David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*

Notes to pages 3-72, 89-102, 123-135, 201-223

Ch. 1-2 (3-72)

Magician’s intelligence in Bali resides in mediating between the human community and the larger community of beings upon which the community depends for nourishment (6). The tribal shaman ensures that nourishment flows from the larger community into the human community and from the human community back to the larger ecosystemic community. The health of the human community and the larger community of nature to which it belongs depends on balance.

Western anthropologists, steeped in the Christian tradition of otherworldliness, focused on the shaman’s role as communicator with the supernatural, and overlooked the ecological function (7). Shamans enter into relationship with plants, animals, forests, winds, that for the “civilized” Europeans are just scenery (9).

Magic means “the ability or power to alter one’s consciousness at will.” (9) In an indigenous and oral context, traditional magicians cultivate this ability in order to make contact with other organic forms with which human existence is entwined (9).

This defines the shaman: “the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture—boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language—in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more than human field” (9).

Magic is the experience that the world is made up of *multiple intelligences*; thus intelligence is not limited to human reason.

**Animism: the belief that everything of the earth has a soul or spirit. The belief that the earth is *alive.* This comes from the Latin word *anima*, which means “soul.”**

Abram recounts his encounters with non-human others—with fireflies, ants, spiders—to show how they refocused his attention in another way such that he began to “hear and see” in a way never before (20). Animals seemed to “talk” to him—engage his attention and not run away.

His thesis: because our industrialized society has caused us to live in an imbalance with nature we can expect many of the psychological and physiological diseases we have—anxiety, depression, suicide as well as the physiological diseases such as cancer, allergies and immune dysfunctions. (22)

Technology is the distraction of our attention—a new “magic” that reflects us back to ourselves. We forget the sensations and sounds that we have evolved with—those of the more than human world we share. “We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human” (22).

Upon return to the US, Abram finds his attention being refocused by the dominant modes of seeing: the natural world is a mechanism, is mechanical in nature. It can be known, like other kinds of mechanisms, like a clock, for example, by taking it apart to understand the codes and programs by which it functions (27). In chapter 2, Abram will go into the philosophical origins of the mechanical view of nature, which begins with Descartes.

What are all the ways you can think of in which sensory experience of the natural world is “dubbed over” by some mechanical noise?

Implications: what we sense determines attention and focus, and thus how we know the world. In a technological culture, how will this affect how we know the world? In a culture that lives far away from wildness in “civilization” how will this affect how the natural world exists in this environment?

Ch. 2 Philosophy on the Way to Ecology

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS FOR PHENOMENOLOGY

* How to reconcile the subjective and objective views of what is real.
* How to make a science of direct, first-person experience.
* If conscious experience is a mental phenomenon, how do we solve the problem of solipsism?
* How do we have a direct sensory experience of another conscious mind (the problem of the Other)? What is the role of the body in this direct experience?

Phenomenology is a method of getting to truth through observing how phenomena present themselves to the senses and to the mind. It has come the furthest in Western philosophy to contesting the view that there is an objective reality “out there,” opposed to the subjective reality “in here” –that is, inside my head. Abram defines it on 35: “phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience.” Phenomenology is a “science of experience.” (35) It is a “return to the things themselves”: direct, immediate experience. 35

Phenomenology poses the terms *intersubjective* and *intersubjectivity* to describe what is real. Subjectivity refers to the essence of the “I”—of the first-person perspective. We might call subjectivity “I-ness”. Intersubjectivity is the perspective developed between and with all subjects or “I”s. It might be called a kind of “We-ness”. In phenomenology, reality is a collective construction—it is not subjective to the individual or is objectively determined by things, but rather it is *intersubjective*—between us all.

With Descartes and other figures of the scientific revolution in the 17th century, the mechanical view of the world became prominent—what is also called *mechanism*. The view of the world as an object or collection of objects to be taken apart and reassembled belongs to mechanism. The mechanical view is a purely objective view of the world that disregards subjective experience, which is the first way that we encounter the world (32).

Science is driven by scientists, who have a perspective that comes before and guides their scientific interests. Thus science is not without its subjective bias, even though it must report on and talk about the world in objective, unbiased ways.

Yet in our scientific culture, the first person perspective is dismissed as “merely” subjective; only what is quantifiable and measurable is seen as “real.” 34.

Husserl, a German phenomenologist at the turn of the 20th century, emphasized the mental nature of our conscious experience; this led to charges of solipsism (37). Husserl was then faced with the same problem Descartes had!!

Philosophical problem: How does subjective experience enable us to recognize the reality of other selves? (37) In other words, can we have a direct sensory experience of another person’s mind or subjectivity?

