


Andreas Weber



SHARING LIFE

The Ecopolitics of Reciprocity

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“Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature – however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be – is never truly alone.”

Richard Nelson

“Whoever told people that ‘mind’ means thoughts, opinions, ideas, and concepts? Mind means trees, fence posts, tiles and grasses.”

Dōgen

“There is no community unless you are willing to be wounded.”

Bayo Akomolafe

This essay proposes animism as an attitude in order to readjust humanities' relationship to earth – the shared life of human and non-human beings. I explore emerging ideas in anthropology and biosemiotics, which highlight the animistic understanding that the material world displays subjectivity, feeling, and personhood. The insistence of western culture to treat aliveness as a subjective illusion is a colonisation of the living cosmos, which severs humans from their own liveliness and destroys the lives of other beings – humans and non-humans alike. This essay asks animistic cultures for guidance in a process of western self-decolonisation. The search for animistic perspectives and practices is intended as a dialogue in which western thinking is willing to undergo radical – and sometimes painful – change. Animism can enable us to imagine a truly new worldview for our epoch, the Anthropocene, where human and non-human agencies contribute to a fecund earth.

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1

On Writing Animism: Undoing Western Logic from Within

9

"If 'cutting trees into parts' epitomises the modernist epistemology, 'talking with trees,' I argue, epitomises ... animistic epistemology...

To 'talk with a tree' – rather than 'cut it down' – is to perceive what it does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility."

Nurit Bird-Davis

The animistic worldviews of indigenous peoples contain practices and knowledge that can be of crucial guidance for the multiple crises of our current time, which has been named the Anthropocene¹. These crises are manifold, but related: They all concern the breakdown of participation and equality, be it towards non-human beings or other humans. The dilemma of the Anthropocene could be defined as a relationship disaster on various levels, a dissolution of the collective. This is strongly related to the core conditions of western thinking. Western thinking tends to be antagonistic and resource-oriented, whereas animistic thinking tends to be inclusive and community-oriented. It does not create the split into actors and environment, which haunts western culture and its treatment of non-human domains of reality.

Adopting this stance, or at least reviewing its usefulness for a shift of the occidental approach to reality, could be a major breakthrough for social and ecological sustainability strategies. And it could lead to a cultural shift: A shift to the

¹ Throughout this text I will use the terms "animistic" and "indigenous" interchangeably.

perspective that this world is profoundly alive (instead, as the mainstream holds, that it is dead, a “mere thing”, through and through) could lay the groundwork for those “unprecedented” changes in society and economy, which have been called forward in the latest

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018 report, and which, no doubt, are required.

This essay, therefore, will explore animistic ways and highlight their differences to a western style approach to reality. Obviously, there are many indigenous people, and equally many animistic cosmologies. Here, I follow others (Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2016) in suggesting that there is nonetheless a common ground of indigenous thinking and acting, which stands in opposition to western thought. From a western perspective it is helpful to look at these defining divergences, at the grand structures, in order to adopt a more critical point of view on the own cosmology.

For half a century, part of the western fashion of enlightening and teaching non-western peoples was to explain to them the idea of what later was to be called “sustainability”. This has influenced ecopolitics in the global south to a huge degree. It meant to declare that the old ways were childish superstitions, which needed to be discarded for a scientific handle on the world, and to put trees, rivers, and other living beings into the status of mere things and then proceed to their protection – often bluntly against the living relationships of humans with these beings.

This essay is an attempt to turn the inquiry around: It assumes that the idea of treating the living planet as an assortment of objects and then try to protect the more precious of them (who decides?) does not work. Sustainability cannot cure the “health” of biomes without taking into account the livelihoods of the humans. Conversely, the ways, and thoughts, and desires of non-

human beings cannot be omitted, if the whole of a given community-in-country, humans and otherwise, is meant to thrive. Therefore, it is worthwhile – indeed, it might be the only way out – to turn around and look into a direction the western worldview has deliberately avoided for at least the last 500 years. It is the perspective that the world is alive. It is the perspective that the world is animated. To turn our eyes to this view is the goal of this essay.

There is an intrinsic contradiction in the circumstance that a white male biologist, philosopher and nature writer from the North (me)² is composing an essay about the need to rediscover the animistic reality of living in relationships within a collective of life. The contradiction lies in the fact that I am trained in the machinery of western thinking. This thinking – and its tool, the discursive, competitive, and ultimately eliminative argument, which is usually laid out in essays or books – is what brought animistic worldmaking down. So the aim of this piece of writing seems to be an impossible task. Still, it is necessary to tackle this challenge. In the end, western thinking needs to be undone from within the west. As any other healing process, self-decolonisation can only be brought about by having those give way who are holding up the restraints of instrumental reason. And those are us, the thinkers, artists, and politicians of the west. So the task might seem impossible. But at the same time it is unavoidable. We need to try to approach it as truthfully, as open-minded, and as accepting to the manifold ensuing flaws as we can.

2 In the following I will use the terms “from the North”, “western”, “occidental” interchangeably. They all refer to a heritage of thought and argument – and, more broadly, a metaphysics, which Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has labelled the “Western Cognitive Empire”. Anyone who adheres to the according set of beliefs is called a “westerner” in the following discussion. Obviously we cannot ascribe a clear identity – “westerner”, “adherent to the cognitive empire” – in this way, but we are all to a bigger or lesser degree influenced by the according concepts. For this reason I have decided to use the terms in a rather broad sense. The particular way I am using these attributions will become clear in the text.

Western thinking is based on the assumption that there is a sphere of reason – be it semiotic or mathematical – which is the only serious vantage point from which to sort the threads of the fabric of our cosmos. Already the attempt of a description will procreate the western ideas of how to structure, which have a lot to do with particular dichotomies (mind-matter, actor-object, culture-nature) on which the western cosmology rests. Everything in the mind of a thinker applying western style arguments hence becomes incorporated into the western hegemony, so the warning goes, or is rendered invisible by it. A worldview, or better a host of different worldviews, which thrive through direct communication and felt exchange with the non-human persons, can ipso facto not be described in terms of western scientific discourse. And, even more dangerous: If somebody deeply anchored in this discourse tries to trace this other cosmos, will it, this other reality, inevitably be sucked into the western model – a world split into (western human) subjects, and the remainder of mere objects – and hence be invalidated, and, worse still, again colonised?

These are extremely necessary cautions. Still, in order to step out of the trap of the western cognitive model (western – human – subjects here, mere objects there), western thinking needs to be opened up to what it is not. The best way to do this is to start a (painful, and painfully slow) journey of un-learning of what the western cognitive hegemony is about.

This is a two-way-process, consisting of a radical self-questioning of western thinking, and of an invitation to those who are not entirely trapped inside the western discourse to assume the role of mentors. I wish the essay to be understood in this way: As an attempt of a western mind to question himself. As an open query, and a request for mentoring. As an attempt of self-decolonisation in need of guidance. We know, as in any healing processes, that the goal dreamt up ahead is never wholly reached. But healing is the process itself, not

the end of it.

So I want to invite all who are (at least partly) living in worlds, which are still shared between human and non-human persons, to chime in, take my hand, direct my gaze, and lead me, the author, and us, the readers, under a tree, where relations are not analysed, but felt, and made. Please take this piece of writing as a question, not as an answer. I have written it as one loop in an unending process of learning and unlearning, a process that is intrinsically shared and thus dependent on mutual transformation.

2

Mutuality and the Ecological Good

"Interaction is more fundamental than perception."

Adrian Harris

In March 2020 during the global pandemic, humans in most parts of the world stopped moving. The busy global economy came to a halt – with consequences, which cannot yet be foreseen.

What stopped are some of the most prominent activities of the western way of interacting with the world: Extensive travelling, most of the world's air traffic, incessant trade and consumption, and a host of personal pursuits. Near to no planes in the skies above industrial centres, few cars on the streets, silence and an unusual clean air, in which city dwellers could hear the vocalisations of wild animals with whom they cohabit, of birds and insects, some for the first time in years.

Humans were asked to stop their activities in the name of something, which had not been in the focus of western – and global – policy in the last decades: Community. Lockdown was not done in order to push the economy through individual competition, but to protect others. And in the ensuing silence the wider community was felt: The silence of the stars at night, the buzzing bumblebees the Indian myna's calls.

This was not a romantic moment, however. For millions in poorer countries, the stay-at-home-orders are an existential threat of misery and even of starvation. Many poor people and migrant workers do not even have a home where to stay. Humans, forced to sit and wait in an enclosed space with

others are suffering from depression and “camp fever”, violence in families has surged.

The lockdown shone a light on the very social nature of humans. It reminded of a fact that neoliberalism continuously veils: The individual can only live if the collective, which she constitutes with all others, is able to thrive. The virus managed to have humans do what they were not able to do on their own: Sit down, be quiet, and behave so that others in the community are protected. We did not chose to do so, that’s admitted, and we hope to get back to normalcy as soon as we can.

There is a danger that the readiness of humans to stop pursuing their private goals – and even stop securing their livelihoods through work – can be exploited by totalitarian regimes. But this does not change the observation that humans act not from a purely egocentric standpoint. They act from the experience of connection, from the experience that each and any represents the collective.

The virus has temporarily changed human ecology. Instead of devouring everything that moves, individuals have slowed down. They granted others space (quite literally, queuing at street kitchens and even at polling stations in safe distances), they sat and listened. The majority of the world population thus responded to what is the most important, though often unacknowledged, problem of global western societies – namely how to relate to those who are weaker, who are more vulnerable, and, from an ecological viewpoint, even to those who are not human at all, the other living beings. Without great discussion the central principle of our neoliberal world society had been put aside. Under an existential threat, something deeper emerged, a sort of an agreement about how to behave in order to protect life. In this, we do not only protect ourselves, but also the web of living relationships in which we are embedded. This is a very far-reaching

gesture. It is a wordless answer to the dilemma of how to treat the vulnerable other, an answer which we could not give from the standpoint of a purely economical view.

Some months deeper into lockdown, it has become even more visible that the pandemic revolves around the subject of “community”. It exposes to what degree community has been perverted and neglected in modern societies. We see that the poorest members of the world’s societies bear the brunt of the pandemics, and that minorities, which are already discriminated against, are disproportionately affected by damage from the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). We see that racism – which is daily business in most nations – is literally deadly. We see that the lockdown has actually exposed how much societies are divided into classes (those who can afford to stay inside, and those who cannot afford it). In India, we also see how the decision makers have used the lockdown to rampage over nature even more than before, since some long pending contracts were signed for exploitation of resources in biodiversity sensitive areas.

COVID-19 as an ecological stress test

The coronavirus shows that the destruction and neglect of social and ecological mutuality – the foundation of life on earth – is the biggest problem we face, and the biggest threat to survival. So we can observe that the tragedy of community is not only a social fact, but more: An ecological disaster.

Lockdown has not only been a political, but rather an ecological answer to a sudden menace to life, to individual life, which springs from living together. Ecology has taken over the conceptual space. It turns out that we are inextricably linked to a living community. If push comes to shove, we protect it, accepting even damages elsewhere. And if the community is unable to protect its weaker individuals (in case of

social “minorities”), they are exposed to death and suffering.

The COVID-19 outbreak shows us another thing: The community we are dependent on is bigger than the collective of humans. It includes the whole living earth. The community our social collective belongs to is the collective of life. Our individual existence is granted by partaking in this collective, by taking from and contributing to the mutuality it is built upon.

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Humanity’s global reaction to COVID-19 is an ecological event. The outbreak is not only an ecological happening in itself; it has also an ecological source. The fact that every human is (or was) personally menaced by this catastrophe should not seduce us into thinking that the disease concerns only public health and therefore is a human-only problem. To the contrary. The outbreak needs to be understood as an ecological disaster.

There is little doubt that novel coronavirus is an animal virus that crossed over into humans. The coronavirus outbreak is a consequence of the destruction of habitats, of the mass consumption of animals from rare species, of the human encroachment on what is not human. Ecological destruction is the contrary of reciprocity. It is, therefore, the opposite of what human society is forced to prioritise in the coronavirus pandemic: Stepping back and caring for the others.

The COVID-19 outbreak can be seen as a consequence of our global society’s refusal to grant others (humans and non-human living beings) reciprocity and space. It is a symptom of a stance built into the objectifying, globalist ways of thinking: It says that granting space is not needed, as those others are just things, and things can be rearranged most efficiently by the forces of the market.

The coronavirus pandemic proves this view wrong. It shows

that reciprocity is a key ecological quality, and it shows that reciprocity – granting the others space to live in order to keep our own – is asked of us as a crucial ecological contribution.

COVID-19 shows us that reciprocity is a necessity that rules our lives. We can only exist in ecological mutuality. We are part of the ecosphere. We are nourished by it, and we perish through its viruses. Human beings do not stand apart from non-human beings, but are part and parcel of ecological exchange. The virus reminds us of a simple truth that has been ignored. It tells us that we are part of the collective of life, and that we are, as all living beings, mortal – partaking in a cycle of birth and death that provides life with fecundity. The coronavirus pandemic can therefore provide a deep animistic insight.

Microbial deconstruction of the Western Cognitive Empire

Granting others life as a key command of organising one's own existence, and of building society, was never a concern of market thinking. To the contrary, it is deemed a hindrance. Reality here is construed as a dog-eats-dog world (according to the "natural state", described by Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*). Reciprocity with the living world in this thinking is denounced as a naïve dream at best, as a state of crudeness that must be left behind. Humanity needs to agree to a "social contract" (Hobbes) precisely in order to protect against mutuality.

In the dominant tradition of socio-economic thinking, the social contract was supposed to secure stable livelihoods for individual humans (by surrendering to the power of the state). This stability could not be achieved "naturally" through the human competence of granting others their space for life. It needed a contract (actually the consent of society to be kept

in a state of slavery by the sovereign). The social contract had one overarching rationale: It created the conditions for commerce, for material exchange through unmitigated competition of individuals seeking personal profits.

The world of the social contract builds on two pillars. One is the material world, composed of dead things – called nature. And the second is human society, built upon the contract to fight that material nature in order to pursue individual goods and through this detach human lives from material reality. This is the classical dualistic split, which still deeply informs the ways of western thinking: The separation of culture from nature and a re-definition of non-human beings into “things”.

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) has termed this setting the “Western Cognitive Empire”. French sociologist Bruno Latour (2011) has described creation of “monsters” as one of the main occupations of this empire. Monsters are born when we split the living world (which creates life from itself if it is only offered reciprocity) into the two incommensurable and hostile domains of nature and society. Despite the claim, however, those domains can never be truly separated. The COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect example for this. In the outbreak, the material processes change culture and society – and these feed back on the material course of the pandemics. Nature – a virus from wild animals – dictates how society behaves.

The coronavirus destroys the idea that society can treat “things out there” as it wishes. It even destroys the idea that by sustainable actions – by creating larger and more efficient preserves and buffer zones between society and “nature” – we can handle the problems created by humanity; sustainable practices also follow the belief that the world consists of objects and therefore still treat the non-human participants of reality – other beings and the proliferating powers of the earth system – as things. The coronavirus teaches us that

this domain is not made of objects, but of others, who need to be treated with the right amount of reciprocity.

The Anthropocene will not be, inversely to what many may have expected, the extension of the western rational regime to a stewardship over all of “nature”. Rather, the advent of the Anthropocene marks the end of the western cognitive dominion. The Anthropocene is the age in which societies experience that they do not stand above “nature”, and that, even more important, standing within “nature” (standing inside life) has a set of rules which, if society does not comply, will stop our partaking in this very life. The RNA-based actor coronavirus is the paradigmatic anthropogenic agent.

The family of being(s)

A growing number of natural disasters make us understand that we are part of one interconnected whole (think forest fires in Australia and California, disturbed monsoon patterns, cyclones, devastating droughts like in the summers of 2018 and 2019 in Europe). But none of them are as directly threatening to you and me as is COVID-19. Through this, the virus offers a community ethics. The pandemic shows us how to behave in the right way.

This right way – granting the other the space of life – is summarised in the famous Kisuaheli term “Ubuntu”, meaning “You are, therefore I am”. This is the thinking of reciprocity, the thinking that we participate in a collective, which is creating life together, the idea that we are collectively responsible for life, not only for ours, but also for that of the others, and for the fecundity of life as such.

The thinking underlying Ubuntu is animism. Animism is the idea that the remainder of the world is not made of mute objects, but of persons. Persons have interests and needs. They are agents. An animistic approach believes that we

need to establish reciprocity with these persons. We need to share with them in order to be granted our place and, even more important, in order to allow this place to bring forth life in continuity. In the pandemics, the world is stirring, and we keep still, and what emerges in front of our eyes, through our motionless state, is the need to share this world's aliveness with all other persons, human and non-human, of which it consists.

Animism, the cosmology of indigenous peoples, is the most radical form to think and to enact reciprocity among beings – human and non-human persons. Animism has been misrepresented for centuries within the western cognitive empire. The idea, however, that naïve “native” humans live in a “state of nature”, adulating spirits and demons in trees, rivers and mountains is a false myth. This misrepresentation stems from projecting the western cognitive mindset on what the so-called “primitive people” are doing, when they e.g. ritually give thanks to a tree-being.

