Nature Loves to Hide

Navigating Surface and Depth in the Anthropocene

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Abstract
While humans explore and map the subsurface environments of earth, there remain unplumbed depths of nature that cannot be so exposed. This essay argues that along with a literal sense of depth as a spatial dimension, there exists a latent depth of nature hidden to everyday perception that may nonetheless manifest in/as attentive imaginative involvement. It begins by briefly comparing the ontological assumptions of Newton and Descartes with those of Merleau-Ponty before examining how the everyday phenomenon of sunrise might be interpreted through the latter. The practice of terrapsychology is then explored as a means to deepen our engagement with(in) nature and sensitively navigate the necessary ambiguity of imaginative involvement. This latter is highlighted as a corrective to the logic of certainty and control that attempts to maintain human "progress" at the expense of more-than-human nature.

Keywords
imagination, ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty, terrapsychology

Technologically mediated vision and mobility has allowed unprecedented access to the most remote depths of the planet. Caves like the Veryovkina in Georgia have been mapped to a depth of 2,212 metres wherein explorers have discovered more than 6km of subhorizontal passages. Deeper still is the Challenger Deep located in the southern end of the Mariana Trench, which has been measured and explored to its deepest point at nearly 11 kilometres below sea level. Despite these astonishing journeys into the subsurface environment, however, we do not encounter depth *per se*, but rather newly

exposed surface. Unlike the spatial depths of Veryovkina and Challenger Deep that can be measured relative to their ground, the "depth" of our *experience* of these places cannot be so determined.

This essay is an exploration of this latter sense of depth, one that cannot be so located in terms of spatial Cartesian coordinates. It argues that along with a literal sense of depth as a spatial dimension, there exists a latent depth of nature hidden to everyday perception that may nonetheless manifest in/as attentive imaginative involvement. This latter sense of depth is developed along the lines of Merleau-Ponty's "indirect ontology" (Mazis, 2016), which interprets the world in relational terms. For Merleau-Ponty, the world is not a collection of discrete entities undergoing mechanical relations that are represented "in" consciousness (or not) with varying degrees of "accuracy". Our participation in the world is rather a creative gestalt of embodied involvement possessing various registers of sense that may include affective, memorial, and/or imaginal aspects.

Beginning by briefly comparing the ontological assumptions of Newton and Descartes with those of Merleau-Ponty, the essay proceeds by articulating the role that imagination has to play in the latter. It provides an example of the ways in which the everyday occurrence of sunrise might be interpreted through these lenses before exploring the practice of terrapsychology (Chalquist, 2020) as a means to deepen such engagement. The essay then concludes with some suggestive comments regarding the value of ambiguity in a world of failing ecological relations.

In the absolute spacetime of Newton, from which much of the mechanical sciences have developed, we exist within, and separate from, three-dimensional space. Likewise does time proceed independent of perception, "equably without regard to anything external" (Newton, 1674/1934, p. 6). For Descartes, there is similarly a separation between *res extensa* as extended corporeal substance existing in three-dimensional space, and the incorporeal, non-extensive *res cogitans* that represents it. In both the Newtonian and Cartesian models we exist surrounded by spacetime-as-container, bound by its three dimensions of space and one of time.

In his commentaries on Descartes, Merleau-Ponty (2003) locates the origins of this distinction in the Judeo-Christian conception of a transcendent, omniscient God. For Descartes, the world born of an infinite conception of God is one in which everything is foreseen by Him; "there is not an anteriority of the Whole to the parts, not a separation between ends and means" (p. 9). Because of this, finality has no meaning for God, nor for humans who, unable to apprehend the whole, can perceive only the movement of Nature's parts. There is thus no room in Descartes' philosophy for purpose and he is led towards an image of Nature-as-machine:

> Nature loses its interior; it is the exterior realization of a rationality that is in God. Finality and causality are no longer distinguished, and this indistinction is expressed in the image of the "machine", an image that blends together a mechanism and an artificialism. There must be an artisan, and in this sense, such an idea is anthropomorphic... Nature thus becomes a synonym of existence in itself, without orientation, without interior. (p. 10)

Without interior (that only God possesses), Nature is (re)presented to cognizing humans as mere extension, as an exterior of pure surface. Whether considered in terms of matter, elements, monads, corpuscles, atoms etc., thought reaches a boundary beyond which it cannot proceed.

