

The elusive feeling of the real

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The kinds of social consciousness intended by the term ‘Indigenous’, as it is widely understood today, traditionally arise from collective forms of livelihood, or economic *praxis*, based on deeply synergic modes of collaboration with local ecosystems. This suggests that any attempt to attain a ‘re-Indigenized’ outlook in present-day industrialized mass societies would require a wholesale overhaul of modern economies along such eco-synergistic lines. If this is the case, it seems that Indigenous-type consciousness must remain inaccessible to modern individuals for the foreseeable future. I argue here however that there may also exist purely personal possibilities of individual collaboration with local landscapes that could offer, for those who chose to pursue them, first-hand glimpses into aspects of Indigenous cosmology and consciousness. Based on my own experience, I describe one such practice.

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The trope of ‘Indigeneity’ arguably signifies the global counter-culture of our time. It is understood to connote all that is counter to the unbounded, expansionist, all-devouring, insatiable ethos of modernity. Where the current international economy has ransacked the planet, treating every aspect of planetary metabolism as mere material resource to be shovelled into the maw of its own industrial mega-shredder, ‘Indigenous’ societies are understood to be bounded, wedded to place, embedded in intricate ecological lineages of ancestry and posterity. They are perceived as answerable – culturally, cognitively and materially – for the ongoing renewal of those lineages. Where moderns act as outlaws, pirates, relative to the biosphere, Indigenous people are pictured as at home in the world, seated comfortably on the ground around campfires glowing at the core of a living cosmos.

However, as the actual specifics of culture and consciousness in the kinds of society typically designated as Indigenous today vary widely, these societies may or may not match this trope to any significant degree. But where they do match it, this is presumably because their basic economic praxis – the basic

way in which they produce or arrange their everyday livelihood – requires intimate collaboration with local ecologies. Such collaboration in turn requires close attunement to and understanding of local geo/hydro/biological dynamics. While such societies used to be described by anthropologists as ‘hunter gatherer’, they are now understood in more eco-synergic terms. What I mean by this is that their praxis includes active interventions in local ecosystems – via the use of fire, for instance – to ensure ongoing supplies of the resources they need, but that the interventions are carefully calibrated to preserve the integrity of those systems. The daily experience of contributing in this enmeshed way to local ecological renewal imprints and shapes the community’s understanding of reality – their cosmological outlook.

To take this kind of broadly *historical materialist* view of the origins of social consciousness implies that if a society wishes to recover, in some degree, the kind of deeply ecological consciousness captured by the trope of Indigeneity, it cannot do so simply by fiat. We cannot choose our worldviews merely to suit our intellectual tastes. Worldviews, at least to the extent they find consistent expression in the subconscious structure of social motivation, arise from the ways in which people, as embodied agents, actually experience themselves in relation to the world – the ways in which they habitually interact with it.

From this perspective then, contemporary mass societies could not be expected to re-discover anything approximating to an ‘Indigenous’ outlook without undergoing a re-organization of economic praxis to emulate the eco-synergic praxis of Indigenous societies. While it is self-evident that eight billion humans on a planet that is already undergoing biosphere collapse could not revert to the original eco-synergies of our Paleolithic ancestors, reorganization of the economy along *bioregional* (Sale, 1983; Crist, 2020) and *regenerative* (Wahl, 2016) lines might help humanity transition towards new, up-scaled versions of eco-synergy. The wholesale implementation of ‘nature-based solutions’ to human problems and praxis is another way in which the ‘re-Indigenization’ of present-day economies might be attempted (Mathews, 2023). These are promising starting-points for large-scale reform. But as approaches that tackle the economy directly, they might seem beyond the practical horizons of individuals longing to re-Indigenize their own consciousness but not yet in a position to extricate their livelihoods from the tentacles of global capitalism.

Are there then other practices that might be available to such individuals? While I have suggested here and argued at length elsewhere that historical materialism is probably correct in its assumption that it is economic *praxes* that most fundamentally shape a society’s worldview (Mathews, 2023), there may be other ‘material’ practices that can deeply affect individuals’ sense of identity and purpose, practices that are not strictly speaking economic.

Caring for Country as a personal pathway towards a more Indigenized consciousness

In this essay I would like to offer one such practice, drawn from my own experience (*cf.* Mathews, 2020). It might be described prosaically as ‘private

conservation', but it is much more than this – more like a lifetime commitment to minister ecologically to a chosen place. I offer this example because it has opened for me a window into a new mode of being-in-the-world. Undertaken widely, it might help to motivate larger-scale transformations of economic praxis.

