

The Ontopoetics of Eros and Thanatos

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Is ontopoetics, the grace-filled unfolding of potentials of being that occurs through communicative dialogue with a psycho-actively responsive world, defensible?

My being sighs with relief that such a way of relating to the world could be real and experientially validated. My body sinks into an embodied knowing, a remembering of those moments where the world has responded to my silent imprecations, opened its beauty, lifted my heart and gently set me on a path into a richness of experience that I could not imagine. I'm a believer! And yet my belief butts up against twenty-five years of the embodied disability of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, as well as the ordinary strivings and failures of life, and I am challenged to somehow accommodate the existence of pain and suffering within the ontopoetic framework. My mind turns to the multidimensional realms of suffering, to the everyday trials of people and beings, then to the macro events, the cataclysms of earth and human history, and I have to wonder how ontopoetics can be justified.

We can probably all agree, looking back over the terrain of our lives, that life does pick us up in moments of graced communication that widen our sense of self and unfold the potentials of our life. We can also undoubtedly point to those times when life has picked us up, like flotsam on a wild sea, tossed us around and broken us open. Through the filter of our own growth and development, or through a developmental reading of ecological and social history, we can put a positive spin on this. We could say that life seems to use chaos, suffering and conflict to wake us up, to awaken deeper forms of self and collective consciousness. It seems to use these "negative" dynamics to bring forward potentials that exist beyond the constrictions and contractions of selves, egos, societies, beyond the fracturing, conflict and pain of our personal and eco-social histories. I call these negative or contractive dynamics *thanatos*. Thanatos seems an undeniable part of reality. I would suggest however that thanatos serves eros. The destructive or contractive current seems to play out in ways that catalyse evolutionary unfolding.

If the world is psycho-active and communicatively responsive to us, we would have to reconcile all its communications – the pain-filled and the joyous, the diminishing and the enabling, the destructive and the creative, the thanative and erotic. The view from ontopoetics suggests that if we want to unfold being poetically in the midst of this flux we have to understand the structures of our own being, the dynamics of our psycho-physiology. Our potential for communication with the world will then be conditioned by our psycho-physical structure and capacity. With awareness of this structure and capacity, we can negotiate every event, every thing that shows up in our lives, as a communication from the world. And, as I've noted, some of these communications can be pretty brutal. Why is this and what can we do about it?

On one reading of ecocosomology, namely that provided by the General Systems Theory of holons, we could understand the self to be a dynamic structure that is itself an

established habit pattern of relating.¹ Our psycho-physicality, from this view, is simply a stabilized habit of being, of perceiving, cognizing and relating, of receiving and transmitting communications. It appears fixed. We say in reference to our self: “This is me,” “I am this way,” “This is how I see it,” “That’s just the way it is.” The “I” seems permanent. Until a certain stage of our development we see things in terms of “object constancy,” which is to say that from a certain structure of consciousness things – me, you, it, that – exist as objects that have permanent form. Things, beings, events can be pointed to objectively. We can agree with others about the objective shape of things. We negotiate reality accordingly. We negotiate agreements based on shared perceptions or beliefs about reality. We then encounter different others who challenge our view, our beliefs, our truth and we start to see that there is a subjective dimension to our perceptions and beliefs. We start to grow beyond our fixations and see how our beliefs about the self, others and the world are conditioned by past experience, are in fact habituated patterns of being, interpreting, relating. We start to see that our psycho-physicality is a structure that encodes a form, a formalized habituated way of relating and communing that exists at multiple levels of being: bio-physical, ecological, inter-personal and cultural.

