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Renewing Experientially our Sense of Existence and Cultivating Seeds of Joy

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Abstract: In this commentary, I provide some accounts showing similarities to Petitmengin’s position. While being totally in line with the argument of anchoring in experience as an act of resistance facing the social and ecological crisis we are witnessing, I raise two main concerns: a first one regarding the question of unity and multiplicity as for humans and nature, in relation to the “how to live together?” question; a second one to challenge the author on the conditions under which her proposal can be implemented.

Resonances with other research

1. In her target article, Claire Petitmengin very convincingly shows how the ecological disaster is intimately related to our being cut off from our lived experience. In this commentary, I will offer an overview of accounts taken from the fields of ecopsychology and environmental psychology and philosophy, which all show similarities to the position defended in the target article. Such an overview reinforces the need for developing a science investigating subjective experience in the first or second person, such as Petitmengin does, as an act of opposition to the plundering of the living. Petitmengin’s position currently resonates with much research on the loss of human–nature interactions. Robert Pyle has termed this ongoing alienation of humans from nature “the extinction of experience.” He has argued, in particular, that “this is not just about losing the personal benefits of the natural high. It also implies a cycle of disaffection that can have disastrous consequences” (Pyle 1993: 146).
2. Petitmengin describes a rupture with our experience, which leads to the conclusion that “experiential destitution and ecological ravage are two inseparable faces” (§19). This experiential famine, in addition to depleting the Earth, leads to negative emotions, such as the psychoterratic emotions in the Anthropocene – emotions that people feel in relation to the Earth and its endangerment – described by Glenn Albrecht “so much that a type of emotional death with respect to nature is taking place” (Albrecht 2019: 67). Emotional death occurs when certain human beings no longer have a reaction to the end, death, or loss of nature, when they have no emotional presence anymore to bear witness, as all remaining biota are ignored because they are not relevant to their life projects.
3. The previous rupture also has the effect of limiting our understanding of human modes of knowledge, by reducing these modes to disembodied mechanisms – such as

categorizing or comparing. Indeed, these mechanisms do not make it possible to sufficiently account for the transformations that continuously take place in the living world, nor to understand them. By losing track of the ever-dynamic character of the world, as well as that of our relationship with it, this world comes to a standstill. François Jullien (2009) thus outlines the difficulties of Western culture in dealing with the silent transformations occurring within some living systems, showing how transitions – such as climate change or ageing – escape Western understanding. In contrast with this tendency, Petitmengin invites us to acknowledge and honor a way of knowing that is embodied and dynamic. Such a way of knowing is reminiscent of Hubert Reeves’s “knowledge that does not know that it knows” (Reeves 1998: 169, my translation), which can be illustrated by migratory birds’ knowledge as they orient themselves geographically. According to this author, this knowledge is much older and denser than “knowledge that knows that it knows,” i.e., technical or scientific knowledge elaborated over the last centuries through a dialogue between observations, intuitions and theories – something that could amount to instruction manuals to learn to fly like a migratory bird.

4. Such an impoverishment of the modes of attention to what lives within us is also outlined by Baptiste Morizot, for whom the ecological crisis is

“a crisis in our relationship with living beings. (...) A tragic impoverishment of the modes of attention and availability that we maintain with the forms of life” (Morizot 2020: 309, my translation).

This breach with the living, triggered and maintained by the “compulsive need to acquire objects, whether tangible or intangible, to confirm our own existence” (Petitmengin §22), then leads us to wonder, as human beings, how to renew our sense of existence with respect to nature? How to foster and cultivate joyful spaces of resistance?

Humans and nature: Unity and multiplicity

5. Most of Petitmengin’s argument relies on the idea that the separation we usually think we perceive between “inner” and “outer” spaces is vain (§8, §14f), and that we have to acknowledge unity regarding “humans” and “nature” within our experience to reanimate our lives (§20). Although I also argue that boundaries between these spaces turn out to be permeable when explored with an experiential method such as micro-phenomenology (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé 2019), I wonder how one could – or could not – articulate unity and multiplicity when it comes to humans and nature. What is this unity to which the author refers? How to define it more precisely? How could it be articulated with a multiplicity of states of being? (Q1) This is a key point in Petitmengin’s argumentation that should be more explicitly addressed.

6. It seems that within the attentional disposition Petitmengin describes, which consists in allowing an intimate contact with our experience and a living relationship to the world, elements that one might consider as opposing one another can co-occur experientially. Consequently, it would allow us to consider unity and multiplicity at the same time. This matters because it raises the question of the relationship to other living

beings. Indeed, considering living beings as both separate and belonging to the same whole, the “how to live together?” question, which is one of the great challenges of the ecological mutation, can be addressed. An “ecological self” can indeed then be conceived of, which relies on the experience of belonging to the living and the widening of our sense of identity, as outlined by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown. As they put it, “through widening circles of identification, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest” (Macy & Brown 2014: 45). This allows us to move on from “I am protecting the Earth” to “I am part of the Earth protecting myself.” Macy and Brown add that “the requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves” (ibid.). This widened self integrates a unity with nature (“I am part of the Earth”) and a multiplicity of beings (“I am only a part of the Earth, which consists of many other parts”).

