

Relationality, Reciprocity and Flourishing in an African Landscape

Mike Hannis and Sian Sullivan

Dec2015, Forthcoming in Hartman, L.M. (ed.) *Flourishing: Comparative Religious Environmental Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Introduction

Human flourishing does not happen in isolation. It is dependent on, and in large part constituted by, relationships – with specific others, with multiple communities, and with the world(s) in which one lives. At the interhuman level this theme of relationality has been explored under many labels, including capabilities approaches and relational autonomy.¹ More recently the same insight has informed environmental virtue ethics, which extends the idea of identity-constituting community out beyond the human, asking what it is to flourish as part of such a community.² What is the relationship between the flourishing of human beings (individually and/or collectively) and the flourishing of the non-human world? What kinds of relationships with ‘others-beyond-the-human’ characterise a flourishing human life – and what are the virtues of character which build and nurture such relationships? Such questions break down the false dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, freeing environmental ethics to make meaningful contributions to broader debates rather than staying bogged down in metaethical speculation.³

A fully flourishing human life requires connection and relationship not only with humans but also with the rest of the world. This kind of relationship cannot be built with homogenised categories such as ‘nature’ or ‘biodiversity’.⁴ It requires approaching and understanding animals, plants, forests, rivers and mountains *as themselves*, rather than *as a class of things* defined only by their shared ‘nonhuman-ness’. Recognising ‘otherness’ is important in this process, as is recognising commonality.⁵ But both are beginnings, preliminaries to the development of a mature reflective relationship with the ‘non-human’. Connection and relationship are still less likely to emerge from thinking about ‘natural capital’ or ‘ecosystem services’. Here the enforcement of commensurability works to *remove* distinctiveness and difference, as more and more domains of the world become abstracted into numbers, absorbed into spreadsheets and offset in frequently marketised exchanges. Trees become carbon, carbon becomes dollars, and ‘the world’ becomes subsumed into ‘the economy’, rather than the other way round.⁶

¹ Nussbaum, M. 2011 *Creating Capabilities* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press; Sen, A. 1999 *Development as Freedom* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Mackenzie, C. and Stoljar, N. (eds.) (2000) *Relational Autonomy* Oxford: Oxford University Press

² Sandler, R. and Cafaro, P. (eds) 2005 *Environmental Virtue Ethics* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield; Sandler, R. 2007 *Character and Environment* Columbia University Press; Hursthouse, R. 2007 ‘Environmental Virtue Ethics’ in Walker, Rebecca and Ivanhoe, Philip (eds) *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* Oxford: Clarendon Press; Treanor, Brian (2014) *Emplotting Virtue: A Narrative Approach to Environmental Virtue Ethics* New York: SUNY Press

³ Hannis, M. 2015a *Freedom and Environment: Autonomy, Human Flourishing, and the Political Philosophy of Sustainability* London: Routledge; Dryzek, J. 1998 Political and Ecological Communication in Dryzek and Schlosberg (eds.) *Debating the Earth* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Whiteside, Kerry 2002 *Divided Natures: French contributions to political ecology* Cambridge: MIT Press

⁴ Soper, K. 1995 *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human* Oxford: Blackwell; Maier, D. 2012 *What’s So Good About Biodiversity?* New York: Springer

⁵ Hailwood, S. 2004 *How to be a Green Liberal* Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press; Goodin, R. 1992 *Green Political Theory* Cambridge: Polity; Martin, A., McGuire, S. and Sullivan, S. 2013 Global environmental justice and biodiversity conservation *The Geographical Journal* 179(2): 122-131.

⁶ Sullivan, S and Hannis, M (2015) ‘Nets and Frames, Losses and Gains: Value Struggles in Engagements with Biodiversity Offsetting Policy in England’ *Ecosystem Services* 15: 162-173; O’Neill, J. 1993 *Ecology, Policy and Politics* London: Routledge; Polanyi, Karl 1957 *The Great Transformation* Boston: Beacon Press

One way to resist this culturally hegemonic urge to abstraction is to reflect on one's own direct experience. Nobody has ever *experienced* 'biodiversity' or 'natural capital'. By contrast, both first-hand and scholarly evidence confirm the transformative potential of real experiences of worlds beyond the human, and indeed of the damage caused by the lack of such experience.⁷ Another is to learn from the experience of others, through close attention to different cultures. Anthropologists have described many understandings of the relationships between humans and the nonhuman world, and these frequently include ideas about nonhuman agency, personhood and moral status which can seem challenging to a 'Western' mindset. This chapter presents some preliminary reflections from the 'ecocultural ethics' component of a research project called *Future Pasts*, supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council.⁸ In this we seek to bring ethnographic detail and perspectives from the 'anthropology of sustainability' into dialogue with environmental philosophy and ethics.

