

**B**ali was recently rocked by explosions causing the deaths of almost 200 people in a bombing in the night club district of the capital. It is a far different experience that David Abram sought out in the Balinese rice paddies. One night he found himself caught floating between sky above and sky below, reflected in the black waters of the rice paddies. And he found that he had lost his way because he could not orient himself with respect to the borders of perception—what is night sky and what is reflected sky? What is true firefly flitting through the moonless night and what the reflection of a firefly in the inky dark of the rice waters. This loss of place had a particular appeal to a magician aware of the need to bend or warp or stretch or better yet melt the perceived borders of the world in order to carry out one's tricks. And this is so because of the fact that the magician lives on or beyond the borders of the typically human organization of the world—out of the village and in the woods or in the paddies or otherwise in nature where he or she is close to that presence the shaman must interpret and connect to the lives of the humans living in their typical way. (See pages 6-7.) It is this borderlands habituation that gives the magician a connection with the nonhuman forces and processes of the world that might interfere and manifest themselves as illnesses in individuals or in a people. This is not just hocus-pocus. Remember what I said about the continuing need of individuals and collectives to balance themselves with respect to each other, the ongoing need to adjust and adapt to the changed conditions we induce in our very being and becoming in the world. Who is to do this balancing or who is to guide or lead us in this accommodation of our activities to the world's other nonhuman ways? Who is our magician with respect to providing food, clean air, clean ample water, an ongoing supply of available energy, abundant raw materials, beautiful vistas and the rest we turn to nature for? In pursuing these things we will disturb the nonhuman ways of the world. Who is to lead us in these disturbances so that we are able to continue to carry them out and continue to provide for ourselves in the world? Who is to find us our place in the world and in doing so to accommodate us to the world's ways? Are these the scientists—thus far these are the ones who have taken over the job from the farmers and the miners and metal smiths and the homeopathic and herbalist health care providers and all their traditions. Who is to do this job in the way that is most defensible, now? That is Abram's question in this first chapter. And the suggestion is that the magician lives in a world of relationships enabling him to see his way to linking these two worlds of the typically technologically human and the nonhuman. “[T]he medicine person's primary allegiance, then, is not to the human condition, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded—it is from this that his or her powers to alleviate human illness derives—and this sets the local magician apart from other persons. This sets the local magician apart because it places her or him in contact with the ways of being and becoming of other species, indeed even of nonliving things, and once in that contact the consciousness of the shaman is opened out to include itself as only one way of knowing, only one way of sensing among many, and only one way of organizing the flow of life, the narratives of living that make up our passages here.

The traditional magician cultivates an ability to shift out of his or her common state of consciousness precisely in order to make contact with the other organic forms of sensitivity and awareness with which human existence is entwined. Only by temporarily shedding the accepted perceptual logic of his culture can the sorcerer hope to enter into relation with other species on their own terms; only by altering the common organization

of his senses will he be able to enter into a rapport with the multiple nonhuman sensibilities that animate the local landscape. It is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture—boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language—in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the larger, more-than-human-field.

Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own. (pp 9-10)

And thus the magician is an intermediary, but also an interpreter of forms of organization we are blinded to in our nearsightedness focusing as we do on the world of the human categories and human ways, as though that is the only world there is, the only form of organization that might induce changes in the earth and our environments and so interfere in our pursuits for the search for food, shelter, amusement and the rest. But that would be the height of underestimation of the complexity of our situation, suggests Abram. And indeed it is then the magician or the shaman that is modeling another form of organization who might expand our ways of understanding beyond the merely human.

; rather, it is by propelling his awareness laterally, outward into the depths of a landscape at once both sensuous and psychological, the living dream that we share with the soaring hawk, the spider, and the stone silently sprouting lichens on its coarse surface [, it is in this way that the shaman links us with what else, and with what other organizing influences in the world, we need to be aware of for ‘life and health’]. (p. 10)

Abram talks of these other influences as “spirits”—not in the sense of ghosts, but in the sense of “those modes of intelligence or awareness that do not possess a human form.” (p. 13) In other words, as we live in the world we come to organize it and ourselves in certain ways—we build buildings, we construct highways, we record CDs, we plant row crops for food and clothing, we pipe oil, gas, water, sewage and process it for further use and so on. We have come to depend upon science that gives a certain linear and analytic and reductive sense to the world and that gives us a certain pattern of modes of seeing or hearing the world through approved lab procedures and reports, and through a variety of testing equipment and a variety of mathematics for expressing and manipulating measurements of what is tested or observed with according to these procedures. And what comes of that is the scientific view of things. This is all conscious, very deliberate, contrived and recorded to be repeatable and highly objective. But the resulting view of things is not the only one possible. We might also see things through the multi-lensed eyes and the leg based smelling receptors of the common house fly. Or we might be highly aware of where we are in the space of the sea and just what our attitude is relative to the earth and the sky by the proprioceptors of fish placed along their sides and organized by their brains—that as opposed to the measuring devices of space craft which tell the capsule’s pitch and yaw. How we know is a form of organization telling us as much about the knower’s form of organizations as about what is known. We know this—watch an experienced brick layer mix cement or “mud” and then lay up a row of bricks and then watch a weekend handyman escaping from work at the office do the same thing and notice how they both go about the job, what they do and what they seem to watch for. Indeed notice how they move, how they handle the cement and the bricks and

how they handle the tools they use, and you will see a difference in the kind of organizing knowledge I am speaking of. Watch a chimp draw out ant pupae from a rotting log using a stick which it then puts into its mouth and sucks off the ants. Compare this with the work of an aardvark which will tear the tree or a concrete hard termite hill apart with its strong forearms and bear-claw like fingernails. These are different forms of organization managed by different forms of intelligence and awareness—different spirits at work in the world. They are different spirits as much as the spirit of the wind found in a reliable updraft flown by soaring birds is different from, but in some functional ways akin to the updraft floating moats of dust in a sun beam piercing winter's cold in the corner of a house, or from the magnet that draws up the car and moves it to the crusher in the auto wrecking yard. To be sure there are different forms of physical effects at work here, different forms of energy, different forces that can make things happen in our world, but they might all be thought of as different effective tendencies or changes in the world and considered different spirits each with its own way, or logos, or logic and laws.

To humankind, these Others are purveyors of secrets, carriers of intelligence that we ourselves often need: it is these Others who can inform us of unseasonable changes in the weather, or warn us of imminent eruptions and earthquakes, who show us, when foraging, where we may find the ripest berries or the best route to follow back home. By watching them build their nests and shelters, we glean clues regarding how to strengthen our own dwellings, and their deaths teach us of our own, we receive from them countless gifts of food, fuel, shelter, and clothing. Yet still they remain Other to us, inhabiting their own cultures and displaying their own rituals, never wholly fathomable. (p. 14)

And if we believe that these forms or tendencies of organization can survive in the very materials that make us up, it would be natural to believe in ancestor worship finding the parts and organizing functions of those who have gone before in the things that exist and function now. And this links humans and other animals or plants or even other nonliving things into which might go that which was us. And, in a moment of analogical enthusiasm, Abram even suggests that this transference of materials that formerly were a part of the human to that which is living or not and not human, can even suggest a bridge of sentience so that “the other forms of experience that we encounter—whether ants, or willow trees, or clouds—are never absolutely alien to ourselves.” (p. 16) I say that this is only an analogical inference—same material, therefore same organizing tendencies and experiences or patterns of being and responses in the world, because self-organization itself can make a difference to the behavior of what is organized so that the same material can be in a variety of things that behave and tend to respond in very different ways.

Abram does a wonderful job of pointing out, even evoking a sense of the appreciation, and even the perception or recognition of these differences in the variety of things and places that we encounter in the world. Through his growing appreciation of these differences between and among spirits, he was able to see the world differently. He became as he said, “a student of subtle differences:...” (p. 20) And it is the ability to appreciate these various patterns, these various differences of organization and response that gives the shaman her or his power to heal and to interpret the world beyond to the ordinary citizens who did not have the capacity or time to make such observations. Notice that in saying this, he is not saying that shamans are just the poor natives' scientists. He is not saying the shaman is a scientist without grants and instruments and mathematics. The shaman is much more the observer of exemplars in nature that connect her or him directly with the world in which we act and its variety of organizations and responses, so that the shaman might directly appropriate and convert to human use the wisdom of the Earth's spirits. Technology would take us away from this sense of the ecological wealth of wisdom around us.

Caught up in a mass of abstractions, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with *other* eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence, we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human. (p. 22)

Unlike those who, for example, suggest that we are distinctive by virtue of our differences from and separations from the nonhuman, that it is difference that distinguishes rather than connection and interdependencies and constellations of similarities, Abram is saying that we are distinctive by virtue of our contacts and co-evolutions and co-adaptations with other nonhuman beings of our world, both live and dead. And if we were to try to take ourselves outside of this nexus or spider web of relationships and dependencies, then we would see clearly that we do become something different from what we are. Consider animals in the zoo which become mean and dangerous or withdrawn, even catatonic because of the disruption of patterns deep within their ways and styles of being. This is what he is talking about. Is that unfamiliar to you? Then consider how we humans have placed ourselves in cities and become members of gangs, and social clubs accepting within our midst a level and frequency and casualness of violence that is just not seen in nature. Consider how we have let so many of our kind starve and become victimized. Consider how much rage so many of us harbor and how this provides both a commercial opportunity for reinforcement and for catharsis in recorded media and film. Do we feel outside of ourselves? Do we yearn for a little relaxation? Do we feel frightened and bored with life? Are these the plight of any animals in the wild? Still out of reach?—Consider how you feel in a place you have never been and where you do not know how to behave and consider how clumsy you were and how self-conscious you were, then and afterward. We can lose our way and things can come to mean nothing to us so that the only thing we have left is consumption that is meaningless because of its repetition and that is useless for the good it really does us as it forces us further onto the treadmill of work and escapism, or further into the withdrawal of imaged violence or imaged banality we surround ourselves with. How many are gambling today—what percentage of the population? Has that percentage increased in the last 100 years, in the last 25 years, in the last 10, in the last 2? I suspect so—look at the ways you can spend on the lottery at the corner gas station. Does the average person have more disposable income in the last few years? No. What then is this gambling a sign of?

In this latest issue of World.Watch Magazine, in the monthly column of interesting figures titled Matters of Scale (p. 40 in the November/December issue) there is a comparison of various threats to security. Thus in the US, to select only a few, the magazine compares the number of deaths approximated as due to a variety of factors. So: “killed by guns (other than in war) per year, on average....34,000, killed by adverse reactions to prescription drugs, per year, on average.....32,000, killed by suicide in 1998.....30, 575,” and it goes on and on including the figures from the worst killings by US and non-US governments in the recent years, such as Cambodians killed by the Khmer Rouge in 1975-78.....1,700,000, the killings of all civilian and military in the current war in the Congo.....1,700,000, and the killings by the Guatemalan army massacre of 400 Mayan villages in 1981-82..... 200,000.” The death toll from the “9-11” killings was approximately 3,000. So in all of these ways we can find evidence that we have lost our way and have failed to see our selves and each other in a supportive and sustaining light, as opposed to

seeing only what leads to violence, escapism, and disregard of the personal needs in ourselves and others.

Abram talks of how after his return from Bali he got back to normal so that the plants, the other animals, the very air (p. 26) changed character. He came again to forget his body and its immersion in a medium of the world including other animals and including plants and the humid cold air of a fall evening. He notes that most of us fully accept the destruction of species at an ever increasing rate—or that we are not even aware of this. We have become more and more alienated from our environment and with that we have more and more lost touch with other organizing forces and spirits in the world. We have lost that ability to appreciate the other—be it animal, vegetable, mineral, or human. As he asks:

How, that is, have we become so deaf and so blind to the vital existence of other species and to the animate landscapes they inhabit, that we now so casually bring about their destruction? (pp. 27-28)

... can we even hope to catch a glimpse of this process, which has given rise to so many of the habits and linguistic prejudices that now structure our very thinking? (p. 28)

This is the challenge of the book—to catch that glimpse, to explain what has happened to us so that we have become so blind, deaf and generally insensitive not just to the world around us but to each other. Abram begins this quest by looking at two theories of experience, that of Edmund Husserl and that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Let me finish out these notes with an interpretive look at what Abram has to say about Husserl.

The question here is how are we to understand our experience of the world as we find ourselves in it—not any special experience such as what the physicist has, or the DJ has, or any specialist, but the experience we all have of the world we inhabit. Up until two centuries ago, those who sought to understand our awareness of the world came at it by way of trying to understand how we form and become aware of images of the world that represent it to us. These are not direct presentations of the world, but re-presentations of it, images of the things we see through or by means of them; devices like instant Polaroid photos that provide a connection with the world and its qualities as we go through it in our day-to-day business. Approaching perception in this way has invited puzzles from skeptics who ask, in effect, how in the case of any experience could we tell that the representations we have of the things around us are accurate? And of course, the answer is that we cannot. We can say that our images are accurate or reliable to the extent they are caused by a world with just the sorts of properties the representations tell us the world has, or we might say the images represent the world accurately just in case they were gathered in just the right circumstances—in those circumstances which are conducive to correct beliefs about the world's colors, shapes, and so on. But clearly neither of these will help because they require either that we have independent knowledge of the world in order to know when it is such as to cause us to perceive correctly, or else that we have independent evidence of when representations formed in certain conditions are fully reliable. So if we take this talk of representations seriously that will cut us off from experiencing the world directly and being able to check out just which representations are reliable. (Some might say that we rely on science to tell us the answers to the questions of how the world is for the scientists demand that their experiments be repeatable and inter-subjectively checkable. But then the question is what does the repeatability of experiments tell us really about the accuracy of our representations? After all if we are making a mistake in one case—a mistake of interpreting the results of the experiment or observation, then all we will do is repeat the

mistake. Besides we cannot rely on science for that is merely the source of one kind of take on the world—one interpretation among other possible ones of what is there before us).

The problem comes from trying to take ourselves out of the world and then to re-establish ourselves in the world having moved out and cut ourselves off from it. We cannot go from the inside out for if we are caught inside of our representations we will never gain another perspective from which to certify them. Further we cannot go from the outside in seeking to establish the correct physiology lying behind perceptions that are reliable, for either we are already assumed to be in contact with reality directly so that we can see which conditions are going to give us reliable representations or we are only caught up in more representations of what we take to be the outside causes of our internal images. ***A third approach suggests that we place ourselves in the world in interaction with the things of the world, and accept as reliable those interactions which seem to give us self-control of and affective satisfaction in those of our actions which we need to perform in order to survive or otherwise to carry through our undertakings and commitments, and reject those that do not.*** We must reject the notion that we have to prove that we are in the world and in contact with reality (where else might we be anyway--out of this world?), and in its stead accept our place as the real organism we seem to be.

The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the 'realer' world of quantifiable and measurable scientific 'facts.' It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs. Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and 'real;' than the world we experience with our unaided senses. The living, feeling, and thinking organism is assumed to derive, somehow, from the mechanical body whose reflexes and 'systems' have been measured and mapped, the living person now an epiphenomenon of the anatomized corpse. That it takes living, sensing subjects, complete with their enigmatic emotions and unpredictable passions, to conceive of those subatomic fields, or to dissect and anatomize the body, is readily overlooked, or brushed aside as inconsequential. (p. 34)

But these are not inconsequential points. We must own up to our presuppositions in doing science and in living the everyday life we do. And if we do, we will place ourselves within the world and turn our attention to how we come to experience things from within, so to speak.

By thus returning to the taken-for-granted realm of subjective experience, not to explain it but simply to pay attention to its rhythms and textures, not to capture or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse modes of appearance—and ultimately to give voice to its enigmatic and ever-shifting patterns—phenomenology would articulate the ground of the other sciences. (p. 35)

It is not a private, but a collective, dimension—the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are entwined—and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it. The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior, indeed, to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion. All of our concepts and representations, scientific and otherwise, necessarily draw nourishment from this indeterminate realm, as the physicist analyzing data is still nourished by the air that she is breathing, by the feel of the chair that supports her and the light flooding in through the window, without her being particularly conscious of these participations. (p. 40)

Ok. So there is some form of baseline experiencing through which we move in the world and which we refine and then conceptualize in our accounts of the world in which we “freeze” it into a fixed set of facts. And this baseline is common to all who are placed in the world and yet for all we can tell it is highly variable among us since our individual experience tied to our own movement through the world is tied to our individual emotions, aims, and takes on what we encounter. Further it seems to vary not just between species but even within species by cultures and thus we can expect that the variety of cultures that we become aware of bring with them a variety of ways of encountering and taking the world and then a variety of variations on the base-line experience—that is a variety of variations on how we interpret the presence of the world so as to orient our activity or action and thereby meet our needs or achieve the affective satisfactions we seek. And even beyond this we might speculate about whether there are in the different styles of different individuals determined by their occupations, their artistic experiences and training, their personal physical challenges, and such personality traits as their risk aversiveness the variances will make a difference to the base-line experiences had by these individuals even within a culture and even within a style of say an active physical laborer or skilled craftsperson versus a sedentary intellectual person, between male and female, between physically weak and strong, and so on. And finally, the baseline experiences can be expected to vary with the sorts and gravity of expectations placed upon the persons by others and the willingness and interest of the person in question to respond to those expectations. A plethora of factors will affect the varieties and individual expressions of the base-line experience. But still there are commonalities and some shared dimensions or parameters of this experience which we should anticipate finding if we are as similar as our interactions and interdependencies suggest, and if we are placed together in a shared world as we seem to be.