Despite advancements in contemporary science beyond this mechanistic worldview (in complexity theory and quantum physics for example), we can yet detect Cartesian assumptions haunting accounts of the natural "environment" as the surface upon which cognizing beings go about their business. The catastrophic breakdown of ecological relations has, however, forced the recognition that the "environment" is itself agential, unpredictable, and at times unstable. As Latour (2015/2017) has put it, "it is as if the décor has gotten up on stage to share the drama with the actors [and that] from this moment on, everything changes in the way stories are told" (p. 3). The environmental crisis is revealing the limitations of a mechanistic worldview, and it is here that we find ourselves invited towards a reimagination of the "depth" of nature that cannot be so measured.

For along with the apparently surficial aspect of nature, we may consider its depth *as it occurs in experience*. Our *experience* of nature cannot, after all, be located on a Cartesian grid, nor placed within a straightforward Newtonian chronology. Where, for example, might we locate the memory called to mind by the scent of a spring morning? From whence does inspiration arise? Why is it that an hour waiting for the bus feels longer than an hour lost in the flow of engaged activity? Whatever the answers to these questions might be, they do not seem to indicate absolute spatial coordinates, nor any kind of metrical chronology. We do not *experience* the categories of space and time *per se*, as they are rather derived from a more immediate perception. What we experience is the movement of the sun across the sky, the growth of flowers in spring, and the shifting sensations of embodied, emplaced perception that they engender.

In describing the relatively straightforward perception of the colour red, for example, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) begins by stating what it is not:

> this red under my eyes is not, as is always said, a *quale*, a pellicle of being without thickness, a message at the same time indecipherable and evident, which one has or has not received, but of which, if one has received it, one knows all there is to know, and of which in the end there is nothing to say. (p. 131)

"Red" is, in other words, not a singular, isolable phenomenon that exists in a positively identifiable way. The *experience* of red rather emerges from a "more general redness" whose precise form is "bound up with a certain wooly [sic], metallic, or porous configuration or texture, and the *quale* itself counts for very little compared with these participations" (pp. 131–132). The particular red here before us emerges from an elemental involvement, as a "node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive" that becomes distinct by "connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colors it dominates or that dominate it" (p. 132). The experience of a rose, the cardinal outside my window, or in Merleau-Ponty's example, a dress, "punctuat[es] the field of red things" (p. 132). "Red" is thus for Merleau-Ponty not an object that can be positively identified and is rather likened to an "ephemeral modulation of the world… a difference between things and colors" (p. 132).

Perceiving is thus for Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) a creative gestalt of meaning making whereby "what" we perceive instantiates a *provisional* foreground/background distinction, though, it is important to note, there is no absolute background from which we can derive positive identifications, no "surface" upon which to build systems of certainty. The meaning of encounter is instantiated in the act of perception itself:

> Perception is just that act which creates at a stroke, along with the cluster of data, the meaning which unites them—indeed which not only discovers the meaning which they have, but moreover sees to it that they have a meaning. (p. 36)

In the example of experiencing "red", I might identify this particular instance of it in front of me as such, though another (an artist perhaps) might see there burgundy, carmine, or scarlet, a sensitive poet might feel love, passion, or courage, or perhaps this particular shade calls to mind a memory of a woolly blanket once owned, while someone with protanopia (inability to perceive red light) may not register the colour at all. What is important to note is that the taken-for-granted identifications of our experience (i.e., red = "red") are not its basic facts, as they are rather more like modifications of a more primordial pre-reflective perception. Our identifications, each true in their own way, thus modulate the world in an iterative, ongoing manner. As the quality of light changes, as the colour here before us is further examined and discussed, as we delve deeper into the phenomenon, its identification and subsequent meaning transforms, and with it, the way we move through the world.

As Merleau-Ponty scholar Glen Mazis (2016) highlights, participating in this creative possibility requires directing our attention beyond the apparent surface of things. Opening to the depths of experience is an "embrace" that occurs by "sinking into things in perception" with the quality of "hushing or stilling the voices and enunciated categories that resound within consciousness" (p. 26–27). Participating in the depth of nature happens as a "kind of releasement into the body's more primordial exchange with the world" (p. 27). It begins in immediate, pre-reflective, embodied engagement, and is only subsequently identified in categorical terms. Thinking *with* the unruly creativity of nature (as opposed to merely thinking *about* surficial nature) requires cultivating an ability to participate in its depth dimension—a task that requires suspending categorical judgement, for as Mazis puts it, "the perception of depth is the perception of incompossible things being at the same time, and thereby being together in a way that defies rational categories" (p. 448). The perception of depth is not accomplished with the kinds of analysis that correlate percepts with preconceived systems of thought (i.e., as members of a genus), but rather through a *labile imaginative comportment that can dance with the ambiguity of expressive nature*. As each encounter is unique (*this* tree, *this* moment, *this* red), by circumscribing it in accordance with a given category or scheme, the ambiguity of its expressive depth is diminished, and along with it, creative potential.

