

# Aligning with Law: A review of Freya Mathews's *The Dao of Civilization*

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**A review of: Freya Mathews (2023) *The Dao of Civilization: A Letter to China*, Anthem Press, London, UK.**

In her recent book, eco-philosopher Freya Mathews dissects the mindset underlying Earth's destruction. She goes beyond merely calling out anthropocentrism – the prevailing view that, morally speaking, only humans matter – to deconstructing it from its foundations.

Beneath the dichotomy of human versus nonhuman nature, she uncovers the received dualism of mind versus matter. Mathews focuses less on critiquing how mind is exclusively or superlatively assigned to the human. Her originality is to scrutinize the shadowy representation of matter, which is cognized as “sheer externality” and “lacking indwelling powers” (16). Since nature's building blocks have been sheered of inward dimension, nature appears as “exhaustively defined in materialistic terms” and the universe emerges as “dark, self-indifferent and intrinsically meaningless” (20).

This portrayal of matter, nature and universe poses the riddle of mind's derivation. The mainstream of Western secular thought depicts mind as emergent from a material base, a correlate of neurological structures. Mind belongs to beings with such structures, and quintessentially of course to humans. Beings with minds become *subjects* who relate to living and nonliving entities as inert *objects*.

Understanding mind as encased within the subjectivity of beings with neural structures – with humans as apex subjects – suffers from intractable problems. One is the *deus ex machina* arising of mind from matter; with an abyssal chasm between them, the ontological journey from matter to mind remains inscrutable. Two is the “zombie problem” articulated by philosopher David Chalmers and rehearsed by Mathews: given a metaphysics that excludes

mental properties from matter, life might be expected to merely possess “information processing capacities” *without* consciousness. A dead-matter universe ought to be populated by zombies – beings without experience, intentionality or awareness.

As a relevant aside, this is how the dominant culture treats nonhumans: as zombies. Conventional society appears quite ‘sophisticated’ in drawing that inference from its crass materialist metaphysics. It is only towards zombies that one can direct eradication programs, industrial fishing, clearcutting, pesticide spraying, factory farming and the like. The assumption underlying these activities is that beings who endure them are inwardly vacant.

Panpsychism, which Mathews defends, offers an opposing perspective to mind-matter dualism. “There is no brute stuff,” Mathews argues; rather, materiality has “a depth dimension inaccessible to observation” (23). Panpsychism is more familiar in environmental discourse as *animism*, which apprehends “the universe as inwardly textured” (23). As wary as the average Westerner, indoctrinated into materialist metaphysics, may be of animism, the latter circumvents the logical, empirical and moral conundrums of crass materialism: First, the problem of getting mind from matter, when there’s no inkling of mind in matter. Second that the universe is *not* populated with zombies, but with beings with agency and experience. Finally, the hideous problem of treating beings, consistently with dead-matter materialism, *as if* they are zombies. Animism has the virtue of recognizing beings’ indwelling intelligence, thereby sidestepping the depravity of a materialism that renders existence profane and nonhuman beings morally unworthy.

Mathews calls for superseding brute-matter materialism. An animist view bypasses its problems by dissolving what generates them: mind-matter dualism and the constitution of matter as dead. Animism restores mind as coextensive with matter. The understanding of existence as always already imbued with mind comes with its own aporia: For where did *that* originate? Ignorance of the ultimate origins of existence, however, is *built* into human life (excepting faith or revelation). Crass materialism comes with the exact same ignorance, but is additionally freighted with logical inconsistency, empirical hand-waving (mind as ‘emergent’) and license to immorality.

The view of existence as suffused with mind, while also composed of “distinct existences” (David Hume’s concept that Mathews cites), leaves unaddressed the question of holism. How does existence – especially earthly existence, our prime concern – cohere? That inquiry cannot get underway by summing up “distinct existences” pursuing discrete interests. Reality’s holistic nature must be queried *relationally*. Relationality, in turn, is bound with *normativity* for it is beholden to the question: How shall I act? Inquiring into the holistic patterning of existence, Mathews makes her boldest argument: It has a normative core. If this is true – and Mathews makes the case cogently – morality is not foundationally an anthropological issue. Humans are/become moral beings when we align with reality’s normative core.

That normative core is revealed in praxis-based being whose universal essence Mathews calls (after Spinoza) ‘conativity’ or life’s will to existence

within a relational web (32). Beings are invested in maintaining and fulfilling their self-existence, always within a totality. What we generally observe is that conative being does not assert itself in the modality of “impose and control”. It tends instead to express normatively as “attune and align”. In Mathews’s vocabulary, life *accommodates* exigencies and opts for pathways of *least resistance*. The alert reader may note that these modalities conserve energy, so that (*ceteris paribus*) Darwinian natural selection would tend to favour them, which Mathews underscores.