Through regarding colonial reason as supreme, we have unlearned what ecological knowledges and alternative worldviews entail. A central principle of these knowledges is that they are not actually about knowing in a western sense, but about sharing a world. Animism accepts that all beings co-create a world that is continuously producing life, and takes responsibility to keep this cosmic fecundity going. It understands the cosmos not as made up of things, but of agents, which all resemble humans in the fact that they, like us, crave for life, express their needs, and are required to interact with one another.

In a cosmos of relationships, reciprocity is required in order to thrive, and it is required from all sides. In a world of connections, we are not atomistic individuals set against one another, but on a deep level we collectively create one coherent process of life. The collective is as important as the

individual. It is the other side of it. This collective is not only human, but made of every being and every force of reality.

If we look from a structural point of view, an ecosystem is the embodiment of reciprocity. It consists of a multitude of beings related in endless ways. Ecological life is always lived in relationships with others. An ecosystem is a commons, shared and brought fourth by all its participants. It is not an assemblage of egoistic agents. For a long time, Darwinian economics of nature have overstressed competition (and hence have introduced Hobbes' "social contract" as a teleonomic horizon in nature) and not paid due attention to the host of dependencies within which competitions play out. (For a deeper discussion see Weber 2013 & 2019).

So a view to substitute the crumbling western cognitive empire is already at hand. It is the etiquette of reciprocity we can find unconsciously executed in ecosystems – and culturally instituted in societies, which have managed to live in mutuality with those ecosystems for a long time. To explore this view, the west will need to step out of its intrinsic supposition that "western rationality" after all is the way the world works – and that all other ideas of reality are mild or severe superstitions.

Scientific anthropology attempts more and more to take the perspectives of animistic cultures seriously and to meet them on a level equal to western science. A leading author of this shift is anthropologist Edoardo Kohn (2013), who in his book "How Forests Think", sets out to literally explore the thought of forests – instead of "what indigenous people think about forests". Others, like Edoardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) and Philippe Descola (2013) provide similar findings in the camp of anthropology. Authors like Donna Haraway (2016) and Timothy Morton (2017) are preparing the same soil from the viewpoint of critical theory. For all of them, the world itself is acting according to material and subjective

standpoints at all times – a perspective that for the first time in western discourse had been proposed by Bruno Latour (1993).

The animistic attitude, attempting to enact the productivity of the cosmos and to share it among its participants, contrasts the basic principles of the western cognitive model. Animism is not about material objects being possessed by spirits. It is about constructing a culture on principles that enable reciprocity, building on a cosmology, which integrates the experience of being part of a fecund collective. These principles play out in different key fields, which are all crucial areas of conflict in the Anthropocene. It turns out that most conflicts of the Anthropocene boil down to difficulties in maintaining good relations through sharing the cosmos. So most of the current predicaments need to be addressed through healing relationships; this is what animism is about.

3

What is Animism?

"Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others."

Graham Harvey

Occidental thinking separates nature and society ("material objects" and "human culture") into two different areas that cannot be mapped onto one another. Animistic thinking addresses these two realms as one. The world is material and embodied and it is personal and subjective at the same time, everywhere. Animistic thinking perceives subjectivity and matter not as exclusive and contradictory, but as co-present. Therefore, indigenous thought takes the world – humans, plants, animals, rivers, rocks, rain, and spirits – as a society of "persons", which are in a constant becoming-together. The human role is to facilitate this becoming through participating in it in a benevolent way, to make the world (as a society of subjects) fecund, able to give life. Existence is increase; all actions are valued in their capacity to give life.

Indigenous worldviews are not assortments of theoretical knowledge over facts. They do not separate observation from ethos. The animistic cosmos is always performative. Its members enact creation by fulfilling their due role in it. In indigenous thinking, you are a worldview, you represent cosmos, so you behave as such. You are kin to all beings, and all beings (organisms, rivers, mountains) are persons. Indigenous cosmologies evade those rifts in western thinking that in the present day lead to the current ecological and social

dilemmas and their various combinations (how the commons of the atmosphere should be distributed between its different participants, for instance).

Indigenous worldviews and practices hold inspirations to creatively reimagine the very problems occidental mainstream thinking and acting has run into. At the same time, indigenous cosmologies suggest these new vistas not as theoretical knowledge, or epistemological frame (and ensuing prohibitions to think otherwise), but as practices of collective action. For the cognitive culture of the west, opening up to animistic practices of worldmaking and world-understanding promises to be the starting point into a profound – and urgently needed – transformation.

Why animistic thinking in the Anthropocene?

The Anthropocene is marked by a critical shift in the status of nature. Nature is not longer experienced as outside of human subjectivity and culture, but deeply entangled with it. This shift manifests itself not only conceptually, but also physically and politically as climate and biodiversity emergency. The earth system is in a transition to a different state, thereby inevitably foregoing many of its current lifeforms. In occidental thinking, the defining feature of this catastrophic shift is the fact that human traces can be found everywhere in the biogeosphere – hence the term “Anthropocene”.

Through this, human civilisation discovers itself as enmeshed with everything else in the earth system (Horn & Bergthaller 2019). We realise that there is no inside or outside, only a huge mutual network of reciprocal transformation. The findings of the Anthropocene, therefore, help to correct a centuries-old dualistic misconception of the cosmos. Instead of seeing the planet as a passive rock circulating through space, the earth system as a whole is perceived as an actor, as “Gaia” (Latour 2018). Even matter is re-evaluated

as “vibrant” and agential (Barad 2013, Bennett 2015). In the emerging new view the cosmos has basically become alive – and human culture seems to be but one of the factors contributing to this aliveness.

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For western mainstream thinking, this is a new, and often startling, situation. The neat separation line between agents (humans) and things (matter, nature, objects) has dissolved. Even the demarcation between practice and theory has blurred: Theoretical assumptions do produce physical changes, as they change the way civilisation deals with the physical environment and make this environment “act back” in specific ways. The human impact on the earth system has been so massive that its consequences have empirically disproven the working hypothesis of western technical civilisation, namely, that humans are the sole agents in a universe consisting only of things.

This is the due occasion where the cornucopia of indigenous cosmologies needs to be put centre stage. All the more, as these cosmologies represent an Anthropocene thinking *avant la lettre*. For tens or even hundreds of millennia these worldviews have been enacted according to continuity between “nature” and “culture”, following the principle that theory is already practice, believing that the world is full of agents, and humans are only some of them.

So, paradoxically, the techno-semiotic demons of civilisation have unleashed a very old way of thinking/ acting. The Anthropocene discovers an animistic baseline in our semio-culturally embodied reality. Indigenous cultures have never discarded this vision. From a contemporary standpoint, their concepts sound extremely modern. This insight should deeply humble westerners.

For animists, the world is a profoundly relational and social phenomenon. Imagination does have a physical impact.

Everything is alive, and that life comes about only through cooperation. Fecundity is created by collective action. This cosmology has kept the biosphere fertile for at least the last million years, since humans similar to modern mankind first emerged.

All western insights in term of the Anthropocene, therefore, would be painfully incomplete if they did not take into account what indigenous cultures have been exploring for millennia. This exploration, however, must not be another western appropriation. It needs to be a humble act of cleansing western patterns of thought and practice from their underlying assumptions of the few (human, particularly western actors) dominating the many (non-western humans, women, children, other beings, the living earth, forests and streams, matter). The approach to indigenous cosmologies hence needs to be undertaken in the way westerners should approach all other beings: In asking to be received, to be taught, in accepting to know less, rather than more.

If we want to correct western ways through indigenous worldmaking, we better hurry up. Indigenous ways are dwindling. Indigenous people are those suffering most directly from eco-collapse, climate breakdown, and from the political terror, which is the precursor of more serious earth system failures. But this is not an utilitaristic call for urgency. Indigenous ways need to be conserved and protected, because their cosmological aim is to give life, and this is what we should try to do anyway.

Areas of animistic thought

Every culture is different from all others. Still, we can discern a certain basic orientation in indigenous worldmaking, which often is recognised by indigenous actors themselves as “typically indigenous” or “animistic” vs. western (Chimère Diaw, pers. communication, 2019). We can, therefore, compile

a short list of areas in which indigenous thinking particularly differs from western ideas and practices.

Generally speaking, the principles of indigenous thinking circle around a cosmos, which is fundamentally alive because everyone is gifted with life and is in turn required to participate in creating life. Western thinking, however, is built on the assumption that the world is different from human experience in that it is dead and therefore hostile, requiring individuals to compete against one another in order to survive (see Table 1).

Table 1
Five Core Beliefs of Western versus Indigenous Cultures

Five Core Beliefs of Western Culture	Five Core Beliefs of Indigenous Thinking
1. We are each other's enemy: "I am because you are not".	1. We are required to work together: "I am because you are".
2. Competition lies at the heart of our being.	2. We desire reciprocity.
3. Reality is not alive.	3. Everything has life and inwardness.
4. We can understand reality only by counting and measuring.	4. We can understand reality through participation in its aliveness.
5. We need to avoid our individual death.	5. We need to keep the world fecund.

In indigenous societies, these beliefs play out in different areas of reality. All share the idea that the cosmos is a process providing for everyone and requiring cooperation by everyone. They all assume that there is no split into "nature" and "culture", human-only affairs and dead resources (Descola 2013). Therefore, cooperation is not only required between

humans, but between all beings including humans. Non-human persons provide humans with food; humans are needed to provide non-human beings with the space to flourish.

From this, we can discern some important areas of animistic cosmology/ worldmaking practice:

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Everything is first person. The cosmos is a society of beings

Not only humans are subjects, but animals, plants, rivers, mountains, watersheds, and spirits, too. They all are persons (Harvey 2017). These persons have individuality, agency, and can be addressed by communication (particularly through shamans whose work is needed to keep open the communication with other beings/ spirits). In order to live a fecund life, human actions need to be in balance with the wills and the needs of these other beings. Intricate ways of understanding what these needs are belong to most indigenous cultural practices.

Feeling is primordial

As the cosmos is alive, and its elements are persons with needs and interests, feeling is a predominant tool for orientation and communication. By feeling I understand the perceptive faculties, which are not thinking – e.g. sensation, emotion and intuition (see Harding 2004). In contrast to western thinking, which is suspicious about feeling and at best views it as something secondary, illusionary and strictly individualistic, the indigenous mindset accepts feeling as a primary way through which the collective of beings is approached, understood and addressed. Contact to other beings, and to other humans, is primarily established through feeling. In social circumstances, newcomers often are welcomed by “simply sit and feel connected”. In the western worldview, however, matter, not feeling, is the most basic category.

Matter is what all participants of the cosmos share (in the western mainstream view, stones, ferns, mice and humans are made from matter, but only humans, and maybe higher vertebrates to some degree, feel). In the indigenous cosmos, the fundamental category is feeling (spirits, mountains, mice, stones and men have feelings, only that spirits have no bodies; see Viveiros de Castro 2016). Feeling is not set against the remainder of the material world; rather all bodies potentially feel and feeling persons tend to manifest as bodies. In the animistic cosmos, the world is not only physical, but at the same time always has a feeling- and experiential inside. The world has inwardness with which humans can directly communicate. Spirits are a highly individual expression of this ubiquitous inwardness. Creation stories, like the Aboriginal “Dreamtime” often describe the creational potency of this inwardness, which is not perceived as one historical event, but is still unfolding. The fecund potential of this creative inwardness can be tapped into at any time and must be fed by human activity.

Egalitarianism: Cooperation presupposes equality

Indigenous cosmologies are predominantly egalitarian, as are their ways of organising social life. They are egalitarian, but not undifferentiated. Each individual (and each single species) follows a certain set of rules required by their roles in the mutuality of continuous creation of life. This egalitarianism is mirrored in social rules. Contrary to western beliefs and popular myths, in indigenous societies there rarely is a “chief”, but a frequently a “committee” of chosen elders giving guidance in social life. This egalitarianism is not restricted to the human society, but through rituals and the right everyday behaviour extended to all beings (“persons”) with whom the humans share the world. Egalitarianism is the glue, which holds together the society of being.

Rejecting narcissism

In the west individual narcissism is considered morally bad but is socially welcomed. Narcissism even has become a tool for social ascent. Though the goals of western institutions try to limit narcissistic behaviour by imposing rules based on morals, narcissism is a practice, which serves the western goal of “winning against the others” well. Indigenous societies regularly block narcissism through intricate mechanisms denying overarching power to individuals (Suzman 2017). Strict rules regarding decency of personal behaviour and the organisation of kinship put a limit to individual ascent to power and fame, and consequently make domination of others more difficult. This cultural practice resonates with the biological observation that narcissism is an “ecological deadly sin”: Every participant in an ecosystem is fed by the whole and ultimately feeds her/ his body back into it. In indigenous cultures, humans often consider themselves as the “youngest sibling” of other species, thus acknowledging the fact that we need to learn and culturally imagine how to live in mutual beneficent exchange with all others.

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Ethics as morals of reciprocity

In order to keep the world fecund and the cosmos functioning, humans need not only take, but also give. We are fed by a world, which assumes this task within its continuous creation. In order to keep this creation going, humans need to give back to the world, too. This exchange is not viewed and practised as barter, but as the mutual giving of gifts. From an animistic perspective, the gift is the primal reality that makes life possible; only when it is returned and renewed life can flourish (Hyde 1986). This stance explains much of the ubiquitous expressions of gratitude in indigenous cultures, and many rituals in which this gratitude is enacted. A culture of the gift is based on the perception of the world as unconditionally welcoming. From an animistic viewpoint, we are not required to earn our lives, but we are called to give back

what is given in order to keep creation thriving. An ethics of the gift differs from an ethics of individual perfection, which defines the western value system. An ethics of the gift requires commitment to the other, modesty, and the rejection of ego-centredness.

Mutual cooperation and the commons

Because reality is organised as society of beings, lifemaking can only happen within and in accordance to this society. The individual must act in reciprocity with other actors. Individual behaviour is measured as to what degree it resonates with this cooperative worldmaking. Exchange and the distribution of material goods are not conceived of as a fight against scarcity, but as enabling everyone to participate. As the animistic cosmos consists not only of what the western mind calls things, but also of what our worldview accepts as persons, the “cosmic” commons includes everything and everyone. In contrast to the western idea of economy as efficient exchange, in which rational agents (humans) distribute things, the indigenous view sees agents (humans, animals, plants, rivers, spirits) cooperating with other agents. Only one domain of contemporary economic theory describes exchange in a way, which is strikingly similar to how animistic societies organise participation. This is the theory of the commons (Bollier 2014, Felber 2015, Bollier & Helfrich 2019). In economy, the theory and practice of the commons has been gaining traction in the last decade (Weber 2013, Hopkins 2013, Bollier 2014, Felber 2015, Bollier & Helfrich 2019). In a commons economy, agents are not considered as consumers of resources, but as subjects sharing their livelihoods with other subjects (human or non-human). Commons have emerged as a major focus in relation to sharing cultural resources (computer commons like Wikipedia) and making visible the “care work” devoted to family (hence, kin), which is not acknowledged by the current neoliberalist worldview. From a commons standpoint, economic activity should be

reorganised as participation in a common activity that at the same time creates the resource collectively and redistributes it accordingly to its participants. The commons philosophers David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2019) observe: A commons is not a resource, but a set of relationships. The commoners realize the commons by enacting these relationships. Policy here means to enable a fair participation (through giving and taking). Commons economy is therefore profoundly different from mainstream economy. It does away with the dualistic ontology underlying capitalism. Therefore, a turn towards a commons economy establishes, in the words of commons theorists Bollier & Helfrich (2019), an “Ontoshift”. What this shift is about we can observe in animism.

Invocation as ecological practice

Every practice in indigenous worldmaking stands in relation to the cosmos. Ritual is needed in order to enrich the cosmic fertility. If done wrong (missing out on reciprocity), it can decrease that fertility. The world is ongoing creation, establishing the first principles anew at every moment, and therefore sacred. Human interactions with the world are sacred, too. This sacredness is enacted at various articulating points of human daily practice. It needs to be particularly emphasised at the occasion of major moments of change, where the continuity of a fecund life of the collective is at stake. The existential nexus is sacred precisely because every being (animals, plants, stones, trees, water, and so forth) participates in it. Communication – talk, song, dance, painting, sculpture – can invoke this sanctity, as it makes our interaction with other beings visible and invites them to communicate back. Because of this interaction, which is physical (they feed us) as well as spiritual (they experience existence as inwardness in the same way we do and in mutual resonance), there is no communicative barrier. To address the “spirit of a river” e. g. means to refer to its individuality as part of a process, which is longing for continued creation. Invoking a non-human

member of creation is possible, because all beings (in the sense of the cosmos as a society of beings) share the same substance as members of the society of beings. As beings we can address one another. Done humbly, as a question, and with the fact in mind that humans are the most inexperienced of those beings, we can access this community directly, through our participation in it as embodied persons.

