philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram's understanding of the natural world; drawing on his personal, lived experiences with tribal people who sense that the whole world is alive with spirit – “a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses” (1997, p.32) - a world within which human beings and nature are “deeply intertwined” (1997, p.33). Similarly, when I use the word ‘dialogue’ I am aligning myself to Abram's position which affirms that the human, sensing body is in continual “conversation” with the world around it, ceaselessly adjusting its actions “to a world and a terrain that is itself continually shifting” (1997, p. 49). In this case, I suggest it is possible to expand the idea of ‘dialogue’ from human-to-human, to human-to-the- more-than-human world, shifting perception to be able “to converse with the more-than-human-cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the civilised mind, are utterly insentient and inert.” (1997, p. 71) Echoing Abram, philosopher Erazim Kohak suggests that rather than thinking of discourse from a theoretical standpoint, as an exchange of information in a definite natural language, real-life conversation, as well as the exchange of words, consists also of shared silences, gestures and hints (1992, p. 372) – widening the possibility of perceiving communication as able to happen with other beings who are not able to exchange words; recognising another being as part of a “community of discourse” (1992, p. 386). It is from this frame of reference that this paper is written; opening up towards the idea that “dialogue” can be something *more* – i.e., a way of establishing deeper, more harmonious, and open connections with whatever it is that one comes into relationship with.

world.² Following the advice of American poet John Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962) in the poem above, and inspired by my PhD supervisors, in this paper I am going to experiment with taking a risk;³ for it is in these moments of exposure, between and beyond everyday analytical thought, into the realm of heart-centred, intuitive and imaginal awareness,⁴ that a way of interacting with the world which has previously remained hidden, may perhaps feel ‘safe’ enough to reveal itself.⁵ Sensing the need for, but feeling very anxious about, this idea of risk-taking, I follow Transformational Learning theorist Rosemarie Anderson’s method and stay with the uncomfortable feelings, intuiting that they are related to my own unease at stepping into a space which might expose me to criticism, perhaps even ridicule – for here I am attempting to write a paper exploring the possibility of ‘dialoguing with nature,’ when the modern world within which I live has developed a distinct epistemological dualism between nature and culture allowing a “simultaneous discrimination between distinct orders of phenomena and distinct means of knowing about them.” (Descola, 2013, p. 31). Pinpointing the source of my unease, I sense that I will not be able to move forward with my exploration of ‘dialoguing with nature’ until I briefly ‘unpack’ this idea of epistemological duality and the legacy it has left, particularly within Western thought.

While our modern understanding of nature has its roots in ancient Greece and played a pivotal role in the scientific revolution during the seventeenth century,⁶ the growing idea of

² The phrase, ‘more-than-human,’ was first used by Abram in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (1997), to refer to earthly nature as a whole.

³ Using Transformative Learning theorist Rosemarie Anderson’s method of intuitive enquiry - an epistemology of the heart that joins intuition to intellectual precision (2004, p. 308) - in this paper I am aiming to follow the “subtle ways of the heart” to balance “analytic ways of knowing” through observation and inward reflection.

⁴ In agreement with religious philosopher Henry Corbin, I am differentiating the word ‘imaginary’ (i.e., something which today is equated with the unreal/something outside of the framework of being and existing), from the imagination as an *organ of perception*, which mediates between the sensible world and the world of the intellect. Based on his understanding of Sufism, Corbin states that the heart is the “seat of the imagination” (Corbin, 1971).

⁵ Anderson suggests that new understanding and creativity is often found in the “in between” (2004, p.308). To use an analogy, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist in his thesis exploring the nature of the divided brain (2009), speaks of the notion of ‘betweenness’ in music; “Music consists entirely of relations, ‘betweenness’. The notes mean nothing in themselves: the tensions between the notes, and between notes and the silence with which they live in reciprocal indebtedness, are everything. Melody, harmony and rhythm each lie in the gaps, and yet the betweenness is only what it is because of the notes themselves....What we mean by music is not just any agglomeration of notes, but one in which the whole created is powerful enough to make each note live in a new way, a way that it had never done before.” (2009, pp. 72–73). My intention is to create a space between different modes of awareness (i.e., analytical and imaginal) to consider what may emerge in that space.

⁶ See Iain McGilchrist’s thesis *The Master and his Emissary* (2009) for in depth information regarding the development of the human brain from ancient Greece to the present day and how this has affected modern Western thought. Particularly with relation to the Western scientific method – a specific approach to the world which values fragmentation of knowledge, measurement and logical reasoning.