The earth is thus, for Husserl, the secret depth of the life-world. It is the most unfathomable region of experience, an enigma that exceeds the structurations of any particular culture or language, in his words, the earth is the encompassing ‘ark of the world,’ the common root basis of all relative life worlds. (p. 43)

That is, there is a common world, a common earth on which we find ourselves whatever we make of it.

Now this approach and the relegation of science into only a portion of the various cultural takes on the world, into only one or another of a small number of life world cultures even though it claims to be the objective official source of knowledge of the way things really are sound a lot like the claims of the official and maybe even the private versus the social and the personal in narrative accounts of what and how we experience. Perhaps then the question about the nature of experience is really a question of how we are going to decide which narrative--the social or the official/public to credit as reliable as we go through life, and which source—that underlying the personal or the private we should associate with or come to elevate (in a value judgment) to the status of base-line reliable experience. We will take this up in the next set of notes as we take a look at Abram in Chapter 2, on the work of Merleau-Ponty. Stay tuned!

Lecture 17, Abram 2, Narrative, Interpretation and Experience: Toward A Narrative Theory of Experience  
Charles V. Blatz

ast time, in lecture 16, we ended with a rather unusual suggestion. Perhaps science is only one narrative, its methods only one way to approach the world, its observations the results of only one set of manipulations of and only one way to effect separations of some things (individual things separated-off) from others in the world. Then the authority of science might be questioned as to whether it has the authority of the official and whether it should be allowed to distort the personal where we find another set of manipulations, another set of procedures, and another set of approaches to the world. Scientific lab manuals and observation procedures might be only so many narratives of a certain genre, one genre that happens to be aimed at a certain set of purposes carrying us into the world—namely, prediction and control of the events we experience, not necessarily the creation and nurturing of an affectively satisfying personal life, a life suited to organize 70 years of striving and accomplishment and to give it meaning so that the person understands her self and what she is capable of and about.

Perhaps there is a single sort of experience underlying both the scientific and the abstracted philosophical tales and the personal undertakings and strivings that we tell and take part in. But this is a single form of experience that is not articulate and not yet interpreted in ways made acceptable among many persons, not yet corrected by intersubjectivity. And it is in that bringing to co-consciousness, that making acceptable to many persons that we can transmogrify—or is it transfigure--the common experience into something very different and no longer necessarily recognized as of any clear personal significance. Then we find that we have intellectualized or made commonly acceptable as a matter of reflection the world we experience. But at the same time we have lost the world we live in and now we must learn our way in a world we have constructed and negotiated and struggled over the description of. Thus consider our plowing a field, inserting the disk or the blade into the surface and loosening or turning it over to expose what was once underneath to the air and light, while breaking it up into the beginnings of a loose matrix into which we will plant corn or soy beans or wheat, or tomatoes. We can in this way describe the common treatment of soil due to the application of standard equipment by accepted procedures. But how is this activity lived? How was it lived at the beginning of the previous century when we were still not equipped with internal combustion engine-driven tractor power and the rest of the technology we now use?

Harnessed like yoked oxen, to a heavy task, we feel the play of our muscles and joints, the weight of the plow and the resistance of the soil. To act and to know that we are acting, to come into touch with reality and even to live it, but only in the measure in which it concerns the work that is being accomplished and the furrow that is being plowed, such is the function of human intelligence. Yet a beneficent fluid bathes us, whence we draw the very force to labor and to live. From this ocean of life, in which we are immersed, we are continually drawing something, and we feel that our being, or at least the intellect that guides it, has been formed therein by a kind of local concentration. Philosophy can only be an effort to dissolve again into the Whole. Intelligence, reabsorbed into its principle [beginning or source], may thus live back again its own genesis. But the enterprise cannot be achieved in one stroke; it is necessarily collective and progressive. It consists in an interchange of impressions which, correcting and adding to each other, will end by expanding the humanity in us and making us even transcend it. (p. 210 of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell, and published by Random House Inc. in a 1944 edition of the original 1911 English version.)

Bergson goes onto to say more of this view of perceptual experience--as beginning in action and being tied to our awareness of the world as we move through it in our actions and only later coming to common consciousness as we articulate it and piece together these personal memoirs

so to speak. He claims that this view will draw objections from those who say that no, perception is a matter of the mind or the intellect viewing representations of the world and progressing through the sorting and arranging of these as we construct a world from these images and as we seek in this construction to match our reflections to the reality reflected or re-presented. To say otherwise the objection goes, says Bergson, is to reason in a circle. That is the objection says that our use of sensuous awareness to guide our actions presupposes the use of reflection and the application of concepts—an inner dialogue in commonly used terms undertaken to organize and apply our insights as to what we are facing and what we are doing as we plow the ground, or drive the car or mend the torn fabric. We reason in a circle to say that sensuous experience comes from action and then only comes to be reflected upon and intellectualized or articulated in common terms of a public language. But Bergson disagrees:

The objection presents itself naturally to the mind. But the same reasoning would prove also the impossibility of acquiring any new habit. It is of the essence of reasoning to shut us up in the circle of the given. But action breaks the circle. (p. 211 of *Creative Evolution*)

In other words we have to note that we are at times new in the world, we have to try to stop smoking, stop that annoying habit we have that others have pointed out or we have to start anew something that involves new moves, new ways of bodily understanding and only later can be the subject of reflection and articulation as to what we are doing and how we are doing it. Consider learning to ride a bicycle, learning a new dance step, listening to music we have never heard before—(remember the first time you heard techno? Did your body start to move without your thinking about it?) In all of these cases, Bergson seems to say, we will find the base-line experience at work and in none of them will we find reflection until after the fact, only later, only in retrospect. All this suggests that we turn to action, to some sort of participation in the world through our body in order to find what we are looking for by way of an understanding of baseline experience. And it then would be action that provides the authorization of one account or another of what we experience, an account in a narrative that is either personal and then social, or is public and then is private as we assimilate the official into our observations so that then we can act--be it in plowing a field, or dancing, or using an electron microscope. Which of these stories makes the most sense of perception or of sensuous experience? That is the question now for us. In the account that is developed by Abram, it is the Bergsonian or participatory view of experience that we must turn to. Abram approaches this in terms of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

“Merleau-Ponty begins, then, by identifying the subject—the experiencing ‘self’—with the bodily organism.” 45

“The living body is thus the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge. The common notion of the experiencing self, or mind, as an immaterial phantom ultimately independent of the body can only be a mirage: Merleau-Ponty invites us to recognize, at the heart of even our most abstract cogitations, the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself.” 46

“The living, attentive body—which Merleau-Ponty called the ‘body subject’—is this very being that, pondering a moment ago, suddenly took up this pen and scribbled these thoughts, it is the very power I have to look to and to see things, or to turn away and look elsewhere, the ability to cry and to laugh, or to howl at night with the wolves, to find and gather food whether in a forest or a market, the power to walk upon the ground and to imbibe the swirling air. Yet ‘I’ do not deploy these powers like a commander piloting a

ship, for I am, in my depths, indistinguishable from them, as my sadness is indistinguishable from a certain heaviness of my bodily limbs, or as my delight is only artificially separable from the widening of my eyes, from the bounce in my step and the heightened sensitivity of my skin. Indeed, facial expressions, gestures, and spontaneous utterances like sighs and cries seem to immediately incarnate feelings, moods, and desires without ‘my’ being able to say which came first—the corporeal gesture or its purportedly ‘immaterial’ counterpart.” 46.

Thus Merleau-Ponty imagines us active and encountering the world in so far as our physical presence comes in contact with its various fixtures as we seek to see to our needs and the ends of our various undertakings playful or serious. As Abram points out, this is not a matter of our intellect guiding us through a sea of already discriminated or determined things. Rather, we move in the world and find in its resistances and in its passages and in its possibilities of manipulation that we can divide it up and treat these divided and separated-off portions as separate things with their own particular properties of interest to us as aspects of the world; we can grasp so as to control our encounters and gain what it is we seek. We are able to move about because we have tried and found the path that works for what movements we would make—or we were stymied and then disappointed, unable to solve our problems. We do not move like a captain piloting a ship—our intellect in charge and applying terms and concepts that were given us before and independently of our working through them in experience. Rather we move like one seeking to put our large hand down the slender crease between the couch cushions to reach and retrieve whatever loose change we can find there, or we move like a hesitant child trying to color within the lines so as to be able to enter the holiday coloring contest.

Considered phenomenologically—that is, as we actually experience and *live* it—the body is a creative, shape-shifting entity. Certainly, it has its finite character and style, its unique textures and temperaments that distinguish it from other bodies [as we might discover in our own experience trying to play basketball or dance, or as others might discover in their intended or accidental encounters on the basketball court or the dance floor]; yet these mortal limits in no way close me off from the things around me or render my relations to them wholly predictable and determinate. On the contrary, my finite bodily presence alone is what enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives. Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things.” (p. 47 of Abram)

And it is in relations with things that we come to mark their boundaries and characters and thereby put ourselves in a position to be able to articulate what they are in their significance for us—that is to experience them in one way or another. In this practice based account of experiencing, science is then just one set of procedures for approaching and observing or changing the world—just one regimen or one set of paradigms for experiencing the world and the things we find there. The standardized and repeatable experiments or experimental experiences we learn to perform or achieve as we learn the practices of science are just one set of such things and *not always, but sometimes* those that are most significant for us personally, even though they are the most significant for us in a course of studies in a science class. But whether the mode of interaction and its standards of practice are scripted or learned by happenstance in a trial and error or whimsical manner as often in life, we are, as a bodily presence, always in contact and in a give and take with the world around us so that we might find our way. Imagine wandering around in one of those haunted house Halloween scare experience places and having to touch all sorts of disgusting or spooky things—not at all what we think they are—in order to find our way through. That is what sensuous experience guiding action and found in action is like, except that in many

cases some have gone before and have found a path and were able to articulate it and make a map we could follow; but even then we have to go ourselves and find the turns, find the path for ourselves that is interpret and apply the map ourselves in our own interactions. Or remember the work of the acclaimed physicist Werner Heisenberg who reminded us that there are limits to our abilities to measure the features of the world—we cannot measure the position and momentum of an electron in an atom simultaneously for when we try we are sure to disturb one or the other by the introduction of the photons (particles of light energy) that we would need to record where and how fast the electron is moving. Sensuous experience and interventions in the world based on this mode of access to the future are interactive as well as experimental. And this is blind or pre-reflective as we proceed. We are not monitoring ourselves at every moment to see, for example, just how we might place our hand or focus our eye to see the drop of dew on the blade of grass refracting the sunlight and so causing a prism effect.

“Perception, in Merleau-Ponty’s work, is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.” (pp. 52-53 in Abram)

And as Merleau-Ponty makes clear, echoing Bergson’s view of the awareness of life in the moment, we are operating in this base-line experience prior to reflection and it is this that makes reflection and articulateness possible or open to us.

By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists.” (p.57)

But we suspend this participation only on behalf of other participations already going on—with the other persons in the room, with the hard and uncomfortable chair on which we sit, with our own thoughts and analyses. We always retain the ability to alter or suspend any particular instance of participation. Yet we can never suspend that flux of participation itself. (p. 59)

But this is not all. As we proceed to participate in the world via our various senses or various modes of testing and accessing the resistances we might encounter and then shape into the world, we must bring them together into a single place we inhabit—or better yet we must come to appreciate their ties to each other and to the determinations we form so as to be able to act. This is true not only of our experiencing objects in the world, so-called, but also and very importantly experiencing other beings with the same sorts of strivings and same modes of access to the world as we have (for the most part).

Hence, just as we have described perception as a dynamic participation between my body and things, so we now discern, within the act of perception, a participation

between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Indeed these events are not separable, for the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my senses, and vice versa. The relative divergence of my bodily senses (eyes in the front of the head, ears toward the back, etc.) and their curious bifurcation (not one but two eyes, one on each side, and similarly two ears, two nostrils, etc.) indicates that this body is a form destined to the world; it ensures that my body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth. (p. 62)

Thus not only do we come to separate out the various senses from the unity of our experience of the world even as we come to separate out what we call particular objects and what it is necessary for the effectiveness of our efforts to treat as separate and distinguishable things, but also we come to treat as separate and special some of these distinguished “things”, namely those that can push back or can probe our being (as we would probe that of a tree or a pomegranate in search of the ends of our purposes). We wonder if we should come to treat them as themselves capable of sensuous experience and as seats of action—how else could we regard them as they push back in ways important to our achieving our purposes. And then we come to see some of these reciprocating others or perceive some of these reciprocating beings as valuing, intending, striving, acting beings and we come to see others in this way as a response from our whole beings, from the whole of our senses, the whole of our beliefs, and as a grasp of others as like us in being in the world as physical presences and then as experiencing like us, and as having values and as being like us in striving to achieve their ends.

So the recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension of experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded. As we return to our senses, we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies—supported, that is, not just by ourselves, but by icy streams tumbling down granitic slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind.

This intertwined web of experiences is, of course, the ‘life-world’ to which Husserl alluded in his final writings, yet now the life-world has been disclosed as a profoundly carnal field, as this very dimension of smells and tastes and chirping rhythms warmed by the sun and shivering with seeds. It is, indeed, nothing other than the bio-sphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded. ....; it is rather the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely a part of the world that he, or she, experiences. (p. 65) And

Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient. (p. 67)

Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me. (p. 67)

Now Abram seems a bit enthusiastic on this point to me, for he would grant sentience far beyond the limits we find reason for in our experience, in so far as the world seems to be pushing back at us in our strivings. (But this is tricky ground—do we ignore and render as non-sentient the beings frozen in fear at our presence and perfectly capable of pushing back but paralyzed beyond

that for the moment? Who of those millions silenced by our show of force would push back if they thought they could do so with impunity? Do we say they have accepted our actions and our beings or even worse that they are insensate and not a matter of our concern as we scan the world looking for other sentient life? Well, that political stand has been taken in various cases of genocide, but is no more defensible for that. So we must be careful to not deny sentience and feeling to our kindred in the world no matter whether they are of another culture, or of a different species. It would be easy to mis-step here and assert our sentience over that of others only to see that in doing so we have undermined our very grounds for being taken seriously in our actions by failing to extend authority to all who have the same claim in their sentience. This, in its way, is what happens when one narrative articulating one sort of experience is asserted above all others as the true narrative—it is what happens, for example, in the elevation of science above all else or all other narratives.

We must be careful to note that the truth of narratives articulating the action guiding awareness we have is truth living up to the standards of access necessary for action in the world as suited to our purposes, and then standards answering to the lived spirit of the world, not to the supposed letter of the world. This means that the kind of truth provided in experience and its interpretive articulations in our common languages and common paradigms for observation and access is not that pretended by a narrative of description recreating or picturing or re-presenting the world, exactly as it is as if it is a certain way rather than seen and approached and interacted within a certain way(s). Yet it is science's claim to provide just this sort of narrative and it is then science's fault to claim that its narrative—the narrative it articulates suited to its purposes of foresight and control of experiences is the truth and the only truth. We must rest content with one or another account that best serves our varying purposes, with a narrative not of re-representation of the world, but a narrative of practical presence in the world. As some would say, we must rest content with a narrative possessing a kind of practically effective verisimilitude, not a narrative possessing a kind of literal re-creativity, a kind of isomorphically accurate re-representation of the world. Our experience deals with models and their articulation, not actualities and their re-productions.