These underlying habits, these structures of being and consciousness, are largely unconscious. We are not aware of them. What we are aware of is the experience we have of life. What we get to see is how life shows up. Again until a certain stage of development we look out beyond the self, to others, to the dynamics at play in the eco-social structures of the world, to understand what is causing those misalignments, those difficulties of life wherein life doesn’t conform to how I, or we, think life should be. A developmental step beyond this is to look at our own behaviour, to see how we are inter-involved in causation. We then engage in strategies to enhance our communicative capacities to try and effect different outcomes. A further developmental step beyond this is to see how we condition the arising of reality through the whole of our psycho-physical structure, energetically, bio-physically, psycho-emotionally, psychically. We see that we are not separate from causation but agents of the play. We start to see that we are agents-in-communion, intrinsically and indivisibly part of much larger wholes or communions – ecological, social, cultural and trans-personal. We then start to develop an awareness of how we can impact the co-arising real. We open to an understanding of the multiple modalities whereby we are communing with the world.

As a psycho-physical being who is a delimited, unique though inseparable part of a psycho-physical matrix, who is therefore part of/partner to the creative or destructive emergence of life, we are called to attend to the whole of life, to cultivate receptivity to the communications of the communions, the wholes – ecological, social, transpersonal – within which we have being. Where communication is a central operating principle of a system that is built on communion, a general rule of thumb would be that dissonant communications are invitations to change. If I, or we, are constantly involved in conflict

¹ For a detailed exploration of General Systems Theory and its application to human development see K. Wilber (1995), *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, Shambhala. Boston. Wilber also develops the notion of structure as habit further in K. Wilber (2003), *Kosmic Karma and Creativity*, Shambhala, Boston (extracts available from: <http://wilber.shambhala.com/html/books/kosmos>).

and chaos, if I, or we, are unwell – bio-physically, psychologically, psycho-physiologically, psycho-socially – then the world is inviting me/us to transform. The body or the system is telling me or us that we are living unconsciously, according to psycho-physical habit patterns that are no longer serving our unfolding. We're being asked to recalibrate the receiver, to listen anew, to deconstruct our old forms of communing that are now a source of such radical disharmony and to reconstitute our form. We do so or we further escalate the dynamics of dysfunction that can, potentially, bring about our personal or our collective destruction. We are invited, by these very disjunctions, to *transform* being, to transcend the limiting past while including its functional dimensions into new integral forms of communing or community. These new forms, by necessity in an ecologically ordered cosmos, exhibit deeper receptivity, vaster connectivity. They foster mutuality and promote dynamic stability. It is this ability to alter consciousness, either by transforming the structures of our being and consciousness or by entering for short spaces of time into different states of consciousness, which enables us to receive the communications of the world at increasingly subtle levels and so shape its flows co-creatively into resonant form, which has us living onto-poetics.

How then do we make such a move?

We can train ourselves to enter non-ordinary states of consciousness, states where we are not subject to the controlling hand of our habituated personality or mental systems, so to enter into a receptive, responsive and co-creative mode of being. However, if we are to live onto-poetics in our everyday lives, we have to grow and develop these abilities as structures of being and consciousness.

In what follows I will outline some potential practices that could help us to make this shift a permanent one. At this point I would like to draw forward a subtext of this conversation, namely the idea of post-metaphysics. Post-metaphysics suggests that you can cognitively sketch a picture of the real but if you wish to ascertain the “truth” of the view in question then you have to engage in practices that give you access to the experience that underpins it. This means that we approach life as a dynamic practice. Practising a “way,” a path, will cultivate the habit that becomes elaborated within the form of the personality as a structure of consciousness, which the ego can then utilize in the conduct of our lives. In practice we *inhabit* and *transform* structures of the persona and constantly fine-tune our responsive co-creative orientation to the world.

PRACTICES

Explore an understanding of the self as both (a) a being that is distinct, possessing boundaries and hence the capacity to exercise its own agency, and (b) one who is inseparable from the matrix, the inter-connected co-arising whole, and is hence profoundly in communion with life. Combining (a) and (b) gives us the idea of agency-in-communion.

Explore our habituated patterns of being, seeing, cognizing and relating. It is hard to gain access to these patterns as our habits are ourselves. One key is to pay particular attention to the hot zones of life, to the uncomfortable psycho-physiological communications coming from others or the world. By attending to conflict, to those areas of our lives where we are swept up in negative emotions, where we experience *disease*, breakdown or dysfunction, we can start to perceive the habits of the body-mind.

