

Position Paper

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I will focus on two themes.

First, what is it to think change? This calls for a thinking of the relation between reason and imagination in the thinking of difference.

Second, if nature and culture exist in entangled becomings, how can one, (can one,) think of a different worlding where the nature of entanglement will be different?

Finally, I will try to situate this discussion in the context of the Covid-inflected world.

Bachelard begins his book by saying that the work of imagination is that “it *deforms* what we perceive”, and that “it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them.” (1) The introduction itself, if we remember, is called “Imagination and Mobility”. In the sentence I quote, “change” is emphasized with an italic. The book itself is called, we all know, *Air and Dreams*, but with a descriptive subtitle, *An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Change, motion, movement, and their inalienable relations with ‘imagination’ is at the heart of Bachelard’s concerns. That relationship is complex. One has to change what is there in order to move, has to imagine de-form-ation in order to change, has to change what is immediate to perception in order to imagine. These are related in serpentine, entangled ways.

On the one hand, there is the attempt to distinguish motion from being, imagination from reality.

“... real mobility, the very essence of motion, which is what imagined motion is, is not aroused by description of reality, even when it describes the unfolding of reality.” (4)

There are acute analyses of the differences between what he calls the “kinematic” and that which he calls the “dynamic”, almost a distinction between the “vision” of movement which is not really a motion and that movement which is “an integral part of our inner lives” (8). This latter movement which is the crux of imagination lets us imagine and activate change. It is, in a way, also a materiality of the imaginary –

“... in our research on the imaginary we are *carried along by fundamental kinds of matter*,” (7).

On the other hand, there is the mutual constitution, rather an entanglement, of the imaginary and the real. Bachelard asserts that his study is about –

“... how the imaginary is immanent in the real, how a continuous path leads from the real to the imaginary.” (4)

He conceives the journey, the relation between the real and the imaginary, in a direction which is opposite to the commonsense one. For him, it is the image which is, rather than the object, “the subject of the verb to imagine” –

“In human reverie, the world imagines itself” (14).

Thus, a materialization of imagination is the dynamic of change. That materialization presupposes a distinction between motion and the present being.

If we now *think* this aporetic relation, of course an impossible move, in the attempts to think a world different from what it is now in terms of sustainability and ecology, what are the figures that appear? The question of difference remains at the heart of the matter. Difference, internal and external, difference in continuity with and breaking radically from the same. Difference which rents the presence of this world and constitutes this world, difference which yet seems to operate a clean break for some. Donella H. Meadows, in her unusually sensitive piece on the imagination of sustainable futures, operate with the idea of such a clean break. Her attempt, as I see it, is a policy document at its best. A policy document that opens itself up to different, radically other, visions of (often) impossible futures.

“Where would we like all these models, this information, this implementation to take us? What is our **vision** of the world we are trying to create for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren?” (2)

This move, as one easily realizes, is of immense importance in a world built upon the workings of realizable and calculable goals. Goals, being constituted on the principles of calculation, being, as we know, ever displaced and distorted by the incalculable and the unanticipatable.

Meadows’ article has references to the participation of reason in the production of vision, yet it operates on the principle of a clear separation between the two.

“... some of the most profound ones [visions] have come not through "seeing," but through sensing in other ways” (6).

The ideological making of the vision (or the senses) of one who inhabits a certain world is not something which she speaks of. We can, a little expansively perhaps, remember Bachelard’s distinction between the kinematic and the dynamic, between vision of motion and the dynamic of becomings. The fixity of an immediate presence pervades the policy document, even in its openings into other visions. The need is then, to navigate the chasm between the kinematic of the present and the dynamic of im/possible changes. Bachelard talks about a similar predicament in the context of writing and speech –

“The written word has an enormous advantage over a spoken one, because it can call forth abstract echoes in which thoughts and dreams reverberate. The spoken word requires too much effort on our part; it requires too much presence” (250).

In the act of thinking in terms of entanglements, the hard substance of “too much presence” may continue to persist. The imagination of a different world, from within a present worlding, has continuously to negotiate the weight of this presence even when it articulates imaginations underivable from that presence.

Moving (a little too) quickly on to the question of the shifting presence of this world inflected by the pandemic and of impossible ways in which one makes attempts to work through it, I raise the following question.

How to think (about) the virus?

The virus that is so close to its kin that causes the common cold, yet, a tiny bit different, a difference that explodes into the disease that caused and has the potentiality of causing more than a million deaths in a single year.

The virus that, in all probability, moved into the human habitat from the non-human ones due to the devastations wrought by the Anthropos on its surroundings.

The virus that, in its turn, has brought about changes in that habitat the humans call the social to an extent that no one thought possible some months ago.

The virus has pushed, to extreme limits, the attempts of the modern man to control the present and predict the future, only to bring out their utter futility. It has made mundane what were marked for and as states of exception. By pursuing unbelievably authoritarian measures on the basis of democratic states, it has led to movements of people fully beyond the welfare net of those states. Trying to increase distance in the ‘social’ public, it has pushed women into the family, even more torturous and heterosexist than before. Pressing on the medical logic to heal populations, it has thrust people completely outside the healing touches of other persons.

One might remember at this point that the germ theory of diseases, which link what medicine marks as ‘abnormalities of the body’ produced in reaction to causative ‘organisms’ in the environment, has been operative from the late nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that that is the period when a sub-discipline of medicine called the Tropical medicine also did emerge – a special medicine for the tropics, the less known geographies of diseases. The body’s encounters with its many others were trying to map and calculate those others in terms of space and of reified different bodies, the bodies of micro-organisms, which were marked as causes of diseases. The virus, it will be instructive to recall, is one such disease-causing micro-entity.

The science of medicine experiences the ethical in its respect for the adversary, death. The ultimate singularity of this one event reflects the unanticipatability of the *event* – of any event not reducible to the predictions of a prior calculus. Probably not only the practice of medicine, with the possibility of annihilation smiling its content face over the entirety of a globe, a respect for the nonthinkable infinitude of non-presence may be the only responsible way to respond to the familiar entity called death, death that surrounds the near alien experience of living. It becomes difficult then to call for, as some states have automatically done, calculated moves of implicit non-care for the elderly, a none too implicit eugenic move, one could say.

The point is, in many of the instances we are talking about, with the exception of certain events that are blatantly the outcome of callous aggression on the part of the state, the outcomes are chillingly cruel yet the means are not straightaway reprehensible. The auto-immune processes of democracy and science had as if turned against the tissues and organs of the selves.

My tentative and inadequately thought response tries to talk about certain ways in which medicine and modernity have been presupposing relations with the other. May be, we need to philosophize in the face of the pandemic. My attempt is only to speak of its necessity, not to provide a substantive solution. May be, it is too soon to make such a move.

The pandemic made possible by the entity that straddles the living and the non-living (we have all read in the early textbooks about this intermediate status of the ‘virus’) has in its turn made us face the in/calculability of life as of death, through our intense work of calculation. Trying to make sense of a chaotic universe, or multiple chaotic universes, it is still our calculations that lead us on to their limits. Covid 19 is a name that tries to describe and define polymorphous, shifting and mutating entities onto the grapheme of life/death, and, not the same though, of living/dying.

If to change is to imagine, and imagination a break and entanglement with reality, if to reason is to be deflected by the works of the unintended, and dis-ease the deflections of planetary efforts for the anthropic good, one ethical move perhaps is in unsure responses and a respect for the dynamic webs of living/dying.