Ontology, particularity and ethnography

From an anthropological as well as postcolonial perspective, the western hierarchies of value associated with other-than-human natures, whilst universalising, are understood to in fact be highly *particular*, embedded in, and made possible by, particular cultural and historical contexts.⁹ Importantly for human relationships with nature beyond-the-human, they restrict the attribution of agency, intentionality and communication to human actors (and often only some human actors), whilst backgrounding the possibility that other entities might also enjoy such capacities. This restriction, so characteristic of 'the West', is strongly associated with the Enlightenment period and the ushering in of modernity but, as emphasised by Matthew Hall (see Table 1), is rooted in hierarchies of value asserted in classical antiquity.¹⁰ This universalising framework involves fundamental assumptions about the 'known' nature of reality. It prescribes what entities can exist, into what categories such entities can be sorted, and by what practices they can be known.

[insert table 1]

From a cross-cultural perspective, cultural and historical differences generate *plural ontologies*. This plurality, combined with power/knowledge relations infusing historically and culturally situated 'regimes of truth'¹¹ has significant implications for who and what might be meant when the term 'we' is invoked, as well as for what entities might socially be brought within the realm of moral considerability by this 'we'¹² and thus for what constitutes appropriate ethical practice in

⁷ Abram, David 1996 *The Spell of the Sensuous* New York: Random House; Louv, R. 2005 *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder* Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books; Albrecht, Glenn 2005

"Solastalgia": A New Concept in Health and Identity *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3: 41–55

⁸ See www.futurepasts.net

⁹ cf. Chakrabarty, D. 2000 *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* Princeton: Princeton University Press; Viveiros de Castro, E. 2004 Exchanging perspectives: the transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies. *Common Knowledge* 10(3): 463–484; Descola, P. 2013 *Beyond Nature and Culture* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Kohn, E. 2013 *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology of Nature Beyond the Human* Berkeley: University of California Press; Sullivan, S. 2013 Nature on the Move III: (Re)countenancing an animate nature *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Enquiry* 6(1-2):50–71

¹⁰ Hall, M. 2011 *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* New York: SUNY Press, pp19–26, after Plumwood, V. 2006 *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* London: Routledge; see also Marder, M. 2013 *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* Columbia University Press, and further discussion in Sullivan, S. in press, (Re-)embodying which body? Philosophical, cross-cultural and personal reflections on corporeality in Thomas-Pellicer, R., de Lucia, V. and Sullivan, S. (eds.) *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*. London: GlassHouse Books (Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series)

¹¹ Foucault, M. 1991(1975) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* trans. A. Sheridan London: Penguin; Butler, J. 1988 Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519–531.

¹² cf. Behrens, K.G. 2014 An African relational environmentalism and moral considerability. *Environmental Ethics* 36: 63–82.

relation to these entities¹³. In particular, whilst the modern ontology of ‘the West’ may be *universalising*, it frequently does not translate well across different cultural contexts. It is itself particular, rather than universal.¹⁴

Ethnography, the attempt to understand in detail the makings of social reality in different cultural contexts, without necessary recourse to ‘the West’ as the measure of all things, can add detail, complexity and nuance to the understanding of different ontological ideas about relationships between humans and other-than-human entities. It seems, however, to have been relatively under-utilised in environmental philosophy, apart from quite broad brush-strokes such as Baird Callicott’s *Earth Insights*.¹⁵ From a Foucauldian perspective, ethnography can also enhance possibilities for the destabilisation of knowledge categories and practices that seem problematic for the flourishing of diversity, through assisting with diagnosis of their objects of knowledge, the subjugation of knowledges with which these are associated, and the ‘regimes of truth’ that naturalise certain ontologies and associated ethical possibilities over others.¹⁶

Many indigenous communities globally - by which we mean cultures who have retained some degree of long-term, continuous ancestral connection with land areas – seem to conceive of an expanded zone of moral considerability and reciprocity that includes entities beyond-the-human¹⁷, as these are embedded and constituted in specific and shifting relational settings¹⁸. These cultural contexts are frequently also associated with localities now celebrated as ‘biodiversity hotspots’¹⁹, where ecosystems characterised by high diversity and the incidence of endemism and rarity remain, within the broader context of a global anthropogenic extinction event. Human cultural arrangements in these contexts have clearly been associated with the maintenance of relationships with diverse natures-beyond-the-human, despite immense modern pressures to transform such cultural landscapes in the interests of economic growth. As Gorenflo et al. state, ‘the tendency for both [biological and linguistic diversity] to be high in particular regions suggests that certain cultural systems and practices, represented by speakers of particular indigenous and nonmigrant languages, tend to be compatible with high biodiversity’.²⁰ Understanding the ontologies that have made it possible for human cultures in these contexts to maintain particular relational sustainabilities thus seems relevant for learning how to live in more accommodating ethical relationships with many kinds of selves, only some of whom are human.²¹ Of particular relevance, as emphasised by Eduardo Kohn, are the ethical perspectives and practices that may arise when people live as if other kinds of being can see ‘us’, and thus act as if the way(s) that ‘they’ see ‘us’ matters. As Kohn writes:

[h]ow other kinds of beings see us matters. That other kinds of beings see us changes things. If jaguars also represent us – in ways that can matter vitally to us – then anthropology cannot limit itself just to exploring how people from different societies might happen to represent them as doing so. Such encounters with other kinds of being

¹³ As noted in Kelbessa, W. 2014 Can an African environmental ethics contribute to environmental policy in Africa? *Environmental Ethics* 36: 31-61, p46

¹⁴ Chakrabarty 2000

¹⁵ Callicott, J. B. 1994 *Earth Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* Berkeley: University of California Press

¹⁶ See e.g. Foucault, M. 1982 The subject and power. *Critical Enquiry* 8(4): 777-795.