“a mechanical nature” (Descola, 2013, p. 31) which can be measured and objectified,⁷ has over time helped to place modern humanity into the role of ‘spectator.’⁸ This observation speaks directly to a conceptual framing towards the world based on the idea of “one” separated from “another”. In agreement, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist (2009) pinpoints 600 BCE as the time when a “change of awareness in the Greek mind...created a space for one person to be able to perceive ‘the other’ (Livingstone, 2016).⁹ Indeed, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn suggests that awareness of dualism is deeply ingrained in what it means to be human” (2013, p. 223) stating that dualism is not just “a sociocultural product of a particular time or place; it goes ‘hand in hand’ with being human” (2013, p. 223).

Certainly, the divided nature of our reality has been highlighted and explored in various ways throughout history across a wide range of discourses including the arts, philosophy and science; from Goethe declaring that ‘two souls, alas! Dwell in my breast’,¹⁰ to Schopenhauer’s description of two completely distinct forms of experience,¹¹ to Scheler defining the human being as a citizen of two worlds,¹² and Bergson referring to two different orders of reality.¹³ Similarly in the present day, drawing upon the work of semanticist Alfred Korzybski (1933), American communications scholar Marla Del Collins in her work on dualistic thinking in conflict situations, suggests that this conceptual framing towards the world “may have originated from nature’s binaries” (2005, p. 263) as the “primitive brain focussed on dissimilarities” (2005, p. 265). Del Collins is unclear about what her definition of ‘primitive’ is, however, this does not limit the value of her statement, as for the purposes of this exploration I am aiming to demonstrate the centrality of dualistic thinking across all modes of human experience.

⁷ Mechanism in the sense that the behaviour of each element can be accounted for by strict laws (Descola, 2013, p. 31)

⁸ Philosopher of science, Henri Bortoft, speaks of the growth of “spectator awareness” which entails objective observation. Particularly developed at the time of the Scientific Revolution, this mode of awareness has become the preferred mode of approaching modern daily life. Indeed, according to Bortoft, everything we encounter becomes one thing or another; differentiated, outside and separate from another. In recognising the world this way, “we, too, are separate from and outside of the things we see. We find ourselves side by side, together with, and separate from, the things we recognise” (1996, p. 13)

⁹ For more information, see Livingstone (2016) and McGilchrist (2009, Chapter 8)

¹⁰ Goethe, Faust, Part I, line 1112

¹¹ Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I, ii, §19, 1960, vol. 1, pp 163-4

¹² Scheler, 1976, ‘Die Formen des Wissens und die Bildung,’ p.95

¹³ Bergson, 1908, ‘De la multiplicité des états de conscience: l’idée de durée,’ p.74

Indeed, in his thesis exploring the development of the human brain from ancient Greece to the present day, McGilchrist puts forward the case for epistemological duality based on right and left brain hemisphere division, and suggests that this division affects our understanding of all living things (2009). According to McGilchrist, we need the characteristics of both hemispheres to work in balance, however in the modern West the left hemisphere (which deals efficiently with abstraction and logic) has come to dominate,¹⁴ suppressing the capacities of the right hemisphere which is concerned with interconnectivity and relationships between things – “It is deeply imaginative and intuitive; a rich world of symbols, feeling and metaphor” (Livingstone, 2016).¹⁵

While McGilchrist has done a great deal to highlight the limitations of a left-hemisphere dominated world that has come to view nature, and subsequently reality, as being governed by natural laws (creating a “determinate and mechanical” assumption about nature as a whole – Abram, 1997, p.8), one woman who spent years researching the particular structure of dominance that drives Western society was Australian ecofeminist, philosopher and activist Val Plumwood (1939-2008). One of Plumwood’s key concepts was that of “hyperseparation;” defined as the “structure of dominance that drives western binaries” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 94) – i.e., culture/nature, male/female, mind/matter, civilised/savage. According to Plumwood, hyperseparation places value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other to a position of “oppositional subordination” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 94). In her work, Plumwood demonstrated how nature was “backgrounded vis-à-vis the human, and thus relegated to a role that allowed usefulness without requiring moral considerability” (Bird

¹⁴ The dominance of the left hemisphere has particularly gathered pace since the period in history known as the Scientific Revolution, when modern science (as we recognise it today) emerged. This period marked a time when fundamental developments occurred within mathematics, physics, astronomy and biology, transforming cultural views about nature. Taking place in Europe from the early 1500’s and lasting into the mid 1700’s, this period is also known as the Enlightenment; a time when reason and critical thinking – characterised by the scientific method – were seen as more reliable ways of obtaining knowledge. Approaching the world as largely determinate and material helped to create conditions for the philosophy of mechanism – i.e., the idea that the natural world can be explained through mechanical or chemical processes (www.oed.com – accessed 01/05/2017). Indeed, theologian and natural philosopher Joseph Priestly (1733-1804) in his book *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777) wrote that “Mechanism is the undoubted consequence of materialism.” (www.oed.com – accessed 01/05/2017).

