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Extending co-operative inquiry beyond the human: Ontopoetic inquiry with rivers

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Abstract

Co-operative inquiry was conceived as an authentic science of humans as self-determining persons. But what if we extend our definition of persons to include beings in the more-than-human world – and indeed the cosmos itself – as sentient and responsive? This paper gives some account of a series of co-operative inquiries with human and river persons worldwide, drawing on living cosmos panpsychism to address questions of the kind, *What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects?* The paper includes some narratives of encounters with animals who appear at our river encounters, and reflects on the veracity claims we are making.

Keywords

Co-operative inquiry, living cosmos panpsychism, animism

Co-operative inquiry was developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a form of humanistic action research, based on the view that it is not possible to have a true science of persons without engaging with humans *as persons*. Since persons are self-directing beings, manifestly capable of choosing and making sense of their actions, the distinction between a 'researcher' who does all the thinking, and 'subjects' who do the behaving is completely inappropriate. In co-operative inquiry these mutually exclusive roles are replaced by co-operative relationships: all involved work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions (Heron, 1971; 1981a; 1981b; 1996a; Heron & Reason, 2001; 2005; 2008; Heron & Sohmer, 2019; Reason, 2002).

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But these humanist assumptions preserve the very clear distinction between humans and non-humans. This Western, Cartesian viewpoint channels our thinking and perception in significant ways. It tells us that the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity, consciousness, or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose, value, and meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans, and humans alone, have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world.

Thus, in the tradition of Western thought, persons – those beings capable of self-direction and rational choice – are necessarily humans and humans alone. In extreme patriarchal versions of this view, full personhood is even more limited to include only elite, white males. While this extreme view is challenged by feminists, new materialists, post-colonial thinkers, and others, and we may hope is passing, it still has significant influence. As Amitav Ghosh has pointed out in his exploration of the impact of colonial thinking on the planet:

> The questions of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis… What if the idea that the Earth teams with other beings who act, communicate, tell stories, and make meaning, is taken seriously?.. This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, film makers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans. And as with all the most important artistic endeavours in human history, this is a task that is at once aesthetic and political – and because of the magnitude of the crisis that besets the planet, it is now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency... (Ghosh, 2021:195,197, 204)

The many traditions of action research have extended the right and capacity to create knowledge beyond the academy otherwise excluded groups of humans (e.g. Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). But what if we go further? What if we accept, as Ghosh and others would have us, that sentience and the capacity of meaning-making extends beyond the human? As animist scholar Graham Harvey puts it, drawing on a traditional Ojibwa perspective, *the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human* (Harvey, 2017:17; 2021). Similarly, 'geologian' Thomas Berry invites us to see the world as a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects (Berry, 2006). As the planetary crisis of climate change and ecological devastation gathers speed, Ghosh asserts the importance of listening to the voices of the more than human world:

> As these events intensify, they add even ever greater resonance to [indigenous] voices, voices that have stubbornly continued to insist, in the face of unrelenting, apocalyptic violence, that nonhumans can, do, and *must* speak. It is essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those nonhuman voices be restored to our stories. The fate of humans, and all our relatives, depends on it. (Ghosh, 2021:257; italics in original)

Over the past 4 years, I have with a group of colleagues been developing a practice of co-operative inquiry engaging with both human and more-than-human beings to explore and articulate this worldview. We have been working with questions of the kind:

> What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects? How would we relate to such a world? And if we invoke such a world of sentient presence, calling to other-than-human beings as persons, might we elicit a response?

The core group associated with this stream of inquiry includes philosopher Freya Mathews who articulates *living cosmos panpsychism* (Mathews, 2003; 2017c; 2019; 2023); biologist Andreas Weber whose *poetic ecology* regards feeling and expression as necessary dimensions of the existential reality of organisms and of life (Weber, 2016, 2017); ecologist Stephan Harding whose *Gaia theory* provides us with a science-based understanding of Earth itself as a self-regulating complex system, a great planetary organism, essentially an animate being (Harding, 2009; 2022); and Sandra Wooltorton whose *place-centred ecology* recognises all beings – living creatures and also rock, cloud, mountain and river – not as other but as kin, as family (Wooltorton et al., 2020; Wooltorton et al., 2021). The collaboration draws together several continuing streams of work, one starting point being the Voicing Rivers project that viewed rivers as living, culturally and socially engaged beings (Wooltorton et al., 2022a; 2022b), and continuing through a series of online co-operative inquiries sponsored both privately and by Schumacher College in Devon, England.[1] At the time of writing, over 60 human persons and maybe 70 Rivers across the planet have participated in inquiries, some of which have lasted for six intensive weeks, one of which has continued with the same core membership for over 3 years.

This inquiry stream is closely aligned to this journal's call for Action Research for Transformations (Bradbury et al., 2019). Arguably the roots of the cataclysm of our times – climate change, the Great Vanishing of creatures, the degradation of the living ecology of the planet – lie in the Western Worldview that reduces the living world to a collection of brute matter. We need, as well as sustainable technologies, ecologies, and technologies an appropriate metaphysical perspective to guide modern humans to an appropriate place in the wider ecology. Such a metaphysic cannot come from philosophical reflections alone, but must draw on a new experiential base; hence the fit between living cosmos panpsychism and action research in the form of co-operative inquiry.

