

Weber, "The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science"

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Book Review

Weber, Andreas. *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science*. New Society Publishers, 2016.

In this day and age, where the basis of our worldview has been shaped by evolutionary theory and neoliberal thinking, Dr. Andreas Weber's book, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science* is a welcomed exception. Weber is a Berlin-based biologist, philosopher, magazine writer, and book author whose thought focuses on the relationship between human self-understanding and nature. He currently lectures at Leuphana University of Lüneburg and the Berlin University of the Arts. Floating between the reigning paradigms that govern natural and social sciences, Weber creates a merged story that re-evaluates our understanding of life and proposes a number of radical ideas. They are intended to topple the readers' pre-conceived image of human beings as rational, machine-like creatures fallen from original sin and desperately seeking the truth outside ourselves, whilst caught up in the great Leviathan where only the strongest survive. In Weber's world, human beings are nature; all organisms are subjects; the biosphere flourishes on creativity, aspiration, and desire; and being "alive" means creatively participating in the ongoing imaginative processes of the ecosystem, which he refers to as "Poetic Ecology."

"Poetic Ecology" is both a scientific and philosophical category that Weber uses to put human beings back in nature, instead of beginning his analysis from the perspective of nature as Other and not as Subject. In this ecology, feeling, expression, creativity, and autonomy are necessary dimensions of the existential reality of all organisms. Nature is a place where all life builds on relations and unfolds through mutual transformations and the creative interpenetration of all sentient beings (3). In this ecology, all sentient beings are subjects because subjects are not restricted to animal bodies with perceivable rational faculties. Instead Weber argues, "We do not experience ourselves as subjects solely because we are endowed with a mind. Rather we have a mind because all life is subjectivity. Our subjectivity stems from a desire without which any physics of life will remain incomplete" (100). This desire is not material and occupies no space, but is the desire for life, living, a future and the desire for subjective self-creation. For example, the human fetus is alive in Weber's analysis because it is the creative composition of those wonderful cells that are striving to live and prosper. Is there a point in its life span where we can somehow pinpoint just when a soul or a subject enters it? Or when it begins to feel? Not for Weber. It is a perfect example of the unique temporality Weber adopts throughout his book. The fetus is always becoming, we are always becoming, life is never fixed to any one starting point (326). For the most part, Weber's book does a wonderful job of explaining and

illustrating his understanding of life and its meaning. Yet, there are a couple areas in his book that are less impressive on this front.

For example, in an effort to include mention of cultures that live life with a deeper connection and appreciation for the coexistence of human life and nature, Weber makes reference to indigenous cultures as “tribal.” Speaking of indigenous cultures he writes, “Tribal peoples nearly everywhere live in a relationship of deep reverence and awe in respect to animals, plants and even rocks and lakes” (98). Firstly, the reference to all of them everywhere, as though there is no need to differentiate between them, is deeply problematic. He intends to reference a positive example of a healthy understanding and relationship with the earth from which we could learn, but the unfortunate use of the word “tribal” has the added effect of positioning these indigenous cultures in a state of backwardness. The word “tribe” carries misleading and often derogatory cultural and historical assumptions that deny an understanding of these cultures as diverse, complex, modern and possessing histories of their own. Though the use of the word could be a result of an awkward translation from the German, it makes the reader wonder whether the “correction” (99) Weber hopes can be inspired for the current detached and individualized worldview is in part influenced by a romantic idea of going back to some time or knowledge set where we lost something and is thus insensitively using these cultures as an example of this earlier time and understanding. It would have been better to include any one of the many intelligent and well qualified indigenous scholars that have written about human beings, life, and nature extensively, to highlight the very complex and modern reality of indigenous understandings of life as part of his analysis. Including perspectives from indigenous scholarship might have given more weight to his argument. Yet the only other reference to indigenous cultures in the entire book comes from a similar assumption where Weber recollects Paul Cezanne’s realization, when painting the Montagne Sainte-Victoire in Provence, that indigenous hunters must intuit nature from inside (185). This is an unfortunate approach that, with the best intentions, does a disservice to indigenous life and scholarship.

My point is not to simply illustrate a flaw in Weber’s theory because what he provides is not really a theory. Rather, it is a woven web and an ecology in and of itself, as much as it is writing about a radical ecology. My point also serves to illustrate the extent to which breaking down 19th century assumptions about life, living, and human beings still needs to be done. One of the beautiful strengths of his book is Weber’s own honest and personal dedication to this task. Part of the project for this book importantly includes his own life experiences as examples of his ideas. The relationship between human beings and nature is the research topic, but it is further exemplified by his subjective experience as a human in nature, and this brings the reader to connect with the book. Readers find meaning in their own experiences by being able to find similarities with his. From growing up in northern Germany near fields and frog ponds; his unrequited love for a tall, blond school girl named Mara Simons; finding his niche and coming to

a better understanding of himself in Estonia; and looking into the eyes of the wolf on his trek through the northern highlands of Ethiopia, to the disturbing experience of conducting the vivisection on the lab rabbit—these experiences are all ones that help readers finally come to understand the grand illusion of control and mastery that we live in. We cannot separate ourselves from the whole without deeply misunderstanding who we are, and we exist only through this whole (329).

Weber's work culminates in a call for a re-definition of ethics: "We need an ethics for irrational subjects. We need an ethics for an incomplete creation. We need an ethics that is imperfect from the beginning, provisional, an ongoing tinkering work itself, and which, for exactly these reasons, can be applied to our lives in a living world" (337). Weber's ethic is the ethic of embodied existence. Far from a reductionist approach to narrowing down the right and wrong of a thing, Weber believes that the complexity and chaos that make us is something to be embraced rather than reproached. We, as well as all other animals, experience the consequences of our social actions through feeling (338). Those feelings establish central values in us that are far superior to any imagined theory. These are the values he urges the reader to become more attuned to and to live by.

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