Answer: Yes! And through our bodies! Our subjective experience of the world begins with our body in the world, which gives us a point of view, determines pains and pleasures and how the world affects us. From this bodily, sensory perception, the subjective experience is created.

But when we look at our body in the world, what do we find? Other bodies!! We empathize with other bodies—their reactions, movements, pain and pleasures—and thus we experience others as subjectivities in the world, just like ourselves. (37)

But we can also see that some phenomena are just for me, like daydreams. Others, like the experience of other bodies in the world, are for multiple subjectivities, that is, they are *intersubjective.*

Scientific objectivity becomes scientific intersubjectivity; the scientific enterprise is one that seeks to bring greater consensus to what can be experienced by many subjectivities. (38)

The Life World: the world that is present to us prior to our thoughts about it. The world as sensed before we reflect on it. Here you should think about Locke and his observations of children’s experience. It is life as it is present to us in “our everyday tasks and enjoyments—reality as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our sciences” (40).

This is also called the “primordial world”: this means, the world as it is first encountered prior to reflection upon it. The life world is the shared world that we sense together and create together in sensing it, prior to our conceptualization of it.

What is life before we think about it? Are you thinking when you play a sport? Or a musical instrument? Or react spontaneously to something you see or hear, like a raccoon who crosses your path unexpectedly? Or when you are engaged, fully absorbed, in any kind of activity? No, in fact, once you think about what you’re doing, you’re no longer doing it! You’re thinking about it!

PART II: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY (MP) AND THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS FOR MP:

* How can we have a direct sensory experience of the subjectivity of the rest of the natural world?
* If perception is participatory with the rest of the natural world, and this is how we are able to sense its subjectivity (its animate, alive nature), then why does it seem that we have lost this capacity to sense nature as alive?

Merleau-Ponty goes further than Husserl in making the body the very center of experience—both intersubjective and subjective. Without the senses and sense organs, we have no contact with a world, which is the portal to all reflection and thought that comes afterward.

There is a distinct difference between the body seen as an object, or *objectified*, and the body experienced as a subject. Mindfulness activities, such as yoga or meditation, allow us to be more aware of the sensation of being *in the body, or the body as a subject of experience.*

**Connection to the Natural World**

Affirming ourselves as bodily existences means that we also affirm our solidarity with other animal bodies—and even further, with other earthy forms. *In affirming the body we affirm the earth.*

The mechanical view of the earth and bodies robs the earth and its natural forms of any kind of experience or point of view; the world is seen solely as a collection of objects (48).

**The Body’s Silent Conversation with Things**

Animate bodies are *open and responsive* to the world and its constant changes. The body reacts to the world with action—indeed, action is an interpretation of the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Thus behavior and action are not simply mechanically determined, but rather, the body responds to a world that it doesn’t know beforehand.

Ex: Walking up a hill. In walking up a hill, the body is constantly responding to rocks, sticks, the incline (breathing harder, for example), cracks and holes, the wind, etc. These adjustments to the circumstances are made without conscious effort in many cases; the body does what it needs to. In return the environment is also changed by my presence. This is the conversation between body and world that continually takes place through the body’s sense perception. In most cases, no thinking is required. (53)

This is the *participatory nature of perception: perception as an act of participation between sensing and the thing sensed.* It is the experience of an active interplay between the perceiving body and what it perceives (57). This is how perception senses the aliveness of the things is perceives, since they also participate in the act of perception.

Sleight of hand magic tricks illustrate this. By focusing attention and perception on the coin those watching see, with the help of the imagination, it disappear. Perception is always a creative act that employs the imagination.

The participatory nature of perception is based in the body’s lived experience of other bodies in the world—that our bodies are immersed in the natural world with its streams, trees, buildings, people, non-human animals, etc. In other words, the human body—together with other bodies in the natural world, is first responsible for *the intersubjective world*

The body with its sensory organs attuned to the natural world is the place of contact and reciprocation between ourselves and the rest of the natural world. We feel and sense the natural world, and in doing so, we are responding to it; in our responses to the natural world (our actions, feelings, thoughts) we also create and change the natural world.

It is a *circular exchange* between what is sensed and the act of sensing it.

Merleau-Ponty calls this “the flesh of the world”: the flesh of the world is a concept to describe how all bodies affect and are affected by other bodies. It is the “conversation” that bodies have with one another and which creates the world that they perceive in common.

MP’s discovery of the participatory nature of perception brings him into relationship with the traditional wisdom held by numerous indigenous peoples.