Embodied knowledge

Indigenous thinking is situated as a process inside a universe of persons, and hence unfolds in relation to others. It refers to them and discovers their individual roles in narratives, which can manifest as oral stories or as pictorial or sculptural art. These narratives are cosmic and concrete at the same time. They are always linked to particular features of a geographic place. Because the universe is a society of persons, orienting in it always refers to this particular story in that particular place, in the same way as our personal experiences always refer to particular persons and places. In the animistic frame, abstract knowledge does not make sense, as it is out of touch with the actual world as a shared place. Instead of applying abstract rules, humans who follow an animistic mindset connect with the local actors (again, human and non-human) and let a story of mutual exchange unfold. Ecological practices, in this perspective, can never be the unfettered application of general rules, but must always be local, reciprocal, felt, and experiential.

Unified actions and embodied aliveness

From these points it becomes clear that the western approach to separate reality into theory/ practice (or knowledge/ skills), and particularly the western tendency to remove subjective experience from both empirical knowledge and practical actions is not applicable to indigenous world-making. From this vantage point, we should learn to refrain from mere theoretical, academic assessments of practical

reality without at the same time enacting this reality. One of the strongest benefits and correcting forces provided by indigenous worldmaking is that it truly requires living through theoretical ideas, to enact getting-in-connection, to honestly ask the others.

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Being whole as our natural state

The social, economic, ritualistic, and cosmological practices described above are not only formal. They are always experiences. And experiences are not neutral, they are emotional, and as such they produce existential values. Indigenous practices are intended to make all participants feel whole. Indeed, as various surveys show, members of indigenous societies on average show a remarkable satisfaction with their lives. The state of estrangement from the world and the ensuing existential angst, which is so predominant in western societies are relatively unknown in animistic societies. To be allowed to be alive in ecological balance makes humans feel whole – although it requires some tough cuts on individual freedom of self-realisation and choice (due to cultural practices to restrict egocentric behaviour). Meaningful behaviour intends increase. Because increase is no abstract category (as “growth” in western thinking), but a relational term, this increase is also a subjective experience.

Organisms are subjects and kin

In biology, evidence that other beings must be empirically understood as persons has massively accumulated in recent years. From bees suffering from depression or enjoying euphoria to fruit flies undergoing chronic pain after an injury, organisms, which for a long time in the west have been viewed as mere machines, are witnessed as exhibiting subjectivity and feeling. The current revolution of “plant communications” shows that even herbs, trees, and mushrooms are capable of communication, choice and mutual aid. They all

exhibit the qualities connected with a self. Biological understanding rebuilds around notions of subjectivity as primary feature of life (Damasio 1999, Deacon 2011, Weber 2016, 2019). A newly emerging framework to understand those relationships in other beings in a living world is to experience them and to treat them as our kin. “Kinship” is becoming a focus to reconceive our interactions with one another and with the living world as relational, and centred around a common interest, which is the flourishing of the life supporting kin and through this, us (Van Horn 2019, Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming).

“Forests Think”

In anthropology, some of the “new anthropologists” do not only take the worldviews of indigenous peoples seriously, but also explicitly invite our society to learn from those worldviews (Kohn 2013, Descola 2013, de Castro 2016). In this, some anthropologists openly take a panpsychist position (Danowski & de Castro 2015). This form of scientific anthropology takes a huge step away from the technical methodology of “just observing” other peoples, and openly embraces that meeting other cultures (human and non-human) means to be transformed by them (Wagner 2016).

Invoking wholeness

It is important to stress that engaging in indigenous practices is not a purely theoretic endeavour and is not doable by a theoretical approach alone. The Anthropocene implies an animistic worldview. In order to engage with the world in an indigenous way we have to feel the world, to love it, to call it, to gather at the bank of a river, at a fire. We have to sing and dance, to embrace one another, to be ecstatic, and to listen. Indigenous practices have to be enacted and embodied. The spirits of rivers and mountains, which are entangled with our own lives, have to be invoked and asked for their participation. The overview intended by this essay therefore needs to

be complemented by practice, which enacts the theoretical findings – and through this corrects them, contradicts them, and maybe ultimately makes them redundant.

4

Unbraining: Towards a Self-Decolonisation of the West

“It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, ‘inventions’, and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’. It is Hobbes’ ‘bellum omnium contra omnes’... in Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society.”

Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels

This essay is the attempt to rediscover an animistic cosmology for all – as an escape strategy for what de Sousa Santos (2018) has called the “Western Cognitive Empire”. This rediscovery, however, is not intended to lead to a takeover, as western discoveries are often prone to. I do not advocate the integration of animism into the discursive realm of philosophical thought. We do not only need understanding, but also attitude. If the problem consisted only of finding the adequate rational paradigm for the ecological crisis, society would long have uncovered it. But what is at stake lies beyond the western approach of sorting out the “objects” to talk about, and do that in a rational way. It is not to do with talking in the first place, but with providing kindness in a collective of mutual interdependence. Kindness desired, kindness provided, that is the first requirement.

To turn away from “understanding” to “attitude” is not an idiosyncratic quirk, but an important principle. If we rightly understand aliveness and what it entails, this understanding always requires an attitude. And the right attitude starts with the way oneself behaves. So in order to discover the ecological genius inherent in animistic cosmologies, we cannot pick

their methods and incorporate them into the Eurocentric sustainability toolbox. This is deadening for the cultures the insights are taken from, but also for our own culture. So what for the west at first sight looks as a promising new theoretical turn reveals itself as the necessity to start from square one. The west – anyone inside western culture – needs to attempt a process of self-decolonisation.

To this day, progress in ecological matters, but also in developmental policy, was supposed to follow the same presupposition: It was supposed to happen through more emancipation (individual and societal liberties in the case of humans, the rights of species to be protected in the case of “nature”). In both cases, the subject needing protection was deemed to be pulled “upwards” to the status of the western emancipated (male, white) citizen. The move to attain this status is understood as “development”.

Development, however, often leads to deeper segregation. In the case of nature protection, development is connected with the creation of preserves and off-limit-zones. In non-western societies, this often leads to the separation of traditional landowners from the land, which provides their physical and spiritual identity. In the west, this process is connected to a deepened alienation from nature as “fragile”, better not to be touched, and in opposition to human culture. Though particular species might be protected through this approach, the outcome reinforces the antagonism between humans and other beings. In traditional societies, it creates a hostile situation towards traditional landownership. The classical emancipatory approach of the west tries to protect objects of nature through separation and purification. But if there is no true separation between the members of the society of being, this approach must ultimately destroy what it means to save.

We need something else

The aim of this essay is to turn this process around: Instead of “helping” non-western others (human and non-human) to emancipate, to rise to the height of the subject immanent in the western cognitive empire, and consequently to achieve personal self-realisation, mainly through the acquisition of commodities (objects), we must turn our gaze around. It is the western rational subject who is in need of help. It needs to emancipate from a rational-only actor locked into an objectifying discourse. The western rational subject needs to transform from a cognitive agent to an embodied individual, interwoven with the web of life, and – physically as well as emotionally – dependent on the exchange with other living beings. It needs to emancipate from a thinking actor to a feeling participant. This includes the change from a separate entity to somebody who is part of the collective.

Instead of teaching others (non-western individuals and collectives, human and otherwise) how to act rationally and efficiently, westerners need to learn how to behave as individuals within the larger context of the collective of life. The possibility to protect life here is not derived from an enlargement of conceptual models about the world, but from granting ourselves the aliveness – and the ensuing requirements to allow others their own aliveness – which the western cognitive empire denies as a valuable understanding and practice to interact with life.

We can call this stance the primacy of self-decolonisation. It must come before offering colonial “help” to peoples suffering from the effects of colonialism. It is necessary to first allow ourselves our own aliveness and all its expressions and feeling experiences before we start planning how we should protect life. So we are dealing with an emancipation requirement here, but it is not the emancipation to the western status of fully mature or autonomous subject. It is rather the emancipation away from it – but not back into the state of

dependent serf (or oppressed woman), but forward to mature individuality as expression of the fact that all life is given from others, and all existence is shared.

I have called this move “Enlivenment” (Weber 2013, 2019), in an attempt to stress the necessity to overcome the heritage of enlightenment thinking and to proceed towards the participation in life. The spirit of the enlightenment – and the push to goals of individual emancipation – has been, and still is, the underlying framework for the western cognitivist model. Enlivenment, in contrast to that, emphasises a second emancipatory move that was missing in the original enlightenment and its focus on the “rational actor” working for his individual expansion in a world full of objects. Enlivenment calls for the emancipation from the confinement in rational concepts, as those rational concepts ipso facto take reality as composed of mere things, or, more extreme still, as pure imagination happening through signs in the sphere of culture.

With the arrival of the Anthropocene, the scene has become fluid. The enlightenment-style confrontation between the (linguistic) rational-actor model and a position that experiences the world as inherently meaningful and meaning-generating has somewhat abated. It has given way to the “material turn”, which posits that, in philosopher Karen Barad’s (2003) words, also “matter matters”, that, in Jane Bennett’s (2010) terms, matter has agency, too, that we are part of, in Timothy Morton’s (2017) words, the “Symbiotic Real”, and that, finally, in Bruno Latour’s (2018) view, we need to acknowledge Gaia as a political actor.

All this lends us a lifeline in order to deconstruct the western cognitive empire. On the other hand, all those positions developed in terms of innovations and minor revisions of western discursive thinking often still follow the predominant norm of talking about structures of reality instead of participating in them in a mutual and fecund way. So the bulk of

the emancipation work has still to be done. And it has to be done in a much more deeply self-critical way than is available through current “Anthropocene critical theory”. It has to be done through practical identification with and attending to the needs of the collective of life.

We should do more than talk about the entanglement of culture and the earth system in terms of the Anthropocene, which still keeps a detached eye, which still does not proceed to embed this talk in embodied acts of reconciliation, of direct communication with non-humans, and with putting feeling back into the centre. We should do more than discuss concepts, unless we want to perpetuate colonialism.

Narcissism as symptom of being colonised

So the change required extends further than to epistemological grounds alone. This is why the west needs help – in the sense of life-saving help, not of compliant assistance – of non-western cosmologies. The change required needs to be a profound shift away from the objectifying perspective to a practice of engagement as shared knowledge. We have to stop seeing the world, and the way to behave in and with it, as a problem of observation and adequate description. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the Brazilian anthropologist who has done a lot to allow animistic cosmologies to enter the stage in terms of equals, observes that the “massive conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones is the hallmark of modernist philosophy” (Viveiros de Castro in Bird-Davis 1999: S79). We have to invite ontology back in, but not only in terms of scientific inquiry. We need to admit that it is important how we treat others in the collective. We need to actually treat them differently. We have to start to adhere to a world, not only theoretically debate it.

In the still dominating “episteme”, the organisation of knowledge of reality, caring about how the world is is repressed.

The relevant scientific debate is centred around how people think the world is. In the cognitive empire, still everyone – and every culture – who insists on trying to get in touch with how the world is, is excluded. This exclusion rejects non-human beings from the get-go. And it disqualifies what we share with non-human beings. The western cognitive rules forbid seeing the subjective inner lives of non-human beings, as these lives cannot be measured or proven. This perspective ipso facto cuts the traces that connect us to the remainder of being, and this to us. In order to counter this attitude we need to take serious an ontology which is shared by non-humans. In order to emphasise the relevance of this sort of ontological realism, Edoardo Kohn (2013) explains that he has explicitly called his book on Amazonian animistic cosmological practices “How Forests Think”, and not “How People Think about Forests”.

Barriers are the hallmarks of colonialism. They exclude those not adhering to the club for reasons of assumed inferiority (in this case, intellectual), denying them their personal, embodied, feeling experience of how the world is. The epistemological empire negates participation in the world in the same way an apartheid regime denies access to institutional rights. An individual's ontological experience includes her lived reality and the whole of possible relations to other actors. It touches a profound, vital level of existence. Denying the validity of these experiences denies existence. It is, as any denial of an individual's own being, deeply traumatising.

This trauma is the core defect of western metaphysics. The attitude of the west is not only a worldview among others. It excludes all perspectives from further discourse, which deviate from its standards. For this reason alone the ontological hegemony of the western paradigm necessarily needs to be dissolved. De Sousa Santos (2018: 6, 38) observes: “There is no social justice without cognitive justice... modern epistemological arrogance is the other side of the arrogance of

modern colonial conquest.”

It is impossible to base the healing of life on a standard that in principle denies the ontological reality of life. Such an attitude will always reproduce the typical deadlock of colonialism and turn alleged saviours into destroyers. This is the main reason why mainstream sustainability has such limited success.

The colonising effect of the western cognitive empire does not only ruin the oppressed (non-humans/ humans), but damages also the oppressor. This dialectics has already been observed by post-colonial pioneer philosopher Franz Fanon (1961). Trauma is damaging, to the injured and to the injurer. What is oppressed is something which yearns for life in the oppressor as well. True decolonisation therefore is dependent on the effort of self-liberation of those who exercise violence. It needs to interrupt the trauma cycle, in which the oppressor, through his/ her own oppression, causes more violence. Fanon (1961) has shown that “to fight against” an oppressor might easily turn you into a coloniser, too.

A whole body of post-colonial literature and post-feminist writing grapples with the fact that those who fight the Eurocentric white male paradigm often repeat it unconsciously and thus perpetuate it (Salami 2020). The post-colony – the post-emancipatory state – can even be defined as the pathology of unconsciously mirroring the colonial perpetrators, of re-enacting the cruelties of those who oppress living participation.

By this perspective, decolonisation becomes not only an ontological project and a political struggle, but also a psychological healing journey. The narcissist who hurts others will not be stopped by these others acquiring narcissistic treats and fighting back. The end of violence is in sight only if she looks at what she has been missing, what unfulfilled needs

make her act out. She has to feel who she really is. This is where self-decolonisation starts.

Anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (2017: pos604) observes: “Western metaphysics is truly the fons et origo of every colonialism.” In a world in which only epistemological excellence counts, humans are denied their humanness – their feeling of being alive, their confidence in their own perceptions and sensations, their competence to communicate with a vast range of other beings, their compliance to work for a common good, their readiness to share, their capability to create beauty by nourishing the family of being. Western metaphysics is narcissistic to the degree in which it does not accept other forms of knowledge and bases this decision on an absolute, structural preference for its own position. You cannot reason with a narcissist.

Castro originally pondered to name the book, which now goes by the title “Cannibal Metaphysics”, “Anti-Narciss”. Castro had in mind to relate, via this word game, to the title of Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s book “Anti-Oedipus” from 1972. In Anti-Oedipus the two authors famously claimed that capitalism – the epitome of splitting the world into (non-human) objects and a (human) culture re-arranging those objects – is a manifestation (and legitimation) of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia at its very root means splitting.

For Castro the dualistic division of the world by western metaphysics is a pathology that causes corresponding symptoms. These symptoms then mask the pathology: They make it immune against deeper enquiry (which would be “unscientific”). The trauma of western epistemology works in the same way in which developmental trauma causes a disturbed personality to powerfully block the path to potential healing. Technically, “splitting” in a personality disorder like narcissism is (unconsciously) used by the narcissist in order to project his own feelings of insufficiency onto others who are

held to be inferior. It is applied to mask the problem.

Capitalism as colonisation

There is a close relationship between a dualistic approach to the world as an assortment of objects, and the idea that the adequate treatment of these objects (including everyone and everything not adhering to the societal contract) is to exploit them as commodities. As I have argued in “Enlivenment” (2013, 2019), treating everything outside the contractual society as material good only denies its own life and the role it plays in ours, denying also our own aliveness. This attitude changes reality into a dead zone. It introduces turns our understanding of the world into a “metaphysics of death” – as anything important has only to do with the re-arrangement of material building blocks devoid of personal relation. We – material beings – stick to the waist in this dead zone; we are crazily afraid to drown further (and to die), and hence we wage a constant war and deliberately drag others under (“better them than us”).

The liberal economy, with its antagonism between resources (which are traded) and subjects (who trade or need to be supplied with things), is one of the many manifestations of this dualism. Dualism entails a capitalistic economy, because dualism is the concept of reducing persons to things, and capitalism enacts just that. If we separate ourselves from the remainder of the world, all things become means, and we become means, too. If we sort the world in two boxes, inside and outside, the damage is already done. Positing a subject here and an object there inevitably leads to the destruction of both. Subject and resource, agents and goods – that is the working formula of capitalism. Things there, actors here, this is also the ideology of war.

The western episteme is waging a war against every (human and non-human) person not included in the club. From this

perspective, there is no difference between enclosure, commodification, colonisation and warfare. All of those not only attack living systems, they also damage psychological and emotional identities connected to life and life's dependency on other lives. They are all attacks on "aliveness" itself – a capacity of life that is unavailable and incomprehensible to the dualistic mind. They are attacks on reality. For the Italian philosopher Ugo Mattei (quoted in Bollier 2014), the opposition of subject and object already is a commodification. In this vein, political scientist David Johns (2014:42) observes, "Colonialism is nowhere more apparent and thriving than in the relationship between humanity and the rest of the earth."

