

# Imagination

## Showing the Sense of Environmental Ethics

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**A**s awareness of the global ecological crisis has become increasingly common in recent decades, ecologically oriented investigations in psychology and philosophy have articulated theoretical and practical issues regarding the attitudes, images, beliefs, values, practices, and habits with which humans relate to the natural world. In addressing the ethical implications of such issues, these investigations often raise questions about what humans hold to be of central importance or central value. More specifically, it is common to distinguish between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism, the former designating orientations wherein value and meaning are centered primarily on the human (*anthropos*), and the latter designating orientations wherein value and meaning center more primarily on life

(biocentrism) or on ecosystems and the environment as a whole (ecocentrism) (Nash, 1989, pp. 153-160).

By some accounts, a sustainable world requires that humans participate in the value of the environment from biocentric, ecocentric, or other non-anthropocentric orientations. These accounts often claim that anthropocentrism, by reducing the value of the natural environment to a peripheral status relative to the human being, supports actions that abuse and destroy the environment. However, non-anthropocentric orientations are likewise untenable insofar as they reduce humans to a peripheral or marginal status. While anthropocentric orientations tend to support manipulative and exploitative relations between humans and the environment, non-anthropocentric orientations such as eco- and bio-centrism tend to foster misanthropy and social irresponsibility insofar as they marginalize the struggles of humans who face problems such as poverty, racism, sexism, disenfranchisement, etc.

Although arguments for anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism are often articulated in response to environmental problems and unsustainable practices that are associated with a dichotomy or disassociation separating the human from the natural world, these varieties of “centrism” all tend to presuppose and perpetuate the very

dichotomy that they purport to transform: value is centered *either* on the human *or* on the non-human. In contrast to the either/or dichotomy manifest in these centrisms, I articulate a phenomenological description of the relationship between humans and the natural world in terms of the elemental force of imagination, which discloses the human and the cosmos not as mutually exclusive opposites but as mutually constitutive vectors of sense. Irreducible to the dichotomy between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric, participation in the force of imagination can be described better with the term “anthropocosmic”—an adjective indicating that the human and the cosmos are intimately intertwined and interconnected. Participation in the force of imagination would thus facilitate a turn away from the dichotomy between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmental ethics and a turn toward anthropocosmic environmental ethics.

Before explicating the sense of environmental ethics that shows itself through participation in the force of imagination, I first describe the role of dream and imagination in relations between humans and the natural environment, I propose a monstrous phenomenology of the force of imagination, and then I consider the anthropocosmic relationships facilitated by imagination.

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## Earth Dreams and the Elemental Turn

Dream of Earth. As the “geologist” Thomas Berry expresses in *The Dream of the Earth*, participation in such a dream can open up the human species to an ecologically viable future (Berry, 1988, p. 194). Transforming the relation of the human being to itself, to the planet, and to the elements of the cosmos, dreaming can facilitate a reinvention of human nature: dreaming of Earth “to reinvent the human—at the species level” (Berry, 1999, p. 159). This reinvention would re-place the human in such a way as to “place the human within the dynamics of the planet” and the evolving cosmos (p. 160). Moreover, to reinvent the human is neither a merely cognitive endeavor nor a merely personal mission. It is “the historical mission of our times,” a mission that calls for the emergence of a human species that can enact socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of dwelling in the world (p. 159).

Shared dream experience makes possible a reinvention that would reorient the human to its place within the natural world. Not merely a human faculty, dreaming can reorient the human to the natural world because it is part of the natural world, part of the same elemental creativity manifest as the evolutionary processes of the cosmos. Berry observes that, in human and cosmic manifestations of this creativity, something is given “in a dim and uncertain manner, something radiant with meaning that draws us on to a further clarification of our understanding and our activity” (p. 164). Such creativity “can be described in many ways, as a groping or as a feeling or imaginative process” (pp. 164-5). The imaginative process enacted in a dream of the marriage of earth and sky is the same process enacted in the groping or feeling whereby a predator seeks its prey or whereby an atom bonds or refuses to bond with another atom.

Imagine. Dream of Earth. Participation in this imaginative process requires that one attend to the dual sense of the genitive: dream of Earth, both in the sense of dreaming about Earth and in the sense of dreaming that comes from Earth. The imaginative process is thus at work not only in human beings, but

also in the elemental forces of nature, which are “forces of primitive imagination” (Berry 1988, pp. 201-2). Human imagination and the elemental forces of primitive imagination are aspects of the co-constitutive imagination enacted in dreaming of Earth. The “social construction of nature” is thus balanced with a “natural construction of the social,” such that social or psychological imagination is complemented with what the liberation ecologists Michael Watts and Richard Peet call an “environmental imaginary”—“a way of imagining nature” that includes images of “those forms of social and individual practice which are ethically proper and morally right with regard to nature” (Watts & Peet, 1996, p. 263). Through the notion of environmental imaginary, one experiences “nature, environment, and place as sources of thinking, reasoning, and imagining” (p. 263).