In my own case, this practice began sixteen years ago when I was lucky enough to become keeper of a 350 acre land-holding on the shoulder of a granite mount in northern Victoria, Australia. Though plenty of remnant native vegetation existed on the estate, the landscape had also suffered major degradation – weeds and destructive feral animals abounded; large-scale clearing, cropping and sheep grazing had occurred; and climate change was shifting the entire vegetation profile towards aridity, with consequent die-back of bushland and parched dragon-summers spitting out lethal wildfires.

My self-appointed task was to prompt the land to reverse this degradation and recover its ecological integrity. To accomplish this, I had to acquaint myself with the terrain in all its intricate particularity. This was a gradual, on-the-ground process, especially in my case as, after decades of philosophizing, I had little aptitude for remembering the names and calling cards of the numerous species of plants and animals that populated the place. But the mount itself patiently teaches its would-be custodians; gradually one does begin to recognize and attach names to plants and animals and even eventually to notice patterns amongst them.

Importantly however, this engaged way of knowing is not a matter merely of detached observation, in the scientific or even natural history mode. One is a player rather than a by-stander in this scenario, intentionally culling destructive ferals, such as rabbits, foxes and cats, while introducing new opportunities, such as permanent water sources, for indigenous wildlife. As an active member of one's biotic neighbourhood, on all fours, so to speak, with other ecological agents, one encounters them in unexpected ways – as, for instance, finding a brushtail possum instead of a cat in the feral cat trap or a kangaroo joey self-incarcerated on the inside of a tree-planting enclosure.

Even one's most benign interventions are fraught with danger for unintended wild others: deadly cross-contamination with parasites can, for example, occur as a result of one's provision of water sources to help wildlife through the scorching summers. Moreover, living amongst wild others, off the grid in a relatively remote setting, can pose dangers to oneself: one can oneself become a victim of gut-wrenching parasites as flocks of swallows, endearingly nesting under one's veranda and perching on one's roof, defecate into one's tank water; as redback spiders make themselves at home inside a folded spare mattress; as terrifying storms lay blazing siege to one's house; as bushfires cast their spectre over the entire summer; as gas bottles spring leaks and solar batteries bubble dry in the improvised infrastructure of the house; and as shooters maraud on the rural blind side of the law.

Amidst these perils, one also witnesses the savagery inherent in Earth communities themselves. One's joy at discovering two snow-white wedgetail eagle chicks in a large stick fortress on the upper ridge, for example, is

dampened when one learns that, amongst wedgetail eagles, one of the chicks – the stronger one – is destined to kill its nest-mate before the latter fledges. One notices then that one of the chicks up on the ridge is indeed smaller than the other and that it crouches at the edge of the nest while the larger chick presides in a lordly pose at the centre. Or one goes to investigate something dropped by a large raptor in a scuffle with another bird, only to find, huddled in the long grass, a young silky rabbit, eyes incandescent with agony and disbelief, its nose and half its snout freshly ripped off by the hawk. This is not a movie, a nature documentary, and one has to act – one has to find a way to kill this poor little creature with one's own hands as quickly as possible, however personally aghast one might feel at such a prospect. In the train of such encounters, one reflects that extreme and grotesque suffering is in fact routine in the natural world; one is utterly surrounded by it every day in one's seemingly cheery little haven, but it is overlooked because generally it is hidden.

Experience of this kind immunizes one against sentimentalism with respect to nature – against any temptation to see nature merely as the good and innocent victim of human brutality and to see eco-activists as nature's saviours. Romanticism of this kind is, one realizes, as much an expression of the human–nature dualism that defines the mind-set of modernity as is the dominator attitude: nature as victim is a variant of nature as passive object while the human subject as saviour is a variant of it as locus of power and agency.

So, though pierced by compassion, one has to try to pull back from right and wrong, from taking nature's 'side', because there are so many 'sides' within nature, and one cannot be on all of them at once. One cannot be on the young rabbit's side without being against the hawk; one cannot be on the side of *this* suffering little rabbit while also dealing out death-by-fumigation to all its relatives on the estate in order to assure regeneration of vegetation for the rest of the faunal community. Nor is one any longer the omnipotent human, shielded within the capsule of the city, looking out safely at a 'threatened' countryside, a countryside rendered appearance only through the lens of one's urban amenities. One has also to be on one's own 'side' now, ringed as one is with hazards. Compassion may on occasion have to give way to self-defence as one struggles in a field of competing, endangered and endangering interests.