¹⁵ McGilchrist points to the danger we currently face in the Western world as our imaginative and intuitive capabilities are becoming increasingly divorced from dominant rationality, which emphasises quantifiable, conceptual and theoretical models at the expense of artistic and symbolic narrative. Suggesting that these two ways of thinking are a product of a particular worldview (i.e., the left hemisphere’s need to divide), McGilchrist states that before this division there is a world of ‘betweenness’ where duality is held in suspension. This suggests not only different ways of thinking about the world, but different ways of being in the world. McGilchrist affirms that both ways of knowing are equally as important and valid (McGilchrist, n.d.)

Rose, 2013, p. 94).¹⁶ Considering contemporary approaches towards the world which are dominated by empirical enquiry, materialist and mechanical assumptions and “oppositional subordination,” it is possible to contemplate how Western intellectual thought might have naturally arrived at the idea of anthropomorphism and animism.¹⁷ Indeed, the latter term originated in 19th century anthropological work, marking a distinct difference between “civilised” Western culture and “primitives” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 96). Challenging these one-sided dualisms, Plumwood argued for an enriched view of the world within which all relationships are honoured and are mutually informing (Bird Rose, 2013, pp. 94–95); suggesting deep implications for science, philosophy and anthropology. Indeed, in a similar move, anthropologist Philippe Descola in a lecture aimed at scientists and anthropologists to illuminate and challenge the growing divide between nature and culture, asked how the discourses of science and anthropology can, instead of falling into the either/or debate:

[R]ecompose nature and society, humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives, in a new assemblage in which they would no longer present themselves as distributed between substances, processes and representations, but as the instituted expression of relationships between multiple entities whose ontological status and capacity for action vary according to the positions they occupy in relation to one another? (2013, p. 5)

While I am aware that I am circling around well-established and complex discourses including anthropology, ecofeminism and philosophy, the reason I am drawing in ideas from these seemingly disparate fields is specifically with regards to the *quality* of Plumwood’s and Descola’s sentiments – i.e., speaking directly to the tension between binaries that, if not taken into consideration, can have the potential to detrimentally affect both our thinking and culture; creating a predominantly ‘separated’ approach towards the world (leading towards ‘narrow’ interpretations and definitions), rather than encouraging us to consider a wider view

¹⁶ While Plumwood’s work was not the first to address dualisms within the discourse of ecofeminism and within environmental literature at large, ecophilosopher Freya Matthews has stated that Plumwood’s analysis was the most the most comprehensive, showing “brilliantly how this dualistic system of thought created value hierarchies that systematically rendered inferior all the terms that came to be associated with nature rather than reason...” (2008, p. 319)

¹⁷ While animism has provided an important tool for critiquing Western mechanistic representations of nature, such a method of enquiry only asks how other humans come to treat nonhumans as animate (Kohn, 2013, p. 93). Indeed, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn suggests that if we limit our thinking to how other people think, we maintain a particular frame towards the world that makes it difficult to consider the deeper implications of a different position towards the world (2013, p. 94). Using labels of ‘animism’ and ‘anthropomorphism,’ therefore, do not allow for the consideration of deeper implications of a more expansive approach towards nature and the world as a whole.

of the inherent interconnectedness of all phenomena.¹⁸ Clearly Plumwood and Descola have differing viewpoints, as Plumwood openly considered the living world as possessing “its own agency and sentience” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 94). While it is certainly not my intention to align Descola with Plumwood’s view, he does, in resonance with McGilchrist and Plumwood, speak of the need to reflect on our modern dualistic lens and move beyond/ through accepted polarities; looking instead towards the question of “relationship between humans and nature” (2013, p. 81), and it is to this idea of “relationship” that this paper now turns, exploring how our culture might begin to re-establish a mutually supportive, harmonious and enabling relationship with nature.

Such an idea echoes Plumwood who extends Descola’s statement by asking the “the human to query herself [seeking to] open the human to the experience of others in the contexts of their own communicative and expressive lives” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 98). Indeed, as humanity is faced with issues including ecological degradation and climate change, our relationship with nature is becoming ever more drawn into sharp focus; and subsequently how we think about the consequences of these changes are being drawn into the debate (Descola, 2013, p. 84). According to Descola, this naturally requires “a vast reworking of the conceptual tools employed for dealing with the relationships between natural objects and social beings” (2013, p. 86).