We may find one such example of reductive correlation in a (quite literally) everyday phenomenon. Meteorologists will typically report the exact time of sunrise down to the minute (i.e., as an objective phenomenon), and while there is a sense in which this is statistically true for a given area, it neglects the situated involvement of myriad perceiving subjects—each of whom will experience a unique sunrise at a particular time. For perceiving subjects, the time of sunrise will vary in accordance with the orientation of the earth, the location of the sun, and the location of the observer (not only in terms of latitude/longitude,

but so too height/depth, surrounding environment etc.). The "time" of sunrise thus emerges as a relational involvement of earth, sun, and perceiving subject, and not, it is important to note, as a universal (e.g., sunrise at 6:46 am).

Our *imaginative* involvement with the event of sunrise is yet even more dynamic and particular to a given perceiving subject. For unlike the correlation between earth, sun, and subject that can be identified with clock time, the depth of the *experience* of sunrise is not limited to such correlations. The *experience* of sunrise encompasses myriad registers of sense whose manifestation depends on the quality of attention given to it. An artist may notice the hue it casts on the autumn leaves, a poet may contemplate themes of renewal and rebirth, a physicist may imagine the nuclear fusion occurring at its core. A sunrise may further manifest different affective tonalities depending on the climate of the area, perhaps manifesting apprehension for those city dwellers in the middle of yet another record-breaking heatwave, while bringing relief to others suffering through the chill of an arctic night. Is it an orb of nuclear hydrogen and helium that rises there, or Tōnatiuh—the Aztec sun deity of the daytime sky? Perhaps it is an unwelcome presence, John Donne's (1897) "busy old fool", a "saucy pedantic wretch" who "through windows, and through curtains call[s] on us" (pp. 7–8)? What we call "sunrise" is all of these things and much, much more. When reduced, however, to an explanation based on surface appearance (as in the example of the meteorologist's prediction above), something is severed of our imaginative involvement, and likewise the expressive potential of the event itself. There is a kind of depth to phenomena, in other words, that will always exceed their su(pe)rficial explanations—a depth that may be further disclosed by considering the place in which they occur.

The practice of terrapsychology (Chalquist, 2007), while ostensibly the study of "place", is a manner of interpreting place not only in terms of its spatial coordinates and objective aspects, but also as a (co)emergence of otherwise unconscious elements having variously symbolic, oneiric, imaginal, and memorial dimensions. Terrapsychology expands the field of subjectivity to encompass the more-than-human world and emphasizes the "interactive, multidimensional, interdependent, and symbolically connective and meaningful" (p. 9) (as opposed to the quantifiable or measurable). It seeks to disclose these meaningful interconnections through imaginatively attuned forms of attention and augmentation, to listen *into* phenomena for images and meanings instead of merely learning *about* them from the outside:

> Terrapsychology is the study of how the currents of aliveness, reactivity, interiority, or psychic animation of a geographical location and its creatures and features interact deeply with our own. It offers descriptions of this interaction, methods for registering it, and practices for managing it... A primary goal of terrapsychology is to find out more about the depths of relations between people and places, the human soul and the soul of locale (*genius loci*). By doing so, it strives to play a meaningful part in ending the war against nature that is poisoning the ecosphere while mutating lethally into suicidal antiworlds. (pp. 10–11)

When engaging with(in) place in this way, we are invited towards deeper modes of imaginative involvement that seek to emplace us as ethically responsive beings. As such, the process is guided by three key questions:

> What does the place want from me? What obligations has it left me with? How effectively can I stay with and tend the potent actuality I sense here instead of escaping into some kind of treatment plan imposed from above? (p. 66)

By attending to place with these questions in mind, a "mutual deepening" occurs whereby otherwise su(pe)rficial, banal, or overlooked events may become meaningfully felt experiences (p. 67).

Chalquist (2014) provides an example of terrapsychology in action when he "lorecasts" the weather as a meaningful expression of depth, as "nonverbal, imagistic words in the vocabulary of animate Earth" (p. 251). Imaginatively engaging with the event using techniques of image amplification derived from Goethean science and depth psychology[1], Chalquist finds in a tornado that touched down in Goshen County, Wyoming:

> a meteorological counterpart to psychic complexes: vortices of unbalanced forces whirling around a center point until the energy that created the imbalance dissipates. Reaching down from high above, [the tornado] bridges the gap between higher and lower while flooding out and cleansing, often destructively, whatever [it] touches. (p. 256)

He then remarks on the irony that this rather destructive storm touched down on June 5th, 2009 (i.e., World Environment Day) before interpreting the event as a kind of injunction to look "inside" nature for the "whirling aliveness" that is addressing us (p. 256).