Abram also suggests that a new environmental ethic would be based not so much on rules or principles for action that have been reasoned and argued about, but rather, on an increased perceptual awareness of our participation and co-creation of the natural world with other bodies—an increased attention to the “flesh of the world.” In other words, the ethic would be based on the body, not the mind.

**Ch. 3: The flesh of language**

**Question: what are the philosophical hypotheses about human involvement in climate crisis?**

Abram is going to show how language developed as a bodily response to the world; this gets lost with written languages that are based in an alphabet. The disconnection between language and the sensuous world is also the point of disconnection between ourselves and the world.

I will give a few of the main points before going in more detail on the pages assigned.

75 As children, we learn language not through grammar and syntax, but by actively making sounds—mimicking the world and others.

Yet one lingering way of understanding language, even among linguists today, is as a code that represents actual things and events in the world. This view sees language as something that represents the sensible world, but is independent of it.

This break with the view that language is rooted in the bodily expressions marks our *supposed* difference from other animals. While other animals may communicate through gestures and songs, these are bodily expressions. Language, which is exclusive to the human species (so the argument goes), uses signs that are not based in the body, but in a grammar and syntax that is all its own.

Language, then, has been traditionally conceived as exclusively human.

Abram, with help from Merleau-Ponty’s work on language, is going to contest this. He argues that gesture and context can never fully be captured in the formal language.

We find much evidence for this when we try to communicate via email. Often we have to resort to emoticons in order to get our point across. Formal language fails to communicate the joke oftentimes!

**Pages 89-92**

Abram begins with a particularly helpful review of the main points.

**M-P’s philosophical problem (already state above): If perception is participatory and our primordial (first, original) experience of the world is animistic in nature, how can we account for the *loss of this participation?* Why do we see animals as objects for use or trees as fodder for mills? (90)**

**How does Abram answer this question?**

What happened to perception??? What happened to language?

While perception brings about language and speech, language and speech also influence perception.

Linguist Edward Sapir even says that perception is largely determined by language.

**Chapter 4: Animism and the Alphabet**

**Questions: What is an ideogram? What is a rebus? When pictographic systems began using rebuses, what major difference in language did this signify ? How was the rebus principle expanded and generalized?**

**What is synaesthesia? Give examples.**

**When indigenous cultures speak of “the speech of trees or mountains,” how does Abram explain this phenomenologically?**

Many philosophers have pondered what role humans play in the ecological crisis. Some have said that it follows logically from our generally exploitative relationship with the natural world.

Yet, this generalization ignores the fact that long established indigenous cultures often display solidarity with the land and with other non-human animals. They seem to have maintained a more balanced and sustainable relationship with the natural world in their use of it.

When European explorers came to North America they talked about pristine and unsettled wilderness; yet this continent had been continuously inhabited by human cultures for at least 10,000 years!! That indigenous peoples had hunted, fished, gathered, and settled these lands for so long without severely degrading the land contests the idea that humans are inherently going to ravage the land they live on.

**Hypotheses about where the disdain among European cultures for nature comes from:**

--The Judeo-Christian religions that privilege the world of the spirit and the afterworld of the heavens over the sensuous world of the here and now. They also reference passages in the Bible that would seem to give humans free reign over the earth.

--Some look to our philosophical tradition which also privileges the mind and the unchanging, immaterial forms or essences that it grasps over the sensible realm in which the body resides and functions.

Both ancient Greeks and ancient Hebrews had one potent technology in common: the alphabet.

Writing, like language, comes first not from the human community, but from the animate landscape. The writing of clouds in the sky, the calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, and other patterns in nature—the tracks nature leaves behind.

Pictographic systems use ideograms—a pictorial character that refers not to the visible entity it explicitly pictures, but to some phenomenon readily associated with it. In Chinese, for example, a stylized image of the sun and moon together signifies “brightness” (97).

Even though the ideograms shift attention toward our human-made images, they still point to a more-than-human context in which the glyph has meaning.

A *rebus* is a pictographic pun—images that when read aloud have the same sound as the spoken word they refer to (example: the world “belief” could be represented with a picture of a bee+leaf) (98). This is exactly like the game of charades, but with pictures. With rebuses there is reference to the human sound that is made when spoken, rather than a reference to the external object or thing the sound points to.

The rebus principle was generalized in the Middle East to create “syllabaries” (a set of written characters for a language, each one representing a syllable) and then the alphabet by Semitic scribes around 1500 BCE. The original Semitic *alephbeth* established a letter for each consonant (there were no vowels). The number of characters was reduced to 22. This was very easy to learn and use and it spread to the Phonecians, Aramaeans, Greeks, Romans, and eventually gave rise to every alphabet known.