The co-constitutive sense of imagina-

representational activity” (Casey 2004, p. 31). This dismissal of imagination also pervades the history of philosophy, with imagination often being ignored or reduced to a subordinate or degenerate type of perceiving or thinking (pp. 32-34).

The general trend in Western thinking has been to reduce imagination to a faculty or power of the human, whether as an unrestrained or immature function of the ego or as a degenerate power of perception or thought. However, if imagination shows the mutual constitution of the natural and the social, then imagination is not merely a *faculty* of the human subject or soul. It is more fundamentally an *elemental force* at work in humans and in nature. Accordingly, John Sallis describes how the word “force” conveys “the deconstruction of the most global philosophical determinations of imagination,” which is to say, force marks the deconstruction of determinations that

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tion is considerably different from the understanding of imagination that has dominated the history of Western science and philosophy. The phenomenologist Ed Casey mentions that, throughout the history of psychology, imagination has often been disparaged or dismissed: Freud reduced imagination to mere day-dreaming, which he considered to be the result of a temporary loss of control by the ego; Jung emphasized the therapeutic potential of “active imagination,” but never developed a thorough elucidation of imagination itself; and Piaget saw the imagination of the child as a transitional stage in the development of cognitive functions, a stage of “egocentric

reduce imagination to a mere faculty or power of the human (Sallis, 2000, p. 129). For Sallis, this deconstruction accompanies a turn to the elemental, a turn that “would reinstall the human in wild nature and in its bearing on the earth and beneath the sky, returning human nature to nature” (p. 25).

If this operation of deconstruction is to be sustained, it must include new rigorous determinations that do not efface the force of imagination. For Sallis (2000), this demand “makes phenomenology indispensable” to an understanding of imagination, because phenomenology provides rigorous determinations of things as they show themselves, and it

holds in abeyance any determinations that efface manifestation or fail to adhere to the self-showing of things (p. 8).<sup>1</sup> The importance of phenomenology for a rigorous account of imagination is similarly observed by Andy Fisher, whose radical approach to ecopsychology overcomes the dualisms for which imagination is a subjective faculty, egocentric activity, or anthropomorphic representation of an objective world.

Invoking Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the "flesh," Fisher articulates "a nondualistic and naturalistic psychology" that describes imagination not as mere anthropomorphism, but as a way of contacting the flesh of the world and participating in the intertwining of oneself with all other beings (Fisher, 2002, pp. 133-136). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological reflection attends to the things of "wild" Being to express the contact we have with these things "when they are not yet things said" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 38, p. 168). Before humans and nature are expressed in terms of opposition, they intertwine with one another in the crucial criss-crossing of the elemental flesh of wild Being, or in other words, they intertwine in "the chiasm" whereby sensing (subject) and sensed (object) participate in an interconnected unity (pp. 139, 147, 215). In the flesh, humans and nonhumans emerge from the same sensing/sensed Being, wherein consciousness and wild nature overlap and interlace, exceeding the limits of any oppositional schema.

### Monstrous Phenomenology

Phenomenology mutates with this turn to the elemental and to the deconstruction of traditional philosophical determinations of imagination. Such a mutation requires that phenomenology adhere more rigorously to the complexity of what shows itself, and thus rather than confining itself to the phenomena that

are present to consciousness as objects to a subject, phenomenology becomes what the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard calls "a phenomenology without phenomena" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 184). This mutant phenomenology takes into account the overlap, interplay, difference, absence, and excess that are at work (but not simply present to consciousness) in the constitution of things as they show themselves. By articulating what shows itself as it exceeds the limits of presence, phenomenology attends to an exorbitant sense of "showing" (from Latin, *monstrare*) and mutates into "monstrosity" (Sallis, 2000, p. 42).