If we are colonising life, it follows that we also colonise – and oppress – ourselves, because life is part of us. Western metaphysics rejects the healthy capacities of embodied human beings to live productive lives in mutuality with a world rife with creation. This denial is explicit regarding a large number of humans, where we call it colonial thinking. And it is implicit with respect to nearly all other living beings, where this refusal is upheld by mainstream science. Through the western cognitive mindset, we deny all embodied beings their healthy capacities – including ourselves. The proponents of the cognitive schism, which is the hallmark of the empire, are deemed to be slaveholders, but they are also slaves.

Paradoxically, the critical reflection of the western paradigm I put forth in this essay must itself fall through the epistemological sieve the western paradigm has constructed – as it draws on experiences not within the framework of science. The Western model is inert to critique from within – and it is immune to attack from the outside. Just so is capitalism. It is high time that we move outside our human shell and call the others for rescue. As philosopher Val Plumwood (2013:441) asserts, "We need a thorough and open rethink, which has the courage to question our most basic cultural narratives."

This rethink is a double-sided move: It means to investigate cosmologies, which westerners have forsaken long ago – and it means to put confidence in the fact that the capacity to participate in those cosmologies is part of our own being. We should explore these capacities. We should grant space for what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) called the “savage mind”, our own ability to adhere to the “compact of being”, as poet and ecophilosopher Gary Snyder (1990) says, the rules and ecstasies of the ecological mutuality of life.

The savage mind is the antidote to what post-colonial thinker Achille Mbembe (2016) names the “abstract universalism” of the cognitivist mindset. The savage mind does not entail wildness in the sense of the western, Hobbesian cliché, but a reliance on one’s own existence as productive participation in an ongoing creative process bringing forth diversity and meaning, and providing life in an unlimited way, if it is taken care of. The savage mind understands how to participate in a live-giving cosmos. The savage mind is what sleeps inside of each of us, when we stop in our tracks, startled by the beauty of a rose, by the movements of the leaves in a breeze.

The savage mind is our way to no longer adhere to what is expected from us by the cognitive enclosures of the west. Wild is not devoid of rules, to the contrary. The rules it grows from, however, are not those of usurpation, but of reciprocity. “Wild” has been denigrated as “red in tooth and claw” or touted as “unlimited personal freedom”, but it is none of this. Wild is the capacity to follow the rules in order to be alive and to experience this aliveness as it is, from the inside and from the outside.

It is important to retain that we have a sensory capacity for what these rules to produce life are. In ecological terms, self-decolonisation means to allow our whole embodied self to have a say. It means to admit that feeling, intuition, and the experience of connection are integral ecological

capacities which we share with all beings. Self-decolonisation means to allow ourselves our own feelings. We can trust them when we keep in mind that feelings are a living being's ways of keeping track with the community of others, how she is faring in it, and how they are (Weber 2017).

5

The Rules of Aliveness

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“The earth has power and culture within it.”

Deborah Bird Rose

The argument of this essay follows a paradigm shift pushing the focus of our experiences away from the dualistic mainstream, which determined the last 400 years of western understanding. These new patterns of enquiry go by the names of “New Materialism” or “Non-Human-Turn”. Although those new academic perspectives share many findings with animistic cosmologies, and their proponents sometimes openly express their sympathies towards them (Danowski & Castro 2017), yet for westerners, true animism frequently remains dubious – something with the stigma of “primitive”, “weird”, “irrational” or “uncivilised”.

This is a profound problem, because it creates a block to a possible kinship, which could serve all. It is related to a deep-seated bias in westerners to subconsciously privilege forms of knowledge and practical rituals, which keep the world – the co-creating aliveness of all human and non-human persons – at a distance by observing them as objects.

The thrust of this essay is that in order to rescue sustainability practices from having only minor beneficial consequences, or, even worse, transposing the mistakes that have caused damage to another level, engagement in terms of sustainability needs to embrace an animistic attitude. But what does this mean? Believing in tree spirits and witchcraft? If we want to avoid the cultural traps western civilisation has erected between its routines and the remainder of life, it is crucial to

know what we are talking about when we say “animism”.

No indigenous community describes itself as “animist” – at least outside the need to adopt a western vocabulary. Referring to themselves, people use much more concrete identifiers, which can obscure an adequate conceptualisation in terms of western philosophy. People, for instance, speak of the “collective” (Luz Hualpa Garcia 2019, personal communication). With this, they refer to all beings that are part of the “society of being” including non-organic entities that normally would not be accounted for as “living”, like rivers and mountains.

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If required to refer to the character of their cosmology, indigenous people prefer to talk in terms of “the law” – the powerful life-giving principles of the cosmos that are totally non-exclusive and apply to all, and do not form a hierarchical topography as in western discourse, with (white) man on top, as he allegedly has the highest capacities of understanding, communication, and connection. It is important to see that only a truly animistic way of assuming that we share aliveness, need, and individuality with all, enables us to communicate with others from a non-condescending vantage point.

When, in holistic western science, authors talk about nature as displaying mind (as e.g. Bateson 1972), they do this in a highly metaphorical way. They often silently refer to the Christian-platonic concept as the “one mind” out of which the visible world emerged as manifestation of its transcendent nature. Viewed from that angle, visible life becomes the downgraded concretion of a higher, mental level, and only insofar displays mind at it is the expression of this higher level. This occidental-Christian view which erects a “natural order” in which it always puts the mental aspect higher, and the incarnated, embodied, material dimension lower. Even in some romantic conceptions like Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism, nature (Emerson 2003), the immanent, is

a symbol of the transcendent domain.

Animistic thought is different. It encounters other minds all the time, and it meets them through the body. It does not need a “theory of mind” in order to recognise and address them. It needs to have an experience of aliveness in order to know that this experience cannot be but shared. Rationality from an animistic perspective is not the logic of the world’s building plan (which allegedly can be grasped only by the rational western mind), but is established through distributed acts of self-care of an endless number of beings, who need to manage to live together.

From this juxtaposition of western and indigenous attitudes towards reality, it becomes understandable why anthropologists got animism wrong for a very long time. They basically found what they expected – folks standing on a lower rung of the cultural ladder and projecting their ignorance and fears onto the world, assuming benevolent or malevolent demons in everything. The term animism was coined in order to yield a more systematic term for superstition. The influential Victorian ethnologist Edward Tylor believed that the indigenous human “endow[s] all things, even inanimate ones, with a nature analogous to his own” (quoted after Bird-Davis 1999:S69). This nature, however, Tylor could only imagine as the dualistic western idea of a spirit (mind) in a body (machine). For the Victorian anthropologist, the animistic world must have seemed a cosmos beset with demons.

While Tylor blamed “the primitives” to project their personal experience on the non-human world, in truth he was himself projecting his idea of a person (as a mind entrapped in an object, a body) on the experiences, which indigenous people are making. As Val Plumwood observes: “Our concepts of rationality have misunderstood and misrepresented indigenous animism in our own dualistic terms. Colonial ethnocentrism saw ‘animism’ as holding that humanoid (often demonic)

spirits inhabit and inanimate material objects as separate drivers, which could be welcomed, influenced or evicted. This ploy enabled them to read our own dualisms back into other cultures, and thus to present this major alternative to reductionism as primitive and anti-rational” (Plumwood in Harvey 2013:449).

Plumwood’s colleague Nurit Bird-Davis (1999) identifies in animism two fundamental challenges to mainstream western thought. In animistic thinking, a person is not split up into mind versus body, and the earth is not segregated into humans and environment. To the great astonishment of anthropologists, indigenous people do not discriminate between “nature” and “culture” (Descola 2013). Instead, they consider themselves part of the great society of life. Reality is social – but “social” does not stand as a contrast to “embodied”. Social means that being happens through relationships. From the animistic point of view, society is not restricted to humans. It includes all on an equal footing.

The “ego”, each own’s individuality, can only unfold through honouring this profound primacy of relationship. We all are cut from the same cloth. Life builds on a primordial relatedness. Viewed through an animistic lens, we are all part of the family of life. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) asserts that “the irreducibility of the individual is a peculiarly modernist notion” (Bird-Davis 1999: S72). Accordingly, animistic cosmologies always consider the individual a necessary part of the collective. For Strathern, therefore, it would be more adequate to call the animist conception of an agent a “dividual”.

Animism is practical holistic science

Cultures, which practice animism, have nothing to do with superstition and childish fear, nor with naiveté or wrong but useful perceptual proxies. They are not naive, or primitive.

Instead, they have been adopting a range of profoundly realistic perspectives and practices, which only very recently started to gain ground in western mainstream science.

What are the most important principles of animistic cosmologies? There are probably two major attributes, which are interrelated:

1. All beings are considered persons who possess the whole spectrum of qualities we ascribe to a person, namely a body, a will, desires, feelings, rational thinking, perception and a voice to make herself heard.
2. All those persons come about only through relationships by which the world is shared between all participants.

So we have a very strong, idiosyncratic individuality, which is widely distributed and completely barrier-free (all communicate, can be heard and addressed), and we have at the same time a prevalence of the collective over this very individuality, as the individual really is a “dividual” (Strathern) co-created by the collective of life. All beings are subjects, which have access to one another’s perspective precisely through the fact that all know what it is like to be a subject. And all need to share the reciprocal perspectives, as life is a cooperative process. Therefore, all subjectivity is intersubjectivity.

Put together in a handy table (Table 2) we can compare those basic traits of how life is distributed in animistic cosmologies to the attitude of the west.

The table depicts mainstream science. Yet some newer positions of western science, e. g. quantum physics, biosemiotics, some flavours of cultural science and critique, do not map on the classical paradigm of the cognitive empire anymore.

Table 2
Aliveness in the Western and in the Animistic Cosmos

Western Cognitive Empire	Animistic Cosmos
All elements of life are objects.	All participants of life are persons.
An object consists of smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.	A person consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.
The building blocks which make an object are unrelated single entities.	The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.
Objects do not communicate; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer.	Persons communicate about their needs and desires, this communication is the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place.
Objects have no inner life.	All persons have feelings, desires, needs.
Objects must be addressed by physical manipulation.	Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy their needs.
The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.	If a person communicates well she is provided her place in the collective of life forever.
We must build culture in order to give ourselves life in a dead world, culture protects us against the meaninglessness of the cosmos.	We must build culture as continuation of a live-giving cosmos, culture connects us with the meaningfulness of the cosmos.

Those are still exceptions to the mainstream, however. If we have a deeper look at those transdualistic scientific paradigms, an astonishing picture emerges, in which many newer intellectual patterns are tacitly adopting animistic positions. Those, for example, claim that:

- ≈ Each individual is the product of a shared activity as found in linguistic and poststructural linguistic (Derrida) and social discourse (Foucault). Individuality is distributed and must be viewed as a rhizome (Deleuze)
- ≈ Relationship is the underlying nature of reality as found in physics, (Bohr, Schrödinger, Heisenberg)
- ≈ All living beings strive and desire, all are feeling subjects as shown in biosemiotics (Uexküll, Hoffmeyer, Weber)
- ≈ There are no distinct domains of culture and nature as established in the Anthropocene discourse (Latour, Descola)
- ≈ Reality is a co-creation, or, “reciprocal specification” as found in cognitive science and psychology (Watzlawick, Varela, Thompson, Clarke)
- ≈ Matter is agential as argued in “New Materialism” (Bennett, Barad, Morton)
- ≈ The biosphere (Gaia) is a living organism as found by systems science (Lovelock, Margulis)
- ≈ The biosphere (Gaia) is an actor needing political representation as put forth in sociology (Latour, Stengers)

If we look closely, we can read Bruno Latour's (1993) suggestion that "we have never been modern" as an early appeal to the animistic ground where every life experience is anchored in, and where matter is intimately connected to meaning and relation. According to Latour, western science attempts to purify the world and sort everything neatly into the according spheres (objects into the box with the label "things", meaning into the crate named "culture"). This effort, however, does not succeed but creates hybrid entities ("monsters", which are neither dead nor alive, and which span various meanings and bodies at once (like "the climate", which is a technical term and at the same time something that behaves as if it has agency). Timothy Morton (2013) calls some of those monsters "hyperobjects", or "spectres".

Latour (1993) suggested that instead of trying to segregate facts from meanings and sort both into allegedly separated domains, we should embrace the finding that every body has agency full-front. We should proceed by opening a "parliament of things" in order to negotiate the terms between these hybrid entities – and us as one among them. This brings Latour very close to an animistic conception of interacting with others. Think of an aboriginal elders' council, which represents the voices of the local totemic group. If the elders decide that they need to reduce the hunt of a local totem animal (say, an emu) in order to protect the species, we can describe this as a way of standing in for the will of a non-human being through a human social representation. It seems that animists have established a parliament of "things" already for a very long time.

Science as communication between persons

There is, however, one huge difference between the animism-friendly western avantgarde thinking I have described above and indigenous cultures: The western critique of dualism is mostly treated as "scientific finding" in the typical

western stance. A scientific finding is theoretical and not ontological. It does not have any guidance for life. In this respect, even avantgarde science still respects the alleged ideal of objectivity. By this attitude, however, the avant-gardes become self-contradictory, and therefore toxic. They “preach wine and drink water”.

More is needed. We are required to take serious that while we are breathing in this world we are in intimate contact with an infinity of other, mostly non-human, persons. We cannot exclude those contacts while we do science. We cannot shed them as long as we want to be alive. We are always personally invested, we are always in a meshwork of relationships in which we need to behave well in order to not wreak havoc – for us or the others.

Graham Harvey, religious scholar and author of a standard textbook (2017) and a reference-level edited volume (2013) on animism, makes this very clear. Harvey (2017:xiii) says: “Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others... In reality, there are no individuals. There are only relatives and acts of relating... Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken with. Objects, by contrast, are usually spoken about. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings...” Persons come first. The differentiation into specific kinds of persons – some of whom we would call species – comes later. And Harvey’s colleague, anthropologist Nurit Bird-Davis, observes: “The Ojibwa conceives of ‘person’ as an overarching category within which ‘human person,’ ‘animal person,’ ‘wind person,’ etc., are subcategories.” (Bird Davies 1999:S71).

This marks the true gulf distinguishing between westerners who admit plurality in a theoretical description of the world, and animists who cannot help living what they feel the world

is like. Harvey observes: “People become animists by learning how to recognise persons and, far more important, how to relate appropriately with them.” Animists “use words like relative and relation to replace some uses of person”. In Harvey’s (2017: xiv) “understanding these terms are synonymous”. A person is always related. A subject is always dependent on other subjects. A subject is always intersubjective. Subject means already to be “inter” – to be a relational process itself.

According to Harvey, the defining point of animism entails a radical change in our way to communicate with the world. It vastly enlarges the scope of our participation in it: “If every ‘thing’ we humans encounter might in fact be a living person the implications and ramifications are immense” (Harvey 2017:xx). And he goes on: In animism “intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire are not human characteristics that might be mistakenly projected onto ‘non-humans’, but are shared by humans with all other kinds of persons.” (Harvey 2017:xxiv).

Biosemiotics: Towards an animated biology

The western complacency not only belittles non-western humans, but the whole non-human remainder of being. Western thinking attributes the “state of nature” (Hobbes) to non-human beings and to the supposedly primitive humans living in close connection with these beings, allegedly too ignorant to understand that humans are forever separated from other organisms. Not only has the understanding of the “savage mind” been flawed, the idea of animal and plant mind (or rather the alleged lack thereof) has been flawed too. But finally today, the mainstream conviction that the overwhelming majority of non-human species is not capable of inner experiences can be revised.

For a long time, biology has worked under the assumption that in order to explain the functions of life, those must be

“reduced” to chemical and physical processes. This approach has led to the breathtaking success of biological sciences, particularly to the discovery of genetic information, the ability to extract it, decode it and at least partially tailor it. Ecology has analysed the structure of natural systems through the idea of distribution of resources by competition. This view does not leave space for the “inner life” of organisms. Ecology, as does evolutionary theory, paints a picture of organisms as inanimate biomachines in incessant competition.

Mainstream biological sciences are explicitly anti-animistic: For them, there is no “anima” in nature. Biology has been a stronghold of the conviction that treating life as animated is a baseless fantasy. It could not even be thought of asking for the animatedness of whole ecosystems, like mountains and rivers are. Ecologists speak of systems, disturbances and balances, and they do so in order to understand flows of particles, objects, and information. They usually do not consider that describing an ecosystem is already a way of taking part in it – and that taking part in it is always done through the subjective perspective of existential concern, hence in the first person.

In order to protect natural ecosystems, applied ecology strives to maintain resilience of habitats and natural landscapes. It cannot, however, say anything about why humans should care about keeping as many species as possible in their company – apart from the human-centred idea that biodiversity maintains biospherical resilience, and that this is good for man. Ecological science has been treating other beings just as much as objects as economical science has. In both cases, they are resources for the human world – in one case as parts of the biotic “life support system”, in the other as goods and commodities. (For a discussion of the idea that ecology and economy are parts of the same “bioliberal” science of distribution of objects, see Weber 2013, 2019).