These kinds of interpretations may appear as idiosyncratic and indeed must be so. For while there may be overlapping commonalities of interpretation, each individual's experience of a given place is uniquely situated and as such will resonate in likewise particular and unique ways. The "meaning" of place is here not something imposed from without in accordance with abstract categories (whether Cartesian, Newtonian, or otherwise) but rather emerges from a situated, embodied encounter with(in) the world.

When imaginatively engaged in this way, an otherwise "common" place, perhaps one visited many times before, may be expressed in/as an uncanny sense of (un)familiarity, ambiguity, beauty, or weirdness. One is no longer viewing the world in terms of its utility, taxonomy, or accordance with abstract systems of thought, but rather in/as a dynamic, living image that may surprise, astonish, or otherwise enchant. Participating in nature's depth dimension thus requires a willingness to accept the necessary ambiguity of not knowing. In practices like terrapsychology there is no arrival at certainty, for to do so would be to (re)inscribe a system of meaning onto an otherwise indeterminate process of meaningful participation. We must be willing, in other words, to forgo the relative certainty of objective analysis in favour of the ambiguity of creative becoming. And while objective analysis is of course desirable in certain situations, relying *only* on what is clear and distinct loses access to the depth of experience that provides us with a vital sense of meaning-full engagement.

Manifesting the creative depth of place requires, in other words, a willingness to move beyond the taken-for-granted view of surface appearance. It requires plumbing the

1 A process of resonating an image through a twofold approach of tracking one's own personal connections with it and investigating the history of meanings, symbolisms, cultural appropriations etc. associated with it.

often-ambiguous depths of phenomena as manifest in the uniquely situated particulars of a given encounter. For while surficial thinking *represents* objective realities and quantifiable phenomena, the ambiguity of depth *manifests* through image, affect, and correspondence. Our imaginative participation with the ambiguity of the depth of place is in this way creative insofar as it is that with(in) which we are taken up in/as the generative source of the present.

Indeed, this is the perspective of Ingold (2022), for whom to exercise imaginative perception is not merely to conjure up images that re-present an absolute reality "out there" but is rather to "participate from within, through perception and action, in the very becoming of things" (p. 32). We enter "from the inside into the generative currents of the world itself, by balancing one's very being on the cusp of its emergence" (p. 4). "Imagining for real" thus "demands continued attention" (p. 5) not to that which correlates with preconceived categories (i.e., to surface) but rather towards that which is emerging from its own depths. Rather than an examination of surface, imaginatively oriented perception is a hermeneutic process of *descent* into the underworld of image, affect, and memory. Like the boundary crossing messenger-god Hermes, imagination creates a correspondence between otherwise incompossible realities. Its hermeneutic function is thus one of navigating between surface and depth, creatively transforming perception from within.

And while this traversal into the relative obscurity of creative depth is necessarily ambiguous, we need not react by reducing the experience to a system of certainties. Indeed, there is much to gain by harmonizing ourselves with its unruly movements! The "progress" of modernity that has led us to the edge of ecological collapse is, after all, predicated on a vision of nature as something to be accurately classified, catalogued, controlled, and/or improved upon (see Merchant, 2015). It relies, in other words, on the relative clarity of surficial analysis. And while this may be necessary when building a bridge, designing a building, or creating more energy-efficient appliances, when applied to nature writ large, something of our creative potential is thereby lost. Addressing (and being addressed by) ecological crisis requires not only the tools of analytic consciousness, but also meaningful participatory engagement in its depth dimension.

It is here that the post-Jungian scholar James Hillman (1979) implores us to "stick with the image" rather than reduce its expressive potential to a correlate, for "when we believe we know the invisible, we begin on a ruinous course… [it is] essential [to adopt an] attitude of unknowing [that] leaves room for the phenomenon itself to speak" (p. 193–94). If indeed "nature loves to hide" as Heraclitus inscribed it at the dawn of Western philosophy (see Hadot, 2004/2006), then it behooves us to enact its disclosure not with the hubris of certainty, but rather with the care-full attention of imaginative involvement that does not limit its (and concomitantly our) capacity for creative emergence and renewal.

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