¹⁷ Sullivan, S. 1999 Folk and formal, local and national: Damara cultural knowledge and community-based conservation in southern Kunene, Namibia *Cimbebasia* 15: 1-28; Kohn 2013; Behrens 2014; Kelbessa 2014.

¹⁸ cf. Whatmore, S. 2002 *Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces* London: Sage; Castree, N. 2003 A post-environmental ethics? *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6(1): 3-12

¹⁹ As reviewed in Gorenflo, L.J., Romaine, S., Mittermeier, R.A. and Walker-Painemilla, K. 2012 Co-occurrence of linguistic and biological diversity in biodiversity hotspots and high biodiversity wilderness areas *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109(21): 8032–8037

²⁰ *ibid.*, p8037

²¹ Kohn 2013; Sullivan 2013

force us to recognize that fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.²²

Here we seek to illustrate such reflections with detail from one very specific ethnographic context, where one of us (Sullivan) has worked intermittently since 1992. This is a landscape in West Namibia, known locally as Hurubes, especially by elders from KhoeSan land-associated lineages (*!haoti*) known as ||Khao-a Dama, ||Ubun and !Narenin, who are part of the spectrum of KhoeSan peoples spread throughout southern Africa who speak languages characterised by click consonants.²³ ||Khao-a Dama, in particular, trace their histories over at least a number of generations to Hurubes, although their dwelling practices have been significantly constrained by a series of evictions that (perhaps ironically) have often sought to clear the area of local people in the interests of the conservation of indigenous fauna.²⁴

In what follows, and based on field research conducted primarily in 2014-2015, we offer brief descriptions of several knowledge and value practices through which ||Khao-a Dama (and other KhoeSan peoples) have conceived of agency and intentionality as located in entities beyond-the-human. Through this we seek to contribute to broader explorations of moral obligations and non-human agency in a relational environmental ethics that refracts the anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric dichotomy.²⁵ Key recorded interviews and discussions are referenced here using a numbering system that includes the initials of the interviewee(s) and the place and date of the discussion; interviewee names are listed in our acknowledgements. The inclusion of full interviewee names is preferred by interviewees, and respects the value placed on 'being known to know' given multiple layers of knowledge suppression and displacement - through colonialism to apartheid to market-oriented restructuring - that have shaped peoples' experience in west Namibia. We are not making a comment here on what is becoming known as 'African relational environmental ethics' more broadly²⁶, although the knowledge and value practices we describe might indeed intersect with this approach. We touch on practices relating to ancestors, to different kinds of animals, to a particular class of plants imbued with the power to act to intervene in human fortune and misfortune, and to rain, which under certain contexts is personified as what might be thought of as a supernatural or spirit-being called *!nanus*.

Relating with...

... the agency of ancestors

For elderly ||Khao-a Dama people with associations with Hurubes, moving through the landscape involves greeting and offering practices that connect people alive today with people now physically dead, who were previously associated in some way with these landscapes. While often attenuated through displacement, acculturation and the variously disruptive effects of modernity, such practices remain current and significant.

Ancestors are communicated with through a practice called *tsē-khom*, understood as 'speaking with the ancestors in the day-time'²⁷, (thus distinguished from a different practice of communicating with

²² Kohn 2013: 1

²³ See Haacke, W.H.G. 2008 Linguistic hypotheses on the origin of Namibian Khoekhoe speakers *Southern African Humanities* 20: 163-177

²⁴ For a historiography of land clearances in this area see Meischer, G. 2012 *Namibia's Red Line: The History of a Veterinary and Settlement Border* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁵ See also Cloke, P. and Jones, O. 2003 Grounding ethical mindfulness for/in nature: trees in their places *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6: 195-214; Figueroa, R.M. and Waitt, G. 2008 Cracks in the mirror: (un)covering the moral terrains of environmental justice at Uluru-Kata Njuta National Park *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11(3): 327-349

²⁶ See, for example, Behrens 2014 and Kelbessa 2014.