Living cosmos panpsychism

While the work has been broadly informed by a view of the living and non-living world as sentient, meaning-making, and as kin, a central core to our thinking has been living cosmos panpsychism as articulated by Freya Mathews.

Panpsychism has a long, and partly repressed, history in the West (Skrbina, 2005; 2009). It is currently regaining some prominence in connection with the field of consciousness studies (Goff, 2019). Mathews' living cosmos panpsychism is motivated not so much to explain the origin of consciousness as to understand the nature of the world at

large and the place of the human within it (Mathews, 2017c:55). Her work is more a contribution to ecological philosophy than consciousness studies (Bateson, 1972; Bortoft, 1996; Hinton, 2022; Naess & Rotherberg, 1990; Plumwood, 1993; Rose, 1996; White, 1967).

Mathews points out that 'the presuppositions and beliefs we bring to our encounter with the world act as a kind of invocation – they call up reality under a particular aspect or aspects, so that this is the aspect that reality will reveal to us in the course of the encounter' (Mathews, 2009:3). In similar vein, Richard Tarnas asks us to imagine ourselves as the cosmos. Not the mechanical cosmos of conventional modern cosmology, but rather 'a deep souled, subtly mysterious cosmos of great spiritual beauty and creative intelligence'. Would we be more likely to reveal ourselves to those who treat us as a lifeless object, plundering our secrets; or to those who treat us respectfully as a living presence? (Tarnas, 2006:39)

Mathews adopts a radical starting point which draws strongly on the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and on Australian Aboriginal wisdom. She begins, not by assuming a world of inanimate 'stuff' and then wondering where 'mind' or 'consciousness' might come from. She starts from the position that some kind of innerness – mind, sentience, subjectivity, the will to self-realization – is a fundamental aspect of matter, just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind: all the way up, and all the way down. Mathews asks us to consider the cosmos as One, a coherent field of mind-matter, constituting a self-realizing, meaning-making system with an interest in its own self-existence and indeed self-increase. In pursuit of its evolution and self-expression, the One self-differentiates to form a dynamic manifold of ever-changing, finite 'modes', which can be imagined as ripples and folds in the field-like fabric of the One. Viewed from the outside, these modes appear as the empirical particulars described by physics; viewed from the inside, they are aspects of the cosmos' ever-unfolding subjective presence and experience.

Among these modes are some that have their own capacity for conativity: they are (relatively) self-organizing, self-realizing, self-individuating, with interest in their own existence and increase. They can be seen as *selves* – with a small 's' to differentiate from the *Self* that is the cosmos – and include organisms, ecosystems, and Gaia herself, all glorious yet temporary centres of meaning and action, all of whom return in time back to the One from which they arose. Simple clumps or clusters of matter, from lumps of clay to mountains, as well as human artifacts, can be understood as 'modes' but not as 'selves': their boundaries are indistinct, and they are not self-organizing. Many panpsychists make a similar distinction (see e.g. de Quincey, 2002), which is different from some animist perspectives that understand stones and mountains as in some sense animate (Harvey, 2017, see also 2021).

Thus all things, including the Earth, are integral to the fabric of the *living cosmos*, all of the same sentient cloth. We humans are part of a world that has depth as well as structure. And a communicative order, an order of meaning, unfolds alongside the causal, material order. The Many, as a community of subjects, reach out to each other in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a 'poetic ecology': the fundamental erotics of being touched by the world and touching it in return.

Poetics is not only a way of speaking about the world, it is also a communicative engagement *with* the world, a practice Mathews calls 'ontopoetics' (2009, 2017). For the expression of meaning does not emanate only from the human side: the world is capable of – actively seeks – engagement with us, opening the possibility of a 'communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it' (2017:5). To speak of ontopoetics is to imply not only that the world is psycho-active, as panpsychism implies, but also that it is *responsive* to us, that we bring to it – or can bring to it, if we choose – an attention that calls it forth on a new expressive plane, a plane of meaning and not merely of causation.

This means that when we invoke the world as sentient presence, we may be graced with a response. Of course, this doesn't take place in human language: it is necessarily a *poetic* order, conveying meaning in image and metaphor, taking place not in words or concepts, but through material form in a symbolic language of *things* – animals and birds appear; the breeze ruffles the trees, cloud formations change, all in ways that are apposite and synchronous with our invocation. This world is a place of *enchantment* – literally meaning 'wrapped in chant or song or incantation' (2003:18), its subjectivity rendered responsive by human invocation. Through the poetic we may 'bring forth' a world that refuses to be reduced to objects but is laden with meaning. And while Mathews holds that global features like mountains are not in themselves responsive selves, they nevertheless, as 'part of the fabric of the living cosmos… may provide a localized, poetic frame for addressing and invoking the cosmos' (personal communication, 2023). Of course, as carnal beings with limited perception and interest, we see the world through our own senses, focussed by cultural and personal constructs. But we don't just construct our world. It is not passive but rather responds to our invocation with creative patterns of its own.