Thus we might ask how consciousness works. But this is an empirical question for science to answer in the psychology and neuro-physiology of perception or it is a question for phenomenologists to answer, but not a question to answer by re-creating the moment of experience and the very experience itself. And what then are we to say generally of what we experience, what are the objects of direct experience? These are not images in the mind or brain, ideas, sense-data or qualia, but the world acted upon and through that discriminated into many separate abstractions we call "things" that are supposedly acted upon or encountered in our active presence in the world. Further, the actions we perform upon "them" and the form of our encounter with them thus serve as the sources of what is the appropriate level and kind of description we undertake. The appropriate or even, we might say, the correct level of and genre of specification in articulations is dependent upon and called for by the needs of agency to be successful, or that is, they are determined by what is needed to ***give us self-control of and affective satisfaction in those of our actions which we seek to perform in order to survive or otherwise to carry through our undertakings and commitments***, and we reject those determination and supposed experiences that do not function this way for us. Thus the skeptic who wants us to give a general way to sort out reliable from unreliable experiences, a way that is free of talk of the presence in the world of experiencers and free of reference to their purposes is setting up a foolish enterprise, one that is defeated before it gets started. Pick a standard and a context including a set of purposes and the authority lying behind these and we can then distinguish between the true and false, the illusory and the veridical in experience. Without these we cannot. ***The level and genre of specification must be enough to give us the responsibility we***

***must have to be an agent allowed and authorized within a group of individuals in the world.***

That is the test of truth we must heed, and that is what is in accord with the notion of experience set out here. Our descriptions articulating experience are offered to organize things for our purposes, not to check the accuracy of representations—the world we know depends for its character upon what epistemic task we require of a theory of perception that is wanted or is motivated as an account of coming to consciousness. Why aren't we aware of intellectual images or representations of what we experience? Well, that explanation does nothing for us and we get more from a direct contact/action guiding theory in which we can make sense of our reaching accord with the world and each other through ***the personal*** coming into being, and then also fitting into or participating in the becoming of ***the social***. Thus here in understanding sensuous experience we would do well to suit our account to the genesis of the personal and the social rather than to the given official and the private stands we might take on that.

As Merleau-Ponty says through Abram,

By the term 'perception' we mean the concerted activity of all the body's senses as they function and flourish together. (p.59)

And then we should be clear that reflection and the articulation of experience into language can serve to separate us from the world—it can serve to present the world as if it is so many fixed objects individual and separate from each other in the reality we have supposedly captured in our narratives. Language then can take us away from that unity of physical presences that is the world of the base-line experiences we act through. Or it might serve to take us into it as does poetry, for example, on page 71 of Abram. Here we must be very careful not to fool ourselves into thinking that some preferred narrative, spoken for some preferred purposes of action, provides the world in so many words. It cannot. In language that takes us to the world, we are connected, the world is evoked for us, we are returned to the realm of our action better able to appreciate some mode of access we had not known or paid sufficient attention to before. It is like seeing a gestalt illustration shift before our eyes from a stairway to a cornice, or an illustration of an old woman to that of a young woman—to take only two of the many famous gestalt illustrations.

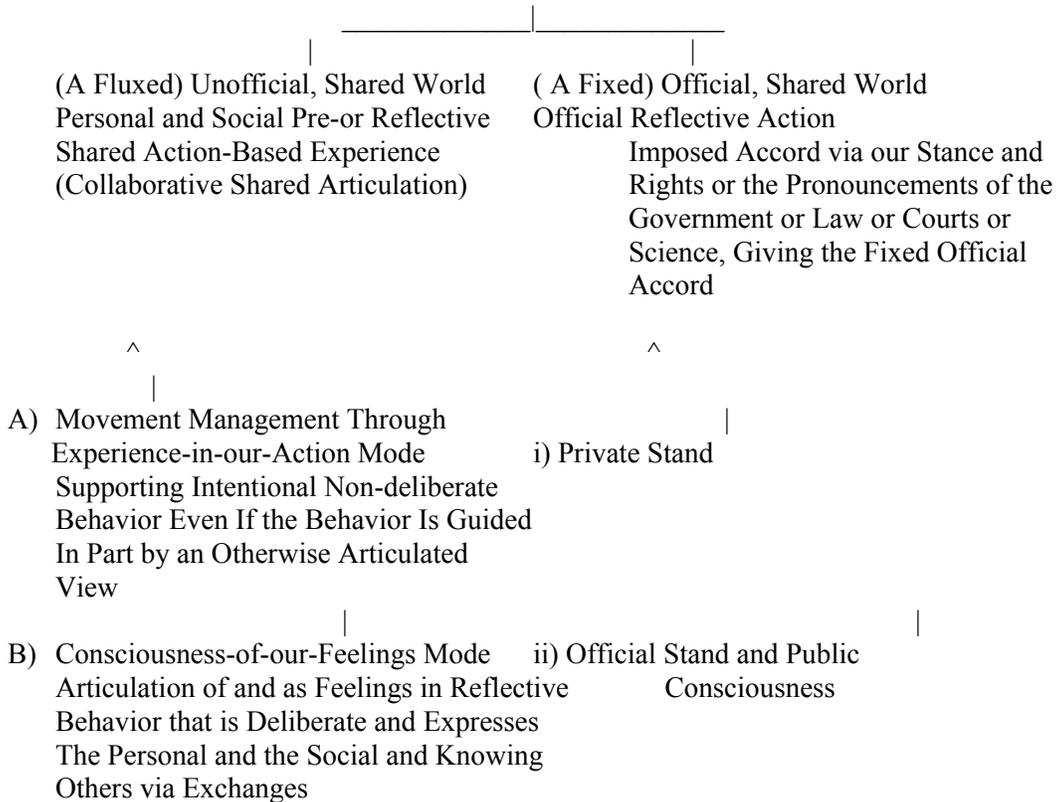
Here words do not speak about the world; rather they speak to the world, and to the expressive presences that, with us, inhabit the world. In multiple and diverse ways, taking (as we shall see) a unique form in each indigenous culture, spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth. (p. 71)

In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances. (pp. 71-72)

How then might we sum up this view of sensuous experience? Generally it is a matter of being an active physical presence in the world and working to form an accord with it—that is either to simply find our way through it in the flow of our unarticulated experiences so that we successfully act in the moment, or else, to partition and otherwise articulate what we access and our path through it so that we are able to anticipate or otherwise control our access and path, and then able to act with intention through our vision and the living of that vision in our physical presence in the world, in so far as we characterize and approach that world through our articulations of previous and present experience—in so far as we seek and successfully act

deliberately. In either case—with merely intentional action or with deliberate action we reach an accord, that is a peace with the world, and we note that in so far as we settle on a path of action, or a path of belief and action, and then go forward through that access to our future physical presence in the world. Thus we are talking about two sorts of experiences, with or without the attempt to make them articulate and to share and reach accord with others over that articulation-reach agreement on what it is we see or feel or hear, or touch etc. Thus there is in general and more particularly:

A Seeking of a Physical Placement in the World of Self and Others—Via a certain Accord



Each of the above four sorts of experience has the constraints appropriate to a different form of approach to the world and a separate form of accord we might reach with it (experience in action, personal or social articulated experience, private experience which is not necessarily articulate, the experience of the official stance on the world which is always articulate and fixed) and each has a style of presence in the world that can be individualized and is relevant to access to another as an agent or to another as a co-participant in and co-experiencer of the world (personal or social subject of experience in the flow of action or through articulation in a personal or a common shared communicative language, and private or public subject of experience that is articulate or not through a common public language in the case of the private, and always articulate through a common and received public language in the case of the public or official experience of the world). (Clearly some of these differences have ethical implications also.)

There are then three approaches to perception/ experience:

- from the inside out in terms of representations of the world perceived;

- from the outside in, in terms of the effects of the world on the physiology and psychology and other aspects of the perceiver; and
- from the physical placement and involved discriminations and separations appropriate for agency made from the inside-out-and-outside-in as we function as agents seeking to make a difference in the world or to interrupt its course in some way.

This third option is perfectly compatible with physics and physiology as accounts of our physical presence and various modes of access, and it allows consciousness to begin with differential responses to presentations through reflection and differentiation. It also allows us to be “taught how to see, hear, etc. correctly” by the directions in lab manuals, in books on how to dissect a frog, through the work of art critics and through other interpretative materials and lessons. These lessons can be seen like the consultations of a shaman operating at the borderlands of our knowing, and guiding us into how to act/see/hear etc. with respect to unknown things. In light of this experienced and knowing guidance, this knowledge, we would understand how to be and how to act and how to interact in the world, and so, then, how to visually or otherwise sensuously experience and practically be in the world at some time. And the instructions would be articulations of previous experience serving to guide us in discriminatively interacting with the seen, or otherwise accessed world, as we proceed in our actions; guides more or less general and informative about how we can work around things or work with them as tools, or how we must respect them, and so on, and in general achieve various different forms of accord with them. They would serve like road maps positioning and coordinating us to access or to meet an aspect of the world, as if to single it out/discriminate it and then to live around or through action upon it, as though it is really a separable thing, a separable part of the world.

Lecture 18, Abram 3, The Language of the World  
Charles V. Blatz

What happened then to separate us from the world of which we used to be such an integral part? What has driven a wedge between people so that we are either uncaring or unable to appreciate and empathize with each other? These are the questions Abram is asking in the book and these are the questions he hopes to answer by looking at what has happened to perception and to language and the connections between these changes. He begins this chapter on the flesh of language with an important quotation from Merleau-Ponty in which M-P is saying that we must not separate the anger felt from the anger expressed as though only the former is real anger and the latter is just some sign or re-presentation of it or some portrayal of what we are made ready to do because of the real anger. The expressed anger shows forth anger—it is not evidence of it. It is the very presence of anger. The anger is as real in the expression as in the feeling, indeed the feeling is present in the gesture or the expression as well. As Abram finishes quoting M-P and then goes on to explain the point as he (Abram) sees it, we see the introduction of the terminology of communicative speech and meaning which are full with and expressive of the affective or the feeling side of the life of the speaker.

*The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.*

Active, living speech is just such a gesture, a vocal gesticulation wherein the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words. Communicative meaning is always, in its depths affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body’s native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Linguistic meaning is not some ideal and bodiless essence that we arbitrarily assign to a physical sound or word and then toss out into the ‘external’ world.

Rather, meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation. (pp. 74-75)

And how are we to understand this very important point? Have you ever been in love or had a child and been fully caught up in another? Have you ever felt that language through which you communicate with another with whom you share love or some other serious responsibility? The point is that this language is filled with and often shows forth the feelings we have for the other or for the situations we are in. This, language used with meaning that shows forth the feeling responses we have, the very responses which motivate as well as inform the language we use, is language in its communicative meaning. What this point is is clear enough. We often know from the words chosen and their delivery what the disposition of the speaker is. We know when the speaker is hostile, suspicious, kidding around, exhausted, or just not caring one bit about what is being said. And this affective or felt side of the speech is very often conveyed on purpose and sometimes in spite of our selves. Now when this felt response to us, to what we said or did, comes through in our speech, we are speaking in the moment in a way that shows our affect, and that is what Abram calls the communicative meaning of our speech. It is the same as what I would want to call the personal felt dimension of our responses in speech—personal as opposed to social, private and public or official. When we use language with communicative meaning we are not only conveying some point that we sincerely believe or accept but also expressing the feeling that we have in connection with that point. That we do this in a guileless way, as a matter of spoken commentary on our world as we experience it, or as we begin to articulate it, is perfectly natural since we learn language in the practice of imitation in circumstances naturally giving rise to the feelings we express. As learners of language we practice the “local language, our resonant bodies slowly coming to echo the inflections and accents common to our locale and community.” P. 75 And, he might have added, slowly coming to take part in the articulation of the felt responses to the world shared in our communicative groups. Thus meaning as well as experience can be personal, or when shared with others and brought to consciousness with them in articulation or prior practice, it can be social and filled with the felt responses or the bodily resonances we feel in the experience that gives rise to the speech.

Without this communicative meaning, at most we are describing not expressing our feelings and experiences. We turn to each other to pronounce, from our standpoint, just what the world is that we are experiencing—that objectified world we have uncovered or revealed in our experiences. Or else, we acquiesce in the public or the official pronouncements of what it is we are seeing. (Think, for example, of being told in biology class what it is that you are seeing under the microscope and learning to look for this by looking at the drawings in which the features you are to focus on are abstracted away from their surroundings. The description of what we experience in those circumstances is what would count as the official, or the common-public meaning of the descriptions we use.)

Thus we have two sorts of meaning to note here—the affective laden first hand reporting language that expresses our responses as opposed to describing our objectifications, and the language apt to the descriptions of the objects we encounter set over against us, separated in the world, as opposed to what we interact with and experience in the participatory way that Merleau-Ponty speaks of. The first of these is the vehicle of communicative meaning and the second of common or public meaning. The first is flexible and suited to the person using it, and the second is the fixed and common-to-all-possible-users, and so not attuned to the personal experience of anyone in particular anywhere in particular, any time in particular. As Henri Bergson puts the point it is the difference between language that is suited to express common concepts, versus language that is suited to express our intuitive experiences in context. “But it [metaphysics, or the study of things as they really are] is strictly itself only when it goes beyond the concept, or at

least when it frees itself of the inflexible and ready-made concepts and creates others very different from those we usually handle, I mean flexible, mobile, almost fluid representations, always ready to mould themselves on the fleeting forms of intuition.” (P. 20) “But to do that, it must do itself violence, reverse the direction of the operation by which it ordinarily thinks, continually upsetting its categories, or rather recasting them. In so doing it will arrive at fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its windings and of adopting the very movement of the inner life of things.” (pp. 63-64 of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Mabelle L. Andison, Philosophical Library, 1961)

And having drawn that distinction, we might quickly note that it is in terms of communicative meaning that we need to meet and engage the other whether in the record of our experiential exchanges or participations in the world, or in the language in which we express to each other the personal world we experience and seek to share with them. It is in communicative meaning, not in terms of the common public meanings, that we might glean the significance of events and encounters making up the living of the person, and then it is in these terms that we must seek to appreciate what the agent makes of her or his world as she or he experiences it and so then what the person is really experiencing, in terms of the significance of her or his encounters. This is the access we have to each other, the source of intuition we have of the other in Bergson’s language, in so far as the other is seen as an independent agent or being in the world. And so it is communicative meaning that might take us into the living of the other person. The public language might at best characterize that life in very general terms and concepts which cannot begin to convey the life world of the other. This has all sorts of implications for us in thinking about ethics, but it is also important in just understanding language and how it might or might not relate us to the world. Abram is saying that it is communicative meaning that relates us to the world. And he is saying that this set of relations is what we can lose. Well, ok. But how does this relate us to the world and how do we lose that set of connections?

And today you read these printed words as tribal hunters once read the tracks of deer, moose, and bear printed in the soil of the forest floor. (p. 95)

We read these traces with organs honed over millennia by our tribal ancestors, moving instinctively from one track to the next, picking up the trail afresh whenever it leaves off, hunting the *meaning*, which would be the *meeting* with the Other. (p. 96)

Later, perhaps, we found that by copying the distinctive prints and scratches made by other animals we could gain a new power; here was a method of identifying with the other animal, taking on its expressive magic in order to learn of its whereabouts, to draw it near, to make it appear. Tracing the impression left by a deer’s body in the snow, or transferring that outline onto the wall of the cave: these are ways of placing oneself in distant contact with the Other, whether to invoke its influence or to exert one’s own. (p. 96) And,

*The sensible phenomenon and its spoken name were, in a sense, still participant with one another—the name a sort of emanation of the sensible entity. With the phonetic aleph-beth, however, the written character no longer refers us to any sensible phenomenon out in the world, or even to the name of such a phenomenon (as with the rebus), but solely to a gesture to be made by the human mouth. There is a concerted shift of attention away from any outward or worldly reference of the pictorial image, away from the sensible phenomenon that had previously called forth the spoken utterance, to the shape of the utterance itself, now invoked directly by the written character. A direct association is established between the pictorial sign and the vocal gesture, for the first time completely*

*bypassing the thing pictured.* The evocative phenomena—the entities imaged—are no longer a necessary part of the equation. Human utterances are now elicited, directly, by human-made signs; *the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a necessary part of the system.* Pp100-101

The scribe, or author, could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down. *A new power of reflexivity was thus coming into existence, borne by the relation between the scribe and his scripted text.* (p. 107)

The fact that one's scripted words can be returned to and pondered at any time that one chooses, regardless of when, or in what situation, they were first recorded, grants a timeless quality to this new reflective self, a sense of the relative independence of one's verbal, speaking self from the breathing body with its shifting needs. The literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal experience. (p. 112)

So the first part of Abram's view is that there is a kind of breakdown in the reciprocity or the mutual participation in the perceiver and the world when the perceiver begins to take her meaning from the written signs. How does this work? Remember back to pages 33, and 68, and 71 where he makes clear the ways in which we are in reciprocity with the world when we experience it, how we are participating in its goings on when we are aware of it. This reciprocity between the world and us in our experiencing is different however from the reflexiveness of thought we experience in reading or in thinking through the written word. In that sort of case, where we are concerned with common public meanings and where these meanings are supposedly fixed and where they come into play in experts pronouncing (not expressing) dated truths about the world at some place at some moment, truths that are re-presentations of the world "as it really is," and will not change from being at that time, in that sort of case, we are aware not of the world as it is in its processes of becoming, but as it is captured in an abstraction from all of these changes and fluctuations. We are not changing with the world, nor trying to do so to be aware of it in its becoming. Rather we are trying to freeze it or fix it, and then to pronounce the way it is. And our language, written as it is, allows us to go back and rethink these re-presentations. We no longer have to rely on memory to relive or recall the events; we can simply read their standardized fixed descriptions and thereby re-present them as they really were. The language in its fixity is feeding back into itself reinforcing the view that the world is fixed and so the written phonetic non-evocative language, shorn of its personal felt responses to the world's changes and our place in it, is suited to it (or the world is made so that it is suited to the language, whichever). Reciprocity is replaced with reflexiveness. Language is no longer a channel to the world as we take part in it, but is just a squirrel cage treadmill of reflections of its own operations of fixing the world into common public meanings separated from our feeling responses.

