

Review of For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism by Freya Mathews, SUNY Press, 2003, 213 pp., reviewed by Glen Cosby, Ph.D., Dean of Humanities and Academic International Education, Spokane Falls Community College, Spokane, Washington, USA.

American philosopher Jacob Needleman once noted, “we live in a time of metaphysical repression and this repression must be lifted.”¹ Symptomatic of this repression is the reduction of nature from physis to mere 'environment', about which he opines, “one cannot stand in wonder in front of the environment, one can only worry.”² Were he seeking an able pair of hands to aid in the lifting of this repression, he might well look to those of Australian ecophilosopher Freya Mathews, whose book, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism* (2003, SUNY Press) aims a dart to the heart of this repression. Mathews adds that the environment is not something we can encounter in a fully personal way either, it betokens a world that has been rendered mere backdrop, rather than the lodestar for human meanings and purposes.³ To breathe life back into the corpse that modern metaphysical repression has made of nature will require nothing less than a “metaphysics of reanimation”⁴ of a panpsychist bent that can allow again for enchanted encounter to occur.

Three questions present themselves immediately to the curious reader: first, what is meant by a panpsychist metaphysics? Second, what reasons are there for accepting such an account? Third, why believe that such an account, if accepted, will have the power to effect change of the scope and scale needed to thwart ecological catastrophe?

The first question is perhaps easiest to answer, for Mathews' own metaphysics has obvious affinities with the dual-aspect monisms of Fechner and Spinoza, for instance, and readers of this journal are doubtless familiar with Arne Naess' interest in the latter particularly as a philosophical resource for Ecosophy. Mathews appears to have more familiarity with the work of Leibniz, but shuns his tendency toward atomism in favor of a holistic view of reality. Her position is that mind and matter form a unity, that subjectivity is a fundamental, non-reducible feature of reality, but that subjectivity cannot be ascribed to individual physical objects, even though it does belong to the material world at large.⁵ She contends that the acceptance of subjectivity as an inseparable aspect of materiality is the key to reanimating the universe.⁶ In the second chapter ("An Argument From Realism") she describes subjectivity as a kind of "presence-to-itself" or "self-presence" of matter, and invites us to consider, by way of analogy, the way the sleeping body "occupies space from within as well as from without."⁷ Her account of subjectivity is somewhat murky however, in that she denies that it need be accompanied by self-consciousness or even

sentience, and says “it is not necessarily identical with thoughts, feelings or sensations, but may be regarded as subtending them.”⁸ Again following Leibniz and Spinoza, she develops her view of an unconscious subjectivity in Chapter 3 (“The Way of the One and the Many”) along the lines of a conatus or impulsion toward self-realization, but crucially links this to orexis, which she depicts as the impulse to reach out to the world. As she explains, “as long as an organism is hungry for contact with its world, it will seek to persevere in existence...desire can be construed as the urge to immerse self in world, to participate fully in the realness of the world. Appetite, as an expression of desire, drives us not toward merely pleasure but towards connection.”⁹

I say this is a crucial link, because the memory of a connection between the fulfillment of human desire and the health of the ecosphere has been all but obliterated in our technology-intoxicated world. From the blind striving of Schopenhauer’s Wille, to the cruel machinations of Nietzsche’s Wille zur Macht, to the infantilism of Freud’s libido, desire has been oft represented in modern philosophy as egocentric to the point of solipsism. Small wonder then that consumer capitalism panders to what is self-absorbed in us rather than to what is other-directed, and smaller wonder still that such pandering has brought human history to the brink of biocide. If there is to be any hope for a state of affairs such as that depicted in Naess’ description—following Kant—of a “beautiful act” (i.e., an act in which our spontaneous desire and our highest