*With the advent of the aleph-beth a new distance between human culture and the rest of nature opens up.* A letter ties the sign to the vocal gesture, completely bypassing the thing pictured—which is rooted in the more than human world.

Skip to page 123

Most research on the impact of writing on human experience has tended to focus on its influence on language itself, on patterns of thought, and on the internal organization of human societies. In other words, the impact that written language has had on something human—either our minds or our culture.

Abram says this reflects our anthropocentric bias (bias toward humans over other species).

Without written language, traditional peoples came to know themselves through the greater natural world they were a part of. We see this in their identification with the rest of the natural world, especially in the diverse modes of “totemism.”

Abram does a phenomenology of reading. In reading, synaesthesia (the intertwining of the senses) is very important. When we see a word, we hear it in our heads; thus sight and sound are combined in one experience. (124)

Reading is seeing and hearing at the same time (125).

Abram then does a phenomenology the synaesthetic experience of sensory awareness. Though all senses are engaged at once, we do not have a fragmented experience of, say, a cat, based on how it feels, looks, sounds, etc. Rather, we have the experience of “the cat.”

--Remember the example from David Copperfield who asked you to count how many times you see his face and hear the word magic. You can’t easily pull apart the synaesthetic experience like that. He called it our “inability to multitask.”

Another example: I am looking at you. I see you burn your hand on the stove. I feel my hand pull away in pain. I see and feel you at the same time.

In this way, I participate through my senses in the world around me, in what others are also perceiving (127).

On 126-127 Abram gives some good examples with a blackbird and a cyclist of how to employ the phenomenological method. **Please study carefully!!**

**The chiasm:** a chiasm is a crossing or interweaving across an abyss or gap. When MP uses this term, he’s talking about the chiasm that is crossed through sensory experience between one’s own flesh and the flesh of the world. For neuroscientists, it refers to the optic chiasm between the left and right hemispheres of the brain where neuronal fibers from the right eye and left eye cross and interweave, and thus make a single view from two separate eyes. For MP, the chiasm interweaves the intersubjective experience of the world in one single experience, just like the optic chiasm is where the neuronal fibers interweave left and right eye to form one single vision of the world.

Abram notes that many indigenous and traditional cultures talk about the speech of trees or mountains; he suggests that from a phenomenological perspective oral cultures join the visual with the auditory (130).

“Direct, pre-reflective perception is inherently synaesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies” (130).

How have we lost this?

Abram argues that our synasthetic perceptual experience has been trained on written words and away from the environment (131). This happened when we moved toward an alphabet that referred exclusively to human-made sounds, and not to the external world (132).

The magic we practice is with the written words. That the written word has a kind of animistic quality is evident from the reactions of indigenous peoples to the Europeans with their books after the first contact: the native peoples called them “talking leaves.” (132)

**Ch. 7: The Forgetting and Remembering of the Air**

**Philosophical questions:**

**What are the various indigenous concepts of air/breath/wind and how are they compared to the Judeo-Christian concepts?**

**How is air/breath/wind related to thinking and mind? What are the consequences, then, for thinking and the mind if our air is polluted?**

This chapter is a reflection on the nature of air and all that it connects together: life. Abrams shows with a cross-cultural comparative analysis that the air is not only the oxygen we breathe, but the very essence of all that is alive—it is the “soul of the visible landscape, the secret realm from whence all beings draw their nourishment” (226).

He begins by looking at the various views of native cultures across the world about air. Nothing, he says, is more common to the diverse indigenous cultures of the earth than a recognition of the air, wind, and the breath, as aspects of a sacred power (226).

Air, wind, breath: all aspects of the same thing. Breath is connected with speech—spoken words are a way of structuring or giving form to the breath.

In North America, wind figures prominently as a sacred power among many of the native peoples. This is reflected in their creation myths—the Creek Indians of the Southwest speak of Hesakitumesee, “Master of Breath,” who sends fog, wind and other weather to the land.

The Lakota peoples value the pipe as sacred, since it makes the invisible breath visible, as well as air currents. It also makes the connection visible between the person smoking and the other creatures that dwell within the world (229).

The Diné, or Navajo: the concept of *nilch’i*—the Holy wind. Refers to the whole body of air, from the atmosphere to what we breathe. It suffuses all of nature, grants life, movement, speech, and awareness to all beings. It is the means of communication between all beings and the elements of the animate world.

They belief that the sacred mountains in the four directions and have winds, and that these winds have messengers (Little Winds or Wind’s Children) that swirl around each person; this is the way that we know. The trace of these winds is left on the spiraling folds of our ears; this is how we are guided. The little winds dwell in other creatures as well, and this is how they know and communicate with others as well.