Once again Abram turns to ethics to help us to see both the gap between us and our world, and the loss of the bridge we are burning as we turn from evocative or expressive language to abstract common terms with standard meanings.

Prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like 'virtue,' 'justice,' and 'temperance' were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were

exhibited. The terms for such qualities were oral utterances called forth by particular social situations; they had no apparent existence independent of those situations. As utterances, they slipped back into the silence immediately after they were spoken; they had no permanent presence to the senses. 'Justice' and 'temperance' were thus experienced as living occurrences, as *events*. Arising in specific situations, they were inseparable from the particular persons or actions that momentarily embodied them.

Yet as soon as such utterances were recorded in writing, they acquired an autonomy and permanence hitherto unknown. Once written down, 'virtue' was seen to have an unchanging, visible form independent of the speaker—and independent as well of the corporeal situations and individuals that exhibited it. (p. 110)

And, of course, when he says that language was seen to have that feature, he does not mean that we discover that feature, but that language comes to seem to be that way in our thinking. But then we end up looking for the world that the language hooks onto, even though we have cut the language—our vehicle of access, free of the world and made it in its abstraction unsuited to link us to the world, let alone to capture the world. Thus we have to think up parallel objects that the words stand for—that they mean and connect up to (these are concepts, or meanings), and then we must figure how these things are somehow embodied in the very things in the world we attach the terms to as we seek to describe the world with them. But now we have caught ourselves up in a process of spinning our intellectual wheels in the airy ooze that we have churned up by our own abstractions. We have disconnected language from the world. We have set it up so that we might reflect within it and reflect on it, but not reflect through it on the world, and yet the whole point of it is to return the world to us as we need to become engaged with it. In this way we have cut ourselves off from the world through the transformation of language into an abstraction as opposed to an expression of our responses to the world.

That is the first pattern of the explanation of why written language has cut us off from the world. We are cut off in so far as the official is suited to the written, and the written to the official account of the way the world is. And in so far as the written and official are abstracted away from the lived world that we respond to through our feelings they have lost contact with it.

The second pattern of explanation that Abram gives has to do with the fact that the written word and its world, create their own replacement for the processes of exchange and participation we have in direct experience of the world. And, the world of the written word allows in the possibility of lies and other distortions in ways that take us forever away from the life-world of our experiences. To explain this further, notice that the first problem Abram talks of is a kind of conceptual problem—we create an abstraction and then we get caught in it through the self-reflexiveness of this public common abstract language. But the second problem is a little different, more a psychological problems having to do with our gaining knowledge. We create in our experience that reciprocates or takes part in the world, a known world which serves to orient us in future experience. But then we come along and generate a language that is written and not such as to take us closer to or to recall the world, but rather is a set of abstract signs that gain meaning in their relations to each other. The coherence we create in our experiential sense of the world is lost for a coherence in the story we generate in the meanings we string together in our written stories. In this way we trick ourselves into saying we are gaining knowledge of the world and are really aware of things in the world independent of ourselves, when really we have become aware of a kind of counterfeit—a made up world centered in our storey and a set of objects that are real and independent only in our written stories. Thus we have replaced the touchstone of credulity that our evolved biology has given us with a touchstone of narrative plausibility. But this narrative plausibility is only a tissue of constructed coherence, just a story, a kind of lie. And in turning away from the world we participate in as the test or touchstone of the

truth of our experience we have lost contact with the world we live in and put between us and that world an official story that relies upon being asserted by the powerful to be regarded as something other than a lie. We have introduced a veil between us and the world and the veil introduces the possibility of the lie, the deceptive re-presentation of the world. In this way we have introduced a new animism into our thinking about the world. We now are aware of the spirit or the intelligence of the written word and the fixed, expertly derived belief, rather than the lived word in its dynamic and fluctuating place in our participation in the world. The second mistake, then, is this substitution of the created and static animism of the written words with the common public meaning, for the natural and dynamic animism of personal experience. The details of the story Abram provides in the following quotations.

Abram first returns to M-P to remind us of the fact that we are incomplete as knowing beings, a kind of open-circuit needing to be connected in some way to be complete and alive.

We may think of the sensing body as a kind of open circuit that completes itself only in things, and in the world. The differentiation of my senses, as well as their spontaneous convergence in the world at large, ensures that I am a being destined for relationship: it is primarily through my engagement with what is not me that I effect the integration of my senses, and thereby experience my own unity and coherence.

Indeed, the synaesthetic flowing together of different senses into a dynamic and unified experience is already operative within the single system of vision itself. [The reason is that vision is the blending of sensations from two separate but joined and coordinated eyes.] (p.125)

The diversity of my sensory systems, and their spontaneous convergence in the things that I encounter, ensures this interpenetration or interweaving between my body and other bodies—this magical participation that permits me, at times, to feel what others feel. The gestures of another being, the rhythm of its voice, and the stiffness or bounce in its spine all gradually draw my senses into a unique relation with one another, into a coherent, if shifting organization. And the more I linger with this other entity, the more coherent the relation becomes, and hence the more completely I find myself face-to-face with another intelligence, another center of experience. {As for example, in watching a bicyclist having an accident and feeling it with her or him.} (p. 127)

... so—according to Merleau-Ponty—there is a chiasm between the various sense modalities, such that they continually couple and collaborate with one another. Finally, this interplay of the different senses is what enables the chiasm between the body and the earth, the reciprocal participation—between one's own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world—that we commonly call perception.(p. 128)

Far from presenting a distortion of their factual relation to the world, the animistic discourse of indigenous, oral peoples is an inevitable counterpart of their immediate, synaesthetic engagement with the land they inhabit.... —all of this could be brushed aside as imaginary distortion or hallucinatory fantasy if such active participation were not the very structure of perception, if the creative interplay of the senses in the things they encounter was not our sole way of linking ourselves to those things and letting the things weave themselves into our experience. Direct, prereflective perception is inherently synaesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects. [The same sort of point can be made for perceiving other humans as important and as having authority as ethical agents themselves. It is only by our recognizing them as significant and active through

our interactions with others and through our seeking recognition from them for the authority we would each claim, that we find ourselves in a world of ethical agents each with her or his own standing or significance. It is our participation and mutually expressive responses in such relationships that allows for a mutual realization of the importance of us and the other as real ethical beings.]

If participation is the very structure of perception, how could it ever have been brought to a halt? To freeze the ongoing animation, to block the wild exchange between the senses and the things that engage them, would be tantamount to freezing the body itself, stopping it short in its tracks. And yet our bodies still move, still live, still breathe. If we no longer experience the enveloping earth as expressive and alive, this can only mean that the animating interplay of the senses has been transferred to another medium, another locus of participation. [That is, since perception is interactive and participatory, if we were no longer engage with the earth itself in our experience, and with each other in our ethical agency, then we must be engaged in something else, something else must animate our presence in experience, something else besides exchanges with other physical or ethical beings—and what could that be?]

IT IS THE WRITTEN TEXT THAT PROVIDES THIS NEW LOCUS. For to read is to enter into a profound participation, or chiasm, with the inked marks upon the page. In learning to read we must break the spontaneous participation of our eyes and our ears in the surrounding terrain (where they had ceaselessly converged in the synaesthetic encounter with animals, plants, and streams) in order to recouple those senses upon the flat surface of the page. . . . *This is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism nonetheless—as mysterious as a talking stone.* (pp. 130-131)

Only when the written characters lost all explicit reference to visible, natural phenomena did we move into a new order of participation. Only when those images came to be associated, alphabetically, with purely human-made sounds, and even the names of the letters lost all worldly, extrahuman significance, could speech of language come to be experienced as an exclusively human power. For only then did civilization enter into the wholly self-reflexive mode of animism or magic, that still holds us in its spell. . . (p. 132)

And once we are animated as parts of the world only within the meanings created within stories about the world, our sense of the world is really cut off from it and we are made reliant upon the word of others, a word that is easily enough distorted and is never made good by any direct contact with the world. We have replaced participation with characterization, reciprocity with self-reflexiveness. We are as Richard Rorty put it caught up in only a mirror of our own views, or as Niklas Luhmann puts it, we are caught up in a communication system which never really co-mingles world and our notions of it, and instead, for all we can tell, floats as free of the world as does a mere lie.

Also, note that in the self-reflexive versus the reciprocal and reflective-participatory forms of perception and articulation, we have found the possibility of lying—truth is cut loose from participation in the world and the personal presence of that participation, and truth is instead made over into a matter of correspondence with the world or matching up with and re-presenting the world. A skeptical gap between speech and the world spoken of arises disallowing checks on the veracity of our words, and thus ushering in the possibility of lying with impunity and with detachment from our cares. Such connection with the world is different from speech that articulates our direct and thence honest, affective responses to the world wherein there is no allowance for a gap or for a mis-description and for lying--inadvertent or intentional. Thus the

contrast we see is that between animism of direct association versus animism of disassociation. Looked at this way we can see in the advent of the animism of dissociation the opportunity for the power of the official or public language to abstract and remake the world and relationships, as well as the relationships of peoples or other agents, and the power of the lie against the expression of personal participation in the world and in the lives of others. Thus the animism of dissociation ushers in the chance for two forms of lying: 1) verbal and descriptive, and 2) ethical or the failure to recognize as present and significant those with whom we interact. The animism of dissociation makes possible the creation of the ethical refugee or the objectified person and thus makes possible the loss of standing through the official use of power in narrating the story of who is significant and who is not. Floating free of the reality of interaction, official recognition now comes to be an expression of power rather than the expression of the personal inter-involvement between people, where we have to see the other's agency and to see ourselves in the world of the other, and come to grips with the fact that our standing is dependent upon the gift of recognition from others. Thus the animism of dissociation creates a skeptical gap in the spaces of autonomy between ethical agents, a gap filled only by official word in the new public language, a language possessed of a truth of correspondence which is revealed by self-appointed experts; as opposed to language possessed of participatory truth or verisimilitude founded in the personal expressions of first-hand experience.

In this way, our experiential knowledge of the world we inhabit, and of those we inhabit it with are lost in favor of knowledge of characterizations of a world apart and of others who exist as separate individuals. Unity is replaced with disunity. Intimate knowledge is replaced with skeptical separation. A coherence of our felt experience is replaced with a coherence of expert narratives. The personal and the social are displaced by the private and the public in experience, meaning, and the discernment of significance.

Lecture 19, Abram 4, The Time of Your Life  
Charles V. Blatz

In chapter 7, Abram searches for ways to understand *time and space as aspects of the world experienced as opposed to abstract flows or expanses* known only through the possibility of the application of various metrics (miles per hour, kilometers per hour, ETA, ET, RPM, knots, rates of acceleration, acres, quarts, light years, and so on), and measurements of reflection or anticipation (years, millennia, hours, average years to graduation, life of a loan, half-life, and on and on and on). How can we make sense of time and space as felt or otherwise known features of the world as what we experience? And how can we do so in a way that brings these features to consciousness as opposed to leaving them part of the underlying unaware, unarticulated awareness or sensing of the world which is part of our bodily presence—features such as our diurnal clock so much a part of our biology, or our sense of time after we get onto a sleep and waking schedule necessary for the hormonal cycles that are such a large part of our emotive and physiological health, or our sense of the space and room around us that causes us to squeeze in when we are shoved to the back of a crowded elevator or else causes us to move back when another is too close to our individual faces. What else in general can we say about how we come to make and become aware of space and time or come to “pick-up on” space and time in our experiential presence in the world? And how can we make sense of the two—time and space—being one in our integrated experience of the world and of our being in the world? In oral cultures, Abram suggests, the connections between the world and living made possible clear answers to the questions of the experiential values of space and time. Time was cyclical just as space was curved and encompassing; both were enclosing and embracing, and locating or orienting. We could place ourselves in both through the creation myths and the place-tied codes of ethics and cultural patterns that we lived by. But then writing and mobility, and

concerns with productivity and many other things Abram does not mention took us away from those oral traditions and from the contacts that these traditions demanded we keep with land and the seasons and the ecological cycles of the earth home of our physical presence.

First, reading and writing, as a highly concentrated form of participation, displaces the older participation between the human senses and the earthly terrain (effectively freeing human intention from the direct dictates of the land). Second, writing down the ancestral stories disengages them from particular places. This double retreat, of the senses and of spoken stories, from the diverse places that had once gripped them, cleared the way for the notion of a pure and featureless 'space'—an abstract conception that has nevertheless come to seem, today, more primordial and real than the earthly places in which we remain corporeally embedded. (p. 185)

On pages 187-88 we get further details about just how this is supposed to work through the letters of the alphabet and the words formed from them referring only to themselves, only to human sound and writing symbols and the spoken or written system of them and thence becoming self-contained in a way that cuts us off from the world these symbols were formerly completed within.

They thus establish a new reflexivity between the human organism and its own sign, short-circuiting the sensory reciprocity between that organism and the land (the 'reflective intellect' is precisely this new reflexive loop, this new reflection between us and our written signs). Human encounters and events begin to become interesting in their own right, independent of their relation to natural cycles. (pp. 187-188)

In fact, Abram might have said that each communication gets caught up in the orchestrated reflections of other communications more and more removed from the facts spoken of and thence becomes just a system of meanings self-generated by self-reflexiveness. We boot-strap whole discourses in speaking and then answering the spoken, and then answering the spoken, and again, and so on, and so on, words without end. The environment we live in will disturb this system of meanings and moves and counter-moves, to be sure, and from time to time. But the system remains, absorbing these periodic disturbances as so many shock waves sent to the dampening systems of our car's shock absorbers. Still the system of meanings and communications hangs above the spoken of or spoken about, so that it is always beyond the veil of our words and the reality comes to be only the spoken or written communications themselves and the sequences and the metrics and measurements of time and extent that we place in it as more words abstracted from the lived experience of our being and becoming. Space is no longer place-tied, time is no longer cycle-tied; their experience is no longer part of our presence in the world but a way of talking about and characterizing or describing that presence so as to relate it to some vast place only within the stories of the communication systems—within histories, maps, battle plans, architects' drawings, surveyors' stakes, clockworks, and on and on in our systems of communications.