Modern humans are perceptually alienated from this poetic order: we are socialized to conceive the world as brute object, so that is what is revealed. But if we invoke a living presence then we may receive a meaningful response – if we are open to it.

> To experience for ourselves the intimately apposite poetic responsiveness of place or landscape to our communicative overtures… is to be shifted on our metaphysical moorings. It is to feel graced, even loved, by world, and flooded with a gratitude, a loyalty, that rearranges in us the deepest well-springs of desire (Mathews, 2017c:68).

All this leads to a profoundly significant re-understanding of ethics and morality. In the Western worldview we only have ethical responsibility to other sentient beings – which means humans and at a stretch some 'higher' animals. Mathews' vision suggests that, since there is an informing intelligence in the way things are, we should seek to align ourselves with this intelligence and act in accordance with it. There is, in other words, 'an 'ought' at the core of the living cosmos of which we, as finite selves, need to be mindful' (2023:34) – not just intellectually but existentially in the way we live. That 'ought' lies in the fundamental mutuality within the ecology as a whole that ensures the ongoing re-generation of life. Mathews refers to this as a 'more ontologically reverent and cosmocentric way of inhabiting the world.'

But again, the point is not just to understand but to encounter the world and rejoice in that experience. The challenge for a philosopher is not how to think *about* the world, but to offer perspectives that enable us to *live in* the world: to know the world 'we have to walk the land' (2022). This leads directly to the establishment of a series of co-operative inquiries.

Co-operative inquiry

Co-operative inquiry has three central characteristics that make it profoundly suitable for panpsychic inquiry: it treats those involved – both human and by extension other-than-human persons – as subjective, self-directing beings and therefore as equal participants in the inquiry process; it emphasizes the experiential ground of knowing; and it asserts the primacy of practice.

In traditional research, the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied. In co-operative inquiry these exclusive roles are replaced by co-operative relationships, so that all involved work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions. Co-operative inquiry is an iterative process. Participants work together through cycles of action and reflection, developing their understanding and practice by engaging in an 'extended epistemology' – extended that is from the rational-empirical categories of traditional research. This epistemology embraces four interpenetrating ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 2008):

Experiential knowing brings attention to bear on the lifeworld of everyday lived experience. This is that aspect of knowing that arises through face-to-face encounter, perception, empathy, and resonance with a person, place, or thing. Experiential knowing is essentially tacit, almost impossible to put into words; it is often inaccessible to direct conscious awareness. Through experience we have direct access to the core of existence (Weber & Stoner, 2022); is the touchstone of the inquiry process and deepens through that process. As Seamon writes of Goethe's phenomenologhy, he 'sought to use firsthand encounter directly in a kindly but rigorous way to know the thing in itself' (Seamon, 1998).

In human centred co-operative inquiry projects, experiential knowing usually takes the form of noticing what has been oppressed or repressed. Paolo Freire calls this *con-scientização*, learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions (Freire, 1970). Inquiry in a sentient world includes this, but is also about shifting the nature of awareness, toward what David Hinton, drawing on Taoist and Ch'an philosophy, sees as 'empty mind mirroring of wild nature'.

> Once mind is empty and silent, perception becomes a particularly spiritual form of ecological practice… Empty mind mirroring reintegrates consciousness and wild earth's ten thousand things as a matter of immediate experience (Hinton, 2022:15)

Discovering the capacity for 'empty mind' is of course part of the inquiry process.

Presentational knowing can be seen as the first clothing or articulation of experiential knowing: we 'tell the story', make a sketch, maybe sing or dance as an expression of our experience, often bringing it into consciousness for the first time to ourselves and to others as we do so. Such a spontaneous narrative can then be intentionally articulated and developed through creative writing and storytelling, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance, all drawing on aesthetic imagery.

Gregory Bateson argues strongly for the arts as a guard against over-reliance on conscious and rational knowing, which he argued inhibited the unconscious and recursive processes upon which all creative art and science depend:

> … mere purposive rationality unaided by phenomena such as art, religion, dream and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life ... its virulence springs specifically from the circumstances that life depends on interlocking circuits of contingency, while consciousness can see only such short arcs of such circuits as human consciousness may direct. (Bateson, 1972:146; see also Reason, 2007)

We have found forms of aesthetic expression of particular importance in inquiries into the human place in a sentient world. As poet Robert Bringhurst puts it,

> Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world's ability to manage and to understand itself. It is the language of the world: something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention, and something that the world will teach us to speak, if we allow the world to do so. It is the *wén* of *dào*: a music that we learn to see, to feel, to hear, to smell, and then to think, and then to answer (Bringhurst, 1993).

Propositional knowing is knowing 'about' something in intellectual terms, in ideas and theories. It is expressed in propositions and statements which use language to assert facts about the world, laws that make generalisations about facts, and theories that organise the laws. This propositional form of knowing is the main kind of knowledge accepted in modern society. In this sense, it is the link between action research and scholarship.

