

## Nature Breaks through Our Worldviews

It is common to think that each of us has a worldview. Religions, political ideologies, philosophical positions, artistic style and scientific understanding are often described as worldviews. What exactly a worldview is and whether it is indeed the case that we all have one, or need one, is occasionally disputed (Heidegger 2002; Geuss 2020), but on the whole we seem happy to accept that each of us has a set of concepts, behaviours, habits, values and emotions that form a more or less coherent whole, a lens through which we view the world.

If we all have a worldview that shapes our ideas and actions then it stands to reason that a major concern of environmentalism is to seek out, develop and advocate worldviews that are conducive to living well in the natural world and preventing the destruction of nature. Readers of *Environmental Values* will be familiar with the kinds of concepts, values and emotions that are generally thought to be important elements of an ecological worldview: the connectedness of the natural world; the intrinsic value of living creatures and our shared earth; wonder, love and respect for those creatures and the earth. Not that we all agree about exactly which elements are essential or how best to understand or cultivate our worldview, but we do share a set of concerns that give us a shared outlook and a sense of solidarity. Our journal plays its part in seeking out, developing and advocating ecological worldviews (Kelbessa 2022; Andersen et al. 2022; Alberro 2020).

That said, worldviews can be dangerous. If we aren't careful our worldview can end up becoming a totalising framework that filters and informs everything we ever experience. Worldviews can be ideological, in the sense of preventing us from seeing what is really informing our view and convincing us that there is no alternative. They can also become rigid, dogmatic and hermetically sealed, preventing us from seeing other points of view or feeling the concerns of others.

The articles in this volume share, as you might expect, a set of concerns that can be reasonably described as pertaining to an ecological worldview. At the same time they ask us to think again about what exactly an ecological worldview amounts to. That is, they don't simply point to the problems and limits of one worldview or another, but to the problems and limits of worldviews as such. Several of them also converge in asking us to consider the significant role aesthetics plays in keeping our worldviews open and alive to what they cannot incorporate.

David Samways argues that environmentalists often operate with an over-generalised and oversimplified notion of worldview and of the relationship between worldview and environmental outcomes. In particular, a good deal of environmental thought has taken for granted the idea that the non-anthropocentric worldviews of hunter-gatherer societies are responsible for their low environmental impacts. Samways argues that this 'anthropocentrism thesis' is

empirically unsupported and far too abstract. Instead we should take a 'strong structurationist' approach that recognises the complexity and potentially conflicted internal structure of all worldviews, together with their complex relationship with and expression within external social structures, the active agency of those who hold these views and environmental outcomes. Values are not stand-alone principles, they form part of a 'hermeneutic framework', that is, a dynamic worldview and hierarchy of purposes. Not only that, we also need to recognise that 'purposeful action takes place under unacknowledged conditions that frequently produce unintended consequences' (p. 133). In another idiom this is a call to recognise the ineliminable role of the 'political unconscious' in all human societies (Jameson 2002). Recognising internal conflict and unacknowledged conditions can give us the opportunity for greater reflexivity with regard to our own worldview and those that we attribute to others. Samways suggests that this approach allows for a better understanding of worldviews as complex, conflicted, contingent and situated coalitions of discourse. This understanding will in turn help us to avoid simplistic characterisations of hunter-gatherer societies and the values of those who lived and live in them and at the same time help us to develop a more effective environmental political discourse.

Nanda Jarosz is also concerned to highlight the significance of the situated, practical and traditional understanding of the natural world that many of us in modernity have, at best, experienced only in partial and fragmented ways. Using the broad category of Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) Jarosz develops a view of the role of knowledge in appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature that is an alternative to those proposed by the longstanding theory of scientific cognitivism and the more recent theory of 'ecoaesthetics.' Interestingly Allen Carlson, who developed and defended the view of scientific cognitivism over the course of several decades, has in recent years moved towards a 'combination position' based on the ecoaesthetics advocated by Xiangzhan Cheng. This view is thought to combine the best elements of a non-cognitive aesthetics of engagement and scientific cognitivism. That Carlson has remained open to such a combined position says a great deal for his capacity to avoid totalising calcification of his worldview, showing that he never allowed his advocacy of scientific knowledge to become dogmatic scientism. Nevertheless, Jarosz makes a strong case that the 'combined position' remains unsatisfactory. One key element of her challenge is that ecoaesthetics still has a narrow account of what counts as cognition and knowledge. Insofar as knowledge is acknowledged as an essential element of appropriate appreciation it is still universal scientific knowledge. Furthermore, there is a lingering concern that the aesthetic qualities that ecoaesthetics appreciates are based on an outmoded theory of equilibrium ecology that has been superseded by an ecology of dynamic flux and rupture. Those who have been initiated into a practice of ILK, on Jarosz's account, have an appreciation of multi-layered diversity, flux