So again the challenge is how do we break free of this reflexivity, so as to return us to a lived sense of time and space and to reunite us to the world? The aim is one Abram has clearly enough in hand:

It is evident, however, that when our awareness of time is joined with our awareness of space, space itself is transformed. Space is no longer experienced as a homogeneous void, but reveals itself as this vast and richly textured field in which we are corporeally immersed, this vibrant expanse structured by both a ground and a horizon. It is precisely

the ground and the horizon that transform abstract space into space-time. And these characteristics—the ground and the horizon—are *granted to us only by the earth*. Thus, when we let time and space blend into a unified space-time, we rediscover the enveloping earth. (p. 216)

And:

That which has been and that which is to come are not elsewhere—they are not autonomous dimensions independent of the encompassing present in which we dwell. They are, rather, the very depths of this living place—the hidden depth of its distances and the concealed depth on which we stand. (p. 216)

So how do we get back the sense of place and the experience of space-time that we live so that we might get back to “the enveloping earth”? Abram thinks that this quest is for something that has the right structure of the space and time we are after. “We are searching, that is, for a structural correspondence—an isomorphism, or match—between the conceptual structure of ‘the past’ and ‘the future’ and the perceptual structure of the surrounding sensory world.” (p. 208) I do not agree here for reasons I will come back to, but that is what Abram thinks. Further he thinks that we can get a handle on this match between the structure of the experienced world and the experience of space-time if we pay attention to the fact that the body only reveals explicitly part of itself, keeping hidden our back just as the other side of things and just as the future is kept from our view. But also, the continuing experiences we have of ourselves are kept hidden from us thus preventing us from viewing, directly, the inside of our body. This remains to us a vast dark expanse that we can get at only in re-presentations through pleasures and pains and the sounds and coordination or clumsiness we feel as we go about the world. This is then just like the past only available to us in the stories of memory or of others remembrances or histories, and just like the portion of the earth under us that somehow supports and nourishes us and is always there behind and beneath our present becoming. These then tie to the earth in the following ways:

The beyond-the-horizon, by withholding its presence, holds open the perceived landscape [providing the future, or the experience of futurity and possibilities to be realized in the future, as well as the expanse that is yet beyond and above where we are now], while the under-the-ground, by refusing its presence, supports the perceived landscape [and then brings us the past, that lying behind, and provides us the underneath and behind expanses of space radiating out from the present where we are and the place where we are]. The reciprocity and asymmetry between these two realms bear an uncanny resemblance to the reciprocity and contrast between the *future* (or ‘what is to come’) and the *past* (or ‘what has been’) in Martin Heidegger’s description above—the one *withholding* presence, the other *refusing* presence; both of them thus making possible the open presence of the present. Dare we suspect that these two descriptions describe one and the same phenomenon? I believe that we can, for the isomorphism is complete. (p. 214)

Well we could say this. But the acceptance of this analogy rests on a certain understanding of the past and the future that ends up anthropomorphizing them and animating them in a way that seems objectionable to me. The horizon does not in itself—whatever it is in itself, does not withhold the presence of anything and thus does not separate the future from the past and the presence. The ground and our inner body do not refuse the presence of anything we might know, and so support and conserve as separate and thus in this way form the past. Indeed, why do we want to say that the future and the past are separate? In several portions of the chapter, Abram is at some pains to show that in oral cultures there has been a blending of space and time and a tie of

these to the world as an arena of action or the world as a place enacted by humans so as to make sense of it to them.

Thus, in place of any clear distinction between space and time, we find... a sense of space as a continual emergence from implicit to explicit existence, and of human intention as participant with this encompassing emergence. (p. 191)

The vitality of each place, moreover, is rejuvenated by the human enactment, and *enchant-ment*, of the storied events that crouch within it. The Dreamtime, then, is integral to the spatial surroundings. It is not a set of accomplished events located in some finished past, but is the very depth of the experiential present—the earthly sleep, or dream, out of which the visible landscape continually comes to presence. And once again human dreaming, human intention, human action and chanting participate vividly in this coming-to-presence. (p. 193)

This blending of space and time of the world or the earth through our action as a part of the world, is suggestive of a less anthropomorphizing rendering of space and time as one and as a part of our being in the world, a feature of that being in the world that links us to the world. How can we articulate the felt dimensions of time and space in the world? Well the felt possibilities of agency, of acting in a way that is within our control seem to afford us this articulation. Why not think generally about the fact that we can only reach so far, so fast, and only do so much, for so long as beginning to give us the dimensions of space and time as expressed in our agency—something we are aware of and which places us in the world? Why not say that these can give us the horizons of space-time? Just how this works out would differ depending upon the type of space and time tied to the type of agency we are talking about. What I mean is that athletic presence might give us one kind of a clock and globe as we examine the intentionality and the interactions which count as agency there. Ethical agency might give us another in so far as we are thought to affect more or fewer people or other beings that count as we do what we are held responsible for or what we are held accountable for—(that is, what we agree to explain and defend to someone when called to give an account for it). Thus we might explore the following forms of connection between time-space and features of agency as an ethical being that is held responsible for her or his acts:

### **Space-Time in the World Animated by Our Presence as Ethical Agents**

- 1) The Openness to and the readiness for accommodation to others as mattering in our actions **exposes us as ethical agents in a way constituting** the openness of futurity and the breadth and reach of space and time in so far as it is ethically open to us to act there and then.
- 2) The Recognition of others and our accountability to them in our actions removes from our reach certain possibilities of action as ethical agents and thus form both the presumed background and presumed ethical basis or ground (or ethical givens in support) of our ethical agency **and these then expose us as ethical agents in a way constituting** a givenness, a closedness or irretrievability of the past, and, as well a depth and extensive reach of space in so far as it is ethically open to us to act there and then.
- 3) The Integration of our life and individual actions with those of others as we (individually or collectively) enact intentions expressing our modeling of the impact of our action and our judgment of that impact upon self and others as acceptable **exposes us as ethical**

**agents in a way constituting** the present of time and space in so far as it is ethically open to us to act there and then.

These thoughts on how we find in our ethical commitments and the ingredients of our ethical agency the very elements of a space and time within which to be ethical agents suggest how we might begin to make explicit the dimensions of ethical space and time and how we might measure these in terms true to our presence in the world as agents, and thus how we might see space and time as connecting us to the world. This approach has the benefit of making this connection by animating the world only through our action, and not through some supposed powers of the earth itself to withhold, grant, or refuse to us its own presence. As a suggestion of the details of this program for understanding ethical space-time in a way placing us in the world, I offer the following notes.

art, at least, of what must be understood is our way of relating self and others in the framework of the space/time of our agency, in so far as we have encountered and are pentangled with them. In other words, our picture should display the actual topology and geology of space, nor the texture, direction and metric of time in our ethical perception. And it is only in an exploration of this space-time of ethical experience that we shall find the remaining crucial element needed to understand our engagement with the other and the removed. Without these elements of the framework of ethical space/time, our vision and our concern are freely floating and unengaged with the other. It is in spatializing and temporalizing our ethical experience that the other enters and can be regarded through our concern and seen as against or within our vision. It is only in “spatializing” and “temporalizing” ethical experience that we can make sense of this experience presenting (in any degree) our connection or intimacy with the other. And it is only in this way that we can begin to get a sense of the world as having an extent, a history and a set of present possibilities for us to act as ethical agents; or so I believe. Let me suggest some metaphors that might clarify what I mean.

There are several dimensions of space in ethics.<sup>1</sup> I assume that what brings another into our ethical experience is recognition as a being to whom we are accountable for acting as we do, or for being as we are. If one is not accountable to someone for the impact of her action or being upon another, that other has no place, is no where in the space of the agent’s undertaking or the space of our undertaking does not map other’s presence into it.. As F.H. Bradley might have said of such a pass, the other has no reality for the agent, is not appreciable to that agent. Thus we might think of the space of our agency as a field bounded, traversed, and contoured in our accountability to and for the other, or in the imagination of and the possibility of that. And speaking of the dimensions of these accountability relations will define a set of dimensions of agency space. Of course the space defined will be that experienced from the standpoint of the individual agent in question, even though the other is herself an agent experiencing or not the first agent as one to whom or for whom she is accountable. There will be on this individual construal of spaced ethical experience, as many spaces as there are experiencing individuals. And these need not be spaces with the same features. They need not be isomorphic in the constructed topological details of their various dimensions. And thus, one lesson in all of this is that here we have dimensions in which we must strive to place the other’s agency and being, and place these with our own so that if

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<sup>1</sup> Here, in the details to follow, I am speaking of the construction of space/time adequate to individual and neither collective nor systemic agency. Collective as well as systemic agency, will each require its own set of such remarks, but for our purposes here attention to individual agency should suffice.

there is not a perfect over-lay, one over the other, we can at least appreciate the other through appreciating the differences.

With this in mind note that the dimensions of the space of ethical experience include at least the following<sup>2</sup>:

**the extent of that space**, that is, how inclusive of the agency of others our accountability is, or, in other words, how many are recognized as agents to or for whom the individual in question can be accountable—it is the extent of ethical space that Aldo Leopold suggested is evolving outward as humans come to take in more and more kinds of organisms as beings to or for whom they can be accountable. And it is this dimension that Leopold imagined expanding to include even ecosystems experienced as ethically significant.

**the surface character of the terrain**—whether desert like or crowded with crossings of our various paths, that is the number of people or others to or for whom we see ourselves in our ethical experience as, *in fact, accountable*. Thus in constructing this dimension of our ethical experience, we might include a being in our ethical space as only an instrument, or else as only a refugee, a being whose agency is displaced and insignificant for us as we act, the way those making up a colonial or slave labor force were insignificant, or in the way those displaced by war or poverty, or other matters “beyond our control” are made insignificant by that “tragedy.” A being can fall within the reaches of our experience of ethical space—being for the most part of the right kind to count, yet fail to register there. Felons occupy our agency space, but have come for many to no longer count there.

**the degree of permeability of our ethical space**—that is the degree to which those within the extent of that space but not encountered there or invisible there might come into the light and become visible to us. In other words we might think of the degree to which we are open to coming to count those of such a kind as we might be accountable to or for, as actually ones for or to whom we are accountable. This is the feature of the openness or infinitude of the horizon of ethical space. Thus the politics of racism makes for an ethical experience that is relatively impermeable without some transformation of perspective or attitude. And in this way it differs from the typical case of a politics of regionalism wherein we are relatively open to seeing as ones to or for whom we are accountable those from whom we are separated by a geographic or professional region of activity.

**the variety of deep structures underlying and giving contour to the surface character of our ethical space**—that is the variety of ways in which we are related to others, the kinds of entanglements we see ourselves as in with others, or again, the kinds of linkages for example of security, of enablement, and of support creating the relationships between us. In other words, the ways in which others are or are not vulnerable to our agency or, that is, the sorts of actions, consequences, attitudes, and dispositions for which we might be accountable to or for those others. Thus that another is experienced as being in our ethical space, and is one to whom our accountability is permeable or actual, is no indication of what or how we are accountable to or for that other. It tells us nothing of what we might see ourselves as accountable for ensuring in our

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<sup>2</sup> Here and in what follows, I mix the various directions of the expanses of ethical space and I do not attend to the temporal aspects of these forms of ethical space/time.

undertakings. Those in the mid-west see those in the mountains of New York as within their ethical space, just not ones to whom they are accountable for avoiding the production of acid rain. In general, in our world of up-stream and downstream relationships, there are many cases of those upstream experiencing others downstream as though they, upstream, are accountable for very few sorts of conditions of those downstream.

**the degrees to which (or the depth by virtue of kinship or other connections) we are entangled with others--** that is, the degree to which we are accountable for the kinds of things for which we are accountable to others. Parents are accountable for feeding and clothing and caring for their children entirely and solely in the absence of close and willing relatives. Fellow nationals are now proclaimed less accountable for the basic needs and opportunities of the poor after the end of welfare as we know it. And in the face of initiatives such as Proposition 187, Californians see their world as one in which their agency is not to any degree entangled with that of illegal aliens with respect to basic needs such as hospital care and education for children of the aliens. This framework feature and the one above generate what Abram talked of as the ground of ethical space. And finally,

**the perceived locus of the other, relative to a particular case of our agency,** varies in terms of whether that other is only in the background of our agency, the foreground or our agency or the center stage of that agency. In other words, is the other seen as not really entangled in our agency to any significant degree so as to stand to be materially different (either better or worse off) if we act, thus only in the background and not really counting as a stakeholder in our agency, or is that other seen as a stakeholder yet not one with whom we are interacting in any direct way, and so seen as in the foreground of that action yet not one whom we might seek to accommodate in that action, for example through direct negotiation? Or alternatively, is the other seen as one with whom we are directly interacting and who stands to win or lose, be benefited or harmed, depending upon whether and how we act. Is the other seen as in the center-stage of our action and then a stakeholder whom we must accommodate in our action? The native seedpod carvers of Costa Rica are at most only in the background of most of the agency of most of us, if they are seen at all. Those of regular presence and interaction, and of roughly equal power or capability to us, for example friends and some family members, are in our center stage. While the others whose children we help to support in school and who help to determine the similar fortunes of our children fall into the foreground of some of our political actions. Thus what we count as our immediate ethical and individual concern we put center stage, what we count as of real social concern we put in the foreground, and what we count as only a collaborative or systemic condition of our ethical agency, we put in the background. These constructions are then heavily laden with ethical significance in so far as they constitute the ethical weightings we give self-organizing beings and our possible interferences in their lives.

The Narrative that forms our personal and social visions and their traces that might emerge as our private and communal stands incorporates a color of ethical concern and an articulation of the ethical ideal. However, these other factors do not construct a time of ethical experience. They do not account for the experience of ethical urgency or its absence, for example. They do not account for the sense of priority of aim, the near or far term which is recorded in our experience of other's behavior as we try to see it in the

proper ethical perspective of long term or near term demands on us. All of these and other dimensions of ethical time are constructed by us in considering and defending our undertakings, and by the construction of institutions and adoption of technologies and other factors of our existence. With this in mind, note that the variable dimensions of time in ethical experience include at least the following<sup>3</sup>:

**the horizon of that time**, that is, an indication of the extent of time within which ethical significance holds. For how long should we consider the implications of what we are considering undertaking—for example, for the next ten minutes, the next year, and the next seven generations? Does this horizon of accountability for implications of our undertakings or the extent of those to whom we are accountable in a certain matter, move depending upon who is involved and what are the stakes? How open is this horizon?

**the direction(s) of ethical time** to be understood in terms of the temporal orientation of the accountability relationships at stake as we reason practically (prospective, contemporaneous, and retrospective).

**the density of ethical time**, that is, the number of related and unrelated undertakings we might be held accountable for at a time, whether these are dated simultaneously or not. Thus in ethical experience how compactly should we see a portion of ethical time in terms of the multiplicity of undertakings we might responsibly be involved in. What, that is, is the structure of the ground of ethical time in its determining past and present normative circumstances of our actions?

**the rate of passage of ethical time**, that is there are variable reference points indicating the important marks of episodes of agency and being in the flow of ethical life with indicators of when closure is brought to ethical agency—for example, when does an attorney’s accountability end: when a billable hour has passed, when a client’s brief is done, when a case is over with a judgment, or when a client has her or his life back together?

**the metric indicating a pace of ethical life within which we need to act or come to be**—a 45 second clock of ethical expectations—for example, are parents accountable for dealing with particular cases of child misbehavior or for the character the child comes to have, or how well the child “turns out” in life, or all of these? How quickly are we to act, if we are to be and act ethically, and, are we accountable for only those modes of being we can conjure in a moment like our intentions and decisions, or for those we nurture over a considerable period like our character traits and attitudes, or both?

**the modulation of the horizon, direction, density, rate, and metric of ethical time**, that is the extent to which any of these can change in our lives as a function of a change of accountability groups or associations we move through in living in different communities and different roles. For example, is it the case that there should be no modulations or only seasonal modulations as we would expect to find in the relatively unchanging lives of highly self-reliant people such as the Amish? Or is it the case that we should expect there to be

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<sup>3</sup> Note that here I do not develop or separate these explicitly into features of the framing of the past, future, or present of ethical time, nor explicitly relate them to the framing of ethical space.

large changes in, for example, the density and rate of ethical time passage as in the lives of middle level managers or department heads where the agent has little control over the demands put upon her, or in the lives of parents of very young children where there are varying demands of an immediate sort placed by the needs of the infant or young child? If the modularity of ethical time for which we can be accountable varies by role and community membership, and culture and a number of other factors, how might we engender appreciation of the resulting differences of ethical life quality, flexibility, and openness to adjustment to harmonize with the lives of others?

All of these dimensions of ethical space and time must be constructed and we—various ones of us might carry out this construction differently and with different results. And this might well lead to the discounting or the ignoring of the agency and being of others in our ethical construction of the world. It is not just that our concern and our vision might exclude or diminish others and their acts or being. It is also that we might leave no place in our ethical space and no time in our ethical clock for their acts and being to be recognized let alone count as they should—no space to include them and no time in which to include them in our considerations and the formation of our ethical stands as we move into commitment and action. For example, perhaps their pace of life is simply too slow for us to appreciate and interact with them productively. Perhaps then we can empathize or even respect them, but it might be hard for us to sympathize and to identify with them. Variance in ethical space-time might lead to limits of the affect of intimacy we can muster toward them as we see them.