Monstrosity is exposed to what



shows itself in its irreducible excess, anomaly, and exorbitance, which is to say, its "monstrosity" (from Latin, *monstrum*, "monster," "portentous sign"). Monstrosity does not assimilate the self-showing of things into traditional philosophical determinations that reduce phenomena to binary oppositions (e.g., subject/object, nature/culture, appearance/reality, matter/form, and sensible/intelligible). Whereas such determinations subordinate the world of sense to an intelligible world of truth, monstrous phenomenology interprets the world of sense without recourse to any schema that dichotomizes the sense of things in their self-showing. If one adheres to the exorbitant and ineffable sense of things in their self-showing, then the sense

of the world is not a meaning or truth behind, beyond, or otherwise opposed to the world. Rather, the sense of the world is the world of sense. As the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy observes, the phrase "'the sense of the world' is a tautological expression," which is to say, the world does not have a sense, "but it is sense" (Nancy, 1997, p. 8).

The sense of imagination shows complex criss-crossings between opposites like subjective/ objective and intelligible/sensible. This is evident in the ambivalent sense of the word "sense," which can refer to subjectivity (sensing; apprehension) and to objectivity (sensed; apprehended), and also to an intelligible sense (meaning) and an aesthetic sense (perception) (Sallis, 2000, p. 32). According to this monstrous phenomenology, the force of imagination is not merely a subjective faculty or a perceptual or mental power of the soul, but is always a movement of intimately intertwined vectors of sense, always effecting combinations and separations that gather things into the horizons where they show themselves (pp. 129-133). To impel things to show themselves, the force of imagination gathers together the monstrous ambivalence of sense, the ambivalence that marks the indeterminacy of the multiple senses of sense. Following the German idealist philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, one can describe this imaginal gathering as a "hovering" (*Schweben*) that brings together determinate phenomena while also wavering between these phenomena and the radical indeterminacy pervading the ambivalence of sense (p. 127).

In gathering together the horizons in which things show themselves, imagination can be described as simultaneously originary and memorial: "originary" because imagination is a creative force that draws things into presence, and "memorial" because that which imagination draws into presence is already there (at least potentially or implicitly) before it is gathered into presence (p. 138). Imagination lets that which is already there show itself (again) for the first time. Hovering between the determinations and indeterminacy of the originary/memorial, the intelligible/perceptual, and the subjective/objective, the force

<sup>1</sup> The word "phenomenology" is derived from the Greek words *phainomenon* and *logos*, with the former deriving from *phainesthai* ("to show itself"). Phenomenology is thus a discourse (*logos*) on that which shows itself. According to Martin Heidegger's etymological interpretation of the word, phenomenology is a way of letting phenomena show themselves in their self-showing: "phenomenology" means "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (1962, 58).

of imagination draws things into the horizons where they show themselves: “imagination composes monstrosity” (p. 139).

Imagination is not a reproduction or degeneration of the true world, for truth only shows itself as such insofar as imagination draws things into their self-showing (p. 144). Nor is imagination a faculty of the human subject, for a subject only shows itself as such through the force of imagination (p. 145). Imagination does not belong to the human. The human belongs to imagination. The force of imagination gathers the vectors of sense whereby the human and the world show themselves. With imagination, the human shows itself not as isolated or alienated but as situated within the sense of the world, and the natural world shows itself not as a homogeneous group of objects but as “a kind of hypernature within nature,” that is, an elemental nature that encompasses and exceeds the limits of things (p. 158).

The monstrous force of imagination operates as an “elemental imagination” through which “humans draw around themselves the elementals that will always have encompassed them” (p. 172). Imagination opens possibilities for re-placing and reinventing the human by reorienting the species to its place in the elemental flesh of the world. The human and the natural world thus show themselves not as mutually exclusive opposites but as mutually constitutive sites of elemental imagination. The elemental force of imagination returns the human to its place within the sense of the world, reorienting the human to its abode within the encompassing horizon opened by earth and sky and the other elemental forces of wild Being.

### **Anthropocosmic Relations**

Through participation in the elemental force of imagination, the relationship between the human and the natural world exceeds the limits of binary oppositions like subject/object and anthropocentrism/non-anthropocentrism. With imagination disclosing the intertwining of the human and the world, their relationship can be described as anthropocosmic. Along these lines, the French phenomenologist Gabriel Marcel notes that “an anthropocosmic relation can only

be established beyond the opposition of subject and object,” and this anthropocosmic criss-crossing of subject/object is evident insofar as the human is always already “in a situation,” which is to say, anthropology is always already “oriented in a cosmological direction” (Marcel, 2002, p. 83). Marcel’s phenomenology of anthropocosmic relations resonates

cradles, corners, nests, shells, etc.). From the miniature to the vast, poetic imagination discloses the “intimate immensity” of space, according to which the intimacy of human spaces is intertwined with the immensity of the cosmos (pp. 183-185). Whether through poetry or reverie, phenomenological explorations of the “anthropocosmic complexes” that condi-

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with the accounts of anthropocosmic relations articulated by other French phenomenologists, including Bachelard and Paul Ricoeur.