Propositional knowing can 'redescribe' experience, to borrow a term from philosopher Richard Rorty (1989; see also Reason, 2003), providing new ways to make sense of the world that are both informative and liberating. Ideas are political and drive everyday life, and the ability to develop alternative views critical of everyday common sense grows out of in-depth examination of experience and new narratives. Living cosmos panpsychism, as outlined above, offers the Western mind one such alternative.

However, propositional knowledge knowing needs to be handled with care, especially in the language-driven worlds of late modernity. It has great conceptual power to divide the world into isolated mental subjects and independent non-mental objects. Propositional discourse is representational and *specular* in nature. Through the lens of our theories, we look out at the world and imagine it spread passively for our epistemic gaze. We can examine it, attempt to work out how its parts and aspects fit together, indeed 'We construct an abstract simulacrum of reality that re-presents, through the lens of theory the manifold

that initially presents itself to us more immediately' (Mathews, 2017b:146). But as Korzybski taught us 'the map is not the territory': the lens of theory necessarily limits our vision, so we will be continually surprised when our hard-headed choices return to plague us. Arguably this preference for conceptual thinking, which originated in Greek philosophy, gave rise to the foundational dualism in Western thought that creates the division between humans and nature (Hinton, 2022; Mathews, 2016). For this reason, propositional knowing must always be taken back into the inquiry cycle, tempered, grounded, and tested in experience and practice.

Practical knowing is knowing 'how to', knowing-in-action. Practical knowing has a quality of its own, 'useful to an actor at the moment of action rather than to a disembodied thinker at the moment of reflection' (Torbert, 1976:167). At the heart of practical knowing is skilful doing, which may be beyond language and conceptual formulation. John Heron argued persuasively for the 'primacy of the practical (Heron, 1996b).

This argument for the primacy of the practical owes a lot to the philosophy of John Macmurray, who holds that 'I do' instead of 'I think' is the starting point for grasping the form of the person as agent. He argues that knowing in its fullness is consummated in an through agency, and that pure thought divorced from action is secondary derivative, abstract, and negative (Macmurray, 1957).

These four ways of knowing that make up the extended epistemology are brought to bear upon each other through the inquiry cycles to enhance their mutual congruence, both within each inquirer and the inquiry group as a whole. These cycles can be characterised as Apollonian – planned, thought through, logical; and/or they can be Dionysian – spontaneous, emotional, and wild (Heron, 1996a:95).

A co-operative inquiry can start anywhere in the extended epistemology – with new experiences that call for reflection, with new practices that are demanded. Often it starts with questions about practice expressed in propositional form – such as the summary of living cosmos panpsychism outlined above. Quality inquiry arises through the systematic – and serendipitous – cycling through these ways of knowing.

Co-operative inquiry with Rivers

The practice of co-operative inquiry thus opens a route toward systematic inquiry into the panpsychic worldview. In our work we have focussed on relationships with Rivers. Our choice of Rivers as our other-than-human partners was partly serendipitous; partly because our first proposed inquiry at Schumacher College, cancelled because of the COVID pandemic, was planned in relation to the nearby River Dart; partly because all the human principals have close links with Rivers near them; but mainly because, even in over-developed lands and despite terrible degradation, Rivers remain complex living ecosystems, still providing cracks where a wilder world may flourish. We are seeking to encounter the Rivers, not as passive objects winding through the countryside and city, but as living, sentient beings, as River – River taken to encompass not only the flow of water between banks, but a whole community: wind and rain, mud and rock, plants, insects, birds, and animals, as well as humans.

There is, of course, a question whether Rivers, or any non-human being, can be a co-researcher within a co-operative inquiry. One might argue that there is no way a River can (or indeed would want to) partake in the design of the inquiry, the process of sensemaking, the 'writing up' of outcomes. And yet, from the perspective of living cosmos panpsychism, the world and its beings actively seek to communicate with humans (and other selves) as part of the process of self-realization. So we can make the assumption that if we approach River respectfully and invite their participation as co-researcher, we can together cautiously establish some level of collaboration. Further, while in the full model of co-operative inquiry, all involved participate in the design, practice, and sense making, this doesn't mean that everyone does the same thing. All can play an equal part while contributing according to their diverse aptitudes, skills, and interests. As in any group process, different people lead and contribute in different aspects of the process. So can River be a co-inquirer? There seems to be no reason in principle why not. And it would be absurd to conduct inquiry into ontopoetic relationship with River without regarding them as co-researchers. How this can evolve in practice remains, as with everything, open to inquiry.

The first inquiry group, Sentient River, was composed of a group of friends who came together in response to the invitation to contribute to the Voicing Rivers project. This brought together activists, artists, and academics to explore a vision of rivers as living, culturally and socially engaged beings; and to publish a journal special issue (Kurio & Reason, 2022; Wooltorton et al., 2022b). After the Voicing Rivers project was completed, the Living Waters inquiries were established as part of the Schumacher College short course programme, taking the form of co-operative inquiry. These workshop communities of between 18 and 24 were divided into inquiry groups of about six, facilitated by a faculty member. The faculty offered a comprehensive introduction to living cosmos panpsychism and co-operative inquiry through YouTube videos (Reason et al., 2021). Participants then engaged in cycles of inquiry: visiting Rivers regularly (once a week) to explore different approaches to invocation – loving attention, meditation, ceremony, song, gift-giving; finding initial presentational form in writing, photography, video, poetry, and drawing; posting these on Google Drive; reading each other's accounts; meeting weekly on Zoom to share experiences and make sense together; deciding the practical actions to be taken in the subsequent cycle; then after several cycles, drawing learning together. The Living Waters inquiries included weekly meetings of the whole community at which underlying theory was presented and discussed; and workshop sessions to draw together learning from the project as a whole.