Thus our ethical concern, our vision, our construction of ethical space and ethical time might exclude, diminish, distort, ignore, and otherwise render us in affect alienated from or separate from others. In this way we might create injustices and other matters of negative ethical significance between us, as we are limited in the affect of intimacy we can bring to bear in our regard of them? What are we to do in order that we are open to others as they are as ethical agents and beings in themselves? How are we to see them as they should be considered, even though their ethical world is not ours, indeed, maybe even in conflict with ours? How are we to take into account future generations, the lives and aspirations of total strangers? How even are we to take into account the lives, the agency and being of intimates? If we cannot, we shall not make sense of finding justice in the world, and we shall not make sense of anything but a distorting form of the consideration of others (perhaps even ourselves). (This is a problem seen in John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, perhaps. However, here the attempt is made to generalize the issue and to address it as a matter of ethical perception or the aesthetic of ethics.)

Without an adequate treatment of these issues, and of parallel similar features of systemic agency we are doomed to fail to understand ethical community, justice, and an ethic that extends across generations, places, cultures, and even species. Finally, there is another element of the time and space frames of ethical agency that we should mark with special emphasis, and that is the point that as systemic agents, the time frame reaches out indefinitely as impartiality moves across generations and brings in sustainability. And as well, the reach of space extends outward so as to connect us fully to all acting as aspects of systems and the world system at a moment. Thus full ethical connectedness is really an expression of the texture of space as agents in the system of the world. These two negations of limits on the extensions of ethical time and space, a concern for sustainability and a concern for connectedness, are called for in our thinking by the demand of impartiality.

With that much of a hint at how I see the space/time of the world of ethical agents--framed by and for us, let's turn to Chapter 7 which gives Abram's treatment of the present in terms of the invisibility of the air.

Lecture 20, Abram 5, The Space-Time, Here and Now of Our Life  
Charles V. Blatz

Chapters 6 and 7 of Abram, seek to make sense of our being in the world and within its space-time. Last time I considered Chapter 6 (although I mis-labeled it as Chapter 7), and concluded that Abram was guilty of two mistakes: first, anthropomorphizing the space and time environments in which we live, and secondly, in separating space from time and those from our actions. Here I want to give this all another look and see if perhaps there is not something else to be made of these two chapters—perhaps what I said last time did not go far enough. That I made this mistake seems clear when we consider Chapters 6 and 7 together, for then it becomes clear that Abram was exploring the past and the future in Chapter 6 and the present in Chapter 7, and that the two of them are to be taken together and that the mode of exploration is through looking for metaphorical models of past, future and present in the features of our physical home, both the Earth and our physical presence, our bodily presence on the earth and within the air. This metaphorical presentation of thoughts is what I want to look at here, as a supplement to what was said last time, both in my talk of Abram and in my presentation of my own offering of a picture of space-time as presented in our ethical agency.

The place to begin is with a quotation from Abram that I included in the previous lecture:

The beyond-the-horizon, by withholding its presence, holds open the perceived landscape [providing the future, or the experience of futurity and possibilities to be realized in the future, as well as the expanse that is yet beyond and above where we are now], while the under-the-ground, by refusing its presence, supports the perceived landscape [and then brings us the past, that lying behind, and provides us the underneath and behind expanses of space radiating out from the present where we are and the place where we are]. The reciprocity and asymmetry between these two realms bear an uncanny resemblance to the reciprocity and contrast between the *future* (or 'what is to come') and the *past* (or 'what has been') in Martin Heidegger's description above—the one *withholding* presence, the other *refusing* presence; both of them thus making possible the open presence of the present. Dare we suspect that these two descriptions describe one and the same phenomenon? I believe that we can, for the isomorphism is complete. (p. 214)

This should be tied in with what he says on the previous page where he is talking about his own body:

What of my own body? Well, most of my body is present to my awareness, and visible to my gaze. I can see my limbs, my torso, and even my nose, although my back, of course, is hidden beyond the horizon of my shoulders. The back of my body is inaccessible to my vision, and yet I know that it exists, that it is visible to the crows behind me in the trees, as I know that the fields and forests hidden beyond the horizon are yet visible and present to those who dwell there.

Yet while pondering the unseen aspect of my body, I soon notice another unseen region: that of the whole *inside* of my body. The inside of my body is not, of course, entirely absent; but it is hidden from visibility in a manner very different from the concealment of my back, or of that which lies beyond the horizon. It is an instance, I suddenly realize, of a vast mode of absence or invisibility entirely proper to the present

landscape—an absence I had almost entirely forgotten. It is the absence of what is under the ground. (p. 213)

Thus the metaphor is played out in a kind of interchange of images between the physical world and my body or that through which I approach and that by virtue of which I am within the world, my body. There is much that I cannot reach, much that is beyond my ken at any time and in any place. There is that which I see before me and which seems to reach out toward me and draw me into the next move, the next thought. There is the doorway to my left and the hallway beyond and the next room and its doorway to the garage and then its doorway to the outside and the driveway to the street and the street to the world—to wherever I can get to from here. There is then in front of me a world of possibilities I have yet to choose between and take up or commit myself to. So too, there is behind me the back of my chair, the stairs going up, or is it down, and another room and then another doorway out and then on to yet other possibilities. In all of this, in every direction from me, there extend out a great encompassing horizon of possibilities of action and of new becomings, not waiting there for me, because they are changing in a variety of ways (from the petite modes of change of the moisture making that door behind me stick a little more, to the grand changes of new roads, new factories, new houses, new fields with new trees encroaching, and so on through the large scale changes of my natural and social ecosystems) but still open to me even if not waiting for me. All of this suggests the future and a reaching forward of time as it will be occupied by me as an agent or as a being in the world.

But as well, I am here on this chair supported by this floor where my feet rest, and that on the joists above the ceiling downstairs, and thus the walls resting on the floor joists below, and those on the foundations and then further down, the good earth of northwest Ohio, resting on a plate whose name I do not know, floating on a molten core of I know not what. There is all of that which I am unaware of yet rest upon, all of that that I cannot now see or feel beyond the chair or floor where my body rests. And yet that is there, making it possible for me to be here, and to type these notes as the time clicks away on another day. This Abram would help us feel by likening it to the inside of my body which I now turn to and feel a small portion of in aches and pains, a gurgle here, a tension there. I trust that I have lungs working, an intestinal track working, a heart going strong, and so on. All of these I am told must be there and must be doing their things in order for me to be here. They are like the ground I rest on through the medium of my residence. And they are like the past possibilities that have been realized, in part by me in part by the physical system that is me and now provides the foundation of my actions as I reach through the membrane of my choices and into the future I am making and becoming. It is this physical presence in its similarity to the sheer immovable depth of the earth I rest upon that gives me a sense of my physical presence in the face of a past supporting my present reachings into the future.

Thus in placing ourselves in the world and in likening ourselves—or aspects of ourselves to the world, Abram gives us a feel of what it is like to be both in and the very presence of the future and the past. To the extent that my body is the frame making possible my movement, in conjunction with the earth I move upon, and the buildings or the trees I move through, it with this body and earth and its fixtures that I am in the past and of the past, and I can feel these by feeling the weight of my body and the tension and relaxing of my muscles as I move to type these words or move to go to my car and drive to the market. The past is not something separate from which I am removed. It is something I am in as I move forward in my life. It is not recorded in the earth like a stop watch timing my movements. It is the ongoing processural recording of my comings and goings as a physical thing as I am moving on and through and out, and down the road correcting myself, keeping myself on target, revising and revising my destination, and so on. It is part, an inseparable dimension, of the very present and the very future I am becoming. And

as I am aware of my body and the limits it imposes even as it fills the world with my possibilities, I am aware of the past, or rather the passing of myself with and within the earth and of the earth as lived through in my passing. Thus I become aware of a sense of the lived past in a way that links me to the earth and the body through which and within which I am connected to the earth.

So too, the extent of my horizon as so many possibilities and limits of what I can see and make happen as I look outward and onward, and the ties of that to the body I live in as I reach, and withdraw, in my actions and through extending my limbs or retracting them, and by opening out my body as in a great stretch or closing it in as in a curling up from the cold I feel, all of this is the feeling of the future as possibilities realized when once they were not. This allows us a sense of a real felt understanding of the future that links it to the unoccupied space around me and behind me. Or rather all of this provides a metaphor through which as I move and seek I am made aware of the unfolding of the future and the expanse of space that is me and the world I take part in.

In these two ways, Abrams seeks to achieve his main mission of giving us a way to reclaim the earth by virtue of our presence in it and this presence in it understood in our feelings of our actions and in our inactions of occupation of space and past, openness and futurity as we inhabit the earth in our body as a part of the earth. Space and time are linked in the past and the future which are themselves experienced in our feeling our way through the earth in our activity or our inhibiting of our activity of our felt body. But what of the present? What of where we always are even as we are always in the past and the future as we inhabit the earth?

It is here that Abram turns to the air and the work he does in Chapter 7. Here Abram wants to do for the present what he tried to do for the past and the future in Chapter 6. He wants to make sense of, to give us a feeling for actually being in the present. How in the world can we get that feeling? How can we find a way to return to this evanescent, always leaving, never finished-always finished place of all of our being, becoming and activity? It would be easier, perhaps, if we were still creatures of the sea—if ever we were. For the water is undeniable. It surrounds us and is visible and has a taste, and has always a clear felt resistance to it. It is something we get in when we go swimming or wading. It is heavy when we put it in buckets and try to move it from here to there. The water is somehow there like the ground, except we know the feel of being in it (unlike the ground, I hope!). But it is like the ground in being this vast physical presence that we cannot, except in a very limited way, see or move our way into. Try diving deeply in a cold gravel pit pool without oxygen and a wet suit! So that medium even though it is felt and in some felt ways familiar to us is not the metaphoric presence of the present. What we need is something that is invisible, virtually tasteless, virtually unfelt most of the time, and yet a medium that delivers us to others through our speech and the tension or calm or other mood we create around us, and delivers others to us in the same ways. We need something that seamlessly connects the apparently inert-unchangeable presence of the past with the apparently totally fluid and alive-influx presence of the future and yet is neither and does not change either. What is it that connects the horizon and the ground where we stand and yet changes neither—or rather allows both to be what they are. What is it that totally permeates us and others and so links us all yet allows us to continue to become separately but in ways connected through our shared pasts and futures? Although Abram gives us several stories and several cultural versions of the single answer to these questions, I will concentrate only on one, that of the Navajo.

When a Navajo person wishes to renew or reestablish, in the world, the harmonious condition of well-being and beauty expressed by the Navajo word *hozho* he must first strive, through ritual, to create this harmony and peacefulness within his own being. Having established such *hozho* within himself, he can then actively impart this

state of well-being to the enveloping cosmos, through the transforming power of song and prayer. Finally, according to Whitherspoon,

[a]fter a person has projected *hozho* into the air through ritual form, he then, at the conclusion of the ritual, breathes that *hozho* back into himself and makes himself a part of the order, harmony, and beauty he has projected into the world through the ritual medium of speech and song.

This brief quote from Whitherspoon makes especially evident the reciprocal, even circular character of the relation between the Navajo people and the animate cosmos that enfolds and includes them. They are not passive with respect to the other powers of this world, or rather they are both passive and active, inhaling and exhaling, receiving the nourishment of the diverse beings and actively nourishing them in turn. As it is spoken in the Blessingway ceremony:

*With everything having life, with everything having the power of speech, with everything having the power to breathe, with everything having the power to teach and guide, with that in blessing we will live.*

For the Navajo, then, the Air—particularly in its capacity to provide awareness, thought, and speech—has properties that European, alphabetic civilization has traditionally ascribed to an interior, individual human ‘mind’ or ‘psyche.’ Yet by attributing these powers to the Air, and by insisting that the ‘Winds within us’ are thoroughly continuous with the Wind at large—with the invisible medium in which we are immersed—the Navajo elders suggest that that which we call the ‘mind’ *is not ours*, is not a human possession. Rather, mind as Wind is a property of the encompassing world, in which humans—like all other beings—participate. One’s individual awareness, the sense of a relatively personal self or psyche, is simply that part of the enveloping Air that circulates within, through, and around one’s particular body; hence, one’s own intelligence is assumed, from the start, to be entirely participant with the swirling psyche of the land. Any undue harm that befalls the land is readily felt within the awareness of all who dwell within that land. And thus the health, balance, and well-being of each person is inseparable from the health, balance, and well-being of the enveloping earthly terrain. (pp. 236-237)

Now we do not have to travel all this road with either Abram or the Navajo. The point is that the medium in which we are immersed and which connects us through sight, sound, and the reach of our actions with all other beings and systems of these, is the air—that invisible, all but tasteless, all but unfelt medium that we live through and that permeates us and others giving life to the body of the past and giving life to the possibilities of the future. It is what we feel going into and out of our lungs even though we do not really feel *it* so much as the muscles and tissues expanding and contracting in our breathing it in and out. It is that which the Buddhists urge us to contemplate as we think our way into the present even though it is nothing that we should try to pay attention to and it is because it is nothing to pay attention to that we are able to become tied to the present moment in our contemplating of it. This is the medium that we can in so many ways, even if indirect become aware of our being in and acting through the present as we move through our lives and through the past, present, and future that we partition off in order to both problematize and make sense of our identity through our lives. This we can be and are aware of and once we become so, we have become attuned to the world we live in and we have made sense of the present co-mingling with the past and the future and with depth and openness and so have placed ourselves in the space-time-here-now of our lives. And it is this we have lost our sense of as we have lost our place here in earth. But through thinking the metaphors of these two chapters

and savoring the experiences that they make sense of, perhaps, we can regain what was lost or repair that loss.

Phenomenologically considered—experientially considered—the changing atmosphere is not just one component of the ecological crisis, to be set alongside the poisoning of the waters, the rapid extinction of animals and plants, the collapse of complex ecosystems, and other human-induced horrors. All of these, to be sure, are interconnected facets of an astonishing dissociation—a monumental forgetting of our human inherence in a more-than-human world. Yet our disregard for the very air that we breathe is in some sense the most profound expression of this oblivion. For it is the air that most directly envelops us; the air, in other words, is that element that we are most intimately *in*. As long as we experience the invisible depths that surround us as empty space, we will be able to deny, or repress, our thorough interdependence with other animals, the plants, and the living land that sustains us. We may acknowledge, intellectually, our body's reliance upon those plants and animals that we consume as nourishment, yet the civilized mind still feels itself somehow separate, autonomous, independent of the body and of bodily nature in general. Only as we begin to notice and to experience, once again, our immersion in the invisible air do we start to recall what it is to be fully a part of this world. (p. 260)

Lecture 21, Abram 6, The Truth About the World, Critical Remarks on Abram  
Charles V. Blatz

The later portions of the Chapter on Forgetting and Remembering the Air explore how we have been drawn out of ourselves, out of the moments we live in (and through), by the language we use. The last portion of the book, the Coda (definition “2: something that serves to round out, to conclude, or summarize and that has an interest of its own.” From page 221 of the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1993), is then a response to this problem, a suggestion of how we are to move, through language, back to the world and how we are to defend doing so. The sense of the challenge is given on page 255 in the last portion of Chapter 7:

In contact with the written word a new, apparently autonomous, sensibility emerges into experience, a new self that can enter into relation with its own verbal traces, can view and ponder its own statements even as it is formulating them, and can thus reflexively interact with itself in isolation from other persons and from the surrounding animate earth. This new sensibility seems independent of the body—seems, indeed, of another order entirely—since it is borne by the letters and texts whose changeless quality contrasts vividly with the shifting life of the body and the flux of organic nature. That this new sensibility comes to view itself as an isolated intelligence located ‘inside’ the material body can only be understood in relation to the forgetting of the air, to the forgetting of this sensuous but unseen medium that continually flows in and out of the breathing body, binding the subtle depths within us to the fathomless depths that surround us.