²⁷ N≠UT, CDT, M|G, |Giribes, May95; WSG, Mai, 030314, CDT, M|AG, Hoanib, 070414; RSS, Hurubes/Palmwag, multiple dates 2014-2015 incl. RSS, Khow, 171114, RSS, Barab, 201114, RSS, Barab, 211114, RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114, RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; Khamdesca-Hobatere, 031114; WSG, !N-D, 121114.

one's ancestors during night-time healing events in order to understand the causes of sickness), and with a literal translation as *tsē* = 'to separate' and *khom* = 'to keep holy'²⁸. *Tsē-khom* usually involves the offering and smoking of tobacco, through which ancestors or *kai khoen* - i.e. big or old people - in the realm of the spirits of the dead are also able to enjoy this smoking. Through *tsē-khom*, ancestral agencies are requested to act in the present to open the road so that travellers can see the best way to go. They are asked for guidance regarding the most appropriate ways to do things, and their support is evidenced through the intuitions people receive in response to queries that may arise as they are travelling. They are also asked to mediate the activities of potentially dangerous animals such as lions, who are understood very much as other *ensouled* beings who assert their own agencies and intentionality (see below). Ancestors thus greeted include recent family members whose graves are located in places travelled to and through; unidentified dead (or what Schmidt refers to as 'the invisible representations of anonymous dead')²⁹; and sometimes a more broadly referenced ancestor-hero known as Haiseb. The latter is considered to have been a real person who was associated with the doing of wonderful and clever things³⁰, who lived in the distant past and with whom large cairns found throughout the dryland environment from the Cape to the Kunene River are associated.³¹

Ontologically, the ancestors are spirits or souls (i.e. *gagas*³²) that have left humans whose bodies have died. As these spirit beings they have ontological reality in the present: they are not simply people who lived in the past, nor are they entities that require worship. They are understood more as specific types of entities that, through pragmatic relationship practices, are called upon to intervene – to assert agency – in the present, so as to influence outcomes. Sometimes this includes intervention in the agency of other non-human agents, such as lions, a species with which humans here continue to live in close contact, as they have done throughout the remembered past.

... animal agencies

Lions are a key and formidable predator, encounters with whom may result in the loss of human life, or the life of herded livestock. Nonetheless, people in the past sought them out, in order to scavenge meat from their kills³³, and lions figure in peoples' realities as animals imbued with agency and intentionality. Just as Kohn describes for Runa interactions with jaguars³⁴, lions are conceived as being able to see, recognise and represent the people they encounter and interact with. The proximity of lions to humans is indicated by calling to lions as 'big brother', 'big head', or as a 'big dog' (since dogs are seen as also socially close to humans) – names which denote respect and proximity. In non-ordinary states of consciousness associated with healing, KhoeSan reality also embraces the perceptual possibility of shapeshifting between lions and humans³⁵. This is potentially evidenced by rock art inscriptions of therianthropes – chimerical figures that are part human and

²⁸ Schmidt, S. 2014a Spirits: some thoughts on ancient Damara folk belief *Journal of the Namibian Scientific Society* 62: 133-160, p144 (after Krönlein, J.G. 1889 *Wortschatz der Khoi-khoen (Namaqua-Hottentotten)*. Berlin: Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft, p: 325)

²⁹ *ibid.*: 135

³⁰ RSS, Barab, 211114; RSS, SO|A, Kai-as, 221114; RSS, SO|A, Uru, 231114; EG, WSG, !N-D, 191014; WSG multiple conversations.

³¹ See also Schmidt, S. (ed.) 2011 *Hai||om and !Xū Stories from North Namibia: Collected and Translated by Terttu Heikkinen (1934-1988)* Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag; Schmidt 2014a; Schmidt, S. 2014b Some notes on the so-called Heitsi-Eibeb graves in Namibia: ancient heaps of stones at the roadside *BAB Working Paper* 3. Online. baslerafrika.ch/wp-content/uploads/WP-2014-3-Schmidt.pdf

³² cf. Inskeep, A. 2003 *Heinrich Vedder's 'The Bergdama': An Annotated Translation of the German Original with Additional Ethnographic Material* Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, p.329

³³ RSS, SO|A, #Habaka, 141114.

³⁴ Kohn 2013

³⁵ For discussion of conceptual and material mutability in KhoeSan thought see Guenther, M. 1999 *Tricksters and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Sullivan, S. and Low, C. 2014 Shades of the rainbow serpent? A KhoeSān animal between myth and landscape in southern Africa – ethnographic contextualisations of rock art representations *The Arts* 3(2), 215-244.

part animal – including a famous rock engraving of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, found at the World Heritage Site of Twyfelfontein in west Namibia, as shown in Figure 1.

[Insert figure 1]

Animals generally, though, are considered to be cognate with humans not so much because of their biological and morphological similarities, as in natural history and evolutionary perspectives (although these are important), but because like humans they are animated by a soul that passes from them when they die, and that confers to individuals a sense of self. It is this soul - or *gagas* (as above) - that gives humans and animals their unique smell or ‘wind’, confers their abilities to move as well as to assert agency and intentionality, and also informs the qualities of action and behaviour from which humans learn how to act appropriately³⁶. In the West, by contrast, the conceptual removal of ‘soul’ from animals was notoriously achieved by Descartes’ affirmation that they were merely ‘soulless automata’, an ontological strategy that has arguably sanctioned ruthless instrumentalisation of animals by justifying moral indifference.³⁷ In the ||Khao-a Dama context, asking whether or not animals have a soul is responded to as a derisory question.