Explore a perception that you are both a distinct and an intrinsically inseparable part of a co-arising field. Explore the impacts of ways of being. Allow feedback from the field to impact your awareness. Getting related to our impacts on others and the field of being is a sure path to transformation.

Learn to listen to the communications of the world rather than purely reacting. Reacting is simply that – a re-act-ing – that is, acting out of an habitual pattern of response. Leave space in dialogues. If we are always jumping into conversations, thumping in with our next point, we are engaging with others through our existing frameworks, our existing stories of the real, our sedimented perceptions of the self, the other, the organization of the world. We are simply downloading from our existing mental maps. This is not to say that we are to give up our maps entirely. We are merely to hold them loosely, with conscious awareness of them, with an understanding that they are always partial, that they are perceptions that are conditioned by a location in space-time, place, ecology, culture and most importantly our psycho-physicality, our unconscious.

Learn to listen inter-subjectively, to enter the world of the other, imaginatively attending to all of the potential conditioning factors of their persona, even while we listen to the cascading dynamics that may be rippling through the fabric of our own self. In so doing we can seek mutual and integral solutions. We don't sell out on our own integrity, the communion of our own being in order to simply seek external harmony. We seek a communion with the other that is marked by communications that result in energy being channelled in creative collaborative directions. We seek to find the balance in the exercise of our agency-in-communion so as to forward inter-subjective mutuality and creative synergies.

Suspend judgement while cultivating critical inquiry. Judgements are indicative of operating within an objectivist worldview. For example, we fix an other as an object, who we then scorn, blame, chide or deride. We also judge a person or a situation according to some objectivist standard, some picture of how we think things should be. Judgements generally generate conflict. They may be appropriate in the face of cultural agreements on how we get along. But these too need to be open to nuance, context, re-alignment, transformation. We need to learn how to be critical indeed, but with an appreciation of the other, an appreciation of the host of contingent factors that go into the co-formation of any disputed territory. We need to learn how to reshape facilitative boundaries that promote both agency and communion, self-realization and that of the collective.

Move away from identification of ourselves as victims into a framework of agency. In saying this, I am not overlooking the fact that sometimes we are victims of someone else's power, or victims of ecological disaster, or subject to the formative dynamics of socio-cultural environments. Our lives are sometimes shaped and determined by forces beyond our control. As dynamic inter-beings we are vulnerable to others and so to hurt, pain or loss. We are biologically and ecologically vulnerable, dependent on healthy ecosystems for our wellbeing. We are socially vulnerable, dependent on others, the socio-cultural collective, for our security, our purpose, our sense of community and support. We are vulnerable and dependent on the integrity and vitality of our eco-social bonds. We do experience disease. We are swept along in directions we haven't chosen by larger inter-personal, ecological or socio-cultural dynamics in ways that threaten or harm us.

No matter the circumstances, however, we still retain the power to choose how we will respond. In order to continue to act with agency in the world we must in fact learn to process the pain and suffering that arise in our being from those circumstances in which we are indeed the victims of life's processes. We must allow the pain of these experiences to move through us so that they don't solidify in our identity structure through continued identification with the hurt and with our status as victims. To allow such solidification to occur is to establish a pattern in which we will attract conflictual dynamics to us that will attempt to break open this modality of being, precisely because it is closing off potentials of agency. It is perhaps our current lack of ability to process such suffering that drives the destructive dynamics that are at play, on such a grand scale, on the planet today. In the face of fear, pain, or threats to our self-realization – individual, organizational or cultural – we contract, defend, kill off aspects of the self, kill off the other, literally or figuratively, close off ourselves, close down our borders, separate, defend, enact thanative strategies. We respond to threat, the less than ideal communications of others, with shut-down or aggression. We blame the other and refuse contact or we go on the attack in order to force a change in the external environment. If we learn rather to process our pain, suffering and hurt, no matter how vast it is, we open up to co-creative engagement with others and world that can generate potentials that are beyond our attempts to control reality in our stance as victim. A movement from victim to agent is critical if we are to live onto-poetically.