In recent years, this view has been challenged from within biology. Change comes from two fronts: From behavioural science and neuroethology, where moods and subjective states of other animals, but lately also of plants, are researched, and from cognitive science, particularly from the research field of “biosemiotics” (Uexküll 1980, Hoffmeyer 1996, Emmeche & Kull 2011). Findings in both fields have led to a veritable revolution in biological thinking (which is still fully under way). I will, for the sake of the argument, only shortly touch on the main findings here, which are the subjects of several works of mine (Weber 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2019).

Animals, and even plants, so the hardening evidence, have subjective experiences. Those experiences exist throughout different species and are not confined to the small group of (mostly mammalian) organisms closely related to humans, as biology was ready to admit before. To give just a couple of examples: We know now that not only apes and dolphins, but also cats, dogs, crows and even pilot fishes and octopuses can recognise their own self (e.g. in a mirror or through sniffing).

These findings mean that we potentially have to admit that the experience of self extends to non-mammalian species and even invertebrates. It is improbable that only one mollusc species, octopus, has developed self-consciousness, and all others, e. g. garden snails, have not. We already know that bees can feel euphoria and suffer from depression, and we know that fruitflies experience chronic pain throughout their lives after they have been injured. (Do not ask me how researchers tested this). We know by now that plants perceive and communicate, cooperate and have social lives, just as animals, only in a different, sedentary fashion, plant style.

These findings are accounted for by biological theories that seek to understand organisms as subjects. In

biosemiotics, cells are no longer viewed as plain, albeit complicated, things, as biomachines, which react according to programmed information and physical laws. Rather, the phenomenon of life on a very basic level, which is the maintenance of a cell, is understood as the creation of an embodied self with an according inner perspective.

Cells – and all organisms – are, according to this new research field of embodied semiotic biology, subjects with interest in their own existence, and with curiosity towards others with whom this existence is shared. There is a “meaning dimension”, an “imaginary dimension” and an “intrinsic teleology” (Varela 1997, Weber & Varela 2003) to all life, even to the most basic forms of it. The inner experience of being alive for all organisms is similar to ours in principle. It may be different in degree, but it is not different in kind.

In my essay “Enlivenment” (2013, 2019), I have summarised the most striking features of this view on organisms as follows: “For the emerging new biological paradigm aliveness is a notion and an experience, which governs the perceptions of biological agents... In the emerging new picture, organisms are no longer viewed as genetic machines, but basically as materially embodied processes that bring forth themselves (Weber & Varela 2003, Weber 2010). They are matter, organisation, but also meaning, existential experience, and poetic expression. Each single cell is a ‘process of creation of an identity’ (Varela 1997). Already the simplest organism must be understood as being a material system displaying the desire to keep itself intact, to grow, to unfold, and to produce a full-scope of life for itself. A cell is a process that produces the components necessary to allow for these developments— while the materials of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus, silicon flow through it.”

Let me sum up the traits of this new framework in a synoptic way in order to conceptualise the principles that guide a

living being (Weber 2019:81):

- ≈ It acts according to its own autonomy and therefore is not completely determined by external factors. It creates its identity by transforming foreign matter into the stuff of self.
- ≈ It produces itself and thereby manifests the desire to grow and avoid disturbances, and actively searches for positive inputs such as food, shelter, and partners.
- ≈ It shows behaviour that is constantly evaluating influences from the external and its own, internal world.
- ≈ It follows goals.
- ≈ It acts out of concern and from the experience of meaning.
- ≈ It is a subject with an intentional point of view. We can call this way of meaning-guided world-making 'feeling'.
- ≈ It shows or expresses the conditions under which its life process takes place. A living being transparently exhibits its conditions. We can relate to its inwardness through the sensual expression of it (Weber 2019:81).

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The biology, which is currently emerging, corroborates many points of animism in a breathtaking way. This is summarised in the following chart (Table 3), which contrasts the new findings of biological science with the traditional scientific biological paradigm and compares them to the principles on which animism is based. The chart builds on table 2 above.

Table 3
 Perspectives on Life in Western Science, Biosemiotics and Animism

Mainstream Science	Biosemitotics	Animism
All elements of life are objects.	All participants of life are subjects.	All participants of life are persons.
An object consists of smaller objects; it is static and self-identical.	A subject consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.	A person consists of the process of relating, it is processual and performative.
The building blocks which make an object are unrelated single entities.	The process of relating which creates subjects at the same time establishes the ecosystem.	The process of relating which creates persons at the same time establishes community.
Objects do not communicate; any perceived communication is a projection of the human observer.	Subjects act according to their needs and desires, these actions are the ecological exchange processes (assimilation, feeding, decomposition) which create more subjects and provide fecundity for the system.	Persons communicate about their needs and desires, this communication is the relational process which creates more persons and provides fecundity for the place.
Objects have no inner life.	All subjects have feelings, desires, needs.	All persons have feelings, desires, needs.
Objects must be addressed by physical manipulation.	Subjects need to be addressed through a first-person-scientific approach.	Persons need to be addressed in a way that takes into account their desire to satisfy their needs.
The world is silent. Connection and communication are impossible. We are cut off from life.	The world is profuse with meaning, we can understand non-human beings through our embodied imagination.	If a person communicates well she is provided her place in the collective of life forever.
We must build culture in order to give ourselves life in a dead world, culture protects us against the meaninglessness of the cosmos.	Culture is not different from biological worldmaking, both are participations in relationships through the creation and experience of meaning.	We must build culture as continuation of a live-giving cosmos, culture connects us with the meaningfulness of the cosmos.

The biological self is not a substance. Instead, it arises as a relational process based on necessary sharing and through this creates subjectivity. The self is a centre of action, which creates an experience of concern. It is dependent on the surrounding system that nurtures it, and at the same time struggles to maintain a status of precarious independence from this system. Already the smallest building blocks of living beings – cells – are not static objects, but form a process, an activity. This process is concerned with transforming what is outside of it (light, nutrients, benign or dangerous situations and actions from others) into a coherent identity. In order to bring forth a self – as body and as meaningful experience – it is necessary to relate and share.

Embodied selves come into being through other selves. They depend on cooperation and “interbeing”. A self can neither arise in isolation nor through the struggle of all against all. Rather, it is dependent on “other”—in the form of food, shelter, collaborators, partners. Self is always self-through-other. In this respect, the biosphere is paradoxically cooperative: Symbiotic relationships arise from antagonistic, incompatible processes: Matter/ form, genetic code/ soma, individual/ other. An individual comes into being because it negotiates several incompatible layers of worldmaking. A living system is a partially self-contradictory “meshwork of selfless selves” (Varela 1991).

We could even say with anthropologist Edoardo Kohn (2013) that any living system is a forest that thinks.

Nature is culture

Recent biological research and theory support the animistic intuition that the world is peopled by persons with whom we share a fundamental level of embodied experience. The indigenous cosmology proves to be more accurate than the classical, dualistic biological view, and not less so. A similar

re-evaluation happened to physics when it adopted the multi-centered view of quantum mechanics a century ago. Today, we can observe an exciting shift away from ingrained dualism. Only one major domain of institutional knowledge barrages itself against the insight that individual flourishing is a function of the collective, and vice versa. That domain is economy.

Not only the avantgarde of western science overlaps with indigenous perspectives and practices to an astonishing degree. Animistic experiences permeate everyday life. In a very basic sense, we have never left the animistic universe of an ecology, which is massively shared. We continue to be embedded in mutuality: With those bodies whom we eat and with those who eat us after our lives end. We thrive on the breath of others that we inhale (the oxygen respired by the green plants) and others prosper because we feed them with our breath (the CO₂ taken up by the trees, flowers, and algae). All these are elements of an existential nexus. They are included in the experiences that we make on a daily basis. A walk in the forest allows us to experience the trees as the other persons whom we feed simply by breathing. A passing gaze at the sky lets us peek into the vast “commonwealth of breath” (Abram 2010), which we all share by being part of it. Harvey (2017:229) observes accordingly: “Even if the effort to be modern has involved trying to ignore human kinship with all other beings (and with constitutive matter), we remain involved participants in complex webs of predation, consumption and recycling.” These existential relations play out in our reality in symbolic form and become the basic elements of culture (Weber 2016). Culture is a way of expressively and creatively managing our existential needs and of keeping them in balance with the need of others, human and non-human.

As such, culture is not fundamentally different from the ways other, non-human beings, manage these needs. They have cultures, too, because they have needs, which reflect the

world from a meaningful perspective. They have cultures because they are persons. And these different cultures meet in the requirement to live in lasting ecological relationships together. Referring to this necessity, Gary Snyder speaks of the “etiquette” of the wild world, emphasising the mutuality through which ecological relations play out. The “etiquette” of the wild requires that no participant oversteps his or her space in the meshwork of exchange of matter and meaning. In their ways to manage existential needs all these different spaces are cultures, even though they may not be as prone to arbitrary “cultural” change as ours is.

So there are innumerable ways of forms and behaviour, which the westerner sees as “only nature” (the beaver building his dam, the lyrebird doing his dance, the smoke-like column, which bats form while flying out of their cave in dusk, the striped body pattern of a giant wasp building her nest under the roof of a tiny shelter in the bush). To the animistic mind, all these are communications about the respective cultures. Animists experience those “endless forms most beautiful” (Darwin) always as impressions of an inside, of a somebody, with whom one can relate precisely through these appearances. The appearances have a meaning for us humans, because they are meaningful for the animal person.

If you are about to jump up and shout “that’s so naïve”, wait a minute. All these semiotic characters are indeed signs of the specific life of the respective species, and they do tell a lot of how they live, what they need, how we can help them to thrive, and how they can help us to feed on them. The hunter knowledge of indigenous peoples is remarkable, and it is so, because they stand with other persons (which we call their prey) on an equal footing and can read their culture.

Viveiros de Castro (2016:250) concludes from the biosemiotic background that “culture is the nature of the subject”. Because all beings in reality are subjects, their life worlds

are always cultures. “Bodies are souls... as souls and spirits are bodies because both are bundles of affects and sites of perspective.” (Castro 1998:481; “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism”). And Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139), an Australian anthropologist, adds: “In country [the Australian term for the living landscape which has brought forth the collective of its inhabitants] there is no nature/ culture divide; one could say that it is all culture, but that misses the more fundamental point that country is primarily a system of pattern, connection, and action.” Culture is real, not as a human invention, but as a habit of reality. Culture inevitably governs the manifestation of bodies in relation.

This is where the great doyen of anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, went wrong. It was dear to him to save the long standing distinction between “nature” and “society”, which had characterized French anthropology and philosophy at least since the work of Emile Durkheim. While earlier anthropologists had sorted the “primitive” peoples to the nature side (“savages”), Lévi-Strauss “elevated” them to the culture side. They have cultures just as we have, he held, only that their cultures are obsessed with plants and animals.

Lévi-Strauss argued that other beings play a special role in animistic societies because on an early cultural stage “animals are good to think”. For Lévi-Strauss, indigenous people use nature as a proxy for society. Their penchant to “think animals” characterises their “savage mind”. It is a mind that uses non-human others as analogies to human affairs in order to organise the complexities of society. In truth, Lévi-Strauss holds, “thinking animals” is all about humans, and not about animals.

Through this, the French anthropologist saved the importance of nature for indigenous people from being devalued as “primitive”. But at a high price: Non-human beings lost all reality in their own right. They were just a

“proxy” – and therefore something even less valuable than the disordered and evil realm of nature, “red in tooth and claw”, as civilisation sees non-human others. Plants and animals changed into mere projections of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss’ proposal rests on the assumption that other beings are empty planes of projection, and have no subjectivity of their own. This theory had an influence that cannot be underestimated. It stood at the beginning of the strong emphasis in structuralism and poststructuralism to view “nature” as an illusion, and thus helped to damage real “nature” as something not worth our care.

The true “savage mind” smiles at this artful dead end. She understands that nature truly is a society, because it is peopled by (non-human) persons. Nature is “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss) because nature is already permeated with culture. Culture (the generation of subjective and shared meaning) is a fundamental biological process. Nature has culture, because non-human persons have desires that need to be negotiated in systematic and mutual ways.

Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, the cultural fixation on nature which indigenous people show does not mean that these peoples thrive because of their useful, but arbitrary habit of structuring their thought by the means of plants and animals, whereas westerners structure it through discursive reason. In indigenous cultures human society is not formed after the society of other beings, but with them. It is so because these non-human beings are our kin, and we need to respect their ways, allow them to prosper, and must not deviate from the principles of life, which are the principles of continuous creation and rejuvenation.

Permanent life as society must be ecological, which is just another way of saying that we need to nourish good relations. We can learn how to be ecological if we allow ourselves to be inspired by ecology, which is the art of

building relations in mutuality. Ecology embraces a society of life in which the needs of embodied subjects are distributed, negotiated, and eternally transformed into new life.

70 In order to appreciate this attitude we must not bypass the testimony of our living body. We have to be considerate of the bodies of other beings, but we also need to take our own seriously. It is important to see that both requirements go hand in hand: Allowing ourselves to see other beings as persons with needs helps us to accept that our own being is a person with needs too, not only abstract cognition. Consenting to the “soft animal of your body” (Oliver 1994) softens us. If we accept ourselves as feeling, yearning, knowing beings, we cannot stop from accepting others in this new experience.

Allowing the others to speak

To most, this understanding becomes immediately clear when they walk into the outdoors in order to fulfill their emotional need to be in touch with other beings (and not only to observe and classify them). The others start to speak. The others start to gain a voice. They start to be meaningful, to assume unexpected presences, to move to tears. Those experiences can be facilitated by practices of nature mentoring which have become widespread in our western societies. But they are something, which comes to us naturally. If we decide to treat other beings as persons, we will have a completely different experience of them.

We need to retain this as a lesson for a different sustainability practice, based not only on theoretically grasping (and teaching) the principles of animism, but also engaging with the most profound of its principles, which encompass sharing the world with others on an equal footing. We all – humans and non-humans – are persons with needs, emotions, and a social intuition. We cannot forsake these capacities

in order to be “scientific”. As we are surrounded by persons who all expect from us that we behave in an adequate way, there can never be such neutrality. Rather, it is an insult, as it pretends that those others, who exist as persons like we are, are only things.

Not only does observation grant access to reality, but also feeling and intuition. In his book “Animate Earth” ecologist Stephan Harding (2004) names four ways of coming into connection with the living cosmos: Through thinking, perceiving, feeling and intuition. The living cosmos informs us in a direct way, because we and all in it are sensitive bodies, which emotionally experience themselves as persons – concerned by the doings of others acting on others.

From the vantage point of shared experience animism can no longer be regarded as a naïve projection of one’s own humanity on a mute and dead nature. The world of bodies and the world of meanings, of habits, of customs, of language and of the social order, necessarily arise from one another. They are all worlds of relations in which meanings unfold. Real individuals with true feelings experience these meanings from the inside and integrate them into their material worlds in a creative manner. Life produces its creative expression, is aesthetical, has codes, rites, practices of behaviour, pheromone-mediated warning signals, forms of parlance, poems, and rock paintings. Nothing is separated into two worlds. There is only one.

So the western dualism dissolves. From the inside, from the inner experience of biological subjects, being nature is society, and its means are culture and metaphor. From the outside it is body, and its means are hunting and gathering, touching and feeding. In one’s own body both collapse into one. Within my body I can experience how hunting and feeding do crucial relationship work: When a tiger eats a deer, he incorporates the energy of the prey and enlarges the reach of his power.

Feeding and hunting are cultural acts from the inside, and material changes from the outside. The wisdom of indigenous people consists in realising this from the start. Their genius is to have built cosmologies on that insight, allowing to construe a balanced exchange with the remainder of the world for hundreds of millennia.

Different from what the west still believes, there are no autonomous natural facts. Everything, which is seen as nature from the outside, proves to be culture from an inner viewpoint. At this stage matter inevitably becomes existential, personal concern. Retaining the conviction that all nature is also inward, meaningful, cultured has consequences, which for a westerner at first seem strange. They account for the “picturesque” and fairy-tale impression indigenous cultures first made to the colonisers. But they are also underlying the early stages of western culture, the “mythical age” of ancient Greece and the animistic Europe whose oral literature has transformed into fairy tales in which the animals can still speak and shift shapes.

From each other being's perspective (be they animals or spirits), the world is seen in the light of the respective species' culture. What to us seem neutral objects, for other beings can be charged with meaning in a similar way as are objects from our own culture for us, and may be accordingly associated with pleasure or disgust. If we know the culture of non-human beings, we can communicate with them. Castro (2015:251) observes that the inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest present corn beer to the jaguar and are convinced that from his perspective this is experienced as blood. What to us is soaked manioc, so presume the inhabitants of the forest, the spirits perceive as rotting corpses, and gladly accept as an offer.