For ||Khao-a Dama elders soul animates animals at the top of the food chain, such as lions, but it also confers vitality and agency to much smaller creatures such as insects. Social insects such as harvester ants who harvest seeds subsequently gathered by people, and bees from whom people harvest honey, are valued extremely highly. These creatures are so valued not only for how hard they work to gather important foods that are then shared with humans, but also for the *egalitarianism* with which they share both this work and the resulting foods. Great care is taken by people when gathering seeds or honey from harvester ants nests and beehives respectively, so as to ensure productivity in future years. Human action thus supports the harvesting work done by harvester ants, and neither seeds from harvester ants’ nests (seen as the ‘home’ – *oms* – of the ants in a manner that is parallel to the homes or ‘*omti*’ of humans), nor honey harvested from beehives, should be gathered in such a way as to leave nothing for the future sustenance of the ants or bees.³⁸

These practices might be interpreted as simply examples of ‘resource taboos’, that in a utilitarian manner act to safeguard human sustenance from one year to the next.³⁹ But this interpretation does not mesh well with the ontological reality informing such practices. This is because although humans are of course seeking to eat from the multiple kinds of selves with which they live, since these selves are conceived as variously able to also see, represent and act, an expanded sense of reciprocity and relationality arguably informs these contexts.⁴⁰ As Viveiros de Castro writes for Amerindian contexts, the assumed shared hypostasis of soul as animating embodied existence acts to attenuate the emergence of objectification and instrumentalisation practices.⁴¹ Associated human behaviours, which (may) consciously realise and sustain the flourishing and abundance of socio-ecological assemblages rather than of individuals only, arguably recall Arne Naess’ concept of

³⁶ RSS, Barab, 211114.

³⁷ Descartes, R. 1637(1637) *Discourse on Method* London: Penguin Books, pp. 75-76. See discussion in Hornborg, A. 2006 Animism, fetishism, and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world. *Ethnos* 71(1), 21-32, p24 (after Evernden, N. 1985 *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp16-17); Harrison, P. 1992 Descartes on Animals *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42(169): 219-227; Baird Callicott, J. 2013 Ecology and moral ontology in Gergandi, D. (ed.) *The Structural Links Between Ecology, Evolution and Ethics: The Virtuous Epistemic Circle*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 296, p112; Sullivan in press.

³⁸ Sullivan 1999

³⁹ See, for example, Forbes, W., Antwi-Boasiako, K.B., and Dixon, B. 2014 Some fundamentals of conservation in South and West Africa. *Environmental Ethics* 36: 5-30, pp10-14

⁴⁰ cf. Kohn 2013

⁴¹ Viveiros de Castro 2004

‘Self-realisation’, meaning realisation of the ecologically-connected relational Self (with a capital ‘S’).⁴²

... *plants as agents*

Plants, in contrast, are not necessarily considered to be animated by soul in the same way as humans and other animals, mostly because they do not move as animals do. Nonetheless, they are definitely considered to be alive, and to die, just as humans do⁴³. Some plants, however, are conferred with special properties of agency. These are a suite of plants considered to be ‘soxa’, i.e. as particularly potent. A cluster of these plants are considered to act in a protective manner, especially against ‘bad thoughts’ or envy (‘surib’⁴⁴) seen as a cause of sickness when directed towards someone, especially a person who is vulnerable such as a child, or someone who is already ill or elderly. Importantly, a key aspect of such plants is that they will not work – indeed they will not stay with the human person seeking their protection – unless something small – a 5 cent piece, a piece of a person’s clothing, etc. – is given to them in exchange. This direct material exchange between human person and potent/soxa plant binds the matter and healing action of the plant to a person⁴⁵. Through this material exchange, the agency of particular plants matters in their ability to act in relation to a human self.

... *the personified agency of rain*

Our last example extends agency and intentionality further still, to include the actions of biophysical entities. For ||Khao-Dama and other related KhoeSan peoples, it is the personified, supernatural force behind the phenomena of rain – known here as |*nanus* – that asserts agency in selecting those humans who become healers⁴⁶. Healers are thus known as |*nanu-aob* or |*nanu-aos* – meaning literally man or woman of the rain. When someone is called by |*nanus* they experience a psychological transformation precipitated by a loss of a sense of self. They go into the field and wander around, lost to the normal world of everyday waking ego consciousness. On realising that they have disappeared, people of their community go looking for them singing the songs of healing dances called *arus*. It is when the nascent |*nanu-aob/s* hears the threads of the familiar songs of the *arus* that they are able to re-enter the social world, having been ‘opened’ by |*nanus* so that they can see sicknesses of the people. Through virtue of their selection by |*nanus*, combined with ritualised practices of consumption of particular rain- and healing-associated substances – such as the *soxa* plant *tuhorabeb* (‘tu’ = rain⁴⁷) which assists with being able to see⁴⁸ – healers are conferred certain powers of perception that permit them to see and cure sickness. These powers are independent of other forms of leadership, so are not necessarily consistent with any sort of political authority.⁴⁹

This final example takes us towards what ‘we’ might conceive as the ‘ontological edges’ of modernity, to extend a currently lively seam of work in the humanities that explores and opens up some of these ontological edges. This includes work encouraging recognition of the biologically-grounded ontologies of being of nonhuman species towards more sensitive attunements with other-than-human presence⁵⁰, as well as work that takes seriously the socio-ecological and ethical

⁴² Naess, A. 1987 Self-realization: an ecological approach to being in the world. *The Trumpeter, Journal of Ecosophy* 4(3): 35-42

⁴³ MH, Kham, 021114; RSS, Barab, 211114.