Thus they see the patterns of connection between our breathing, heat rising in waves, the moving of branches or the rattling of a snakes tail: all of these patterns of movement articulate or make visible the same vast fathomless body of Air (235). Nilch’i is a way of saying the interconnectedness of all things.

We participate in the air, not passively, but actively, as “one of its organs.” (235)

Their understanding of language is also very profound. According to Witherspoon, the Navajo consider the act of speech to be the externalization of thought, which structures and forms the world, and the surrounding air, in a new, transformed way.

Abram then makes the comparison in European alphabetic cultures with the concept of mind or psyche (psyche=soul in Ancient Greek/ anima=soul in Latin). For the Navajo, the Air, in its capacity to provide awareness, thought and speech is akin to the soul. The one major difference: for the Navajo, the air isn’t just what is “within us”, but also what we ourselves are immersed within—we are just as much within the air as the air is within us. The European concept of the soul, by contrast, traditionally has been seen as a property within each human being—and thus is more individualistic than the communal concept of nilch’i. (237)

Yet if we look more closely at related concepts in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we find even greater parallels with the Navajo concept.

The ancient Greek word *psyche* (psychology=knowledge of the soul) means *soul* but also *breath* or *a gust of wind.*

Another Greek word for wind or breath, *pneuma*, also signified “spirit.” (238)

Abram concludes that for ancient and traditional peoples, the air is a sacred, pervading presence, experienced as “the source of both psyche and spirit” (238). It was experienced as the material aspect of conscious awareness, or the mind.

Thus, he says, the soul as breath and air, was seen as what connected us to the rest of the natural world, not what distinguished us from it (238).

Question: how did this change? How did the psyche, the soul, withdraw from the natural world—and even from human beings, since now we only talk about the soul in some religious contexts, and in a secular culture, talk of the mind and brain has replaced it.

--example: psychology itself has split as a discipline. For the most part, we no longer look at it as knowledge and study of the soul, but rather as a neurological science, or a behavioral science.

**Wind, Breath, Speech**

In this section Abram discusses the ancient Hebraic tradition, since this is the origin of most alphabetic languages today.

They too had one word for both “spirit” and “wind”: *ruach*. *Neshamah* is a more specialized word for wind, meaning “the wind within one” and signifies conscious awareness.

The ancient Hebrews were among the first to use phonetic writing and had a alphabet (the *aleph beth*). They used it to record many things, including their traditions and laws.

There was a taboo on animism for the ancient Hebrews. To actively participate or worship the visible forms of nature was considered idolatry.

“It was not the land but the written letters that now carried the ancestral wisdom” (240).

But they continued to worship the invisible form of nature: the wind and breath.

Their relationship to the sacred air and breath can be seen in their writing system, the *aleph beth.* The alphabet contained 22 letters, all consonants. So to read the sacred texts, you would have to speak the words and add the vowels as you spoke, which was an act of interpretation.

Vowels are sounded breath. To write them down would be to make the breath or spirit visible, which was taboo. No visible representations of the divine were allowed (241-242).

Thus the words, instead of being a stand-in for the sensuous world, and thus *independent of it*, relied upon the physical act of speech—of someone’s own breath—in order to be made complete.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, this literary animism is even more present; the letters themselves are considered to be alive (245). They are even thought to have magical properties—which Abram understands as a result of their cultivation of the synaesthetic experience had in reading (the visible letters are also heard—they ‘talk’).

Finally, in the Jewish tradition, the breath of God pervades all things, giving them life.

With the introduction of the Greek alphabet, which included the vowels, written language became more efficient—it could stand on its own and needed no one to speak it out loud and interpret it.

But giving visible form to the sounded breath by creating vowels robbed the air and breath of its sacred nature—it “desacralized the breath and the air” (252).

Abram argues: “By breaking this taboo, *by transposing the invisible into the register of the visible, the Greek scribes effectively dissolved the primordial power of the air*” (252).

Thus we forgot the importance of air. It is the most taken for granted phenomenon—except, of course, when you lack it, or lack clean, healthy air.

We rarely even question this, however. The acrid smells cast off from petrochemical plants along Baton Rouge’s “cancer alley” are quickly left behind when one speeds past them in a car on the way to New Orleans. We laugh about the “Tacoma aroma,” but just plug our noses until we pass on by. Somehow, we think, these fumes will get cleaned out by themselves.

What are the ways you have felt and sensed the polluted air coming into your body—as the “breath within”? What does it mean that toxic jet fumes form “the breath within” or the very material basis for the mind’s conscious awareness? Does it change thinking itself?