Speaking to this space, Kohn warns that this process will require awareness and vigilance in order to not create more problems arising from an insufficient mode of thinking (2013, p. 41). Instead, Kohn suggests that we radically need to reconsider the processes that form the basis of thought (2013, p. 7).¹⁹ Echoing Kohn’s cautionary note, ecofeminist Andrea Leshak states

¹⁸ The discourse of holistic science (an approach towards the world which incorporates systems theory, ecophilosophy, quantum physics, deep ecology, Gaia theory) takes a ‘wide’ view – considering how relationships between parts give rise to collective behaviours of a system and how the system interacts and forms relationships with its environment (i.e., the whole). Such an approach immediately questions the limitations of reductionism and naturally raises questions about our interactions with nature: “There is a growing understanding that addressing the global crisis facing humanity will require new methods for knowing, understanding and valuing the world. Narrow, disciplinary, and reductionist perceptions of reality are proving inadequate for addressing the complex, interconnected problems of the current age” (Maxwell, 2003, p. 257).

¹⁹ Kohn defines this as ‘representation.’ By expanding our awareness outside of ourselves, it may be possible to consider that it *matters* how other kinds of beings see us. For example, considering how a jaguar might see us (i.e., as prey) changes how we see things too, and could even help us to question what it means to be human and to question our relationship with the natural world. “Such encounters with other kinds of beings force us to recognise the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs” (2013, p. 1). Echoing Kohn’s observation, Plumwood speaks of the time that she became prey in the mind of a crocodile which took her into a death roll three times before she managed to escape, changing her

that a new conception of difference should be created, one which is able to honour and understand difference and connection at the same time (2009, p. 10). This suggests the cultivation of a ‘wider’ lens with which to view reality; something which Kohn suggests is only possible by remaining “open” (2013, p.66). Indeed, by challenging preconceived ideas of the nature of reality, and reflecting upon what the world represents to us, using the entirety of what it means to be human (i.e., left and right brain, rational and imaginal capabilities, mind and body, feelings and thoughts), it might be possible for different ways of conceiving of the world to open up. Interestingly, a method for opening up towards the world and transcending rigid binaries can be seen in McGilchrist’s approach to his own study of the divided brain, demonstrating effectively the importance of cultivating a balanced, reciprocal relationship between the right and left hemispheres of the brain which each have their particular skills:

This reciprocity, this betweenness, goes to the core of our being....the right hemisphere starts the process of bringing the world into being.....Whatever the left hemisphere may add – and it adds enormously much – it needs to return what it sees to the world that is grounded by the right hemisphere (2009, pp. 194–195).

Using a metaphor to ground his theory, McGilchrist demonstrates this movement through the analogy of the relationship between living and reading:

Life can certainly have meaning without books, but books cannot have meaning without life. Most of us probably share a belief that life is greatly enriched by them; life goes into books and books go back into life. But the relationship is not equal or symmetrical. Nonetheless what is in them not only *adds* to life, but genuinely goes back into life and *transforms* it, so that life as we live it in a world full of books is created partly by the books themselves. (2009, p. 196).

Clearly demonstrating the importance (and creativity) of reciprocal, mutually enhancing relationships, and inspired by the call from Descola, Kohn, Plumwood and McGilchrist for contemporary society to develop different, expanded ways of engaging with the world, I sense some of the anxiety I felt at the beginning of this paper subsiding. Indeed, I now feel I

understanding of what it means to be “a creature in a world in which other creatures have their own intelligence and objectives” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 102)

can step into a genuine space of exploration, able to consider my own relationship with nature and the possibilities that such a relationship could create; mirroring Plumwood and Abram's expansive approach towards the more-than-human world. I will now respond to the call of the poet Jeffers referenced at the beginning of this paper, and attempt to "uncentre" my mind from my analytical brain, at least for a brief moment, and frame the sentiment of this paper within a personal story.

Stone and me

As I child, I recall magical walks along the Land's End Coastal path in Cornwall, surrounded by towering granite rocks which I felt deeply connected to and in communion with. Even now, I can transport myself back in my mind to those enchanted days and recall the joy in my heart that I felt when I was with the stones along that enchanted path, and similarly among the myriad of stone menhirs strewn across the mysterious Penwith peninsula. Indeed, for as long as I can remember, I have had a deep connection with stones – from crystals and rocks, to pebbles washed up on beaches, prehistoric stone circles, tors, and granite cottages. Whenever anyone close to me goes away on a far-flung trip, he/she will invariably return with a stone treasure just for me; picked lovingly from a sacred site, or a place of 'significance.' My home, car, pockets, and handbag, are all crammed full of rocks, crystals and stones. It is difficult for me to describe this connection, however when I am with my stones, I *feel in a relationship* with them; as they have the capacity to transport me into a different frame of reference. Writing this paper I now wonder whether I have been 'communicating/dialoguing' with the stones, and if I were pressed for some kind of analysis, the best I could offer at this moment in time would be to say that, *yes*, in some way, (that is clearly different from human-to-human communication) I do experience some kind of reciprocity; a sharing, if you will.²⁰ Could this 'sharing' be described as information? I cannot say. Is it feeling-based? *Probably*, but again, I would not, at this stage, like to pin down my interaction with the stones to a specific answer either. What I *can* say for definite is that *something* happens to me when I am connected with stones; something is exchanged between myself and them which leaves me with a greater sense of wellbeing and calm. It is as though I am in the presence of some kind of ancient