⁴⁴ Schmidt 2014a: 142

⁴⁵ WSG, Mai, 030314.

⁴⁶ M!UO, Outjo, 061114; CDT, !Nosa, Ses 251114.

⁴⁷ cf. Schmidt 2014a: 147

⁴⁸ N≠UT 1995-96; !Nosa, Ses 251114. The identity of this plant is known but protected for intellectual property reasons.

⁴⁹ cf. Clastres, P. 1988 *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press

⁵⁰ See, for example, Haraway, D. 2008 *When Species Meet* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Flusser, V. 2011(1987) *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* New York: Atropos Press; Marder 2013

demands of materiality⁵¹. But for anthropologists and others working in variously ‘non-modern’ cultural contexts there is a whole *other* ontological edge that demands to be taken seriously, as gestured towards in the example above of the personified agency of rain. This is the diverse world of both ancestors and spirits, which in many cultural contexts are known and encountered as agency-enacting entities with ontological reality.⁵² As Kohn writes, ‘spirits are their own kind of real’ emerging ‘from a specifically human way of engaging with and relating to a living world that lies in part beyond the human’.⁵³ Since the spirit realm has its own future-making logics and habits, Kohn remarks additionally that how this reality is treated ‘is as important as recognizing it as such’.⁵⁴ In other words, there may be further vistas to explore in an expanded relational and reciprocal ontology, with implications for future flourishings.

Flourishings

We have only been able here to skate over the surface of the above ethnographic examples. In doing so, however, our suggestion is that the knowledge practices we describe illustrate an expanded sphere of moral agency and considerability, associated with relations of reciprocity with other-than-human entities which may be fruitful for engendering multi-species abundance. A *milieu* of relationality and reciprocity such as that described above, with an ontological assumption of distributed agency accompanied by keen awareness that ‘difference makes a difference’⁵⁵, might thus act to discourage excessive interference with, and instrumentalisation of, other-than-human natures, and conversely to support the flourishing of both human and other-than-human diversities. What ethnography and environmental anthropology might offer to a relational environmental ethics, then, is a deeper understanding of how people might live in specific relational contexts with different kinds of agency-asserting entities, only some of whom are human.⁵⁶ Through such cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural engagements, a hope is that pluralistic perspective and dialogue might (conversely) inform a shift in transcultural solidarities and shared values that responds to contemporary global ‘wicked problems’ associated with multiple environmental crises and accompanying cultural displacements.⁵⁷

Knowledge, Value and Symbiosis

In particular, the kinds of practices and associated narratives we gesture towards above indicate that something has been lost in the ‘disenchanted’ modern reality most readers of this collection probably inhabit.⁵⁸ This loss makes it harder to work out what it is to really act on the basis of relationship with the nonhuman. Of course there have been ‘gains’ too: modern humans know a great deal about things like evolution, genetics, mathematical ecology and molecular biology. But this knowledge arguably brings ‘us’ no closer to understanding our own relationships to the rest of

⁵¹ See, for example, Latour, B. 2004 *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; Bennett, J. 2010 *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* Durham: Duke University Press; Hecht, G. 2012 *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press; Jackson, M. 2013 Plastic islands and processual grounds: ethics, ontology, and the matter of decay *Cultural Geographies* 20(2), 205-224

⁵² cf. Chakrabarty 2000; Kohn 2013

⁵³ Kohn 2013: 217, 216

⁵⁴ *ibid.*: 208, 216

⁵⁵ Kohn 2013, after Bateson, G. 2000(1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵⁶ cf. Figueroa and Waitt 2008; Baird Callicott 2013

⁵⁷ cf. Mazzearella, P. 1992 Introduction, pp. 1-12 and Pellegrino, E.D. 1992 Prologue: intersections of western biomedical ethics and world culture, pp. 13-19, both in Pellegrino, E., Mazzearella, P. and Corsi, P. (eds.) *Transcultural Dimensions in Medical Ethics*. Frederick Maryland: University Publishing Group; Brown, V.A., Harris, J. and Russell, J.Y. (eds.) 2010 *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination*. London: Earthscan.

⁵⁸ Weber, M. 1993 (1963) *The Sociology of Religion* Boston: Beacon Press; Curry, P. in press. From enlightenment to enchantment: changing the question in Thomas-Pellicer, R., de Lucia, V. and Sullivan, S. (eds.) *Law, Philosophy and Ecology: Exploring Re-Embodiments*. London: GlassHouse Books (Routledge Law, Justice and Ecology Series)

the world. It has in fact become commonplace to remark on the danger that scientific prowess can *increase* human separation from the world.