Relinquishing the omnipotence of the 'theoretic' perspective

The task in this connection is, I think, to shift from the presuppositional mode, with its advance decisions on matters of morals and metaphysics, to a more *strategic* mode, experiencing oneself in push-and-pull relations with the living presences that populate one's local ecological environs. One tunes into the particularity of these presences, taking one's cues from their signals rather than from abstract preconceptions regarding what to expect. In tuning in to them however, experiencing the push-and-pull of their resistance, one is immediately aware of their independent subjectivity, their active will-to-continue-in-existence, to repel incursions into their integrity; one becomes, in a word, aware of their *conativity*. One consequently registers a kind of all-in-

this-together affinity of purpose with them. Such a felt affinity makes *theoretic* presuppositions regarding their moral and metaphysical significance superfluous. One accommodates other beings – to the extent that doing so is consistent with one’s own safety – because one’s strategic involvement with them results in a visceral sense of fellow feeling and solidarity with them.

If one can step out of the *theoretic* mind-set in this way, and re-immense oneself strategically, agentially, as co-contributor to a common ecological purpose, a curious thing happens. As one moves cognitively into this realm of intricate particularity, the landscape begins to *open*. A new depth dimension is revealed. Where before, the natural landscape may have seemed two-dimensional, mere appearance, now it is multi-dimensional. What was a screen of background trees, for instance, now becomes a differentiated, intricately dimensional space of yellowbox, Deane’s wattle, lightwood, wallowa, weeping pittosporum and cherry ballart, with an equally differentiated under-layer of specific shrubs and herbs, all full of evidence of bird and invertebrate activity and hiding, underfoot, fungal signals and tell-tale marks of animals. One also begins not only to see, but to hear: what was generic ‘birdsong’ now resolves into expressions of specific birds – diamond firetails, rainbow bee-eaters, choughs – in specific communicative situations.

Each of the individually cognized plants and animals comprising this dimensional labyrinth is moreover rich in personal and narrative associations arising from one’s own shared history with the community. One has, it seems, entered a new kind of space, a new form of ‘-cosm’ that is neither macro- nor micro- nor topographic at all but a honeycomb of innerness and outerness, of signature and meaning. This is moreover a thick social milieu, in which, as in a family, a thousand things tap one on the shoulder, calling for one’s attention and response. The world as mere appearance, as specular surface, has opened up and *come alive* as a result of one’s ecological engagement and collaboration. One has entered ‘Country’, in the Aboriginal sense: “Country is living, responsive and caring, and [the word] is capitalised to denote an Indigenous understanding of one’s place, which connects people, socio-economic systems, language, spirit and Nature through interrelationship” (Wooltorton *et al.*, 2020).

Of course, theoretic perspectives such as science and even metaphysics need not be entirely excluded from this exercise. One might borrow scientific nomenclature, plumb the scientific literature for answers to everyday questions, such as how to identify a mysterious crustacean that has turned up in the wildlife trough or how to propagate quandong seeds. Science can be a useful tool for one’s project – it can contribute to the clusters of meaning that gradually accrete around particulars. Metaphysical terms – such as *panpsychism* or *animism*, for example – might also come in handy for designating the hidden dimensions of reality revealed by the strategic perspective. But theory *per se*, with its subject-object divide, no longer structures the epistemic space one now inhabits.

I have explained the contrast between these two ways of knowing – the theoretic (*theoria*) and the strategic (*strategia*) – at length elsewhere (see

Mathews, 2023). Through the lens of theory, the world is reduced to the passive plane of abstraction, representation: in the 'theatre' of the knower's intellect, it figures as mere map, model or schema. Stripped of its independent reality, the power of this world to push back against the knower or return the knower's gaze is lost. As a primary way of apprehending the world, *theoria* is thus, according to this account, the root of the dualism that solipsizes the subject and ontologically disenfranchises the object, eventually manifesting as the malignant form of human self-absorption that characterizes the condition of modernity.