Following the first Living Waters inquiry, some graduates of the latter joined the Sentient River group, which at the time of writing is ongoing, having completed four inquiries each composed of 6–8 weekly inquiry cycles over 3 years. All inquiry groups, with some minor exceptions, formed intimate and reflective relationships both between humans and with Rivers, despite the limitations of Zoom. With its longer life, the Sentient River group has, as might be expected, developed deep bonds both between human members and the places and Rivers with whom they have engaged.

Some outcomes

What have we discovered, or maybe better *uncovered*, in our many hours sitting with, by and sometimes in Rivers, and reflecting with our human companions on our experiences? One thing we can say, as one participant exclaimed in a reflection session, is "It works!". If we approach the world as brute matter, that is what we will meet. But once we approach the world as a community of sentient beings, once we learn how to attend and to listen, we may receive a response that signals a reciprocal presence – the world gestures to us unmistakably through synchronous conjunctions of events. As Jean writes

> I'd been sitting for maybe an hour by the river. It was quite dark by then, with the moon coming through the trees on the opposite bank. The otter had come and gone, a sudden breeze travelled down the river and was gone too. I started to drift into my thinking, reflecting on a recent meeting that had left me feeling unacknowledged and pigeon-holed. I felt despondent and wondered maybe I would just give up and not go to the next meeting. Then it was as if a wave of energy came off the river and slapped me on the face. It really was as if the river slapped me on the face. It was a sudden shock. It felt as if the river was saying to me, 'yes, you will go', reminding me of a bigger duty than my personal frustrations. I felt very supported and cared for and yet it was fierce and uncompromising. I was engaging with an entity that was fierce and wild and powerful; but it was a river-Jean moment. I felt that it was river-Jean who would act, who would go to the meeting; I was supported yet I had no choice, and it was not primarily about me.

Our encounters to Rivers drew forth a wide range of responses, both inner and outer.

- For many co-inquirers the initial challenge was to get over the internal voices that questioned the whole activity – this even though they joined the inquiry sympathetic to its aims. We all needed to quieten our minds and hush our expectations sufficiently to give fuller attention to River. Many found themselves at first distracted and self-absorbed.
- Once inner voices were somewhat quietened, it was still easy to drop into a traditional subject/object relationship, to look at the river as still 'out there'. However, with persistence, practice, and support from the human inquiry community, most were able to sustain a feeling of sentient presence, and then move into what one group called 'getting in the zone'. This is the experience of a sentient, embodied world, and of one's own animal body as part of it; usually accompanied by intense feelings of pleasure and gratitude, maybe wonder at the sheer beauty of it all.
- Going deeper, there sometimes arose a curious juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary; and close to that a profound feeling that the ordinary is *all* extraordinary.
- Some inquirers also developed a complex imaginative or psychic response, as if the world is somehow 'speaking' directly in words and images.
- In time, many participants found themselves 'slipping under the psychic skin of the world' or 'lifting the veil', with the illusion of separation slipping away.

- Finally, there were on occasion active ontopoetic responses, moments of grace when the world and its beings actively gestured back in response to invocation.

For clarity, these are presented as distinct 'levels' of experience, but it is important to emphasize that these experiences overlap and interpenetrate. An uncanny shift, or 'liminal space' often occurs as experience shifts to a deeper level.

This theorizing of experience, although supported by experiential evidence (we have many pages of experiential narrative and hours of Zoom-recorded discussion), will not give the reader a full sense of the nature of the ontopoetic experience we have been reaching for. Descriptive narrative may help. One of our more specific uncoverings, particularly in the on-going inquiry group, is of repeated experiences in which animals 'turn up' and participate in our ceremonies. These experiences parallel conclusions drawn by Harvey in his review of reports by anthropologist Viveiros de Castro and others, that when indigenous people conduct ceremony, animals appear to join in (Harvey, 2017:98–101). Similarly, Cheyenne activist and teacher Tiokasin Ghosthorse gives an account of a peace ceremony held at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the pipe ceremony was offered, he writes, 'I noticed the enormous flocks of birds, rabbits, and a small herd of deer… that had negotiated their way… between the barbed wire fences…", remarking that 'when Native people gather in a circle for ceremony, oftentimes others naturally gather as well' (Ghosthorse, 2021:83–84). As Mathews puts it, 'as soon as we start to observe the protocols again – by engaging in ceremonial forms of exchange with the wider community of persons, for example – those persons immediately respond, by turning up at our rituals or offering other "signs" of their attention' (Mathews, 2017:54).