This line of thought can easily run into the quicksand of the old debate between ‘reductionism and holism’.⁵⁹ Some varieties of environmentalism have been keen to pin the blame for present ecological problems on modern Cartesian reductionism, in the process downplaying the importance of detailed empirical and experimental methods of environmental observation in nonmodern contexts.⁶⁰ But this is not the whole story, as evidenced by nuanced debates in environmental aesthetics about the potential role of ecological knowledge in properly appreciating and valuing ‘nature’.⁶¹ Does a scientific understanding of exactly what is going on in a forest, for example, just distract attention onto mechanistic details, or does it in fact facilitate a deeper appreciation of the complex interconnected whole? There is no right answer – both may potentially be true. In any case, perceiving and appreciating *relationship* requires properly apprehending both the details *and* the whole. It might be argued that such apprehension cannot be done with the ‘rational’ mind alone. Alternatively it might be observed that, as has often been noted, there can be many rationalities.⁶² From this latter perspective, perhaps scientific ecological knowledge is just one of the rationalities that can potentially help develop the skill, the virtue, of perceiving and experiencing coherence and interconnectedness, of seeing both the wood and the trees. After all, as an anthropology of nature suggests, scientific ecology derives from one of many possible ontologies⁶³.

This is not, however, to say that environmentalists are necessarily wrong to mistrust ‘reductionist’ scientific paradigms. The existence of multiple anthropogenic ecological crises does strongly suggest a significantly reduced capacity for *symbiosis* between modern humans and our nonhuman companions. (Re)building this capacity for symbiosis is perhaps the most urgent challenge facing humanity. John Barry describes ecological virtue as “a mean between a timid ecocentrism and an arrogant anthropocentrism”, centred on “modes of character and acting in the world which encourage social-environmental relations which are symbiotic rather than parasitic”.⁶⁴ The *absence* of such virtue leads to the destructive modes of social organisation we see today, which arguably position humanity as a parasite rather than a symbiont. As Barry’s more recent work argues, change requires excavation of the political, ethical and ontological underpinnings of this destructive modern story of the human / non-human relationship.⁶⁵ Having other stories to compare it with, particularly ones in which symbiosis is more clearly valued (as, perhaps, in those recounted above), can help with this project.

Egalitarianism and Reciprocity

Valuing symbiosis entails a very different understanding of how egalitarianism, obligation and reciprocity may work to sustain community. Maintaining a calculative balance sheet of entitlements and obligations between individual ‘economic actors’ does not nurture community. Anthropologist David Graeber argues that it is a modern innovation to interpret mutual obligations in terms of an ethical imperative to ‘pay one’s debts’.⁶⁶ Non-capitalist cultures, Graeber suggests, would see a person who attempted never to be ‘in debt’ as effectively placing themselves outside the community

⁵⁹ As discussed in e.g. Bergandi, D. and Blandin, P. 1998 Holism vs. Reductionism: Do Ecosystem Ecology and Landscape Ecology Clarify the Debate? *Acta Biotheoretica* 46:3, 185-206

⁶⁰ Richards, P. 1985 *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution* London: HarperCollins

⁶¹ See e.g. Rolston, III, H. 1995 Does Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscapes Need to Be Science-Based? *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35: 374-386, and discussion in Brady, E. 2003 *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press

⁶² Dryzek, J. 1987 *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy* Oxford: Blackwell; MacIntyre, A. 1988 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth

⁶³ cf. Descola 2013

⁶⁴ Barry, J. 1999 *Rethinking Green Politics* London: SAGE, pp33-35

⁶⁵ Barry, J. 2012 *The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability* Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁶⁶ Graeber, D. 2011 *Debt: the First 5000 Years* New York: Melville House.

by rejecting the social fabric of reciprocally obligated relationships, thereby choosing instead to define their identity atomistically, and to deal with others as strangers.

To reject such atomism, and to instead celebrate the webs of mutual obligation as importantly constitutive of community, is to embrace a more complex, multidimensional understanding of reciprocity. Possession and exercise of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls *virtues of acknowledged dependence* can allow a person to understand and discharge their own responsibilities as a member of a community, a “network of giving and receiving”.⁶⁷ These networks form a kind of organic scaffolding supporting community: the exercise and transmission of the relevant virtues thus maintains the coherence and integrity of the networks, of the social arrangements within which individual flourishing lives can unfold. They are also essential for an individual’s development of a proper understanding of their own autonomy – as MacIntyre argues, “acknowledgement of dependence is the key to independence”.⁶⁸

Expanding this idea to consider virtues of acknowledged *ecological* dependence leads to an ‘ecological eudaimonism’ which recognises that character traits which tend to maintain the integrity of the non-human world are beneficial for their human possessors as well. This is not only because such integrity is itself important for human flourishing, but also because recognition and acknowledgement of our dependence upon non-human worlds contribute to our understanding of ourselves.⁶⁹ Ecological virtues include traits and dispositions related to aesthetic, emotional and spiritual perceptions of the natural world, as well as those related to the ‘rational’ perspectives of environmental science. Moreover, what Rosalind Hursthouse calls “right orientation to nature” includes respect not only for living things, but also for (at least some) inanimate natural features and phenomena, and for the integrity of whole natural systems themselves.⁷⁰ This is justified not on the basis of respect for the *telos* of living things, but on the eudaimonist basis that a human life characterised by a right orientation to nature will be a more flourishing one.⁷¹ Such an orientation would not of course see *all* human impact as ethically problematic, but would involve a reflective and respectful approach to the human use and consumption of ‘nature’.

