

ENCHANTMENT, EMBODIMENT and ECOLOGY

Patrick Curry

(A talk given for the Embodiment Conference, October 2020)

I was having trouble preparing this talk until I realised that before I could discuss the subjects of my title – e., e. & e. – there was something else I had to mention first. So I’m going to take a moment to do that, by raising this question: during an extraordinarily tense American election – and the slow train-wreck of Brexit, where I live – and the pandemic, which isn’t going away – and global climate chaos, which is only going to get worse, isn’t thinking about and talking about *enchantment* kind of frivolous?

That question suggests another, related one: amid such overwhelming disenchantment, can we afford to dispense with wonder altogether? Couldn’t it be that on the contrary, we need it more than ever? If you think that might be true, listen on.

I’ll start with some remarks about what enchantment is, as well as isn’t. Then, since what it is includes being both embodied and ecological, we’ll see what flows from that.

First and foremost, enchantment is an **experience of wonder**. So right away, we can see that it needs someone to be present, experiencing it and participating in it. If you are on the outside, merely observing, it isn’t happening. The word itself implies as much: from the French, originally Latin, *en chantment*: *in* a song. That is, to find yourself in the song that you are hearing or singing, and by implication, in a picture, or in a story.

When that happens, there is a range of intensity. It can be merely *charming*, or it can be *delightful*, or it can culminate in full-blown *joy*. (Note that I don’t describe it as ‘pleasure’; that quality is somewhat different.) The last of these, joy, is normally something which only happens a few times in one’s life, and can be life-changing. I call it ‘radical enchantment’, and most of what I have to say concerns that.

Now let’s consider wonder more closely: that is, pure or existential wonder. One way we can throw light on a concept or value is to ask what its opposite is. The opposite here is *will*: any desire or effort to *make* something happen, to *change* something, or to make someone *do* something. If that is what is happening, then enchantment isn’t.

But we can refine our starting-point. The wonder of enchantment is always wonder *at*, or *by*, another. (Not power *over*.) It’s an **encounter**, across a gap of difference. And in that meeting, the gap is bridged. Boundaries remain – they don’t disappear – but they cease to matter.

Furthermore, as in any true relationship, no one is in charge. What happens is determined jointly and recursively, not only by one party or the other. In other words, enchantment is essentially **wild**. And in this important respect, it’s like **nature**. In the whole natural world, including us but vastly greater, there are many, many agents, subjects and interests at play, and very few outcomes if any are entirely predictable.

What *kind* of relationship are we talking about here? The poet W.H. Auden distinguished between true and false enchantment. In **true** enchantment, he said, all you want is for the enchanting other to be well, to flourish, for their own sake. But with **false** enchantment, you want ‘either to possess the other or be possessed by them’. Following on from that, Auden’s teacher at Oxford, J.R.R. Tolkien, said that ultimately, enchantment is ‘a love and respect for all things, “animate” and “inanimate”, an unpossessive love of them as “other”’. He added that ‘This love will produce both *ruth*’ – a word meaning pity, empathy, compassion – ‘and delight.’

Now the other party can be anyone or anything: a human being, another animal, a plant, a place of any kind, a sight, sound, smell, taste or texture, or even an idea. But in the process, whoever or whatever the enchanting other is, they become, and are realised to be, a *person*, with qualities, subjectivity and agency. Otherwise a relationship wouldn't be possible.

We ourselves are a particular kind of being, however – the human animal – so enchantment *tends* to happen in certain domains: love, art, religion, food and drink, learning, sports, humour, and nature. Let's touch very briefly on each of these.