²⁰ When considering my own interpretation of dialogue/communication, in addition to Abram, I also draw inspiration from Plumwood's stance, which asks how humans can open up to a responsive engagement towards nonhuman others. In recognising earth others as "fellow agents" and experiencing relationship beyond the rational mind, it might be possible to recognise nonhuman others as having intentionality which includes "communication" and "exchange" as "communicative beings" (Bird Rose, 2013, pp. 97–98). Therefore dialogue/communication in this sense is *an experience of relationship or exchange*.

wisdom that comforts and soothes me, and I do feel that I am equally as important in the life of the stone.²¹

Reflections

Having shared this story, I am reminded of Plumwood who, according to her colleague Deborah Bird Rose, resisted making “truth claims about the world”, but rather was asking, in a similar way to Abram,²² “what kind of stance [can] a human...take that will open her to a responsive engagement in relation to nonhuman others” (2013, p. 97). Indeed, as I consider my own relation with the natural world and my connection with stones which seems to defy language, I wonder about my own “responsive engagement.” While stones clearly cannot ‘talk’ as in a traditional human-to-human conversation with words, I do sense some kind of engagement and exchange on a subtle, sensory level; something which Abram describes as a bodily response “to the mute solicitation of another being” (1997, p.52) which:

[R]esponds in turn, disclosing to my senses some new aspect or dimension that in turn invites further exploration. By this process my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence – to the *way* of this stone, or tree, or table – as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity. In this manner the simplest thing may become a world for me, as conversely, the thing or being comes to take its place more deeply in *my* world (1997, p.52, italics in original)

At this point I am reminded of psychologist and phenomenologist Robert Romanyshyn’s imaginal approach to research which uses the imagination as an organ of understanding to mediate between the intellect and the senses. In an imaginal approach Romanyshyn suggests that the researcher and the work are mutually informing. As the work is an integral part of the wider relationship, I can now ask what the stones, and indeed this paper, want from me

²¹ Jung also had a similar interaction with stone: “In front of this wall was a slope in which was embedded a stone that jutted out – my stone. Often, when I was alone, I sat down on this stone, and then began an imaginary game that went something like this: “I am sitting on top of this stone and it is underneath.” But the stone also could say “I” and think: “I am lying here on this slope and he is sitting on top of me.” The question then arose: “Am I the one who is sitting on the stone, or am I the stone upon which *he* is sitting?” This question perplexed me, and I would stand up, wondering who was what now. The answer remained totally unclear, and my uncertainty was accompanied by a feeling of curious and fascinating darkness. But there was no doubt whatsoever that this stone stood in some secret relationship to me. I could sit on it for hours fascinated by the puzzle it set me (1989, p. 20).

²² See Abram (1997, p.264)

(2013, p. 82) and as I do this, I notice new questions arising: *what does the stone/nature have to say to me, and, what is happening in the space of our meeting?*

A different Space

Considering these questions, my attention shifts and illuminates the question of my relationship with nature; naturally pointing to some sort of mutual experience or exchange which, I sense, wishes to be expressed in this paper. Indeed, exploring this further, Plumwood suggested the importance of recognising “earth others as fellow agents.....opening one’s self to others as communicative beings” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 97). In this way, one finds oneself in a position of “being able to experience communication” (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 97). This approach is reminiscent of the work of philosopher Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) and poet and scientist J. W. Goethe (1749-1832). Indeed Buber was particularly influenced by Goethe, distinguishing between “I-Thou” and “I-It” modes of existence; the “I” of the “I-It” relation is a self-enclosed, solitary individual that takes itself as the subject of experience. The “I” of the “I-Thou” relation is whole, knowing itself as subject; becoming whole, not in relation to him/herself, but through relation to others. The “I” of the “I-Thou” relation takes place in a dialogic relationship in which each partner is both active and passive, and each is affirmed as a whole being. Buber speaks of “imagining the real” of the other (1953), moving from an “I-It” relationship to an “I-Thou” relationship, captured beautifully in his contemplation of a tree:

I can consider a tree. I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background. I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, such of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself. I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life. I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognise it only as an expression of law – of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate. I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure mathematical relation. In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution. It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. (1953, p. 7)

I am particularly interested here in the way that Buber opens up towards *experiencing the tree* as something more than its literal or dictionary-defined label; and his approach strikes me as very similar to my own experience with stone. While both modes of awareness are important in navigating the fullness of the human experience, the latter suggests a more expansive approach which enables the consideration of something more; an understanding of the deep interconnectivity of all worldly phenomena. Indeed, for Buber, the kind of relationship we establish with an-other, determines the kind of world we live in. When we say ‘It’ or ‘Thou’ both we and the world are changed; i.e., we can see the world as separate to us, or as participants in a network of intricate relationships. Similarly, McGilchrist echoes this sentiment by stating that “The kind of attention we pay actually alters the world; we are literally partners in creation” (2009, p. 5). What I understand both McGilchrist and Buber to be saying is that the world around us changes, and reflects back to us, depending on our particular approach to it.²³ In both cases, it is clear that the idea of reciprocity and relationship with an ‘other’ is important in the active creation of each moment of experience; something which Abram defines as an “act of perception” (1997, p.54) and which for him is:

[A]n attunement or synchronisation between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures” (1997, p.54).

Citing the work of philosopher Merleau- Ponty, Abram suggests that:

[Perception...], is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness – and often, even, independent of my verbal awareness... I find this silent wordless dance always already going on – this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits (1997, p.52-53)

With full, bodily awareness of the ‘other,’ Abram suggests that the act of perception is created through the “sympathetic”, dynamic relationship of both the “perceiver” and “perceived” (1997, pp.53-54); drawn together, reciprocally encroaching upon each other

²³ As Abram states, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s work - our most immediate experience of phenomena is “necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter – of tension, communication, and commingling” (1997, p.56). We can choose to see a phenomenon in a more expansive, interconnected way, i.e., as a dynamic presence that “confronts us and draws us into relation” (1997, p.56), or define it as something inert or passive, thereby immobilising and objectifying it by “mentally absenting ourselves from this relation” (1997, p.56)

(1997, p.54). In this way, we enter into a direct experience of the other, speaking of phenomena as active and animate, “with which we find ourselves engaged” (Abram, 1997, p.56).²⁴

Abram’s philosophy has a strong resonance Goethe’s scientific method of enquiry which uses the imagination to develop deep, intuitive and holistic relationships with the phenomena of his study, requiring a fundamental shift of attention within everyday experience.²⁵ Moving beyond his analytical mind, Buber sank into his imagination which facilitated a ‘deepening’/expansion of his experience of the world; supporting him to develop a fuller, more intimate, sacred relationship with life – an act of mutual participation and exchange. Certainly, following this line of thought, one could suggest that an imaginal approach towards reality can lead to a deeper, fuller understanding of the world; beyond literal definitions and the seeming ‘separateness’ of phenomena. Indeed, religious philosopher Henry Corbin (1903-1978) in his work on Sufi mystics deemed the imagination as an *organ of perception*, which mediated between the physical world and the divine (1971).

It could therefore be suggested that the imagination is a bridge-builder which allows a ‘seeing through’ the “density of embodiment...to its immaterial essence....engendering a kind of knowledge which arises from the confluence of inner recognition with ‘external’ reality” (Voss, 2009, pp. 1–2). This idea of *seeing through* binaries, from form to formless, matter to spirit and vice versa has been developed extensively by Jung and James Hillman through the disciplines of depth and archetypal psychology and the approach of the ‘active imagination.’

²⁴ I understand that the ideas raised in this paper are circling around the thorny subject of consciousness. While it is not my intention to draw distinctions between the consciousness of the human as opposed to the more-than-human world, for ease of understanding, in this paper I am aligning myself with Abram’s understanding of “life-world” (drawn from the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl) – the world of immediate lived experience; prior to our thoughts about it, between the transcendent and the world of the material. “Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or philosophise. It is not a private, but a collective, dimension...and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it” (Abram, 1997, p.40). Such an approach suggests a mindful awareness and openness towards lived experience; sensations, feeling, thoughts and emotions, in a similar fashion to Buddhism. Both phenomenology and Buddhism, at their foundation, both seek to enhance the lived appreciation of existence through attentive consideration of direct, lived experience (as well as the paradoxical nature of life, and its tendency to elude strict measurement and definitions). It is to this approach that my paper is oriented.