The world has no objective character. It must be suffered and enjoyed from any possible perspective. It holds many per-

spectives at once, and all beings experience a different one. This attitude, says the ecophilosopher and poet, Gary Snyder, can be observed in an exemplary way in the thought of Japanese eleventh-century Zen master, Dōgen. Snyder (1990:115) quotes Dōgen writing: “Dragons see water as a palace or a pavilion”. A detail of “nature” that humans superficially experience as beautiful in truth may be a part of a dragon’s palace, or the favourite dish of a rare predator.

To experience nature from the inside is an emotional process. It means that our own feelings are also part of the ecosystem. The world can be understood as the desire to be connected – and this understanding happens right in myself. Feeling is no private affair, but an organ of perception through which the relational character of the cosmos becomes manifest. It is a reality, which we continuously create (the “dreamtime” of ongoing creation), and we create it in togetherness (the “ubuntu” of the primacy of the other). How could the experiences of all those natural subjects appear other than through feeling?

We can see here that the rationale of animistic thinking is very different from the ideas, which guide western mainstream ecological attitudes. Animism builds on the “animation” of all life as a primary moving force. The west has forbidden this idea for a very long time, offering the pattern of separation and domination instead. Both paradigms are antagonistic to one another, while one of them (the western cognitive empire) claims intellectual superiority and ontological validity over the other. A lot of decolonisation work is still necessary. As Graham Harvey (2017:172) observes: “The West’s individual is thus a fiction whose well-being must be doubtful as long as it is sought in the maintenance of separation.”

6

Kinship: An Ethics of Increase

"There is balance in the world but no cause."

George Tinker

We have seen that animism is not the naïve belief in demons inhabiting trees. It rather is a metaphysically sophisticated and astutely realistic way of understanding how persons come about through continuous processes of relation. Animism is confident that our inner experiences are key to share this realm of relations in a live-giving way. If we see the central philosophical problem of the west in the question of how the experiencing "I" is related to the infinity of the world (or, as Immanuel Kant asked, "how is inner experience possible?"), we have to accept that animism has an answer.

At the same time as animism offers an epistemological framework, it also provides a collective ethics. If the cosmos is able to create individuality by sharing the total, and manifold, then the human ethical challenge is how to perpetuate this creation. The necessity of perpetuating the creation is foundational for the practical ethics, which animism proposes. As with everything animistic practical means just that: The pledge of keeping the cosmos fecund must be lived rather than argued for. It is not an abstract attitude, but rather an – often even wordless – practice. To state it again in terms of western philosophy: In animism, ontology and ethics cannot be separated. Every detail of the cosmos has a value, because it is part of the personal culture of another species, and is meaningful because of that.

Western ecological thinking and philosophy, however,

explicitly attempt to separate existence and value. Existence is taken as objective fact (the material existence of things without interest), but value is always personal and private. As we will see in the course of this section, these are the reasons sustainability politics so often collides with indigenous practices. But while “environmental ethics” still struggles to supply reasons to protect other species, indigenous peoples have been able to manage ecosystems without destruction for extremely long periods of time. Western-minded sustainability projects are often less successful at that.

A lot of research notwithstanding, western mainstream philosophical discourse has not come up with a widely shared framework for an ecological ethics (for an overview see Holmes Rolston III, 1986). The relatively scarce proposals on how to frame ethics together with the land, with non-human species, and for a more-than-human community, which have arisen in the west are mostly critical about the western philosophical tradition and base their foundations on the deep ecology movement with its romantic roots and its Buddhist inspirations. The most influential positions of those “unorthodox” environmental ethics here are those by Joanna Macy, Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold and Gary Snyder.

All of those, although from different backgrounds, propose normative approaches that set out an ethics not for individual (human) subjects, as is common in the west, but for a community. Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethics” is probably the most known among those. Its rationale goes: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold 1949). We need to note that Leopold developed these thoughts in the US, standing on land that had still harboured – and nourished – its original owners only few decades ago. Their maxims probably had not looked very different. Leopold comes to his insight on a common ground – but does not

quote (and might not be aware of) any direct inspiration by the American indigenous ways.

Gary Snyder (1990:163), the beat poet and Buddhist disciple, points to the closeness of early Buddhist teachings and an indigenous background. In fact, he says, the “structure of the original Buddhist order was inspired by the tribal governance of the Shakya (‘Oak tree’) nation – a tiny republic somewhat like the League of the Iroquois – with democratic rules of voting [...] Gautama the Buddha was born a Shakya – hence his appellation Shakyamuni, ‘sage of the Shakyas’. The Buddhist sangha is thus modelled on the political forms of a Neolithic derived community”. Snyder here brings several threads to a close. He continues: “So our models for practice, training, and dedication [...] can also look to original communities with their traditions of work and sharing.” Romanticism can, from this vantage point, be seen as a search for an original animistic cosmology and ethics.

In the previous section, we have seen that for the indigenous perspective the world is not static, but populated with persons. A person is somebody with whom we can (and even must) share. Sharing goes before the category of the individual. Relation comes first; it gives birth to individuality. This is already an ethical guideline. As Nurit Bird-Davies (1999:S72f) observes in the Nayaka people: “A Nayaka was normatively expected to share with everybody as and when present, especially (but not only) large game, irrespective of pre-existing social ties, criteria, and entitlement. Sharing with anyone present was as important as if not more important than effecting a distribution of things among people... the Nayaka sense of the person appears generally to engage not the modernist subject/ object split or the objectivist concern with substances but the above-mentioned sense of kinship [...] The person is sensed as ‘one whom we share with’ [...] Their composite personhood is constitutive of sharing relationships not only with fellow Nayaka but with members

of other species in the vicinity.”

“Kincentric Ecology”

In animism, sharing is a cosmic pillar. Sharing is key to community, and sharing is key to self. I already mentioned, although only in passing, the African indigenous concept of “Ubuntu”, translating with “You are, therefore I am”. Anthropologist Enrique Salmón (2000:1331) observes in his seminal paper on “Kincentric Ecology”: “Indigenous people believe that they live interdependently with all forms of life. Their spiritual, physical, social, and mental health depends on the ability to live harmoniously with the natural world. Indigenous identity, language, land base, beliefs, and history are personifications of culture that regulate and manifest the health of the human as well as the natural world. It is understood that a person who harms the natural world also harms himself.”

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The idea of community is based on two notions: The idea that there is some powerful force equally accessible to all of its members, and that all members are responsible to replenish this force. This gives another spin to the understanding of society as the collective of all persons (human and non-human). The term “society” does not entirely grasp what is at stake, as it still carries a western-flavoured connotation of a domain brought about by conscious actors and their discourse. But the society of being is not only institutional, but physical relatedness. It is family. We cannot choose to not pertain to it – we can only rebel against it, or poison it with toxic behaviour. The human relationship to all other beings is that of kin.

Some readers will feel slightly uncomfortable when reading these words. “Family”, and worse, “family obligations” do not sound pretty to many in our society, in which family has often become the playing field of narcissistic spleens and disrespectful acting out – and consequently is often fled. But

in particular, the aspect of the combination of “kin” and “obligations” pretty much englobes what the rules of behaviour in animistic societies are about. You are part of the collective, and you need to nourish the collective. In turn, you can expect to be unconditionally nourished by it. It is important to retain here that many animistic societies are (again, against the cultural myth of the “Indian chief”) rather democratic in organisation (as was the tribe Gautama Buddha stemmed from).

We need to admit once again that indigenous peoples have a sharp intuition: From a biological standpoint, and in the light of evolution, humans and all other beings are indeed kin. Other animals are our ancestors. Our cells stem from the first living organisms in direct lineage. Each of us is the end of a single, uninterrupted line reaching back to when life began and which will only end with the death of the individual. Even the minerals are our kin, the earth’s water and air, as we find all these substances in our bodies, making up ourselves. From this point water and stone and air, the elements, are truly our flesh and blood.

Humans originally care for nature not because they take an advantage when they “think with animals” in order to better understand their own ideas. They even do not see nature as society only for the reason they experience it filled with persons. They see it as kin because it is – and therefore it must be related to as society. The original peoples take the similarities between human affairs and those of the living world at face value and construct from this similarity their motivation to keep the cosmos alive. Western metaphysics takes the differences and constructs from those a motivation to enslave the cosmos. That’s a pretty important distinction.

Being kin to non-human beings is an experience. It is not just a concept. It is a numinous and rare experience that nonetheless is part of our normal spectrum of experiences,

the experience of mystical awe and enigmatic wholeness, which most people have made a couple of times in their lives. These mystical and at the same time common experiences are an important part of animistic culture. Usually, anthropologists have been very bad translators of the frameworks in which those experiences are embedded, as apart from Christian-mystical rapture there was not really a place for them in western culture.

So, anthropologists ended up with misleading terms for the acute experience of cosmic kinship. English terms applied for these dimensions, which do not really render what is intended, are, for instance, “medicine” in case of the indigenous peoples of the USA, or “dreamtime” in case of the Australian aborigines. All those terms, however, signify something that might be translated as “mystical potency”. The Rarámuri, the people described by Salmón (2000:1328), use the word “iwigara” for an equivalent dimension. “Iwigara expresses the belief that all life shares the same breath. We are all related to, and play a role in, the complexity of life. Iwigara most closely resembles the concept of kincentric ecology,” writes Salmón.

Kinship is shared breath. Breath is what transforms the air of the atmosphere in plant flesh (when the plant breathes in during photosynthesis), and what transforms plant flesh back into the air of the atmosphere (through the animal metabolism). Breath is what transforms bodies into one another, lets the carbon atoms from the plant’s body settle as muscle in the animal’s flesh, and then travels on into the blue vault above our heads, englobing us all within the atmosphere. Kin then is fluid, it is what I can be, or have been. It is truly a shared body. It is truly participation in the same flow of blood. It is breath.

The mystical potency in sharing breath is an experience, and it is a necessity. If you relate to kin, you have no choice but to

be obliged, because it is kin, which nourishes you and which brings you forth. So again we see what cruel projection of their own superstitions the colonisers cast on the original peoples they encountered, when they assumed that those were worshipping demons in animal and plant bodies. Rituals are done in order to nourish community. Rituals are not done in order to subordinate to some demon or goddess.

Rituals – song, dance, painting (on sand, rock and bodies), sculpturing – are made to give back the nourishment that is provided by kin. If people sing songs in a ritual in order to invoke rain, they ask “that the land be nourished and that the land will nourish the people. The land is nourished by the results of the ceremony which brings rain. As the songs are performed, the iwi [the force of fertility] continues to turn” (Salmón 2000:1328). This is again an exchange of breath. The word “iwi [...] translates roughly into the idea of binding with a lasso. But it also means to unite, to join, to connect. Another meaning of iwi is to breathe, inhale/ exhale, or respire” (Salmón 2000:1328).

What colonists and the early anthropologists often have taken as superstition is in truth the practice to nurture life. This practice has not only a magical, ritualistic side. It also shows many practical aspects of care work. For the Raramuri described by Salmón, these practical aspects include labour such as planting edible corn and bean fields. Through this, the vegetables become available for the people. But also the other vegetation alongside corn and beans grows more abundantly through the cultivation process, which loosens and irrigates the soil (Salmón 2000:1329). In a cosmos of relations, caretaking is done to a mutual benefit.

From this it becomes clear that we cannot clearly differentiate between hunter-gatherer communities and agrarian peoples. In much of the anthropological literature, the egalitarian attitude of hunter-gatherer societies is contrasted with

the allegedly more controlling culture of agrarian cultures (“agrologistics”, Morton 2017). But as it has been observed by David Graeber (personal communication, 2018), the crucial feature is not if a given culture nurtures plants or just collects them, but the level of direct communication, which is at work between humans and non-human persons. Indigenous cosmologies already include the necessity to nurture kin. So the step to do this nurturing in a garden, and from there move to a plot of land, is small, and in some respect inevitable. Farming cultures can be based on reciprocity, as hunters can act out of the drive to dominate and destroy.

It is plausible that the original human cosmologies all build around the idea of nurturing what life has given. This attitude could even be imagined as a species-specific trait of the human species (which has been described as “biophilic” by some authors, as e.g. Wilson (1984), Shephard (1998)). The true cultural divide might not be found between early agrarian societies and hunter-gatherer tribes, but between land-users who treat country as kin, and those who treat it as matter and resource only.

Salmón (2000:1330) concludes in this vein: “Raramuri land management represents a tradition of conservation that relies on a reciprocal relationship with nature in which the idea of *iwigara* becomes an affirmation of caretaking responsibilities and an assurance of sustainable subsistence and harvesting. It is a realisation that the Sierra Madres is a place of nurturing, full of relatives with whom all breath is shared.”

Ethics as practical care

An animistic ethics does not follow the demands of what is needed in order to be an ethical subject. It is not about obeying the demands of a transcendent god expecting deference from his creatures. It has nothing to do with “the moral good” in a Kantian sense, or with ethical obligations.

Still, interestingly, Kant's "categorical imperative" – the obligation to act in a way that the rule of your action could become ethical law – retains a flavour of the idea of reciprocity. Animistic ethics is not even called "ethics" by the original peoples. They often simply call it "law". The law is concerned with what is necessary in order to give life. In animistic law, there is no relevance to the hopeless question, which has impeded western ethics to embrace a moral system which includes non-human beings: How can we extend moral values to non-human subjects, when "subject" is a term reserved for humans (and, ultimately, only for those who subscribe to the societal contract)?

Within a western mindset, it is nearly impossible to include non-human persons into moral considerations. Still, we continuously treat them in ethically relevant ways. We constantly take from those persons, we live together with them in intimate proximity (think of the symbionts in your body), and human civilisation inflicts mass pain and death to those others. The impossibility to include them into an ethical reasoning is a profound problem in western moral thinking. We need to ask if western ethics is not only unable to heal antagonisms, but creates them in the first place.

Anthropologist Priscilla Stuckey (2013:192) criticises the "western conviction that nature, including human nature, is individualist, acquisitive, and competitive, so that what is considered animal becomes opposed to what is regarded as social". She argues that the "conflict between individual and society rests on a dualism of body and mind, with the body coded as selfish and instinctive, while only the mind or soul is able to connect with the larger collective" (Stuckey 2013:193). Traditional western ethical systems more or less explicitly rely on this dualism and for this reason privilege the mind of a (human) ethical subject over the body, hence excluding the remainder of the living world from ethical participation. In practical life, however, the proto-ethical matrix of biotic

relationships is mediated between bodies, not between rational subjects.

The Australian philosopher Freya Mathews sees the ability to think and act in terms of what gives fertility to the whole of the biotic community as a hallmark of a possible (and necessary) ecological civilisation. Her ideas follow the corresponding attitude, which we find in animist cultures, that the aims of the individual and the collective of beings are not truly in opposition, but are very much aligned: “In our modern societies we have entirely forgotten about desiring only what Earth-others need us to desire – and, so far, we have gotten away with this” (Mathews, 2020:52). A fair community with life would follow “a proto-moral principle of adaptative accommodation to the needs of the rest of Earth-life”. This, so observes Mathews, “broadly equates not only to wu wei, in ancient Daoist tradition, but to the normative principle, or Law, that is core to Australian Aboriginal cultures and that Aboriginal people read from land itself” (Mathews, 2020:52).

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Ethics in an animist perspective is conceived from the standpoint of what is necessary to contribute to the fecundity of a system or process of relationships developing in a given place or part of “country”. The resulting moral rules can be called a distributed ethics or a commons ethics, which privileges not the moral (human) subject, but the unfolding inter-subject of shared life. The ethical principle then is care for this shared life.

Power is relationship

Many ecologists think (at least silently) that “humans” are detrimental to “nature”. They design nature preserves as exclusion zones from humans, often causing great distress to local populations, who frequently are the traditional “owners” of the land. The US Wilderness Act from 1964 defines wilderness as “land untrammelled by man”, an attitude that found

its way into many similar legal texts all over the planet. Wild here is understood as “unspoilt” in a western romantic sense, which means the absence of man.

This definition follows the old rules of the colonised mind, where the domains of “man” and of “nature” are forever separate. The only difference is that in the version provided by environmentalism, “nature” is not the root of all evil, but the harbour of all good. This stream of thought has its own lineage deeply down into enlightenment thinking, which cemented the split between human mind and the material world. An influential advocate of the idea that “nature” is the harbour of all good things was French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While “wild” means “evil” in the Hobbesian tradition, it means “good” in the Rousseauian heritage. But both lines of thought uphold a fundamental separation of human society and wild “nature” based on differences of substance. Humans are fundamentally different from other animals (the latter are “wild”, the former have “culture”), so a bold line must be drawn.

Asking truly “wild” peoples – peoples living in an explicit necessary epistemological and physiological exchange with the more-than-human world – we get a different answer. We learn that “wild” means to be in relationship, and to fulfill your part of the relationship in such a way that the collective of life does not unravel. Being wild means being involved in nurturing others – as those wild others also nurture us. Wildness is the drive of the world to generate persons and experiences through mutual nurturing. Wilderness to the western mindset is life-taking, whereas to the animist it is life-giving.