Of course, we see many beings in the more-than-human world as we sit with our Rivers. Where I sit by River Avon, I am delighted to often see Kingfishers flying past. Most of the time, they are going about their own business with little regard for humans. It may well be that I am more attuned to their presence after spending time giving loving attention to the more-than-human world. But on occasion their appearance and behaviour is remarkable: Kingfisher appears directly in response to my invocation or simply to my loving presence.

This has happened on many occasions, and the appearances can be quite surprising (see Reason & Gillespie, 2023). One morning I was quietly sitting by River, giving loving attention to all I noticed, including Kingfishers passing and engaged in fishing.

> Suddenly, Kingfisher arrives, flying low upstream close to the bank, passing within a yard of my feet hanging over the bank, then swoops up into the willow tree, circles around, plunges down again and wheels off upstream out of sight. As ki[2] passes close to me, I am caught by the characteristic whirring flight, then as ki rises in the tree the sun catches the feathers in a brilliant turquoise against the green leaves. Amazing, beautiful, special (personal notes, August 2, 2022).

At first my sceptical self questioned that this should be seen as an ontopoetic event, yet as I reflected with my colleagues, my doubts receded. As Mathews responded, '*To me*

your kingfisher moment seems like a quintessential ontopoetic response! Your visit to River, your attentive frame of mind, your inner address, all constitute the invocation (personal communication, 2022)'. There is a synchronicity and sense of surprise in these encounters – with Otter, Kingfisher, Swan, Fox, Crow, Deer; with Black Walnut, Yew, Hemlock and many others. The following three narratives, drawn from accounts of inquiry cycles, are offered as exemplars.

Kathleen. Since I've been rewilding here,[3] we don't have any natural predators. And so the little rodent population has been taking off big time. My husband and I were having a conversation about this: he said, 'We need an owl to come and set up shop here'. We looked at designs for owl boxes, thinking, if we build one, they will come. But before we got round to that, I was taking my dog for a walk about a mile down the road, when I heard an owl making its 'Hoo Hoo' call. So I answered. And Owl took off from the trees and flew beside us and eventually settled on the land here. That's quite a big distance to get here. That was in the evening, and I wondered if it would hang around. And I've been hearing them in the mornings and in the evenings since then. They are here. It's been very exciting getting to know this particular Owl, who sort of came when we requested. [A few days later, on going outside] the Barred Owl *Strix varia* who I recently befriended, greeted me with "who-whoot-who-who." I returned their greeting to which ki responded again.

Jacqueline. One morning I found the small, broken body of a male hedge Sparrow in a plant pot on the back doorstep. Wrapping him carefully in a tissue, I decided I would do something to honour his life when I next visited River. I made a floating bed of reeds and lichen for his last journey to the sea, like a nest, and gently laid Sparrow's body on the top, decorating around him with some rose and chrysanthemum petals. Complete, I sat next to him for a while singing quietly, admiring the flash of yellow on his beak, the deeply wooded shades of his feathers. I found a good place to launch this floating nest-shrine into River, whispering words of love and thanks over him, asking the world to accept his body and spirit back into the all-that-is, before leaning over the water and gently pushing the nest-shrine out into the current.

I then sat for a long time, humming a new tune that came to me and made me tap the rhythm out with my foot. I hummed and swayed and tapped for a good long while, entering a kind of trance, sometimes eyes closed, sometimes not, just feeling the music and rhythm stirring within before it was released to join the music of River, of world. As I stopped, a burst of birdsong – Sparrow, Blackbird, Robin – rose from the trees behind me as if in tribute to the dead Sparrow.

Then I noticed Dipper on a rock close to the opposite bank. As soon as I saw him, he started to sing, a gurgling, watery, river song. He sang and sang, and I watched and felt held, as if he were singing a spell that I was bound to, as if he knew the effect of it on me. After a good few minutes, I heard another Dipper begin to sing on my left, downstream from the first singer. I watched as she dipped and sang like her mate, their voices joining together in stereophonic joy. I felt very much the tri-partite configuration of the three of us, as if each bird were singing into each of my ears, holding me between them. Then with a big dip and final flourish, the

second singer suddenly stopped, flew toward her mate who also took flight, and together they whirred around the corner and were gone.

The following week, when I visited River and started to sing, to my great surprise the Dippers appeared, streaking low over the water in front of me. They stopped on the same rock as last week and started bobbing, as if dancing to my song. Then, to my great surprise and deep pleasure, facing me, they started singing too. The joy/surprise/disbelief I felt at being seen, acknowledged, joined with, is immeasurable.

Luisa. I had been busy and not visited Manzanares in Madrid for a while and was concerned I might not be welcome. Spontaneously, I took four stones, a candle and a Buddha from my home down to River. Hesitant at first about approaching, I was encouraged when a blue heron flew past.

Taking that as a sign, I took my rocks and candle as close as I could get… Now I could see the ducks, the water flowing down and a little Egret, shining with her or his white feathers over the dark blue/dark brown waters. She flew away. Feeling a bit disconnected, I asked Manzanares for guidance, and surrendered to whatever he wanted to show or teach me. I told him how I was still uncertain of what it is I could do in return, or how I can help him, and I simply surrendered.