Develop ego agility. Living life in attunement with the universe does not entail a simple abandonment of our ego. As if that were simple anyhow! The ego itself is not some fixed thing. It can be understood to be a co-ordinator, an organizing dynamic of the persona. In order to live in conversation with life and co-generatively with it we have to cultivate deep self-awareness, of the type I have been advocating, and ego agility, which is the ability to enact different dimensions of the self in ways that catalyze the realization of life potentials. The self can be understood to be a dynamic system with many parts to it, for example, a controlling part, a pleasing or critical, agentic or communing part. It is the ego's job to facilitate beneficial alliances, to enact our own cast of characters on the stage of our lives in such a way as to forward the realization of agency-in-communion.²

Exhaust the talk. Let the rational mind speak all it wants on a specific topic, its perspectives, its fears, its hopes, etc. Then enter the silence. It is important to still the flow of language in the brain. The language centre is located in the left hemisphere. Silencing the language centre of the brain, or quietening it down, potentially allows us access to the right side of the brain, which is registering the ever-present field of the inter-connected whole, the continuous field of which we are a node, an energetic constellation. It is the left brain's task to separate us from the flow, to create boundary, distinction, a sense of past, present and future, to enable us to negotiate reality in terms of our separated individuality.³ We need this capacity in order to be self-realizing and to communicate with others and inter-act in the world. Ultimately however we need to

² For an expansion of the idea of ego agility see C. Cranwell (2007), *The Ecological Ego: An ecological post-metaphysics*, PhD thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

³ J. Bolte Taylor (2006), *My Stroke of Insight: A brain scientist's personal journey*, Viking, New York.

facilitate a greater dialogue between left and right hemispheres of the brain to enable the agentic self to act in concert with the larger emergent field.

Cultivate field awareness. Attending to field dynamics involves developing a capacity for presence, an attentive presence to “what is.” It involves both listening to the currents that run in the subterranean territories of the psycho-physical and to what wants to emerge from within the field of the possible. It involves moving away from habituated patterns of being, perceiving, cognizing and relating, sitting within the field of phenomena, opening our heart and our will, invoking that which is more than the “skin encapsulated ego” and then, when the current arises, enacting it.⁴ In this process I move into the essential emptiness of all being and phenomena, I access the current of eros, the source of the universal desire to be in relationships of communion. I embrace thanatos and let die that which must die and I act to serve the emergence of a new ecology, that of my own ecological being and that of the eco-social collective. I come to see how the source of life is welling up as me, creating world through me and the essential relational and storying matrix that I am such that I learn to be in intentional co-generativity, in service to the evolutionary unfolding of the depth potentials of life.

Do without doing. By acting without trying to force a particular outcome, we cultivate a skill for focused intentionality and surrender. We train our mind and our being on a goal. We then let go and trust the creativity of the field to enact an outcome that is aligned with our intent. In surrendering to the field, to the One, we generate outcomes that have a greater potency than we could have envisaged.

In an ecologically and evolutionary universe we are continually invited into deeper levels of communion where we hear the desire of the universe to unfold its potentials in the heart of the self and in the everyday field of inter-being. Developing self-awareness and ego agility, inter-subjectivity, mutuality and a capacity to attend to the field, learning to place ego at the service of eros and thanatos, we can unfold life ontopoetically. And it takes practice! We’re invited to engage life as a practice, to immerse ourselves, with conscious intent for self-Self realization, within our experience in an open-minded, open-hearted inquiry. We invite feedback. We look at results. We invoke the more, the realm of transformative possibility, with an open will and a readiness to serve emergence. And we see how that goes! Enjoy the adventure!

⁴ A process which develops this way of being in the world is described in O. Scharmer (2009), *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.