So what is it to flourish as part of a broader community conceived in this way? How is individual flourishing related to the flourishing of the broader community of humans, nonhumans, and ‘land’ (as Aldo Leopold would have it)?⁷² How might seven billion or more human beings live in this kind of dynamic reciprocity with the non-human world? However this last question is to be answered, it will surely require a very different trajectory from that suggested by recent calls for humanity to embrace its role as ‘the God species’.⁷³ Acknowledging and assuming nonhuman agency may be a key part of telling a new story which avoids such hubris. For these purposes nonhuman agency need not necessarily be taken as literally or objectively ‘true as scientific fact’. An heuristic interpretation may still do the job of opening up the required extra reciprocal dimensions, of stretching the imaginative muscles required to really perceive the complex webs of interconnections between living (and non-living) things.

This is not, however, to suggest that in describing Damara realities we are merely sharing metaphors or analogies. These are sophisticated practices and narratives which embody accumulated cultural knowledge of ‘how to live a good life’: and as Brian Treanor notes, ecological

⁶⁷ MacIntyre, A. 1999 *Dependent Rational Animals* London: Duckworth, pp 9, 99

⁶⁸ MacIntyre 1999: 85

⁶⁹ Hannis, M. 2015b The Virtues of Acknowledged Ecological Dependence *Environmental Values* 24: 145–164

⁷⁰ Hursthouse 2007

⁷¹ Hannis 2015a; Hursthouse 2007; Thompson, A. 2008 Natural Goodness and Abandoning the Economy of Value: Ron Sandler’s Character and Environment *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11(2): 218–226

⁷² Leopold, A. 1968 (1949) *A Sand County Almanac* Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁷³ Lynas, M. 2012 *The God Species: How Humans Really Can Save The Planet* London: Fourth Estate; discussed in Hannis, M. 2012 Another God Delusion? *The Land* 11 www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/another-god-delusion

virtue is in large part developed by and through narratives.⁷⁴ Here, a life characterised by appropriate relationships with animals, plants, ancestors, and spirits is understood as a better life, a more flourishing life, than one characterised by inappropriate relationships with these agencies. It is also a life more likely to bring about the flourishing of others, human and non-human alike. A eudaimonist ecological virtue ethics may be well equipped to understand the ethical implications of the deep relationality that seems to be involved in worldviews such as these. Cultivating ecological virtue, on a eudaimonist model, can help bring about a good life for oneself, but without entailing individualism or indeed anthropocentrism, since the focus is on interconnection and symbiosis.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (ref. AH/K005871/2), as well as fieldwork support from the National Museum of Namibia and Save the Rhino Trust, Namibia. The ethnographic material presented here derives from multiple interactions, discussions and observations. We are indebted to the following individuals for material used from key recorded and transcribed interviews: Welhemina Suro Ganuses, Ruben Saunaeib Sanib, Sophia Obi |Awises, Nathan ǀina Taurob, Christophine Dâumu Tauros, Michael |Amigu Ganaseb, Emma Ganuses, Salmon Ganuseb, Max Haraseb, !Nosa, Martin !U-e So-Oabeb. Invaluable translation and logistical support was provided by Welhemina Suro Ganuses, Filemon |Nuab, Ezegiel |Awarab, Elfriede Gaeses, Andrew Botelle, Eugène Marais and Jeff Muntifering, for which, many thanks.

⁷⁴ Treanor 2014**

Table 1. Plato's and Aristotle's value hierarchies of faculties of soul. Based on Hall, M. *Plants as persons: a philosophical botany*. New York: Suny Press, pp19-26; after Plumwood, V. *Feminism and the mastery of nature*. London: Routledge.

Plato		Aristotle	
spirited	enabling activity and volition	intellective	rational soul possessing mind / reason ' human excellence'
rational	enabling intelligence and self-control. associated with reason / mind / opinion and located in men who are thus able to rule	locomotive	mobility found in humans and animals but <i>not</i> plants
		desiderative	able to desire, i.e. to have appetite, passion, wish - found in humans and animals
appetitive	associated with pleasure / pain / desire as well as passivity. located in the ruled - slaves, women, children and slaves. Plants as fixed, rooted, passive	perceptive	able to sense pleasure and pain - found in humans and animals
		nutritive	mechanical ability to feed and reproduce plants possess only this 'soul', i.e. otherwise rendered as passive

Figure 1. Petroglyph therianthrope consisting of a lion with a human hand emerging from its tail, at the Twyfelfontein UNESCO World Heritage Site, southern Kunene, west Namibia. Source: Sian Sullivan personal archive, 21st March 2014.