A few minutes later, the Blue Heron flew past again, and then the little white Egret appeared. She moved slowly. Her thin black leg was balancing her body against the River´s current flowing beneath her. I watched her yellow foot come in and out. She hid it and then showed it, as if playing with both me and the river. I could tell she knows I'm looking; I could tell she feels my attraction. It seemed like a performance, a choreography, a gift. She came closer to me. One leg lifted, and then the other, slowly shifting shapes. It was a dance. She was dancing with me. Love began to grow from inside me. I began to call her love and had a desire to caress her as if I had known her for some time. I smiled. I just smiled.

These are accounts of individual experiences which took place within the context of an inquiry group. In many senses, these experiences are intensely personal, and one might conduct 'first person' ontopoetic research with the more-than-human world without such a group. However, the inquiry group provides a supporting vessel for these explorations, providing support, challenge, corroboration, and mutual sense making, as can be seen in the following reflection from Luisa:

The group became a shared practice of opening spaces and moments of connection with the more-than-human world. Throughout the months we were visiting river weekly, it became a ritual, a commitment or discipline with a friend, that grew into a cycle of giving and receiving. And with our encounters, we created a sort of melting pot of experiences where synchronicities lined up and meanings were created. It slowly evolved as a textile, a recollection of different fabrics that all together created a shared space of making sense. Each of us bringing into the fabric different questions, fears, visions, experiences and connections, that then became amplified with the response of the inquiry group.

In some senses the groups can be seen as on the boundary between inquiry and spiritual practice. This was a theme Dave frequently picked up, re-describing our inquiry in traditional religious language:

> … a group of people praying together is worshipping. And I suppose we're kind of trying to invent a liturgy together… a co-creative, spiritual practice for entering this liminality. And coming back was having had one's prayers answered… or even not having a prayer answered is having your prayer answered! You can't really lose. You just got to turn up! The only way I can think about is just steeped in mythic language: Divinity, Prayer, Liminality, Threshold, Worship, Sacred.

Dimensions of 'veracity'

There is a particular epistemological challenge in this work. The alternative metaphysical perspective that is living cosmos panpsychism is not open to empirical proof; but nor is it just a question of belief or attitude or value. We can, however, explore what happens when the sentient world responds to our invocation:

> The response of the world is unmistakable in its poetic appositeness, an appositeness already familiar and recognizable to us from the night-time realm of dreams, or those dreams at any rate imprinted with the strangeness of a source beyond the circle of ordinary experience. And there is in this appositeness, in the attunement of this response to the particular poetics of our call, a rightness, a directedness to the meanings at our own most personal core, that draws us inescapably into intimacy (Mathews, 2017c:67).

There is, therefore, an 'empirical' as well as a 'meaning' dimension of this: we ask of a particular ontopoetic gesture both 'Did that really happen?" and "What might it mean?". There is phenomenology in this, but not in the sense usual sense that the ultimate source of all meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. There is social construction in this, in that any communicative exchange with the living world is likely to take place in the context of particular cultural traditions, but this is not social construction. And there is critical theory in this, bringing our attention to the significance of power in the relationships, although that is already embedded in co-operative inquiry itself.

Together, the extended epistemology and inquiry cycles of co-operative inquiry provide an appropriate heuristic for an ongoing practice and process of inquiry. It is a framework sufficiently systematic to guide us round the cycles of inquiry, while sufficiently flexible to draw attention to different perspectives on the nature of knowing and practice.

Since we are claiming that these kinds of experience are the outcome of experiential inquiry, in collaboration with other humans, River and the more-than-human, it is reasonable to ask questions about the veracity of the claims, and indeed ask what we might mean by 'veracity' in this context. We are seeking support for a metaphysical perspective utterly at odds with our socialisation into the western paradigm, including the view that the world may grace us with a response to our call. As co-inquirers we must place enough

commitment in this to spend many hours sitting, sometimes cold and wet, by River, doing things that may appear bizarre from a conventional perspective. Yet we must at the same time guard against wish fulfilment, not be so bowled over by our own beliefs that we are not able to be critical, even sceptical, of our own and each other's claims, to scrutinize the 'evidence' (whatever that might mean) we collect. Are we fooling ourselves? Are our experiences the result of wish fulfilment? Are we collectively engaged in consensus collusion? It should be noted that my action research colleagues and I started addressing questions of 'validity' and 'quality' in collaborative inquiry early in our writing (Heron, 1988; Reason, 2006; Reason & Rowan, 1981a; Rowan, 1981).

For while caution, even scepticism, is important to guard against delusion and consensus collusion (Reason & Rowan, 1981b:244), it is arguably more important to ask what are the positive indications that ontopoetic communication is taking place? For through these co-operative inquiries (and other ontopoetic practices) we give ourselves *permission* suspend our culture-based assumptions and experiment with possibilities of communication with the wider world as sentient and responsive:

> When we… begin to experiment with communicative engagement, totally unexpected possibilities emerge, and we eventually find ourselves in full-blown communicative relationships with those erstwhile 'others', relationships which do not so much provide 'evidence' of the veracity of a new 'hypothesis' as constitute a whole new, revelatory dimension in the lived fabric of our lives (Mathews, personal communication, 2023).