Bachelard describes anthropocosmic relations in his phenomenological ontology of poetic images, wherein he explores the “onset of the image” as it shows itself prior to any assimilation of the image into a dualistic opposition between the human and the world (Bachelard, 1994, p. xix). According to Bachelard, the onset of the image is particularly evident in reverie (Bachelard, 1971, pp. 11, 19, 57). Characterized by the intervention of waking consciousness in the dream, reverie is not mere daydreaming, but “puts us in the state of a soul being born,” that is, “a soul which is discovering its world” (p. 15). With the onset of images in “cosmic reverie,” the cosmos and the dreamer emerge together (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxiv). To attend to the onset of the image is to attend to the elemental flesh, “the anthropocosmic tissue” intertwining the human and the cosmos (p. 22). In working toward the articulation of images that show the intertwining of the human and the cosmos, the phenomenology of imagination becomes “anthropo-cosmology” (p. 47).

Bachelard draws on diverse selections of poetry to explore the images disclosed in reverie, as in *The Poetics of Space*, throughout which he reflects on poetic images of intimate spaces (e.g., houses,

tion relations between the human and the world open possibilities for reorienting the human to its cosmic situation and tightening anthropocosmic ties that have become slack (Bachelard, 1971, p. 123). Moreover, Paul Ricoeur points out that “the sectors of anthropocosmic experience” include not only poetic and oneiric experience but also hierophantic experience, as anthropocosmic experience weaves poetry and dream together with sacred phenomena (i.e., hierophanies) (Ricoeur, 1967, pp. 11-14).

As with other sectors of anthropocosmic experience, the sacred is not a matter of intelligibility opposed to sensibility, transcendence opposed to immanence, or ideal truth opposed to illusory appearance. The sacred appears with the sense of the world. The human “first reads the sacred on the world, on some elements or aspects of the world” (p. 10). The anthropocosmic ties between the human and the world gather together vectors of sense that can show themselves as manifestation of the sacred, as oneiric events of the psyche, or as poetic expressions of language. In referring to the place of the sacred in anthropocosmic experience, Ricoeur cites the use of the term “anthropocosmic” by Mircea Eliade.

For Eliade, “anthropocosmic experiences” occur when the human recognizes itself as a porous microcosm, “a living cosmos open to all the other living cosmoses” in which the human is

embedded (Eliade, 1970, p. 455). The history of religions can help the human being recover the symbols and images of its body, “which is an anthropocosmos,” and it does this by providing determinations of “the archetypal positions” of the body (Eliade, 1991, p. 36). These archetypal positions manifest “anthropo-cosmic homologies” that appear throughout the history of religions as “a whole system of micro-macrocosmic correspondences,” including the correspondence “of the belly or womb to a cave, of the intestines to a labyrinth, of breathing to weaving, of the veins and arteries to the sun and moon, of the backbone to the axis mundi” (Eliade, 1987, p. 169). In rediscovering the archetypal positions and micro-macrocosmic correspondences of the anthropocosmic body, the human and the world show themselves not as mutually exclusive opposites but as mutually constitutive partners in the manifestation of the sacred.

Furthermore, Eliade’s discussion of anthropocosmic relations in the history of religions has been taken up by contemporary scholars who draw attention to the environmental implications of anthropocosmic images in Confucianism, Daoism, Islam, and other religious traditions (Mickey, 2007).

Whether enacted through religion, poetry, dream, reverie, or otherwise, participation in the force of imagination makes it possible for the human and the world to show themselves as vectors of the same elemental sense. Hovering between the determinations and the indeterminacy of sense, imagination composes the anthropocosmic tissue of the human and the world. To participate in the force of imagination is thus to reinvent the human and rediscover its anthropocosmic ties to elemental nature.

### The Place of Ethics

By disclosing the intimate intertwining of the human and the world, the force of imagination makes possible a reinvention that rediscovers the anthropocosmic element of the flesh and places the human and its cultural traditions back into their cosmic context. This cosmic context, this place in which imagination places the human can also be called the ethos of the human, in the original meaning of ethos as “abode” or “dwell-

ing place.” Such an ethos resonates with what Sallis calls “exorbitant ethics,” which names an approach to environmental ethics that would accompany the return of the human to the wildly exorbitant sense of the world, that is, an ethical approach that emerges with “the turn to the sensible and to elemental nature” (Sallis, 2000, p. 206).