This merits another table for comparison:

Table 4
Two different grounds for an “Ethics of the Wild”

“Wild” in the Western imagination	“Wild” in Indigenous Practices
Without rules	Based on rules
Egoistic	Devoted to mutuality
Threatening with death	Life-giving
Opposed to man	Including man
Emotionally detached	Profuse with feeling
Sublime	Nourishing
Stranger	Kin
Opaque to human understanding.	Transparent to thinking, sensing, feeling and intuition
Better off without man	In need of man
Requiring control	Requiring gratitude

If wild is relational, and life-giving, we can – and even must – take an active part in its unfolding. Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2013:139) observes accordingly: “Human groups hold the view that they are an extremely important part of the life of their country.” It is their duty to make increase possible. Is this allegedly central role a discouraging sign of human arrogance? Or is it an insight into our power, because we have the freedom to say no to our responsibility for nurturance, as the western/ global civilisation currently does? Humans play a central role in ecosystems, maybe we could say, because they will be damaged without our compliance.

Rose has collected some impressive insights into the

practice of ethics in animistic cultures. In Australia, the “totemic” system of separate kin groups to which humans adhere functions metaphorically as a tie between diverse human individuals, social groups and the non-human beings of country. The totemic system symbolically mirrors the set of existential relationships (prey/ predator, parasite/ host, niche-builder/ niche) of an ecosystem. The totemic links bind humans to the ecosystem, not in an analogous and purely “symbolic” fashion, but through various layers of obligations, as Rose (2013:140) describes: “Totemic relationships traced through three lines of descent, in systems of exogamy, ensure that people will have numerous non-human kin, and will, in effect, be members of several overlapping, but not identical kin groups”.

Members of the dingo kin group for example “are responsible for the flourishing of dingoes in the world, and this means as well that they are responsible for their own flourishing (as dingo people)” (ibid.). This constellation of finding one’s own identity in the presence of others leads, as Rose observes, to an enhanced vulnerability of the human members: If dingo, or emu, kin suffer, the humans adhering to the respective kin group inevitably suffer, too.

The totemic system of diverse kinships entangled humans deeply with the ecosystem. Accordingly, human powers, but also human responsibilities are increased. Rose (2013:141) summarises: “Kin responsibilities distribute interest and care across species and countries such that one’s individual interests are embedded within, and realised most fully in the nurturance of, the interests of those with whom one shares one’s being [...] The process of living powerfully in the world is thus based on nurturing the relationships in which one’s life indwells. Nurturance is neither infinitely obligatory, nor is it diffused and undifferentiated.”

Indigenous people engaged in increase rituals are therefore

not acting out of superstition and only in their own interest. Instead, they are rendering other beings a necessary (and often tiresome) service: “Increase rituals... [are] performed by members of a kin group with the explicit intention of singing up abundance within a species”, observes Rose (2013:142). The idea accompanying this is not just that “magic” works – but the conviction that we can direct our attention to other beings and that this has an effect, because it is felt by them. If we are acting as much on the “inside” of a reality profuse with feeling as on the material “outside”, acts of invocation change the meshwork of relationships.

Rose’s colleague Matthew Hall (2013:392) states accordingly: “At the basis of most good relationships is communication. In order to construct relationships with plant persons it is necessary to communicate with them, and recognise their presence... In Yanyuwa country, when the humans address songs directly to the cycad trees, they are not ‘worshipping’ them, they are singing in order to keep the trees healthy.” Such rituals are only a part of a wider set of work intended to make other beings flourish. Other parts are concrete rules of whose non-human beings can be consumed by humans and at what times, as Rose observes: “When an emu person [a human pertaining to the emu kin group in Aboriginal Australia] dies, nobody eats emu until the emu people tell them they can, and the first emu to be killed is treated with special ritual.” Rose (2013:142).

Can we become animists again?

A critique of my approach to describe “animism” as a cosmology with an ensuing ethics might well be that all societies are different, so this sort of classification again shows the western colonising regard. What I do means to classify from the outside instead of to ask and to communicate, so the accusation could go. This caution remains valid indeed. Still it is a remarkable fact that so many different societies outside

urban/ hierarchical societies, and particularly outside the global western sphere of influence, retain basic similarities in regard to their cosmologies and the principles of interaction between humans and non-humans (co-creative nurturing of the cosmos) and between humans (egalitarian cooperation).

It is likely that animistic cosmologies have been the default way of human culture since the deep time of early-modern humans. If we compare contemporary ritualistic artifacts (rock art, sculpture) to historic ones, we can indeed observe a host of similarities. Insights into current ritualistic practice help us understand the meaning and rationale of prehistoric art, among others the enigma why the most spectacular of this art was done in the dark depths of caves like Altamira or Lascaux.

In an animistic cosmology, art is a means of reinforcing the mesh of relations between the persons in an ecosystem. It is a way to make visible the invisible dimension, which ties all beings together, and by making it visible, reinforcing it. Art and increase are never separable. Animistic art has an ethical function. Contemporary art has retained this – although the experiences of those animistic dimensions are relegated to the private sphere and are rarely discussed by professional critique. In animism, art is a gesture of giving back, of communicating with the spirits by building them a pleasing dwelling. It is not made for aesthetic contemplation. Again, the idea of a purely aesthetic perspective is a genuine western invention, which does not respect the fact that everything we do inevitably is ethical. Invoking the spirits – the inwardness of the nexus of unfolding creation – without personally welcoming to an animistic eye might count as reckless.

Relation always comes first. The “aesthetic” quality of the surface is the least important aspect. As is its visibility. This may explain why much indigenous art is destroyed after it has been produced, or executed in places which are barely

accessible, as in caves. Robert Wallis observes: “Thinking animically, this hidden art may have been produced for consumption by other-than-human-persons, and was only ever to be seen and actively engaged with by them. In this way, engagements between human-persons and stone-persons may be seen as two-way and relational rather than involving a one-way inscription of human meaning.” (Wallis 2013:322). In animism, art is part of the commerce of fecundity.

Ecopolitics: Renouncing Immortality

"Any inner-outer-dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant."

A. Irving Hallowell

To view other species as kin, and to incorporate them into a system of relationships makes that the human interests and obligations cannot be uncoupled from a specific place and its non-human inhabitants. For this reason, indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to habitat destruction and species loss. Non-human beings are part of their human identity. Stuck (2013:204) observes that "a relational ontology requires a local focus, to preserve the face to face care and nurturance shared with others". It requires being truly locally present in order to be fair and just. This is an important lesson for a western ecological approach where obligations to sustain other species are usually built upon abstract systemic properties of habitats (a species' place in the foodchain, or in a symbiosis).

We cannot imagine a politics of equality without heeding the acute necessities to share with the non-human family members, which are represented only through a specific place, through the food and water it offers, through the breath we share with it. This connection to the world of other living beings might seem negligible to a westerner's eyes. But it is of utter importance, as apart from a specific place relations become abstract, even those between humans. Relations are incomplete without being embedded in the

wider context of mutual care with non-human persons. True egalitarianism cannot work if non-human persons are excluded. True democracy requires the participation of all beings, not necessarily in a parliament of things, but in a collective of shared breath. This point poses a challenge for sustainability practices, which want to engage with indigenous ways. From an animistic viewpoint, sustainability cannot be achieved without entering physically into the web of relationships, which keeps one another mutually alive. There is no sustainability without fairness on an equal footing.

A family of equals

Being “of” a place does not mean to own the place. A human member of a biotic community does not have property rights over other members or over the physical space. There are only obligations to care for this biotic community; there is no human dominion over nature. It is exactly this lack of power, which grants equality among all members of a biotic community. Nobody has the right to possess other persons.

When western debates about preserving nature meet indigenous struggles for keeping “country” intact, two totally different worldviews collide: The idea of property rights confronts the necessity of accommodating kin. For this reason, it should be obvious that indigenous view cannot be directly mapped on western legal structures. The western legal system very much relies on a concept of property, and property is about things – the very concept of property is dualistic. It is part of the heritage of the split world – humans here, things there; and humans with a lot of things on top, and those with fewer things below.

It is therefore doubtful if moves such as granting a river a legal status as a person, or even its own property rights (as has recently happened to the Whanganui river in New Zealand, Lurgio 2019) will change that in western thinking other beings

are viewed as things and therefore are means to personal enrichment. Property as a concept is not really imaginable from an animistic perspective. It directly destroys relationship – if I own you, you are not free to relate to me. The idea of property is the seed from which the western narcissism grows. In its most pathological, narcissism is about possessing other people. Every form of ownership of non-human participants in the cosmic exchange process keeps some traits of narcissism.

Narcissism is the deadly sin of ecology

In western civilisation, it sometimes seems that narcissism is a prerequisite for success, since often the most narcissistic individuals obtain the most socially responsible positions. Indigenous cultures, however, frequently work in an active manner against “letting egos grow big”. They know that humans tend to dominate others. So many of these cultures have invented a set of rules to break that temptation. Many initiation rituals serve the purpose of subduing the personal ego (by showing that individuality is temporary and fragile). But there are many more customs to keep narcissism in check.

An interesting example of such a practice can be found in the Ju/'hoansi culture in Southern Africa. The Ju/'hoansi call this usage “insulting the prey” (Suzman 2017). It refers to the main source of animal protein, hunt. When a hunter comes back to the village, it is customary that the prey is shared among all inhabitants. If the hunter is particularly successful, and has killed a huge animal (and even needs to call for help as he cannot carry it alone), he is not applauded, but mocked. People ridicule his success, the bigger (and hence useful) the prey animal is. The inhabitants make comments such as “it wasn't worth the effort even to walk out if you come back with prey tiny as a fly” when in truth the hunter might have killed an eland antelope. Those remarks are rather scolds

than compliments. The reason for this, the Ju/'hoansi tell anthropologists, is to keep personal narcissism at bay.

Suzman (2017) quotes an Ju/'hoansi elder telling the anthropologist Richard Lee: "When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man – and thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this ... so we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way, we cool his heart and make him gentle." This is a socially imposed negative feedback loop. A very good hunter will be discouraged disproportionately. Those most liable to become proud, to become arrogant, and to assume personal leadership are held back. To be mocked for being successful probably is painful for the individual hunter, who would like to see that his efforts and success are acknowledged. But it effectively blocks his temptation to become the local strongman.

In these and other cultural controls, who reaches up is put down. In order to maintain equal rights and equal access for all, rules have been established, which to westerners must seem brutal. Probably practices of this kind were widely distributed among neolithic cultures. Most had no formal government and no "chiefs". They relied on egalitarian self-governance. The static cosmos of the original peoples about which the western philosopher shakes her head ("I want to live in a world in which improvement is possible!") relies on the humiliation of the overblown ego. If this world, as it is, offers eternal fecundity, if it births individuality (including our own) required to steward and to nurture this fecundity, what can be improved in it? Why do humans need to be on top, if there is nothing gained over what is already there?

Man is the animal, some say, which knows that it will die. Presumably the other beings know this as well (all try to avoid their deaths). But they manage to live with the knowledge that they are mortal and accept that death exists. This is

their greatness and their placidity, even if they have immense teeth. Man, however, has become the animal, which searches an escape from being mortal. He attempts to flee from mutuality, whose deepest expression is the complementarity of life and death. To do this, he controls his environment as tightly as possible. Today, man refuses to be mortal. He refuses to be edible. He refuses the ultimate sharing. This is his ecological distinction. And it is his ecological bestiality. But it is not proven that this is an inevitable character trait. It is rather likely that it goes back to a cultural choice.

Western culture is grounded on obstructing mutual transformation, which is the core process of ecosystems. Mutual transformation requires all individuals to die at some point. It is cyclical, as it always leads to new creation. If mutual transformation is blocked, creation comes to a halt. There is nothing less ecological than immortality. Nothing is less egalitarian in a world of mortals, which gains its strength because it is edible and by this can birth itself everyday anew. To put the own ego in the first place means claiming immortality. This is the deadly sin of ecology. For this reason, indigenous cultures suppress the concentration of power in single members of their community.

Also in this respect, animistic societies teach us an important lesson: An egalitarian approach to other species goes hand in hand with fundamental equality among humans. One cannot be separated from the other. Equality among humans requires that we put ourselves on an equal footing with non-human persons. We have to reject domination completely, otherwise it will always creep back in.

Acephalous societies

The colonisers did not wholly grasp what they found when they discovered the different societies of traditional Africa and the tropical South America. The communities did not

have leaders, there were no tribal chiefs, but councils of elders (in Ghana those are still called the “committee”). In South America, the conquistadores were consternated: The Indians did not know power, they did not know sin and they did not know hell, the first missionaries wrote back to Spain in horror.

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Technically such societies are called “acephalous”. They have no-one in charge and are thus “headless” (cephalos in Greek means head). We can see the pejorative element in that term: A headless body is pretty savage, like that of a jellyfish. For the western colonists, all of them underlings of more or less authoritarian regimes, rule was in order. Anybody who does not subordinate to authorities, so goes the prejudice, stands on a lower cultural step, close to what Hobbes had called the “Leviathan”, the all-devouring nature.

Many mistranslations further distorted western understanding of indigenous politics and social organisation. In the territory of today’s Ghana, for example, the (temporary) speaker of the committee was addressed as “chief” by the British (and is still called so today). The colonial power, organised hierarchically, was not able to make better sense of this social role. So the “tribal chief” who plays such a central role in western literature from Cooper’s “The Leatherstocking Tales” to German writer Karly May and his “Winnetou” – series of novels to “Pocahontas”, in reality was a rare aberration. Going back in history shows that a distinct leader must be seen as a more recent development than the original acephalous groups. The “tribal chief” as a general phenomenon exists as little as the original capitalism by barter and the natural state of pitiless war against one another. The chieftain pageantry, his state and absurd ostentation, are mainly reflexes of a European disease. This is the idea that we need to surrender to an authority, which is cut off from other humans and non-humans and from country and its creatures.

Looking more deeply into the culture of, for example, traditional Africa, we learn that its communities are not controlled by a chief, but governed by an elder who is supported by a council of other members of the community. These are often chosen by consensus among all members. What we find there is a form of basic democracy, where no one obtains a position that is intrinsically more powerful than others, or that cannot in principle be held by any other. Power is not hereditary but a distinction for a limited time. It is as fluid and distributed as it is in an ecosystem.

In Ghana, the British colonists modified this original structure according to their hierarchy of powers. They gave the responsible elder the status of a dependent, local or regional king, and assigned to all others the roles of subservient objects. A regent was created and the tribe could be managed. But by this the common participation in the flows and transformations of the cosmos for all had become impossible. Particularly regarding African history, the European incursion on indigenous societies was by far not the first influence of a centralised power. There have been many African empires in the course of the centuries, and as everywhere the emmeshment of indigenous and centralised, more hierarchical societies was complex.

Commons as politics of kinship

Animistic societies provide a model for the idea of the commons. I have already hinted to the close connections between commons practices and animistic cultures above. At this point we can take a deeper look at the ontological and ethical role of this form of exchange with the world. Practising a commons means to participate in a collective that distributes to its members the rights to use and the obligations to nurture at the same time. This collective is not conceptually different from the place where it unfolds ("country"). It correspondingly embraces everyone and

everything of a given locality. Being part of a commons means that everybody can use, but also that everybody must contribute; everybody receives, everybody provides something. There is neither “inside” nor “outside”. There is no privileged user and no private property. Within a commons, no resource is extracted, but a process of relationships is nurtured. A fundamental mutuality creates the individuals and the overarching whole to which they belong through the same gestures. Participants in the commons are not its operators, but its elements, as are all other entities and beings who are participating in the process of reciprocity, i.e. “country” and its inhabitants. Nothing belongs to one person alone, but all belong to one another. The best explanation of a commons, therefore, is to understand it as a way to organise “fecundity in reciprocity”.

We can stress five general points here (which I have all extensively discussed elsewhere, so I will only briefly summarise their import for the process of self-decolonisation. See Weber 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2019):

- ≈ Commons are truly egalitarian in a trans-species and trans-category way.
- ≈ Commons are not only structural organisations, but also dimensions of inner experience, which are constitutional and cannot be separated from structural aspects.
- ≈ Commons are the way how each ecosystem, and hence the whole earth-system (or “Gaia”), organises itself, so that life itself can be seen as commons.
- ≈ All exchange in a commons is understood as gift, with the original gift being the cosmic creation.
- ≈ All reciprocity in a commons is based on rules, which organise giving and receiving.

It would be fruitful for commons research and activism (which is a quickly developing field today) to further develop the awareness how deeply indigenous societies are embedded in the commons paradigm, and therefore how profoundly the way of the commons is entangled with our past as a species and our cultural history.

The reason why the reality of indigenous commoning – and the existence of according cosmologies based on a practice of the commons – have not been put centre stage in commons discourse is again the different starting point of western thinking. Contemporary commons philosophy inserts itself in western discourse about sustainability policies, whereas the lived commons of animistic communities are basically not technical, but ritualistic. They have to be performed in order to be understood. In order to live a commons, animistic people include all species, and the spirits. That's a thing hard to swallow for western activist discourse, be that as advanced as it can be.