7. If we consider unity and multiplicity from a phenomenological point of view, as impressions, there is no need to consider them as categories, let alone as exclusive ones. Thích Nhất Hạnh sheds a poetic light on this. According to the Buddha Dharma, he writes

“Let’s suppose we are looking at the ocean. On the surface we see waves going up and down. [...] There is a distinction between waves. But each wave is made of a substance called water. It is a wave, but at the same time it is water.” (2001: 31, my translation).

8. Integrating unity and multiplicity seems all the more coherent with Petitmengin’s proposal, as the author highlights the concept of “inner space of the world” (§8), referring to an in-betweenness that at the same time separates and holds together. In her example, the song of the bird gathers the bird and the person who listens to the song. The in-betweenness here is a translation of the Japanese word “aida” (間), which defines the relationship between two elements as a third element allowing us to understand the possible permeability between these two elements (Kimura 1972).

9. Such a perspective, integrating unity and multiplicity for humans and nature, has consequences in our relations with “*le pas-comme-moi*” (not-like-me) (Morizot 2020: 312, my translation) considering the regard we may have for them, i.e., deference or respect.

Cultivating seeds of joy: Becoming hollow and feeding on impressions

10. Petitmengin’s call to reconnect with the living within us is also resonates with Eugene Gendlin’s (1982) invitation. This scholar founded Focusing (§24), an experiential, sensitive and introspective method for creating meaning from the bodily felt sense. During the Focusing process, the first step consists in “clearing a space,” allowing us to momentarily distance our concerns in order to let the felt sense come and the process unfold. Often, while the space is clear, there remains a feeling that Gendlin calls “background feeling,” which is the dominant feeling one has regarding life – e.g., feeling always dull, always a little sad, always in a hurry or scared (de Fréminville 2008). Gendlin then proposes to clear this feeling in order to gain access to a vaster space, which is the source of meaning according to Focusing. Within this space, freed

from background feeling and past conditionings, one can think and act from one's bodily felt sense, being an agent and as such fully responsible. Such a re-appropriation of responsibility, which Petitmengin also mentions (§23), which increases in our power to act, is a source of joy.

11. The previous inner vastness echoes what Luis Ansa calls “concave receptivity” in his oral teachings, as reported by Robert Eymeri (2016). It also relates to what François Roustang (2015: 485) calls “perceptude.” In this state of welcoming of impressions, i.e., the sensory impacts that nourish human beings, one's way of perceiving is global rather than detailed. Such an open perception, relying on a “sympathetic relation with the perceived” (Abram 1996: 42), allows receptivity to the more-than-human, thanks to a way of listening. It offers an adjustment, with respect to the Earth, that some first peoples have developed, for instance with shamanic practices (ibid.). Accessing this abundance, and thereby experiencing continuity and all our connections with the world, brings joy.

12. Together, these selected arguments from the fields of ecopsychology and environmental psychology and philosophy suggest that a human way of being alive should be found within openness to oneself and to other living beings. Such a project would lead us towards a Symbiocene¹ as an antidote to the Anthropocene. It would imply an overall homeostasis of interests, since domination of one part over the rest leads to functional failure (Albrecht 2019: 97). Also, it would transcend the need to sermonize on our moral responsibilities – something that has not proven effective –, and rely instead on positive emotions (such as belonging or empathy) as levers for change.

13. Finally, I would like to discuss the reservations I have about Petitmengin's invitation to urgently create slowdown spaces. Petitmengin addresses the issue of slowing down (§§23, 27) as an essential path to come into contact with our experience, which I am also convinced of. Could we, as researchers, integrate such a slowdown into our practices? How could we embody a slower rhythm, more respectful of the living and more ecological, in an academic world caught up in a race to produce? More broadly, how could we slow down in a world in which we must act now, in the face of the ecological emergency? (Q2)

14. The issue of slowing down should be at the heart of our professional and personal choices. As gardeners of our lives, we can choose to plant and to take time to nurture seeds that nourish us with a militant and regenerating joy. Taking the time to reconnect with our lived experience, as an act of resistance, is thus, as pointed out by Andy Fisher (2009: 60f), a radical choice, at the root of our relationship to the world, in our lived experience.

¹ From symbiosis, which has its origins in the idea of the companionship of life – to live together.

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