The universality of the twin principles of conativity and accommodation/least resistance attests to a normative weave of existence that Mathews calls *Law*. Law expresses the goodness of being as primordial value, because Law promotes life’s self-actualization and endurance. Indigenous people and sages have always recognized, valorized, and strived to obey Law as inherent to reality.

Though always variably realized and empirically transgressable, Mathews’s concept of Law powerfully captures how existence works – or, more poetically, flows. We see this vividly in earthly life. It is puzzling how the vulgar paradigm of nature as struggle for survival, run on selfish genes, came to prevail. Contrariwise, Mathews argues (deploying logic and examples), nature is all about cycles and feedback loops, symbioses and co-evolutions, conservation strategies (of forms and energy) and *de facto* mutualism. Mutualism is a central expression of Law, putting to shame what often passes for ‘morality’ in human worlds, where those at variance with some group’s precepts may be clobbered for disagreeing.

What supervenes from the action of Law, according to Mathews, is that in simply going about their conative affairs beings serve the conative affairs of the whole. We see this co-alignment at fundamental levels of life: Air and soil are coproduced by diverse lifeforms to their benefit and perpetuation. The reverberations of a myriad conative actions aid existence, and affirm the goodness of existence, as beings tend to desire what their neighbours need them to desire. (A harmonious marriage works the same way.) The holism of conative weavings make earthly life virtually indestructible. Gaian theorists make a similar point: life’s unbroken tenure on Earth for 3.8 billion years is inexplicable (or miraculous) without a normative wellspring counteracting titanic cosmic forces (Lenton 2004). *Together we stand divided we fall* is Law rendered colloquially. Beings do not swagger about securing their interests disconnectedly from others or at others’ expense. In Gary Snyder’s words, life has etiquette (1990). Beings tend to respond rather than react; negotiate rather than dominate. When life goes into combat mode, as sometimes it must, it prefers Aikido stealth to Gladiator gore.

A reader might counter, What about predation? Even predation, as Mathews observes, serves life’s perpetuation. The infirm and old, who no longer augment the genetic reservoir of the species, are first to go. What’s more, predation makes the whole Earth green. In the sea, predation is mutual: so-called ‘prey fish’ consume their predators when the latter are in larval form (Roberts, 2012). As Thoreau (1992) hymned, life is a mutual feast whose implicit, mysterious purpose is to keep the table sumptuously laid. At the end

of the day, we all make more soil, co-building the ground of life.

Law, as constitutive principle serving the goodness of existence, raises the obvious question: Why is humanity in such flagrant violation? The question has a well-known historical answer that Mathews briefly rehearses – the swerving of humanity out of alignment in the Neolithic. More generally, the answer hinges on appreciating that Law – the etiquette of neighbourliness – is *not inviolable*. However, beings who systematically violate Law are fated to be short-lived, because by breaking reality’s weave violators decimate the conative contributions of others to *their own well-being*. Humanity’s violation of nature’s normative order, besides undoubtedly truncating the lifespan of *Homo sapiens* (barring radical change), holds a deeper penalty. Since the human is conative to existence, by violating its intrinsic Law, humanity transgresses *its own essence* to align with the whole and coexist within the Tree of Life. The existential degeneracy of humanity, with humans consumed in warring against one another and against the natural world, is a culmination of having lost our way. There is no good ending – no moving to Mars or uploading to the iCloud – unless we return to desiring only what the Earth wants us to desire while actualizing our own conativity.

“The imperative to desire what others need one to desire,” Mathews writes, “will be that every living being in effortlessly following its own inclination at the same time perpetuates the larger system it is a part of” (35–6). This relational knit she calls *biosynergy* (69). We see biosynergy displayed in aspects so elementary that we miss their signification. For example, lifeforms breathe in concert, exuding an atmosphere, modulating climate, creating a cocoon of vitality that envelopes Earth’s sphere. And yet, biosynergy goes well beyond producing a functional order. Biosynergy orchestrates proliferations of ever-changing, ever-similar, ever-interdependent forms. This aspect of the whole Mathews describes as *ontopoetics* (85).

Indigenous people as well as spiritual sages, who exemplify (in Daoist language) *Real Humans* intentionally aligning with Law, have always saluted ontopoetics and succumbed wholeheartedly to their enchantment. Ontopoetics are the numinous, lovely, unpredictable, extravagant fireworks of reality. The courtship display of the bowerbird. The mother tree towering over the forest. Chimps, together, watching a sunset. Starlings spiralling at dusk around a tower. Dolphins leading the bow. Velvet red roses of spring, brittle orange leaves of autumn.

The poetry of the world is crafted by all accommodating one another, dovetailing mutual self-interests, going with the flow, rarely insisting, foregoing ruling, and, above all, prolonging abiding in the “indwelling meaning of the cosmos” (43). In Mathews closing words, “we will become one humanity, our cultures inter-cohering into a new civilization,” when we defer to becoming “shaped by the Law of the living cosmos itself” (89).

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