moral calling coincide¹⁰), then the object of desire must be something more than to just use up the world in a consumptive mode. Mathews' account postulates something more, wherein "a mode of address, rather than of representation or explanation, is now required in our approach to reality, and such address should be integrated into all our social and personal practices... from a panpsychist viewpoint, the aim is not to theorize the world, but to relate to it, and to rejoice in that relationship."¹¹ In short, she would have us rediscover eros as the leitmotiv of existence, and understand eros as the desire for meaningful encounter with the world. This is argued at length in Chapter 4 ("The Priority of Encounter Over Knowledge"), and takes us a long way toward answering the third question posed above, in that for Mathews, "the follower of the path of eros does find fulfillment through encounter, but in seeking others she is not seeking fulfillment—she is seeking them, and that is why her contact with them is fulfilling."¹² Eros, as the desire for intersubjective concourse with the world, presupposes panpsychism.¹³ Encountering other beings entails wanting to encounter them as they are, not as we wish them to be, and so entails solicitude for preserving their way of being—a sort of "built-in" environmental ethic thus emerges from a panpsychist metaphysics, according to Mathews.

It is the second question posed above that is the most difficult to answer in short order. We can see already that there is a psychological argument for

panpsychism, in that a world composed of dead matter is incapable of responding to our deepest desires for connectivity and relatedness. But how can we be reassured that accepting a panpsychist metaphysics is not mere wish-fulfillment, an attempt to veil the horrible, alienating truth about reality? Mathews offers two arguments in response to this, one metaphysical, the other epistemological. Taken together she contends that they offer a compelling case for the view that, not only is panpsychism the world-view that harmonizes best with our deepest longings, it is also the world-view that has reason in its favor.

Mathews' epistemological argument is heavily indebted to Berkeley for his critique of materialism as necessarily entailing skepticism about reality, though she rejects Berkeley's idealism as a plausible solution.¹⁴ The problem is a familiar one to philosophers: if mind and matter are fundamentally different substances, how can we ever be sure that the mental lens through which we must regard materiality is not a distorting lens or reality even a mere projection? Her solution, which she dubs the "argument from revelation," is that we can be sure that there is a world out there not of our own construction or projection because we become aware of other viewpoints than our own, viewpoints that "break in" upon our own tendencies toward egocentrism and solipsism.¹⁵ No determined skeptic would be utterly confounded by this argument since even if it is successful the problems of one subject coming to know another may be as daunting as the problem of an immaterial mind

coming to know a material reality, but at least, Mathews contends, it is adequate to refute the skeptic's doubt about there being a world out there to which subjectivity belongs and to which my subjectivity can relate.

Her metaphysical argument has both a negative and positive side to it. On the negative side is the failure, to date at least, of materialist accounts to solve the so-called (by David Chalmers) "hard problem" of consciousness, which is the problem of how such apparently irreducible features of consciousness as intentionality (the fact that mental states are often "about" or refer to things other than what they themselves are) and qualia (first-person felt states, such as what it is "like" to feel pain or taste a banana) could possibly have emerged from material states that not only lack them but are defined in contradistinction to them.¹⁶ Her contention is that no account which excludes subjectivity from having fundamental ontological status can hope to reintroduce it later as an emergent quality or epiphenomenon. The positive side is borrowed somewhat from Schopenhauer¹⁷ and in its barest essence is the claim that in order to even be able to conceive of a world to which I might possibly relate, I must recall that I too, along with my subjective awareness, am a part of this reality, not a detached spectator, and hence consistency demands that I suppose that reality, like me, has an inner life of its own and is not void of animation.