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and rupture built into their aesthetic appreciation of the natural world because their knowledge stems from ground-level engaged adaptation and resilience building.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of this case for opening aesthetic appreciation to the whole range of knowledge produced and handed down from generation to generation can be seen partly in the questions that it provokes: Is it really possible to provide a schematic overview of the core principles shared by indigenous and local knowledges as Jarosz suggests? In other words, is there such a thing as an indigenous and local worldview? If there is, what are we to do with those elements of ILK that conflict with contemporary science? It may be that the flux and rupture view of nature fits with contemporary scientific ecology, but we can't make such fit an essential legitimating criterion without falling back into some form of scientific cognitivism. Jarosz is clear that ILK cannot be universal because it depends on intergenerational knowledge transfer (p. 165). Yet there is a sense in which scientific knowledge also depends on intergenerational knowledge transfer. It is local and personal initiation that seems to make ILK traditions distinct from science and from one another. That leaves those of us whose ILK traditions have been ruptured and disrupted, in part by the universal worldview of techno-science, with the local and personal problem of reinventing and renewing our traditions and with them our aesthetic appreciation of nature.

A very different way of showing that aesthetic experience can break through a totalising scientific worldview is to focus precisely on those aesthetic experiences that owe their possibility to science. This is what Matt Harvey does by rethinking the experience of the sublime in the light of contemporary cosmology. Against the ethos of exploitation, mastery and control that seems to dominate contemporary attitudes towards space Harvey argues that we find in the unfathomable depth and power of the cosmos a prime opportunity to experience the environmental sublime, that is, a sublime that produces both expansive wonder and profound humility. The expansion of rationality into areas that previously seemed beyond human imagination and comprehension is always opening new depths of unimagability and incomprehension, so science can never become a totalising worldview (p. 180). If we allow ourselves to experience the cosmic sublime it can become a source of spiritual contemplation that will also inspire political action to protect and nurture the only place that we can really live in the cosmos, despite the ludicrous and dangerous fantasies of tech-billionaires, this 'pale blue dot' in the overwhelming power and vastness of the cosmos. Despite Harvey's misgivings concerning Heidegger, there is in his description of the cosmic sublime something akin to Heidegger's insistence that we cannot simply circumvent modern techno-science or set up

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1. For a related account of contextual valuing and resilience see Gendreau 2022. Emily Brady (2022) suggests that intergenerational understanding must become increasingly important for aesthetics in conditions of ecological crisis.

an alternative to it, instead we must remain open to breaks in its totalising and exploitative ethos. Still, I wonder whether the cosmic sublime, in the form of a *cosmological* sublime, dependent on the revelations of astrophysics and cosmology, will be enough to break through. There are the various problems of *access* that Harvey highlights: few of us has access to cosmology in practice; and light pollution means that the sublimity of the night sky is precisely not available to many of us on a nightly basis. More fundamentally I wonder whether the sublimity of the cosmos revealed by cosmology is of the same quality as that revealed by spiritual contemplation of the night sky. As Max Weber said of the disenchantment of the world that comes with the rationalism of modernity, it is not that science thinks that humanity can ever have complete rational comprehension, but that science insists that everything is *in principle* rationally comprehensible (Weber 2004). Spiritual contemplation of the night sky is an experience that, rather than refuting that principle, might allow us to set aside its demands.

In her wonderful contemplative appreciation of *The Abundant Herds*, a work describing and illustrating aesthetic practices of ama-Zulu cattle herders, Samantha Vice shows us another way in which we can free our imaginations from totalising and homogenising worldviews. The ama-Zulu have a tradition of poetic naming of their Nguni cattle, names that often come in the form of seeing the features of wildlife and the wider natural and human world in the patterned hides and overall appearance of the animals. These highly evocative names, such as *inzimikazi ebulumunga* – ‘black cow which is the bark of the mimosa tree peeled back’ (p. 200), are the result of a creative and poetic tradition that not only delights in making unexpected comparisons, but cultivates a way of living with cattle that opens up the world in which we dwell together and at the same time highlights the individuality of each animal.<sup>2</sup> The fact that cattle are often used unthinkingly to represent the ‘herd’, a dead metaphor for lack of individuality, makes appreciation of this practice all the more pertinent and powerful. It seems to me, in fact, that we should continue along this line and consider the *singularity of herds*, flocks, swarms, shoals as they move through the world. A migrating herd is no more simply an instantiation of an ideal type than is a single animal. At the extreme end the vastness and power of a moving multitude can evoke the environmental sublime. Yet there remains something importantly personal in the relationships and practices that Vice and the authors of *The Abundant Herds* describe. For Vice one consequence of appreciating the distinctive ama-Zulu ways of appreciating cattle is that we can avoid falling into a potentially totalising aesthetic functionalism. Not that we should not appreciate the intricate biological and ecological functions of wild and domestic animals, or their uses for human lives, but there is always more to the instance in which an animal appears to us than