We may better comprehend this curious development—the withdrawal of mind from sensible nature and its progressive incarceration in the human skull—by considering that every human language secretes a kind of perceptual boundary that hovers, like a translucent veil, between those who speak that language and the sensuous terrain that they inhabit. As we grow into a particular culture or language, we implicitly begin to structure our sensory contact with the earth around us in a particular manner, paying attention to certain phenomena while ignoring others, differentiating textures, tastes, and

tones in accordance with the verbal contrasts contained in the language. We simply cannot take our place within any community of human speakers without ordering our sensations in a common manner, and without thereby limiting our spontaneous access to the wild world that surrounds us. Any particular language or way of speaking thus holds us within a particular community of human speakers only by invoking an ephemeral border, or boundary, between our sensing bodies and the sensuous earth. (pp. 255-256)

Here we see that Abram is expressing his take on a very common view begun in the 1900's by linguists to the effect that our language somehow gives us a particular take on the world. Although his view is not clear from the text, it seems that he is staying with the two patterns of argument that he set up earlier in the book—our very way of seeing—mediated as it is by concepts--takes us away from the world and our language sets up a self-reflexive system of thought that locks us into a contemplation of the world as conceptualized within the language we use, supposedly to describe that concept world, not the world as we experience it in our interactions with it, that is in its reciprocity with us. Thus we are doubly cut off. Now how again does this work? It first seems to work in our approaching the world through the classification schemes and the set of relationships we find important and entrenched in our cultural take on things so that the world is a certain way according to the linguistic categories and relationships our language provides us in the common or conventional meanings of terms and the scientific or other beliefs about how things are put together, and, in our written records of these meanings and sets of beliefs built upon them.

Abram's first point here could well be that the world is confined and labeled in our conventional means of expressing its states and processes so that when we learn a language (learning to apply its terms and learning the causal and other beliefs that allow us to maneuver within the language by stringing together sentences considered as sensible and plausible) in order to express ourselves in a way taken seriously by others, and thus so as to allow us to communicate and to co-conduct inquiry and other expressions of human enterprise, we become locked into a certain conventional way of seeing the world. This way of seeing the world operates within the constraints of or responds to a set of beliefs about how we come to know, about what makes a belief truth, about what exists, about the ways the existing things can operate, and about the significance that these things and operations can have. Thus whatever we might say, if it is to be right and sensible, if it is to make sense, must be generated within these parameters of speaking or writing and knowing and these ways of proceeding then introduce a certain set of filters through which we see the world and which limit our interactions with the world and our grasp of it.

Abram's second point is that we are confronted in language, and especially written language itself, by a closed system of conventional communication that has been constructed so as to cut off our meaning making from the earth and from the everyday agency of the speakers and writers. What they mean at a time is no longer a function of what they are seeking to express of their particular experience of acting in the world. The conventional languages we speak have become so stylized, and the connections between thoughts expressed commonly by it, have become so tight that it is no longer living or alive in the sense of open to influences of the world as we experience this place. As one indication of this, consider science and the standard lab report we might work up. The categories of what we might see in our lab observations are specified for us, the ways we need to manipulate the environment in order to see what we are to see are specified for us, and it is up to us to learn to see things in that way, to order our thoughts in that way and then to speak the language in that way. Compare this to learning the language of a particularly difficult thinker such as Immanuel Kant. Here the main danger is that we will learn the jargon and learn to manipulate it apparently as did Kant, but only in a way that makes the philosopher's thought dead to us. We learn to sift the symbols into sentences that make sense within Kant's

particular system of symbols and yet give us no real meaning connecting these symbols to the world; and equally important give us no real grasp of what is being said that allows us to approach the language in our own words nor then critically. Here we do not have the learning of essentially profound thought but only the parroting of it. The trick of real learning is to come to grasp the language as one philosopher's expression of his take on truth and as his way of making sense of things in response to a set of questions he asks. If we can see the specialized language of another thinker in this way then we will be able to relate own thinking to that system and to problems of interest to us. And we will be able to relate it to our own take on the world so as to critically approach the work and seek to see if it furthers our personal understanding. Instead of this, however, we get caught up in the mouthing of what turn out to be only conventional formulae with no meaning attached to them, and we have then lost any touch with reality that the language might provide. Instead, we have become caught up in what seems to be no more than manipulations of language within a system of terms and appropriate and inappropriate combinations of them. If we would make language suitable to the task of connecting us to reality, it must be capable of expressing things in ways salient to each of us. That task, in turn, would seem to require that we go beyond the mere conventional meanings of terms and the merely conventional phrasings and ways of raising and answering questions, beyond the ordinary ways of stringing together truths into a picture of the world, fixed in its real nature.

Caught up in the conventional spider web of meaning and belief, we are cut off from the world around us and more and more wrapped in this sticky substance of the strands of the web and then more and more wrapped by the spider of convention itself until we are no longer in contact with anything beyond the web, and we are sucked dry of our personal views, concerns, and meanings. At that point we will have lost any personal take on the world and would have been rendered unable to express anything of ourselves.

For there is no longer any common medium, no reciprocity, no respiration between the inside and the outside. There is no longer any flow between the self-reflexive domain of alphabetized awareness and all that exceeds, or subtends, this determinate realm. Between consciousness and the unconscious. Between civilization and the wilderness. (p. 257)

At that point we can no longer make sense of the world in that we can no longer express ourselves and negotiate our way within it so as to mediate and guide our responses to it. The world has become what we say it is after we have performed the right operations on it, not just any operations, and within these right operations, there is no room for our personal stakes, our personal emphases, our personal combinations and recombinations of the events and processes of the world. There is only the correct representation that we strive toward by common methods calculated to abstract from the personal. And this is a problem.

But, it might be objected, isn't that the truth, the objective truth of the world, the way things really are? Here Abram really departs from the common views of philosophers. In the last portion of the book, Abram explores a different sense of truth. He first points out that his approach to these matters contains a particular emphasis that we might not have chosen to make. We might have gotten at how we have been cut off from the earth by looking at the history of agriculture and then reflecting on that as Wendell Berry has done. We might have looked at the advent and development of numbering systems and explored how these have been incorporated into and indeed have co-evolved with science over the centuries leading to the view of truth and the view of the world we now have. We might have looked at how video has changed our grasp of things—see the book coming up by Mark Taylor. Or we might have looked at the way commerce has done this, as we did in reading Schumacher and Barber. And so it goes. (See

pages 263-264 for his list of other possible focal points through which to understand our loss.) But he took his particular path and here we are with a particular way of thinking about what is the source of our alienation from the earth and about the ways in which this has gotten us in trouble here.

It is a way of thinking that strives for rigor without forfeiting our animal kinship with the world around us—an attempt to think in accordance with the senses, to ponder and reflect without severing our sensorial bond with the owls and the wind. It is a style of thinking, then, that associates truth not with static fact, but with a quality of relationship.

Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are ‘true’ or ‘false,’ but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth, the ways of speaking common to that community—the claims and beliefs that enable such reciprocity to perpetuate itself—are, in this important sense, *true*. They are in accord with a right relation between these people and their world. Statements and beliefs, meanwhile, that foster violence toward the land, ways of speaking that enable the impairment or ruination of the surrounding field of beings, can be described as *false* ways of speaking—ways that encourage an unsustainable relation with the encompassing earth. A civilization that relentlessly destroys the living land it inhabits is not well acquainted with truth, regardless of how many supposed facts it has amassed regarding the calculable properties of its world.

Hence I am less concerned with the ‘literal’ truth of the assertions that I have made in this work than I am concerned with the kind of relationships that they make possible.... In this work I have tried to reacquaint the reader with a mode of awareness that preceded and underlies the literate intellect, to a way of thinking and speaking that strives to be faithful not to the written record but to the sensuous world itself, and to the other bodies or beings that surround us.

For such an oral awareness, to explain is not to present a set of finished reasons, but to tell a story....

Of course, not all stories are successful....the answer [to the question of which stories are successful and which are not] is this: a story must be judged according to whether it makes sense. And making sense must here be understood in its most direct meaning: to make sense is to enliven the senses. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To make sense is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one’s felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are. (pp. 264-265)

We must find a way to slip out of the conventionalized reflective thinking that we are caught up in and reconnect with the world through our senses. Abram claims he has striven to do this in his book and he ends the book with a passage he has written to demonstrate what he is calling for—namely, to turn the use of language to the task of waking us from our conventionalized slumber. Thus Abram’s argument seems to be that we, or those in power over ideas, have turned our purposes and our attention to the conventional knowing and to the stating of this knowledge in public or official language—language controlled by the powerful of any discipline. This has taken us away from the world and caught us up in the spider web of linguistic convention (spoken of above).

Our purposes in life might include that of gaining an abstracted or depersonalized picture of things and their relations. (Perhaps we need that approach for the technology—not the practice—of modern medicine.) But these are not the only purposes we have and need to serve if we are to live a full life. We need more than a common story fixing the world in some pattern. Pursuing only that sort of story and the purposes attached to it has led us away from the world and led us to ruin it in several ways. Beyond such purposes we need to sort out our individual places in the world, in its variety of species and other forms of organization of living in the world, our places in its physical presence to us in our physical presence, in its unity with us and we with it, and the places of our actions with those of others in it. And, the language and knowledge paradigms that we find in science and industry, and rapacious capitalism, and standardized public education as funded and practiced now, are not up to these other tasks. We must get back our senses to find another way that *is* adequate to these tasks that are so central to human living. And in order to do this, we must take truth to be simply what returns us to our sense of the world. The truth is not what serves the purpose of giving a fixed conventionalized representation of the world. It is what serves the purpose of returning us to the world via our senses. It is what recasts the spell of the sensuous over us as part of the world, as a self-aware being included in the earth.

Or so Abram claims. This sort of pragmatic sense of truth as opposed to a representational sense of truth is not new of course. One or another variant of it is found in the work of Charles Saunders Peirce, William James and John Dewey, among others. And at some level it is hard not to be sympathetic to it. What do you think? And do you think that Abram in his book has succeeded in getting at the truth?

Lecture 22, Abram 7, Critical Comments  
Charles V. Blatz

closed the last set of lecture notes with the question of whether or not you agree with Abram's notion of truth and whether you think his overall view is correct. In making some sort of final assessment of the work Abram puts before us here, I need to concentrate just on this question of the truth and whether Abram did reach it. I will be brief by comparison with earlier notes. There is much that Abram has given us that I agree with, in particular the two phase argument that something has been done to our mode of perception by common language and that because of our growing dependence upon written standardized language we have been caught up in a form of meaning-making that takes us away from the meaning-making we are caught up in as we perceive the earth and seek to make coherent as well as salient what it is we see, or hear, or otherwise perceive. I agree with much of that as expressed and supplemented in earlier lecture notes. However, I am puzzled by the "Coda" in which Abram in effect substitutes one restrictive purpose as setting the standards of truth, for another. The standard of accurate representation of what occurs in repeatable ways, and the recording of this in standard conventional language, meaning the same to all, is replaced by the purpose of expressing the world in evocative language that is capable of taking us to the world, of re-enchanting the world so that we come to it in ways that return us to a reciprocity with our natural emplacement and its contents. But surely this is as restricted and dangerous a purpose as is the other it would replace. Someone once said that 'no theory has the entirety of truth.' And that seems apt to remember here. It does seem correct to say that at some level the standards of truth (and then at a "lower" level the truth of claims itself) are determined by reference to what will serve our purposes. But, then, we must remember that there are many purposes to be served here. Some among these would call for the work of science—purposes such as controlling the spread of a bacterial infection in our body, or the secondary infections possible with the weakening of a viral attack. Others, for example, setting agricultural and industry environmental impact standards, and setting personal consumption style

preferences, would demand more the work of a standard of truth such as is expressed by Abram, one which makes sense of the world once again to us. And these standards, or rather the purposes their validation rest on, can clash in a person. And perhaps the way that these clashes must be adjudicated is by asking which set or mix of standards is going to best serve the responsibility of the agents and all the stakes-holders involved; which will allow them to live responsibly, participating in the construction of the world through the expression of the personal, and which at the same time would allow them to reach the deepest level of accord with the world around them and with the other agents in all of the variety of their patterns of self-organization. This is not an easy question to answer. But it is critical that we at least take it seriously and try to answer it in our policy setting and other deciding moments. It is perhaps important that this question of what overall serves a life of responsibility for all concerned and then serves a life of critical ethical responsibility for humans, is made paramount in choosing between these possible guiding purposes.

### **Living Well As An Agent In Environmental Systems**

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Meetings 29 & 30

This meeting follows the paper on animal rights and self-organizing systems which I put up on the contents pages—that is Meeting 28 (even though I failed to label it as such). It also follows up on Meeting 25 on the possibility of being a global citizen. Finally it works a bit further at the notion of systemic agency. I have suggested in the first of these that we would do well to see our ethical self as a self-organizing system like others such as plants and non-human animals. And in the second I tried to point out that if we take seriously that view of humans, then there are several ways in which we are preventing ourselves from living that vision because we are preventing ourselves from self-organizing through the use of reason in the area of ethics, one of the key areas of human flourishing. We are suffering from any number of remissions of responsibility. Are we to be global citizens or just good people? That is the choice I preferred to think about as opposed to Attfield's choice of global citizens or merely citizens of local political or economic spheres.

We need to ask the question of how humans might flourish in their lives as self-organizing beings; and in particular, in the areas of using reasoning to guide and regulate their interactions and interdependencies with other self-organizing beings and systems of these. In the notes today, I want to try to follow out this thread, just a little way, to see if I can begin to suggest how this will look, or how we should see ourselves as ethical beings in so far as we are self-organizing through the use of reason—even in its emotional expressions. I see this project as like one set out by Robert Brandom in his book, *Making It Explicit*, where he undertakes an explanatory narrative about those practices that are up to the task of making practitioners into beings both with thoughts having specific meaning or content, and with intentions to follow up on these thoughts.

Here I want to hint at a story identifying and explaining the operations of practices that give us a life as an ethical agent.

- I want to highlight those practices that give us a life of purposeful action constrained by and conscientious about appropriate ethical limits to what we do and become.
- And I want to highlight those practices that give us both a life responsive to and conscientious about expressing appropriate ethical concern for other self-organizing

beings, and also a life that makes these concerns reflect as much as possible our ethically charged entanglements with other such beings.

I have already begun this story in the discussion under the label of Blatz's Radical Naturalism (see Meeting Notes 19, Towards A New Kind of Ethic) where I tried to suggest that we find the reasons for our actions in our value laden interpretations of the environment or circumstances in which we find ourselves. And I tried to suggest how we move from response to saliency to reasons.

In my view of things, ethics emerge out of individual agenting experience. Ethics emerge as articulations of order sought after or embodied in our judgments and actions. Ethics become present in the very process of our articulating what we are doing and articulating to what we attach importance in what we are doing, as we move from the felt unity of our personal experience as agents through an awareness of our personal direction or intention in acting or being, to a more public and reflective presentation and presence of what we are up to. Ethics, like life, begins in responsive yet striving or purposeful agency,<sup>[1]</sup> and as we go on bringing that agency under our self-control and into a position where we can take responsibility for it and be held responsible for it, we come to bring it into an account which when knitted together with other accounts comprises a story of our life, highlighting our undertakings within that life and showing forth our cares and expressing our concerns within that life. As we sort through these stories with others and with ourselves, taking a stance for others to hear and see, a stance on what we are up to and on its value, we come to form defenses of what we do, giving justifications of our actions—not necessarily expecting others to find in our reasons for acting, reasons by which they might order their life, but rather in the hope of finding tolerance if not also acceptance for our undertakings—that is we seek permission from others to act as we do or did. And when that is not forthcoming we seek to be let off the hook with our excuses, or to be forgiven by virtue of the understanding and willingness to forebear on the part of others with whom we interact. This is partially outlined in the assumptions of the study I set out in the research associated with the notes for Meeting 19. Let me further draw on and to some extent amplify these notes as an entrée. And having done so, let me go on to say a little about the practices of self-organizing beings becoming their future in a life of ethical agency.

First, recall, ethics come of people living together and acting, and then finding the necessity to coordinate their living together and, in order to serve that end of end of coordinating order, then forming reasons, then rules and laws of morality and law and other dimensions of ethics. These efforts allow such agents to understand themselves and others as responsive to reason, and to form some view of what to expect from whom so as to be able to effectively live with and among those others. Ethics do not emanate from conflicts and the need to resolve conflicts, so much as from the opportunity and need to live harmoniously. Ethics do not wait until we are in trouble to be relevant. They are relevant from the moment we are active, and are relevant in all dimensions of our becoming what we become through our lifetime. Think of it this way: you are on a crowded dance floor and you are dancing romantically, or flirtatiously, or in some other way entangling you and your interests together with a partner. You are engaged in what you hope will become a joint undertaking of mere expression of joy in the music, of love, of affirmation of your status or of your real worth, or whatever. To the ends of your striving (that is the objects of your purposes)—the same for both you and others, or merely for you as an individual, you must coordinate your movements with your partner so as to give her or him clues as to where you are going next and so clues to what possibilities there will be for the other within the relationship of that dance. You must give the other clues so as to define in part the agency space you share.<sup>[2]</sup> Further, dancers must coordinate movements with others on the dance floor so that they do not

bump into or trip them, and so all can have, if not a good time, at least space to be the agent they would be in doing whatever it is that they are up to.