²⁵ Through the processes of ‘exact sensorial perception’ and ‘exact sensorial imagination’ Goethe sought to enter into a relationship with the phenomena of his study (he specifically studied plants and the phenomenon of colour) by actively focussing on it as clearly and deeply as possible, without the blinkers of established theories and pre-formed mental models. He then deepened his understanding by actively remembering/reliving the experience through his imagination, inwardly recreating what he originally observed in order to come to know the phenomena better.

Deeply influenced by Corbin's work, in his essay *The Thought of the Heart and the Soul of the World* (2007) Hillman honours Corbin's thesis which states that the imagination resides in the heart:

[B]ecause of him [Corbin], the basis of our work has already been done. We do not have to establish the primary principle: that the thought of the heart is the thought of images, that the heart is the seat of the imagination, that imagination is the authentic voice of the heart, so that if we speak from the heart we must speak imaginatively (2007, p. 4).

As the heart is seen here as “the seat of the imagination,” and the imagination is subsequently “an organ of perception” able to mediate between different realms of human experience, it can therefore be suggested that the heart has the potential to hold differing modes of awareness; offering us a way to consider expanded relationships with each other and the ‘more-than-human’ world.

Entering the heart

My journey through this paper has led me through the limitations of rigid epistemological duality and onwards into the imagination; a journey which has revealed the heart as “the seat of the imagination” and an organ of perception. By committing to take a heart-centred approach, in a hermeneutic circle, the heart has revealed itself as a key participant in the cultivation of an expanded mode of awareness, serving to address the earlier calls from Descola, Kohn, McGilchrist and Plumwood. While none of these aforementioned scholars appear to suggest the heart as an organ of perception, or as a way of knowing (and even Goethe and Buber seem to resist speaking directly of heart-centred awareness as a method with regards to their imaginal approaches towards nature), my own research suggests that the implications of heart-centred awareness is a much overlooked phenomenon for approaching, and interacting with, the world. One of the reasons for this fact could be that the heart, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century across Europe, became understood as simply a mechanical pump; a physical organ of the body that keeps us alive. However, until as recently as the 1800's the emotional capacity of the heart was still considered important in daily life (Bound Alberti, 2010, p. 165). According to cultural historian Fay Bound-Alberti who specialises in the study of medicine and emotions:

It was only with the emergence of scientific medicine in Britain and continental Europe that we find the first real shifts in understanding the heart as an object of theory, reinforced and made possible by a form of medical specialisation... Through the popularisation of such technologies as the stethoscope, it became increasingly possible for physicians to gain objective measurement of the action of the heart, and to detect anomalies according to a newly determined set of 'normal' measurements (2010, p. 165).

As contemporary society focussed its understanding on the heart as a physical organ, its role in spiritual and emotional life was subsequently transferred to the mind with the birth of the mind sciences, psychology and psychiatry; emphasising the brain as “the centre of life and of emotions” (Bound Alberti, 2010, p. 165). While this move could certainly explain our modern predisposition to analytical thinking and conception of the heart’s role in our daily lives (beyond that of keeping us alive) as simply a sentimental symbol of love, since the dawn of history the heart has been conceived of as both a physical and non-physical phenomenon, with an innate capacity to mediate between different realms of human experience (Bound Alberti, 2007, 2010; Hoystad, 2007).²⁶ Indeed, when engaging in daily life and making meaning in the world, many ancient civilisations including the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Greeks and early Christians respected the heart’s wisdom and intellect (Arguelles, McCraty, & Rees, 2003; Childre & Martin, 2000; Perloff, 2010). These cultures believed that the heart influenced emotions, morality and decision making, understanding the complementary nature of the heart and mind (Hoystad, 2007, p. 24). Moving further forward in history, in the early Christian West, the heart came to represent the place of interiority, religious experience, understanding and wisdom; becoming a simple metaphor for emotional life (Eliade, 1987, p. 236; Hoystad, 2007, pp. 57–59). In the East, according to Kallistos Ware, in an essay entitled *How Do We Enter the Heart?* the heart is the intermediate place where the “human and Divine meet” (2002, p. 2)

The centrality of the heart to human experience in terms of interconnectedness and wisdom appears to be universal, and in Sufi wisdom, the heart is both a literal, physical organ and a symbol of spiritual reality; pointing to a deeper ‘truth.’ Within Arabic culture generally, the heart is not only a metaphor, but an objective organ for sensing, intuition and cognition (Hoystad, 2007, p. 79). In both of these traditions, the heart is known as the “seat of the

²⁶ For more information on the heart’s role in ancient cultures see Hoystad (2007) and Alberti (2007, 2010)

imagination”, able to mediate between the physical and non-physical realms, and according to Corbin, this intermediate world is where:

[...T]he conflict which split the Occident, the conflict between theology and philosophy, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history, is resolved (1997, p. 13).