2. For a more general account of the importance of individual natural otherness see Wienhues 2022.

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their instantiation of general functions. What is more, what we can learn to appreciate here are open-ended and always incomplete relationships, characters, displays and comparative connections. The poetics of naming cattle is not a simple exercise in structural simile, but a playful and open-ended exercise in creating connections. Likewise, the best way to show an appreciation of these practices is through similarly open and creative aesthetic exercises. As Vice writes of Leigh Voigt's cattle portraits that illustrate *The Abundant Herds*: 'The unfinished quality of some pictures suggests a freedom from type and frees the imagination of viewers. In not being exhaustively rendered, the animal is not exhausted by the colours and patterns it displays' (pp. 205–206).

In the final article in this volume Anya Daly also asks us to think again about our relationships with animals, this time from the point of view of significant commonalities between phenomenology and Buddhist philosophy. For Daly what both these approaches require of us is to pay careful attention to what is really involved in sentient life. Sentience is not adequately characterised by disjunctive functional capacity to feel pleasure or pain, over which are sometimes layered various 'higher level' capacities of reflective consciousness and selfhood. Sentience in its most basic 'primordial' form already involves a pre-reflective sense of intersubjectivity, or in Merleau-Ponty's phrase 'interanimality' (p. 218). This primordial 'We' comes in the form of mutual and reversible relationships with all sentient life. It is not built by connecting isolated subjects to one another, but is the basis upon which a sense of self and other is possible. So it is not because we reflectively and impersonally recognise the value of sentience that we see the value of sentient creatures, but because we are sentient creatures that we already share with all other sentient creatures in the primordial 'We'. This way of understanding sentience can then form an ontological basis for animal and environmental ethics.

I'm left with some questions about the role of Buddhist thought in articulating the primordial 'We'. Buddhist thought is well-known for advocating a doctrine of 'no-self'. This idea has been interpreted in various ways by Buddhists and those interested in Buddhist thought.<sup>3</sup> But if we take up the idea that selfhood is an illusion that we project onto primordial experience I'm not sure what we should think from that perspective about the 'primordial We' of sentience. If experience comes with a primordial sense of 'ourness' rather than 'mineness', an 'ourness' that includes within it a sense of self and other (p. 228), is there any reason to think that the sense of 'ourness' is any less illusory than many Buddhists think is the sense of 'mineness'? Related to that concern, it is unclear to me whether all sentient creatures always share in a single primordial 'We' and all impressions to the contrary are dangerous illusions

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3. Evan Thompson, who helped develop the theory of cognitive 'enactivism' from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, gives a good overview of some prominent interpretations and an argument against the idea that the sense of selfhood is illusory, even if it is constructed (Thompson 2020, chap. 3).

that right attention can dispel, or whether the primordial ‘we’ is better understood as something more like a ‘primordial potential we’. Daly follows Max Scheler in proposing that, ‘anterior to the concrete intersubjective encounter, there is an innate sense of the primordial “we”’ (p. 228). But if the primordial ‘we’ is always already actual and incorporates all sentient beings, then, it seems, little or nothing can be added by concrete encounters of the kind that Daly describes so beautifully in her recollection of meeting a stag in the forests of Normandy: ‘We stood still for what seemed an extended time and just gazed at each other and then he leapt off into the forest. It was totally enchanting! The awe and wonder persisted throughout the day as though a crack had opened in the regular frame of reality into another world’ (p. 222, fn. 16).

Aesthetic sensibility as understood and cultivated by the authors in this volume is not the privileged possession of those who have adopted the right worldview. It is a determination to remain receptive to what, in the words of Jacques Rancière, ‘cracks open’ our sensorium, the ingrained habits that inform our senses and ability to make sense of things (Rancière 2009, p. 49).<sup>4</sup> Shared traditions and practices, shared animality and shared life on earth in an unfathomable cosmos enable us to remain open to nature breaking through our worldviews. Nature felt as the subtle animating force of what I like to call ephemeral events: the sun or moonlight breaking through the clouds; blossom and leaves bursting open and falling, the unexpected glimpse of a creature streaking from one hiding place to another. These events are iconic of natural beauty because they hint at the life of the natural world. Aesthetic sensibility is what keeps our worldview alive and keeps us alive to what no worldview can capture.

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4. For explorations of the idea that global ecological crisis intensifies the disruption of familiar aesthetic attitudes see Mikkonen 2022; Di Paola and Ciccarelli 2022.

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