The reinvention of the human through poetic, oneiric, or religious engagements

of imagination. Moreover, the anthropocosmic turn in environmental ethics replaces anthropocentrism, but not with non-anthropocentric approaches like biocentrism and ecocentrism.

Anthropocosmic relations exceed any dichotomy between human/nonhuman or between anthropocentrism/non-anthropocentrism. This means that a turn toward anthropocosmic environmental ethics calls for neither another, perhaps



in the force of imagination constitutes an ethical injunction. Indeed, this is Berry’s claim: the reinvention of the human is “the ethical imperative of our times” (Berry, 1999, p. 164). It is the imperative to turn away from the currently dominant ethic of anthropocentrism, which dichotomizes the human and the natural world, and turn toward the elemental exorbitance of anthropocosmic ethics, according to which the human and the world show themselves in their intertwining, gathered together by the force

more encompassing, non-human center nor a modified version of a centralized human. Rather than placing value exclusively on the human (anthropocentric), on life or living organisms (biocentric), on ecosystems or the planet as a whole (ecocentric), or on any determinate center which would exclude or marginalize some periphery, an anthropocosmic approach to environmental ethics overcomes the center/periphery dualism and facilitates the mutual interpenetration of values, such that the values of humanity

and the values of the natural world are interconnected vectors of sense drawn together by the same elemental force of imagination.

An anthropocosmic approach to environmental ethics does not tend to any one determinate center but to the imaginative force that gathers the human and the world into their elemental relationship, according to which central and peripheral values show themselves not as fixed determinations but as oscillating waves of sense. As the force of imagination gathers together the sense of the world, it impels the human and the world to show themselves in their monstrosity.

## Imagination is not merely a faculty of the human subject or soul. It is more fundamentally an elemental force at work in humans and in nature.

The human being is thus reoriented to its ethos not through a determinate center, but through participation in the imaginal hovering that intertwines the anthropocosmic ties of the human and the world.

The hovering of imagination makes it possible for the human to engage in ethical deliberation. The force of imagination draws together various possible directions for the sense of the world, and it frees these possibilities by suspending them between determinate and indeterminate vectors of sense. With a possibility in suspense, one can begin to deliberate, “weighing out” (from Latin, *de-liberare*) the pros and cons of a possibility. As Sallis observes, one can thus “remain suspended between alternatives, hovering between various possibilities in such a way as to weigh them against one another, that is, to deliberate about them, between them” (Sallis, 2000, p. 204). Deliberation opens possibilities for deliberative action, which is not a practice that emerges from a prior ethical theory or system, but a practice that emerges with the self-showing of things.

If anthropocosmic environmental ethics includes a theory, it is a theatrical theory. Whereas “theory” (*theoria*) derives from Greek words for “viewing” (*thea*) and “seeing” (*oros*), a theatrical theo-

ry conveys a viewing that takes place, a *theatron* (the suffix *tron* connotes “place”). As imagination frees possibilities for deliberation, it opens the horizon wherein deliberative action takes place, it opens “the theatre of action” (Sallis, 2000, p. 205). Deliberative action is determined through participation in the shows that take place on the anthropocosmic stage.

This sense of deliberative action works against hegemonic systems of environmental ethics and politics (Sallis, 2000, p. 25). Anthropocosmic deliberation would contest the hegemony of ethics and politics that assimilate the exorbitant sense of what shows itself and reduce it to systems, pre-programmed responses, overgeneralizations, and conceptual schema. Replacing hegemonic systems, the reinvention of the human reorients ethics and politics to the place of the human in the elemental sense of the world. With the turn to the elemental that takes place in anthropocosmic environmental ethics, there is no fixed determination of what is good, right, or valuable, no rigid system that determines once and for all the proper conduct of the human in its engagements with the world.

Hovering between determinations and indeterminacy, the human deliberates and acts according to what shows itself through the force of imagination. Imagination does not center exclusively on the human, on living organisms, or on the environment as a whole. It provides no final determination that answers in advance any ethical questions raised by issues of climate change, pollution, human overpopulation, food production, water scarcity, species extinction, or any other impasses of the current global ecological crisis. An ethical response to the environmental crisis does not require universal ethical theories or moral prescriptions but a new sense of the place of human nature in elemental nature.

With an anthropocosmic sense of environmental ethics, the only imperative is

to reinvent the human, to let the human and the world show themselves as they intimately intertwine with one another through the force of imagination. Deliberately, reinvent the human: let the force of imagination open up places on the anthropocosmic stage where actors can show themselves and sustain their action in the show.

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