Notice however that it is not for nothing that the term, *strategia*, as alternative to *theoria*, is somewhat military in connotation. When one bursts the bubble of dualism and relinquishes the omnipotent subject position, one becomes acutely vulnerable to the myriad forces at play in the field of immersion. One has accordingly to be ready to assume a fighting stance. I am reminded here of a remark by David Mowaljarlai, revered Senior Lawman from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Waking up one morning while travelling through Country with a non-Indigenous companion, he was musing on what the day would bring. At first he spoke with deep affection about being drawn to things, how "when you touch them, all things talk to you, give you their story [...] You understand that your mind has been opened to all those things because you are seeing them; because your presence and their presence meet together and you recognise each other" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 1993: 53– 4). He describes how when things draw you towards them, you become part of the flow of morning, where this gives you life and strength. But then he goes on to say of the new day that "it faces you like a murderer" (p. 56). When I first read this passage, I was jolted and puzzled. Mowaljarlai was a traditional man of high degree, totally at home on the land, inhabiting it as he inhabited his own skin. Why, in the intimacy of this relationship, would he feel like a combatant? He tried to explain. The new day brings fear. "You can have an accident, have a snakebite or fall over a cliff." But fear makes you alert. "Without fear you've got nothing in you to become a person, you never learn anything, you have no awareness" (p. 56).

There is nothing sentimental about this relationship with Country. While all things might be talking to you, "giving you their story", you are still responsible for your own safety. Outside the carapace of technology that *theoria*, with its attendant legions of designers and engineers, assembles around the subject to actualize its omnipotence, one is indeed on all fours with a world which, for all one's intimacy with it, remains dangerous. At the mercy of the manifold forces and elemental energies at play in one's environs, one needs vigilance, alertness, acuity. Paternalist protectiveness towards the natural world might accordingly be a premature attitude if we have not yet experienced our vulnerability in face of it. Yet, as Mowaljarlai points out, it is the experience of such vulnerability that invigorates our conativity, forcing us fully to inhabit our intrinsic powers, our powers of self-efficacy.

A defender of modernity, one who has never passed through the outer appearances into the lively innerness of Country nor, hence, experienced this

invigoration, might ask *why* one should choose to forego the fortifications, the defences, that dualism affords in favour of a modality that places one so at risk? Yes, dualism has undeniably served as a vehicle for political and environmental domination in the course of its history, but it has also built this now planet-wide fortress shielding humans from the perils that haunted our ancestors. And yes, this same mind-set has produced a state of Earth Systems Collapse that may itself place humanity in jeopardy in the longer run (Monbiot, 2023). But couldn't we marshal the power of *theoria* to protect ourselves from this eventuality? Perhaps science can devise means of replacing the natural biosphere altogether with artificial systems capable of serving human interests with equal functionality? Should we forfeit such a possibility of total control and return to a pre-scientific state of vulnerability simply out of moral respect for other species?

My own answer to this question would of course be an emphatic yes, but as Arne Næss pointed out long ago, altruism is not a strong motivator of human behaviour (Næss, 1988). If modern civilization were asked to switch from the theoretic to the strategic mode merely in deference to the moral rights of other species, it would be – has already plainly proved to be – unlikely to comply. But the strategic attitude entrains powerful rewards of its own.

As a way of knowing that situates us as insider, a participant in a shared space of purposive activity, rather than as external and analytical observer and mapper, *strategia* dissolves the old appearance/reality distinction that is the concomitant of the theoretic perspective. It lands us squarely into the thick of reality itself, vouchsafing us direct *contact with the real*.

Our present need for contact with the real cannot be overstated. In the West our historical habituation to the appearance/reality distinction has primed us to defer utterly to literal screens, the electronic screens of digital technology, since the 'screen' of appearance is all that, as inheritors of the theoretic tradition, we have ever known. This transformation of appearance, as our primary datum, into the verily virtual, represents the apotheosis of dualism and, as corollary, the final loss of our sense of the real. But loss of our sense of the realness of things entails loss of any sense of our own reality. When our primary experience, in a theoretically and technologically mediated milieu, is no longer of things pushing back against us, we no longer experience in any corporeal way our own impact upon them. Imposing our will on the merely phantasmal elicits no sense of self-efficacy, no sense of our own potency as a centre and source of self-existence – let alone, as Spinoza taught, any sense of joy in existence.

Dualism isolates the theorizing subject, solipsizes it, removes its vital awareness of contact with reality. The illusory feeling of omnipotence that it confers is countered by a deeper, inarticulate feeling of impotence. The strategic way, by contrast, is a way of potentiation – not the 'potentiation' of mediated domination and co-optation, as per the theoretic approach, but the potentiation that accrues from repossessing the visceral sense of one's own efficacy and hence reality. There is no greater impotence, after all, than the impotence of the unreal.

For all the triumphal grandiosity, posturing and exclusive self-referencing of modernity then, there is, beneath the sound and fury, a sadness, emptiness, stultification and loneliness that is arguably hollowing out our civilization and leading inexorably to end-times violence as a final attempt to rip open the veil, the screen, of appearance and reach through to the perennially elusive real.

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