- Falling in *love* is, of course, a classic experience of enchantment. And ‘falling’ is the right word. You don’t step into it, or choose it, or make it happen. And in its course, the enchanting other *becomes*, and is realised to *be*, both human and divine. (The important thing is to hang on to *both* dimensions.)
But friendship – less showy than erotic love – can run just as deep. And then there’s your children, if you have any: so you, and yet so different! (Again, it’s *both*.)
- *Art*: while remaining in the room you’re in simultaneously, as I said, finding yourself in the picture you’re looking at, or the music you’re hearing, or the story you’re reading. And going deeply into it, which takes you to somewhere else, which turns out to be at the heart of where you already were but didn’t realise it.
- Being moved by a *religious ritual*, connecting you with all the community of others, however removed in space or time, who have celebrated the same truth.
- Sharing a meal prepared with love and skill, taking into yourself not only the ‘physical’ *food or drink* but all the *stories* it contains of where it was grown and how it was cooked or made.
- The delight of *learning* something new, not in order to advance your career, score points, or for any vulgar reason, but for its *own* sake.
- *Sport*, and the exhilaration of that impossible goal, or save, or return, or whatever it was that someone just did.
- *Humour*, being shaken by something absurd yet undeniably true.
- And *nature*: apprehending, in its complexity, beauty and mystery, a natural place or fellow-creature, which sometimes, quite unexpectedly, apprehends *you*.

I believe *all* enchantments are ultimately natural, rooted in nature, including ourselves as natural beings. (Culture is just part of our nature.) In other words, enchantment, like life itself, is not anthropocentric. It includes us but it isn’t all about *us*, let alone *me*.

What does enchantment show us? It partly reveals, and partly creates, a *truth* about the enchanting other: their *intrinsic* value and meaning, which doesn’t depend in any way on their usefulness, or exchange value in the market. [Exactly like metaphor {Ricoeur}.]

Now enchantment takes place as a unique **moment** – so it doesn’t happen *in* time – and a unique **place**, so nor does it happen *in* space. Such a moment is ‘short but deep’ (Etel Adnan), so it is intensely meaningful. ‘Nothing has happened but everything has changed’, as someone put it (Eduardo Viveiros de Castro). For that reason, enchantment is also fateful. Even *refusing* it is fateful, because you do so too late to be unaffected.

In the moment of enchantment, time radically slows. But it doesn’t altogether stop, and sooner or later it comes to an end. So every hello of wonder is shadowed by a goodbye from which we hide our eyes; the wonder of childhood is continually becoming grown-up; wild nature is always falling to so-called development; the Elves are forever passing over the Sea, leaving us behind on the darkening shores of Middle-earth in ‘the Age of Men’, now known as the Anthropocene. Hence the joy of enchantment is often bittersweet, with a poignant or melancholy quality. The result can be a kind of pre-emptive nostalgia. In the words of the great haiku poet Bashō, ‘Even in Kyōto, hearing the cuckoo cry, I long for Kyōto.’ Relatedly, the quality of enchantment is not so much desire as it is yearning, or longing.

Let's turn now to *place*. Tolkien's name for the place of enchantment was *Faërie*, and he described it as 'the realm or state in which fairies have their being. [But] *Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays...it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, *and ourselves*...when we are enchanted.' So *Faërie* is the place you find yourself in when you are enchanted, and it is what the place where you are becomes.

But just as enchanted moments do not last forever, however much they feel that way at the time, we cannot *stay* forever in *Faërie*, only visit or be visited by it. (We are humans, not Elves.) It follows that a healthy relationship with enchantment needs a strong ego, to let go when needs must, and not fall into futile grasping or clinging. [Blixen.]

For the same reason, the enchanting other too is vulnerable to change and loss. But instead of this diminishing their value, they become all the more precious for that! Note the sharp contrast with the apparently eternal, untouchable, permanent truths prized by both science and most religion. As William James said, 'the stagnant felicity of the Absolute's own perfection moves me as little as I move it.'

The social philosopher Max Weber defined enchantment as '**concrete magic**'. What he meant was that it is both utterly particular – *this* person, in *this precise* moment and place – and inexhaustibly mysterious. In other words, it is both embodied, even carnal, *and* spiritual.

By the same token, enchantment is neither purely 'subjective' (a state of mind) nor purely 'objective' (a condition of the world). It is upstream of that distinction. As Wittgenstein said, life is neither merely physiological (these days, neurophysiological) nor merely psychological. 'Life is the world'. And as an especially intense experience of being alive, so is enchantment.

This means that it doesn't fall under the rule of either of [what Gregory Bateson called] our two dominant 'species of superstition': the pure physicality of scientific materialism, on the one hand, and the pure spirituality of supernaturalism on the other. (The latter has also been safely secularised as mainstream psychology.)