It can therefore be suggested that as a mediator, the heart is some kind of channel of communication (Hoystad, 2007, p. 89) with an ability to reconcile differing realms of human experience. Situated between the duality of human experience, the heart offers the opportunity to engage differently with difference. I suggest that this alone demonstrates the heart’s symbolic importance in developing a mutually enhancing, reciprocally rewarding relationship with nature beyond the confines of our contemporary viewpoint.²⁷ This idea also helps me to wonder about whether I might be sinking into some kind of heart-centred awareness in my own interactions with nature; beyond the realms of analytical thought.

The thought of the heart²⁸

As Hillman points out, the heart’s way of perceiving is both “sensing” and “imagining”; offering a way of awakening and developing a more expanded approach to the world (2007, p. 108). As a mediator between different modes of human experience throughout history, in agreement with Hillman I suggest that the heart is perfectly placed to act as a dynamic symbol of relationship and reconnection to the world. Indeed, in his work exploring the dual nature of human experience, Jung suggested that a symbolic attitude can help us to consider a word or an image as possessing “something more than its obvious and immediate meaning” (1988, p. 20), continuing to state that as the mind explores the symbol, “it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason” (1988, p. 21). In agreement, Romanyshyn states that “The symbolic attitude...bridges the gap between conscious and unconscious” (2008, p. 34). As

²⁷ When considering the heart in this particular role, it could be suggested that the heart carries some kind of ‘intelligence.’ It is interesting to note that in the last few decades of the twentieth century, ground-breaking research was conducted into the idea of heart ‘intelligence’ and its role in decision-making. For more information about heart ‘intelligence’ and the heart/brain connection, see the HeartMath Institute in America (<https://www.heartmath.org/>), the research of David Paterson – Professor of cardiac neurobiology at Oxford University (Merton College Oxford University, 2017), and Professor Peter Taggart of the Heart Hospital in London (Malone, 2012; Taggart, Critchley, & Lambiase, 2011)

²⁸ Referring to Hillman’s essay of the same name which aims to restore the heart’s courage and its imaginative power as being key in being able to consider the ‘deeper soul quality’ to all phenomena in the environment; whether “natural” or “manmade”(2007).

the symbol of the heart appears to be able to mediate between binaries, it certainly feels that in the process of writing this paper, I have embodied the symbol of the heart; supporting me to bring through the ideas expressed within these pages. Referring back to my desire to take a ‘risk’ in order for ‘something’ to arise in the “in between” space (Anderson, 2004, p.308) – i.e., the gap between theory and practice - I sense that, as I conclude this paper, the heart has finally felt safe enough to reveal itself, and in doing so has helped to deepen my understanding of my own interactions with the more-than-human world.

Conclusion

While Jung lamented the modern West’s disconnection from nature,²⁹ McGilchrist’s work suggests that this could be because contemporary society has become fixed on rational ways of knowing; creating difficulties in relating to each other and the world at large (McGilchrist, 2009). In this paper I have attempted to move through and beyond this dominant mode of cognition towards a more expansive way of knowing, allowing the heart to emerge and reveal itself as a dynamic symbol of reconnection through my own interactions with nature and subsequent reflections. I feel that I have only just scratched the surface of the potentialities of such communication or dialogue; however in those deeper moments of connection created as a result of opening up to experience, I know I have been interacting on a level well beyond mind, and have sensed a physical shift of awareness into my own heart. Indeed, by embodying the symbol of the heart in reflecting on my relationship with nature, I sense I am opening the door to an ancient, yet strangely familiar, language and mode of awareness.

It was never my intention to reach a definitive answer in this enquiry, rather to open up the possibility of a different *approach* towards the world through the dynamic symbol of the heart. I suggest that those of us in contemporary society still have a long way to go on this journey, for it does seem like we are learning a new way of interacting and ‘dialoguing’ with the world. While Goethean science and phenomenological enquiry has opened up the possibility to develop a deeper relationship with the more-than-human world, I sense that the true depths of the heart’s intelligence and ability to help us ‘think through’ our own place in life’s unfolding, is still a much overlooked and disregarded phenomenon in the wider

²⁹ “No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear.” (1988, p. 95)

narrative of our planet, and the multitude of more-than-human beings that we share the earth with. At this present moment in time, the metaphor of the heart's ability to bridge, mediate and communicate between realms of experience appears to embody the very move that numerous scholars are now asking us to take, and I for one, am looking forward to what the heart has to show me on my own research journey.

“They say that they think with their heads,” he replied.

“Why of course. What do you think with?” I asked him in surprise.

“We think here,” he said, indicating his heart.

(Jung, 1989, p. 248)

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