Animistic societies can give us glimpses into many of the conundrums of commoning and their possible solutions (as much as the society of other beings, the biosphere, can grant us more understanding in this respect). One important insight might be that we can understand commons as the economies and politics of kinship. Kinship is not meant in the sense of political nepotism, evidently, but in the sense that exchange builds on the notion of being necessarily and profoundly related, and that any exchange can only go along these lines of relation, creating them and recreating them, unless it becomes destructive. In this respect, a family is a model for a commons, too.

Colonisation always destroys the commons

In historical times, commons had been widely distributed in the occident (starting from being the only form of allocation

and distribution in prehistory). When thinking proceeded to separate reality into subject and object – or consumer and commodity – those in power transformed the commons into their private property (Weber 2012). This process became possible because the non-human participants of reality were more and more conceived of as separate things. In Europe, the destruction of the commons came to its bloom in the time when Thomas Hobbes wrote his “Leviathan” with its attack against the “natural state”. The importance of “objective science” rose steeply, denying other forms of knowledge and perception. The enclosure of the commons became an enclosure of the soul, which censored the inner experience of shared aliveness, and which contributed to the “coloniser’s mind” the westerner has developed. The enclosure of the commons was a process of colonisation, and like all of those processes, it entrenched the unequally distributed power and actually worsened the overall quality of relationship, but did so in the name of a better episteme.

The colonisation again was a destruction of the commons on a material, cosmological and psychological level. The European newcomers attacked the three main pillars of the commons, its social aspect (the egalitarian reciprocity), its animate aspect (the identity of the humans, which is the identity of “country” in reciprocity with its non-human inhabitants) and its ecological aspect (the nurturing of “country” through a careful culture in mutuality and through ritual gifts). In a way, the colonisers destroyed everything that they had lost themselves long ago, leaving behind desperate and hungry souls in danger of forgetting what they had been.

This colonisation is far from over. Today, it goes by the name of “landgrabbing”. Multinational corporations take away the country from the remaining subsistence cultures in the tropical zones of the earth, and prevent the original custodians from access, as they do not have official property titles. The inhabitants are unable to defend themselves, just as they

were at the times of the first waves of european colonisation. Private property destroys the fundamental reciprocity humans need in order to live. Historically, it was incredibly easy to take land from the original people: They gave it away themselves. The aboriginal elder Margaret Kemarre Turner (2010:133) recounts that when the white man arrived, aborigines gave him the right to use the land whose stewards they had been. They acted according to the rule that the land was a gift to all.

Humans who belong to a culture of sharing are doomed in a world, which does not share but distributes, which separates but does not renew connections. This understanding helps us to better grasp the misery of the post-colonial world. Crushed between traditional human existence, which is devoted to renew the collective and englobes not only people but all beings, and a world, which uses all beings as objects in order to build a secured fortress for the powerful, life bleeds away.

Indigenous people do not survive colonisation undamaged, because capitalism, which is part of the package colonisation comes with, eats up unreserved mutuality. Capitalism feeds on unconditionality. Capitalism devours life, and it eats those, who do not think of other but to be of service of this life, who nurture life, who celebrate life-giving relationships. Capitalism feeds on what has been standing at the centre of animistic practice for hundreds of thousands of years. Capitalism runs on those who make themselves edible, but all its products are totally unpalatable. It transforms a world of mutual nourishment in a toxic wasteland.

Ecology of the gift

The importance of mutuality manifests in the passion of indigenous humans to offer gifts. The central role of the gift shows up in many small things, like the rituals of gratitude

through which indigenous people demonstrate that they have received what they need for a living as gifts and that they take responsibility for not wasting them. In some communities, meat is distributed in such a way that the successful hunter gives all his prey away and then is gifted back just the amount he needs for himself. Everyone who needs something is cared for by the community.

“Generosity is simultaneously a moral and a material imperative”, says US-American nature writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:381) about her own culture. She is a member of the Potawatomi people and therefore familiar with both perspectives: The imperial dogma of the west and the indigenous traditions of “Turtle Island”. Kimmerer (2013:381) observes:

“Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away [...] In a culture of reciprocity, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again.” To give does not follow a personal, but a cosmic reckoning.

“The economy of the gift” is frequently discussed in western debates about new economic models. Indigenous people live inside of it. It is the deep economy of our species and has been so for hundreds of thousands of years. The choice of words which compose the term is not entirely correct, however: It is not about economy, but about ecology, the household of relations in which every participant plays a vital role for another. Everyone gives something to the others – and gets something back from someone else. The sun, water, food, the language in which one grows up, all this quenches existential desires and inspires existential needs to share. Neither in the natural world, nor in the indigenous cosmos, are those gifts something that must be earned. They are the gifts given to anyone in need.

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Kimmerer (2013:3ff) has examined how deeply this culture of the gift has marked the worldview of indigenous America. She recounts the history of her people's creation, starting with the mythical ancestor of the human race, Skywoman. At the beginning, Skywoman sank down to earth from the air, in slow spirals, like a maple seed. And then she was down here, alone, in need of help. She was dependent on the help of the non-human beings, and these heeded her need. In order to save her, one of them even gave his life for her. So the creation story of Kimmerer's people, the Potawatomi, starts with two gifts: Skywoman falls from the sky, like the sunlight, and an animal gives himself away in order to donate his life to her.

For Kimmerer (2013:28) the gift is essential in order to create mutuality. "The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity." In a world of giving, relationships count, not the height of the barriers, which everyone has erected against the others by heaping up things around him.

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Rules for Behaving Well in the Society of Being

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“Animism is about what it means to be alive in the world.”

Tim Ingold

This essay has started as an attempt to show how important animistic practices and beliefs are for a practice of sustainability that overcomes the traumatic heritage it stems from. The essay then has unfolded into an argument for self-decolonisation. I propose self-decolonisation as the first requirement to understand those cultures that have never truly stepped out of the experience that the cosmos is a vast collective engaged in nurturing aliveness. I hold that nurturing aliveness – one’s own and that of the others, which, if done with the innocent intent of providing nourishment, is indistinguishable (Weber 2017) – is the most important step towards a different ecological practice. In this chapter I will make some practical suggestions about how to interact with the persons that constitute an ecosystem (a local commons of reality).

Interacting with non-human persons is not a technical procedure. It is not about learning the right skills from indigenous societies, albeit those skills often require a particular attitude, and therefore acquiring them can lead to nurturing one’s aliveness. What we need in order to nurture life (the own and that of others) is animistic practice. I say this with the same emphasis as the Buddhist who calls what he does not “worship”, but practice. And as Buddhist teacher Dōgen reminds us: “When you find your place where you are,

practice occurs” (quoted according to Snyder 1990:27). It is likely helpful if we understand the technology implicated in the management of indigenous commons, but alone it will never get to the point. In the hands of the westerner, this knowledge will become just another technical means, a tool in treating the world as an object. The first step, however, is precisely to stop treating the world as an object, but to approach it as a personal other instead, a “thou”. If we are open to communicate with gratitude and the pledge for reciprocity, everything is already there, and not much more is needed. For this is what the reality is about: Communicating in reciprocity.

I remember attending a workshop on the ontologies of the commons, which went for several-days. International experts were invited, and there was even a small minority stemming from indigenous backgrounds, and from countries in which this is background is still present as part of everyday experience. There was much talk about ontologies. But the only ontology present was the western conviction that the best approach to the world is to observe its building blocks, construct hypotheses, discuss them, and thereby try to smash competing hypotheses. The participants talked and some of them tried very hard to be right in order to trump the other’s arguments and prevail.

A change only came when the group decided to hold a session in the presence of the local river, a beautiful, although visibly suffering body of water, flowing in sight of the workshop venue, but not visited by any participant before. The simple act of asking to be received, and of promising to provide fecundity, with the water at our feet murmuring a continuous answer of invitation, did everything to change the course of the talk. It was then that I understood that in order to be truly helpful to the non-human persons with whom we share our breath, we do not need to struggle over better theory (and over who wins). We need to ask for permission to

enter into the commons of mutual nurturing again, and we need to pledge to give back. We need to truly do this, with our voice, and our skin.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:183) has given a remarkable account of the attitude, which is needed in order to achieve this reconnection. It is not about technique, or skills, or the right requisites. It is about real care, care on the heart level, of truly seeing the (non-human) others with whom we share. It is about taking reciprocity seriously, as Kimmerer suggests: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you so that you can take care of them.” Kimmerer calls the attitude to approach others in order to ask them to share their world with us the “Honorable Harvest”. She has developed the according set of rules particularly for the situation of humans “taking” from the natural world, for food or for clothing. But the “Honorable Harvest” is a guide to any form of relationship with non-human (and human!) others. Its “ancient rule is not just to take only what you need, but to take only that which is given” (Kimmerer 2013:184). The principles of the “Honorable Harvest” are:

*Introduce yourself.
Be accountable as the one
who comes asking for life.*

*Ask permission before
taking. Abide by the answer*

*Never take the first. Never
take the last.*

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

*Never take more than half.
Leave some for others.*

*Harvest in a way that
minimises harm.*

*Use it respectfully. Never
waste what you have taken.*

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*Give thanks for what you
have been given.*

*Give thanks for what you
have been given.*

*Give a gift in reciprocity for
what you have taken.*

*Sustain the ones who sus-
tain you and the earth will
last forever.*

(Kimmerer 2013:183)

These principles are to be taken seriously. This is the animistic requirement. We need to comply to them literally. “Introduce yourself” means “say the truth about who you are”. Say it. Speak. Communicate. Talk in front of a tree. Introduce yourself in the presence of a twig full of cherries. “Be accountable” means “really do grasp that you are in a relationship in which your actions affect a sentient person”. And so on down on the list.

For the western mind, and particularly for academic thought, this is a near-to impossible task. (At least in a professional setting. It may happen everyday with one’s pet animal or within the own garden). This is so, because the practice of reciprocity as taught by Kimmerer very much relies on our embodied experience sensing the reality of other, human and non-human, persons. The attitude of the “Honorable Harvest” presupposes that we are indeed able to communicate as part of the wider collective of life, and that we need to do so in order to nurture this collective. The communication, which makes this possible, comes first. To communicate –

to present yourself and to be receptive – is more important than a sophisticated plan what to do, or a technical manual, and it is vastly better than to teach others.

If we build on the insights of modern biosemiotics, if we trace back the connections, which psychologically and physiologically link us to a meshwork of bodies with whom we share one life, this insistence on true communication with other beings does not need to seem so out of the ordinary. In the terminology of western philosophy, the attitude, which underlies this sort of relating is called “Panpsychism” (Mathews 2003, 2009). Panpsychism argues that every material process from a different perspective is a subjective experience.

Panpsychism is on the rise in mainstream philosophical discussion. For a long time, it had a hard time among a mainstream science denying any ontological subjectivity and determined to do away with feeling. While debating is the according practice for a dualistic metaphysical approach (talking about), feeling is the necessary means for a panpsychistic worldview (feeling with). Allowing ourselves to feel is the requirement for communication with non-human persons, for listening to them and asking to be heard by them. Feeling communication is at the same time precisely what needs to be achieved by our self-decolonisation. These are not magic skills out of reach for an ordinary western human. To the contrary: We are practising feeling all the time, as we are alive and cannot help to be.

Standing in the presence of a flowering rose and feeling – even inexplicably – drawn towards it, feeling compelled to become active and productive in the presence of its beauty already is a deep communication. So observes nature educator Barry Patterson (2005:136): “A communication with a tree is first and foremost a feeling in your body.” Many of our western practices in the minor sciences of art and poetic understanding are communications with the collective of

the other-than-human world. For a member of an indigenous society the experience of awe and beauty in the presence of “nature” certainly is communication. The others speak to us through our feelings.

So there is a lot of exchange with other persons already going on in our daily lives. We only need to make it explicit, and we need to rescue this experience from the disqualification as “private anecdotes” and the estrangement of being seen as “aesthetic perceptions” only, as mere re-enactments of memes from cultural history. If the others are kin, being welcomed by them instills in us the feeling of being nurtured by family. What the west calls the experience of beauty hence in depth might be the realisation to be kin. It might be the experience to be looked at, to be called, the invitation by this kin to partake, and to nurture back with one’s own capacity to give life (Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming). We should never underestimate the degree to which an other looks at us while we observe her or him. We should never misunderstand a sensuous contact with otherness as a purely causal event of “having a sensory perception”.

The other persons being present in the collective of life communicate their presence, and they give back our gaze, or even return it before we have started to properly watch. The meshwork of bodies sharing breath, as animism holds and everyday involvement confirms, lives through inner experience and the encounter of other person’s inner experiences as much as it does through material exchange. Everything we encounter on the material plane is also a communication on the animate plane. Every sensuous happenstance is as well a dialogue between beings. This dialogue happens very much on a bodily level, as for example the dialogue between our liver and our red blood cells. But it is nonetheless not machine-like and “purely physiological”, to the contrary.

As the liver-erythrocyte-dialogue is providing us with life,

and any disturbance in their communication is potentially life-threatening, their body-talk is present to us as our inner experience, and mood. It is expressed in a language that is difficult to translate in words. But it is nonetheless expressed in an idiom that we understand, because it is the conversation that we are ourselves. It is the communicative process that brings us forth and connects us to all other persons that are equally linked to physiologies and matters of exchange (as in the water or carbon cycle). We converse in a language that is not unknown to us. It is only unknown to our conscious use of reason, which privileges thinking over perceiving. But all is said, although we might need a moment to translate.

Take this moment and look into the trees with their branches moving slowly, and then more quickly, and then slowly again with the wind. And then imagine that everything outward is an expression of the collective of being that nurtures us, and that asks to be nurtured back. Every whisper of the leaves brings its inwardness with it, every gust of wind is from a world, which does not differentiate between mind (us) and body (them), but is both always. And then maybe for a short moment you can perceive that the wind is the breath of someone, and that it meets you as another someone. Imagine that the trees swaying in the breeze, the foliage moving strongly here, only slightly there, then stirring in a soft wave of air, and then calming down again, are actually one being moving and breathing, and expressing her presence.

Cultural anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram has developed this experience into a theory of the ubiquitous animistic spirits as the “Invisibles”, as the sensuous excitement we feel when in touch with the collective of other life. Abram (2013:132) says: “The spirits are not intangible; they are not of another world. They are the way the local earth speaks when we step back inside this world.” Then it is less difficult to know that we are addressed, although it remains difficult to discern the meaning of it. Abram goes on: “By speaking

of the invisibles not as random ephemera, nor as determinate forces, but as mysterious and efficacious powers that are sometimes felt in our vicinity, we loosen our capacity for intuition and empathetic discernment.” This is the sort of experience, which lays the track for a proper communication with the other beings present in the local collective of life.

Here is not the place for a presentation of different practices of communication with those “Invisibles”, with the persons populating the “more-than-human-world” (Abram 1996). Two things are important to mention, though: First, reconnecting to the living world can be done by everyone. It does not require expert knowledge, as it builds on our own inborn practical capabilities to be alive and to nurture life-giving relationships, and to feel if those relationships are providing nourishment. It builds on our capacity to be true to ourselves, and true to others, and to really wish to provide for reciprocity. In the worlds of sustainability activist and mentor Elizabeth Ferguson “so much of it is simply knowing the world to be alive and feeling and to experience great gratitude and relationship to it” (Elizabeth Ferguson, personal communication). The heart leads, not the adherence to any techniques or schools.

Second, westerners need the guidance by indigenous people. Westerners need to be humble. They need to be willing to learn and to unlearn. They need to be willing to truly do the work of transformation in order to work away the trauma. They need to accept that what is necessary is the readiness to not prevail as a protected ego, but to allow this ego to dissolve into the family of being and then from there be born again. Fecundity comes first. The other comes first.

Here is a proposal of what to do before any activity takes place at any given location. It is simple, but if taken seriously, can establish a basic openness for communication. Everything else will come from there.

Arrive. Don't get busy immediately. Don't cater to your needs first. Go ask what is the need here.

Walk around without aim. Let yourself be drawn by your intuition to where you are called.

Be attentive. Where is North, where is South? Where is the wind coming from? What birds are singing? What sounds are around?

Listen for the spirit of the place. Try to sense its mood – the atmosphere of the location. Try to feel what it needs.

At the place where you feel called to (where you feel best, actually), rest, and ask for reception. Use simple words and speak in a normal way.

Pledge to work in favour of fecundity. Pledge reciprocity. Pledge that your work here will be a gift to this place and to all its beings.

**Breathe. Perceive. Sense. Listen to answers with all senses and all of your capacities to receive: Think, perceive, feel and intuit.
Take only what is given.**

Think of what you can offer. Tell what you can offer (“Spontaneity. Precision. Perseverance. Grace”. Or what is your strength, and your love?)

Leave a gift.

Start your work.

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