Though I can but offer the barest sketch of Mathews' closely argued case here, I trust the power of her account is evident. Particularly laudable is her observation that it begs the question to assume that our interactions/ encounters with the world distort or conceal more than they reveal. While it is true that they may distort, it is not any less true to say that the world may only reveal some aspects of itself through encounter,¹⁸ a point made by other philosophers of encounter, such as Buber and Levinas, whom Mathews credits as influences.¹⁹ Also commendable is Mathews' sensitivity to the problem of suffering, non-human and human alike, and the extent to which this presents an obstacle to affirming existence on its own terms. She deals with this problem throughout Chapter 5 ("Suffering and the Tree of Life"), and her response to it is the most philosophically satisfying of which I am aware; that is, if panpsychism is correct, then the universe is implicated in whatever suffering individuals within it experience, but this is the necessary price to be paid for individuation and creativity. She rightly notes that "only a Creator who actually suffers everything that its creatures suffer is truly above suspicion in this connection. All other justifications for the fact of suffering smack of contrivance and rationalization."²⁰ As with Nietzsche, the question of how to affirm the world along with its suffering is a major preoccupation for Mathews, and also as with Nietzsche, even her best efforts at affirmation are tinged with ambivalence:

All that can be stated with any confidence is that the deep desire of the One for the Many that underlies the very self-realization of the One is inconsistent, ultimately, with the suffering of the Many, but that to actualize the order of intersubjectivity that constitutes the deepest potential of the One, the One needs our cooperation.²¹

If, as at least one psychologist has suggested, “the primary emotional work we need to do to deal with our inadequacy in the face of environmental destruction is the work of mourning,”²² then the adoption of a panpsychist perspective that casts the universal One in the role of fellow sufferer rather than spectator or indifferent cause may have therapeutic value in addition to philosophical credibility.

Mathews’ cure for our metaphysical repression is bold, at times dazzlingly so. Her case is not without its questionable aspects. For instance she claims that her own view encompasses but surpasses deep ecological views in that it includes artifacts as well as naturally occurring entities in its scope, going so far as to include a car at one point as an example of the extent to which one can experience an encounter with an entity.²³ Such metaphysical largesse may be required by Mathews’ contention that all matter, not just life, participates in subjectivity, but it seems to leave her position quite vulnerable to the “plastic trees” objection to environmental activism;²⁴ that is, if artifacts have just as much standing with respect to subjectivity as organisms, then why privilege a putatively “natural” entity or habitat over a prosthetic one? At the very least it raises what philosopher Elliot Sober has dubbed “the problem of

demarcation,”²⁵ the problem of where to “draw the line” between what matters most ethically and what is of less importance, and may put Mathews’ position in closer proximity to that of a gospel of ecological invention such as that espoused by Frederick Turner²⁶ than Mathews herself intended. Obviously readers will have to peruse Mathews’ arguments firsthand for a satisfying answer, and I heartily recommend they do so, for her book is an eminently worthwhile read.

¹Jacob Needleman, *The Heart of Philosophy*, New York: Knopf, 1982, p. x.

² Needleman, p. 156.

³ Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2003, p. 4.

⁴ Mathews, p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁰ Arne Naess, "Ecosophy T: Deep Versus Shallow Ecology," reprinted in *Environmental Ethics: Readings In Theory and Application*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, 3rd ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001, p. 154.

¹¹ Mathews, p. 88.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43, and note #27 especially.

¹⁶ See especially p. 194, note #17

¹⁷ As Mathews admits early on in the book; c.f., especially p. 15–17.

¹⁸ Mathews, p. 169.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197, note #2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²² Shierry Weber Nicolsen, *The Love of Nature and the End of the World*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 140.

²³ Mathews, p. 82.

²⁴ So-called after a famous article by Martin H. Krieger that first appeared in the journal *Science* in 1973 entitled, "What's Wrong With Plastic Trees?"

²⁵ Elliott Sober, "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism," in *The Preservation of Species*, ed. Bryan Norton, Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 173–94.

²⁶ C.f., for example Turner's "The Invented Landscape" in *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes*, A. Dwight Baldwin, Jr., Judith DeLuce, and Carl Pletsch, eds., University of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 35–66. Turner there defines "inventionist ecology" as the view that "it is both possible and desirable not only to conserve natural resources, preserve natural ecosystems, and restore natural landscapes, but also, when the occasion warrants and the knowledge is sufficient, to create new ecosystems, new landscapes, perhaps even new species."