Out of these needs to coordinate with others, your partner or not, come conventions, rules or dance steps, and variations on these as you put together a dance at a given moment, expressing and pursuing your varied projects, doing so while interweaving the dance with that of others. Ethical agency is a form of dance, understood thus. It is responsive, striving or purposeful agency that is in need of coordination provided by a number of practices including what we have come to call the giving of reasons, and the following of or enforcing rules. So understood, the agency of individuals, as ethical agents is responsive to an environment in the direction of the strivings in that agency, marks the environment as salient or charged with importance and significance or meaning. Things become trees, become board feet or shade or homes of other animals or models for our sketchpad and so on. And these saliencies serve to provide us a way of navigating through the environment as we are paying attention to our own agenda or personal project, paying attention to our entanglements with others and our concerns for them, paying attention not just to the attitudes through which we are attached to them but also to the degree to which we are connected with them, and paying attention to the stand we have already established on what limits we will live within as we become our future.

This is not to say that reason is merely calculative, a servant of the ends of our striving and the means of our capacities met by the opportunities in our environment. It could be that. But the strivings are not all aimed at possession, or consumption, or some other end- state. Indeed, these are not really end-states, but rather expressions of the self-organization of our lives. The end is mistakenly seen as possession or consumption—it is the life with that possession or consumption in it and the life cheapened and truncated by mistaking the possession and the consumption for the living of it. No, some of our strivings are aimed at our being in certain ways throughout our life. And, some are aimed at caring for objects of respect, which must be preserved beyond our possession or consumption and must then, in that remove, continue to be objects of aspiration.<sup>[3]</sup> And some are aimed, at the respect due such objects of aspiration. And in these cases, reason is not calculative, but instead a vehicle of inquiry or striving for the discernment of objects or processes whose value takes them beyond consumption or possession. And finally reason, in its reflexive moments, reflects on these very strivings of discernment, care and preservation or respect and contemplation, which run beyond possession and consumption, and appreciates them for what they are as transcending our immediate concern. In none of these inquiries is reason calculative. But as Heidegger said, reason then is striving to be “capable of responding to what is worthy of thought instead of, enchanted by calculative thinking, mindlessly passing over what is worthy of thought.” The Principle of Reason, (p. 129)

Thus I would suggest the following (not necessarily complete) set of ingredients that come together to construct saliencies in the responses of an active being engaged in a particular undertaking or a purposive action:

- 1) Current vectors of our action (what we take ourselves to be up to now) and priorities and precedents among these that we bring with us—in other words the directions in which we now take ourselves to be headed
- 2) Valences or the positive or negative charge (or values) of the vectors for us at the moment of our action. That is the attraction or repulsion (and then the possibility of combination or incorporation into our undertakings) of events, persons’ intentions, and the rest we encounter in our environment.

3) Visions of possible futures given the circumstances we now take ourselves to be in—(possible within the set of background assumptions we carry), and, our attunement to these or other futures, for example, as hopeful and purposive, or robotic or accepting without interest. These visions will be general in nature—visions, for example, of the kinds of things we could do with our life or in our friendship with this person, or in these economic or political circumstances.

4) Perceptions of our personal possibilities in our circumstances including what we see as possible for us normatively, as well as in terms of our abilities, and what we see as possibilities for us personally given our political, physical and social circumstances generally. These visions will be more particular in nature—they are visions for us in particular and only us in our particular circumstance and in our particular likings and perceived strengths and so on.

5) Flavors of effort and economies of our undertakings—what efforts and opportunity costs are anticipated and how that makes us feel about the possibilities we see for ourselves.

6) Presences of self—i.e. styles or the aesthetics of our presentation of self in action, and our associated self-esteem or confidence. Here what I have in mind is the thought that even though something might be seen as having some appeal and as being open to us given the effort it will take and the talents we bring to it and so on, we still might shy away from it as too showy, too flamboyant or not enough and so on as a matter of the style within which we conduct our life. (Of course we need not be aware of just what that style seems to be to us. We might find ourselves shying away or being attracted because of one of these matters of style or aesthetics of living.)

7) Our sense of our connections with others and the world including our situation or perceived place and our relations and their qualities, both physical and social (and thus our persona)

8) The tensions of our time and space. See the research notes going along with Meeting 11 and the note for Meeting 25, for some inkling of the specifics of these tensions and just how we place ourselves in a time and space of our agency. The colors and dominances of our concern for others and for both things and events as related to others—for example:

- self-regarding and economic predominantly;
- other regarding and impartial via institutions as in law;
- other regarding and interested in the well being of others and self simply as capable of flourishing as agents as in morality;
- interested in creating a whole including self and others in a harmonious or vibrant or beautiful or other aesthetic creation as in aesthetics; and
- interested in others only to the point of being polite to them or otherwise treating them as in etiquette so as to keep open the door (through civility and politeness) to further contact and possible development of involvement.

9) Further, the degrees of engagement and the affect of intimacy we bear toward others in terms of our merely respecting and deferring to them, our having empathy with them and seeking to impersonally enable their agency, our having sympathy with their undertakings and our coming to accept their narrative and ethical stand as they offer it, or our coming to identify with the project of the other as possible for us and thus coming to have solidarity with the other in her undertaking. (See the research for Meeting Notes 11.)

10) And, an additional ingredient in the mix out of which we bring saliences will be the degree or depth of accountability which we hold ourselves as responsible for in our relations with others as perceived through the concern, the engagement and affect just spoken of in 10 and 11. (See also research notes for Meeting Notes 11.)

11) And finally the self- and other-critical review of each of these vectors, concerns and affects, and the undertakings emerging from them, through the general principles of impartiality and autonomy and harmony as well as consistency and coherence that serve to constrain our ethical reflection and presence in the world.

Items 9 - the sort of ethical concern we might bear toward others, 10 - the depth of our openness to and readiness to connect with them, and 11 - the richness of our relationships of accountability to others and for our entanglements with the other, that is speaking of all of these together, **the accord** we have with another, are of course based on our perception of the undertakings and the saliences of others as they reflect back on us and on still others. Thus these interpretations of the world generating saliences entangle us one with another both in terms of what is taken as valuable and what we are undertaking, as well as in terms of whom we recognize as important and having standing as valuable ethically in herself, or whom we bring into our ethical thinking and with whom we achieve an accord, and with whom we do not.

All of these elements working together shape and charge the world we experience or our experience of the world, or rather our being in the world as we seek to act and as we experience. Since this is so, they bring us to form interpretations of what we encounter, lead us to partition the world into things and times and places and separate possible helps or hindrances to our considered vectors of action. But also they give a certain amount of significance to these possibilities so that we see the world as this or that, here or there, within reach or not, ours or theirs, and so on - all as it affects our undertakings - not necessarily selfishly, but as a function of our concern and striving. All these are all open to being reflected in or expressed in narratives of what we are about or what we are doing. These narratives are more or less personal as expressing our own particular take on these matters, and (since our take on some matter does not determine a unique set of these variables) then our narrative reflects our own personal synthesis of these factors. In other words, we can see things in the same sorts of ways as others and yet not end up with just the same interpretations of their significances, even if other things are equal, since we can choose within certain limits what to make of things from our particular frame of reference and within our own particular background framework of worries and aspirations. Furthermore, we are not set to interpret things in only a single certain way if we have certain valences and vectors, and the rest. We might choose to overcome these or to defy the odds, or to make the best of our lot and so on. And whether we do choose one way or another at a time is up to us in the sense that it is emergent at the time, and not determined. Thus our judgment of what world is acceptable and worthy of pursuit in our continued becoming at this moment in these circumstances and in general will reflect our personal judgment synthesizing a myriad of factors in the way we choose to. And, if we are a responsible ethical agent it will be a synthesis we stand ready to defend to others within shared limits and norms of accountability.

So then all of these factors and our choice make of the world, in our case, in our relations to others, at a time, something with a certain significance and meaning. In fact they might provide several differing meanings to the world at a time. And then we need to make a further choice, to affirm one or the other as our meaning or as what we are up to then and as what things will look like from there on. These complex outcomes are the saliences guiding our lives, the saliences we stand by and live or die by.

These saliences then next encounter congruent or contradictory currents among others as we get further social inputs in the form of critique and rethought expectations from others (including that arch critic, our self as another) and then we must negotiate these with ourselves or others or both.

Out of these articulations emerging within ourselves and these negotiations conducted with others come the views on which we take our revised, but still tentative stands as to what we are about and what is called for from those standpoints. Eventual approximations to general agreements we can comfortably instantiate in our own undertakings, that is eventual agreements among us, and occasions for repetition of similar inputs and interpretations (a predictable repetition since we tend to seek out familiar experiences for ourselves once we have had them and they have been rewarding to us) together lead us to common or convergent ethical stands. The dissemination of these across generations and the further entrenchment of these in our generally common saliences lead to the belief that these are perhaps fitting to the world as it really is. Thus we will tend to objectify or externalize our beliefs or stands raising them into the status of objective truths of the world. And if these stands are interpersonally defensible or are shared, then others and we might be tempted to take them as the truth grounded in reality. And then we have objective ethics grounded in the way things are.<sup>[4]</sup>

Thus in this way, I see our acting as leading to our articulating, defending, and then living in the societal acceptance of a set of stands on what is valuable and worth pursuit as well as what is forbidden and not worthy of our attention. Ethics emerge from acting and the narratives explaining and conveying to others the sense of our acting, and our discussions on these and, then, from the social acceptance of these discussions.

This describes the emergence of norms and as well much of the rest of our ethical environment as we operate as self-organizing beings guiding our path through the ordering of reason constructing and responding to our saliences, and even challenging and modifying or shaping those saliences. If we next see ourselves as self-organizing systems that will reorganize in the face of disturbances in the environment with new norms, aims and rules for the system - that is, new norms for our living emerging as the primary product of that reorganization, and if we see ourselves as making up such social environments with other such self-organizing beings, then we can begin to see how ethics, one of our modes of rational self-organization and one of our modes of reflectively reconstructing our self-organization, is an expression of and catalyst for further such practices making for such organization.

This much should also suggest that ethics—despite their appearance, are not eternal truths about the way things are or should be, truths which can guide us effectively in the real circumstances of our life. General norms have no prescriptive value in themselves. If the problems of learning what ethics demands of us is a problem of re-organizing ourselves at the moment and for the future with all the of the particularity I have hinted at above, then it makes no sense to think of ethics as ethical codes, guides for all seasons. The outcome of a judged saliency for our action is going to come to function as a norm or as a systemic constraint on our behavior though being our intention—either our intention in a project or at a moment or both, or, that is, it will function as an articulation of what we have undertaken in our circumstances. The individual as coordinated with others or in a system is coping with lived details as a system herself. As such she must articulate the ethically proper conduct for here and now and do it in the present conditions of the social and natural systems of which she is a part. These articulations or self-reorganizations (that is the determination of what is ethically called for and the creation of the commitment to strive for that) is emergent upon the system at the time and not predictable, nor is the choice of the particular path for the enactment of the ethical striving endorsed as positively salient by this re-

organization itself predictable. That we could determine this by a deductive application of general rules is ludicrous and reductive.

To be sure where there are agreements and salient repetitions of circumstances and judgments we as individuals and we as members of a social system larger or smaller can come to talk of general rules—norms the system of our self or our society, imposes on the individual at a moment similar to other moments with common saliences. These then can function top down, as systemic guides, even as the individual's or group's reflections at a moment can come to serve as disturbances in the environment of the system—disturbances to the functioning of the systemic guiding saliences. Enough of these disturbances and the system must re-organize and a new salience—a critical normative guide will emerge for the individual or the group working through the giving and negotiating of accounts among those recognized as ethical agents, and the rational review of saliences of the individual or the person. In this way, individuals and groups themselves can be both members of a system and functioning according to appropriate constraints of the system, and at the same time open to functioning as subsystems or that is as individuals (relative to the larger system). And in this way individuals can both be beholden to systemic constraints, operating above their level of existence as individuals, so to speak above them, and beholden to none but themselves. They can be ethically authoritative as individuals who may critique the systemic norms and who must at every turn interpret them by self-organization to identify the salience of the moment in their undertakings. And at the same time they are not ethically authoritative for the goals and composition of the whole of which they are a part, but are ethically constrained by the systemic norms that are but part of the organization which will stabilize, empower, and guide the system itself so as to keep it moving and open to creating. We are but a part, and yet we are a part and as such can perturb the whole, leading to changes in the entirety of the system. And yet we are a part and must play a part with the rest to keep the whole of the biosphere viable—that is open to continuation and needed self-reorganizations. In short, we must live as systemic agents.

In our world we must both play out our own little drama and speak lines in a larger drama that we cannot even get a full sense of. Or to return to the earlier metaphor, we must both dance our own personal dance, and play a part of a larger dance whose guiding melody, rhythms, and configurations we cannot even be aware of - even to know how we change it by taking part in its organization. Yet we can be responsible, for we can seek to recognize ourselves as having only a part in the larger dance and know that if we are not careful we shall knock down all of the dancers and the musicians. We can seek to do as little as we can, or to do no more than we can control and understand as not harmful to the others on the dance floor or to the musicians or the dance floor itself. And we can seek to regenerate the dance with others, seeking to leave what we disturb as little changed as possible, and always better able to self-reorganize after our use - our fields richer in biotic vitality, our streams cleaner, our climate as open to nonhuman guidance as possible. We can strive to live with respect for the system of which we are part and thus in that way with self-respect, and so with solicitude for the system of which we are a part, even as we live with solicitude for the systems which as individuals we are.

Perhaps this is living well as the kind of being we are. And perhaps that is ultimately what is worthy or most worthy for all of us who would self-organize in our peculiar way through the use of reason. Certainly, we must vest each and every one of us with ethical authority and responsibility (up until the agent rejects these and leaves the enterprise of living well by reasoning). And if we do that then ethical agents must be allowed to find their individual and collective way within the constraints of impartiality, harmony and autonomy, and within the spirit of critical thinking. Should they do that they will be acting responsibly as members of the

biosphere and will act so as to become a part of that system of systems in a way compatible with other self-organizing beings doing the same, as much as possible. And then such agents will be leading a life as fully ethically connected with significant others as possible. And this life, I would submit, would be one lived with a concern to flourish as the sort of being we are in the context we really occupy. Generally speaking, I think we can do no better and no more than that.

What do you think? Let me have any questions you might have and any criticisms. I will answer them on the discussion board as a kind of final wrap-up.

If you are interested in the further study of some of the ideas lying behind my approach, see: Alicia Juarrero, [Dynamics in Action, Intentional Behavior as a Complex System](#); Paul Ricoeur, [Oneself as Another](#); Stuart Kauffman, [Investigations](#) and [At Home In the Universe](#); Eric Jantch, [The Self-Organizing Universe](#).

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<sup>[1]</sup> Responsive in that it is embedded within and elicited by our environment—our body, or the circumstances of it; striving or purposeful at least in that the activity would change directions in the presence of a change of circumstances of body or surroundings—as though satisfied in (by or with) that change.

<sup>[2]</sup> Some might observe that in dance today there is no coordination, no limitation of the agency space of the other by my movements—hence the liberation of dance today. But that seems unlikely. At the very least those who dance with another come to the floor and leave together. And those who come to the floor alone must at least leave room for others there if we have dance not chaos.

<sup>[3]</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, [Oneself as Another](#), on solicitude and respect: “The agents and patients of an action are caught up in relationships of exchange which, like language, join together the reversibility of roles and the nonsubstitutability of persons. Solicitude adds the dimension of value, whereby each person is irreplaceable in our affection and our esteem.” (p. 193) “If fidelity consists in responding to the expectation of the other who is counting on me, I must take this expectation as the measure for applying the rule. Another sort of exception is beginning to take shape, one differing from the exception in my favor, namely the exception on behalf of others. Practical wisdom consists in inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude, by betraying the rule to the smallest extent possible.” (pp. 268-269) “in conclusion, one can say that it is to solicitude, concerned with the otherness of persons, including ‘potential persons,’ that respect refers, in those cases where it is itself the source of conflicts, in particular in novel situations produced by the powers that technology gives humans over the phenomena of life. But this is not the somewhat ‘naïve’ solicitude of the seventh study but a ‘critical’ that has passed through the double test of the moral conditions of respect and the conflicts generated by the latter. This *critical solicitude* is the form that practical wisdom takes in the region of interpersonal relations.” (p. 273)

<sup>[4]</sup> See Berger and Luckmann, [The Social Construction of Reality](#).