So the spiritual dimension of enchantment – its 'magic' – is not something floating above concrete circumstances, or added to it, as the words '*supernatural*' and '*transcendental*' imply. It only exists in, and *as*, those circumstances: not the contrary of the world of the senses, but its inner lining and depth, its *meaning* [Merleau-Ponty].

Let's turn to **embodiment**. If it's not already clear, the experience of enchantment is always embodied, and it is one in which the body and the senses play a vital part. So how do we understand the body? More specifically, what does the primal experience of enchantment show us about our bodies?

First, you are not merely 'in' a body, nor do you merely 'have' one, as if you were essentially unaffected by it. Your body is what makes it possible to be a person at all: not only to live, but to know and feel anything whatsoever, and to be apprehended in turn. (All our imaginings of being a disembodied self are ones of what it would be like for an *embodied* creature to experience that.)

Second, there is no body as or purely material object, if by 'material' you mean it excludes the mental or spiritual. Like the enchantment that a body makes possible, it is *both*. And although we can distinguish *between* mind and body, so they are not necessarily completely identical, there is no point at which one stops and the other starts. In the very farthest stretch of our mind, the body is still actively present; and at our most intensely embodied, mind – intelligence, if you like – is at work.

Third, our bodies are constituted by what David Abram called 'the more-than-human world' – and they connect us *to* the rest of that vast and vibrant world. In other words, they,

and we, are fully *relational* – composed of relationships – and *ecological*. (Ecology just *is* the more-than-human world of relationships, including, but far from only, us humans.) All the important questions then become ones of right and wrong relationship; in a word, ethics.

In this perspective, enchantment lives at the heart of embodiment. It is an inalienable part of life; its potential is inherent in being alive as embodied, ecological, interdependent, finite Earthlings. But it is also wonder at *being* alive! An astonishing and humbling apprehension of ‘wild Being’ (with a capital B), incarnated as this particular precious, vulnerable being, triumphantly themself, before another one: *you*.

Let me now ask what we can do to *welcome embodied and ecological enchantment into our lives*. But I will remind you that true enchantment is wild, so it comes either as a gift or not at all. It cannot, without certain failure or betrayal, be made part of a system, a programme, an algorithm, or an app. Even when the goal is *progressive*, enchantment cannot survive an agenda.

So what *can* we do? A lot, actually, although much of it involves something that human beings seem to find very hard: not meddling, interfering or ‘fixing’, but stepping back and getting out of the way. We can learn to exercise what the poet Keats called ‘negative capability’: ‘the capacity to be ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. We can cultivate an attitude of ‘fearless receptivity’ [Stark]. We can give our will something positive to do by *intending* to pay attention, to keep the door open, and to invite enchantment in. We can work hard to create the right conditions for it (hint: not over-controlled). And if it walks in that door, we can try to realise what we are being shown.

Indeed, I believe we can even work with enchantment, if we do it carefully and respectfully. The key is *imagination*. I don’t mean mere fantasizing, but imaginatively engaging with the ‘lining and depth’ (which I mentioned earlier), the inner meaning, of the concrete here and now. We tend to assume that to be fully present or ‘mindful’, the imagination must be suppressed, whereas very nearly the opposite is true. The senses must be engaged, but without creative imagination as well, you can’t truly be ‘here and now’. ‘Reality,’ to borrow the title of a poem by Wallace Stevens, ‘is an activity of the most august imagination’.

Let me finish by returning to where we started. *Is enchantment a frivolous concern?* As I said, I don’t think so. For one thing, in such disenchanted times, why would we want to discourage receptivity to what potential for it *remains*? Moments of enchantment can make life worth living. In Tolkien’s opinion, it is ‘as necessary for the health and complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life...’ And remember that he defined enchantment as ultimately ‘love and respect ... an unpossessive love of them as “other”’. Don’t we need that now more than ever? Dare we forget that there is such a thing?

In the end, we will only fight to defend what we have been enchanted by and learned to love. Reason, although very important, isn’t enough when it stands alone. This point finds a special resonance in the most serious crisis of all that is facing us: not COVID-19, but the *ecocide* of which it is only one result among many. Again, good policy and science are needed, but without personal wonder in and at the natural world, they are ultimately blind. It is enchantment that opens our eyes.

Thank you.