See Candiotto (2022) for a parallel review of loving as participatory sensemaking with place.

We can tentatively map some stages in the development of our experience and the response of the world.

1. As we engage with/encounter River, in collaboration with like-minded humans, we learn to see River not as object but as sentient presence; our metaphysical assumptions shift. These assumptions, by definition, cannot be directly tested by empirical evidence. However, as we accept intellectually that we are part of the sentient whole, we may seek experiential corroboration to support this.
2. Our first experiences can be a dropping away of boundaries of the self, so we feel intuitively part of, rather than apart from, the whole. This is described by one participant as 'A process of settling, listening, healing, of being in communion… of being reminded of who we are by River, just being stripped back to our essence'.
3. This can be deeply emotional, affective experiences, bringing about tears and laughter, that are experienced as self-confirming. Part of this personal subjective experience may include feeling 'broken open' as one participant put it, echoing Mathews' sense of being 'cracked open' through encounter with another subjectivity (2003:19).
4. As we engage with/encounter with River our attention widens; we notice events and happenings we had previously overlooked – the river rippling, the movement of leaves on trees, the fly-past of flocks of birds. We may attribute this as communicative

activity: 'The leaves rustle and say hello as I arrive'. Increasingly we realize that the world is full of ontopoetic response that we simply haven't noticed.

5. As we engage/encounter River, events occur that appear synchronistic – we are thinking about crows and a crow appears; two people in an inquiry group encounter a crushed turtle during the same inquiry cycle.
6. One support for the veracity of these experiences is surprise; such events often confound, rather than confirm, our expectations as modern humans. (As Professor Anne Poelina, a Nyikina Warrwa Traditional Custodian from the Mardoowarra, lower Fitzroy River, in Western Australia pointed out to me, many indigenous people, not socialised to experience the world as brute, will *not* be surprised but take such experiences as part of the normal fabric of life).
7. Another, more subjective, test is that the response is in tune with the poetic rhythm of things, what Bringhurst calls 'knowing freed from the agenda of possession and control – knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being' (Bringhurst, 1993:138).
8. As we engage in specific invocational activities with River – prayer, ceremony, gift giving – there is a gestural response from the River community that seems self-evidently a communicative response.

These different experiences imply different kinds of veracity. Those concerning our 'inner' experience (#1, 2, 3) do not require any independent verification. They are truth claims within what Crook refers to as 'subjective empiricism, 'truth claims in the sense that anyone interested in them is able and encouraged to confirm for themselves through personal assessment' (Crook, 2009:142; see also Hinton, 2022:14). As Mathews puts it, 'Panpsychism maybe construed as an outlook that rests on a try-it-and-see rather than a dogmatic basis (2017c:63). Some experiences (#3 & 4) appear to be life-changing in their impact. To fall in love with the world 'rearranges our deepest wellsprings of desire' writes Mathews. We might appropriately ask 'Do they?' What kind of evidence might we need to test this proposition?

As we move along the continuum (#5, 6) there seem to be a range of experiences for which some critical reflection (Reason, 2002) may be appropriate. If a person holds that the leaves wave 'hello' when they approach, it is reasonable to inquire about the empirical veracity of such a statement. There seems to be plenty of space here for wish fulfilment rather than genuine encounter; yet we must also attend to the experiential evidence; we have in our records observations of trees moving when there is no evident physical cause.

At the latter end of the continuum (#6, 7, 8) the evidence of veracity includes immediacy, unexpectedness, poetic resonance. These questions are not so much crudely empirical – 'Did this really happen?' – as rather subtle questions as to the nature, quality, and mystery of such encounters. Indeed, the more experientially true they are, the deeper these subtle questions become.

For all these sensible reflections, our experiences have been deeply felt, unassailably authentic. They have their own authority and offer intimations of a world quite different from the materialist, brute world into which we moderns are socialized. As an outcome, our metaphysical assumptions are radically re-arranged. It is evident that experiences of a

sentient, responsive, communicative world are available not just to indigenous people living in traditional cultures, but to all human persons willing to put in the time, the attention, to risk their taken-for-granted sense of self, and to open themselves to that possibility.

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Notes

1. Schumacher College is a progressive college for ecological studies offering postgraduate and undergraduate programmes, research degrees, short courses. It is part of the Dartington Trust in Devon, England.
2. A note on pronouns. We agree with botanist and indigenous plant woman Robin Wall Kimmerer that to refer to sentient beings using the pronoun 'it' is not only odd, it contributes to the objectification of sentient beings. Yet standard English offers no alternative. Kimmerer suggests rather than it we use 'ki' singular and 'kin' plural to refer to other-than-human persons, and here I am following her suggestion. I also capitalize the names of beings as proper nouns, when we experience ourselves in active relation to them. This is at times awkward, and it is not easy to be consistent, but this awkwardness in itself alerts us to our habitual objectification of the world around us. (Kimmerer, 2017)
3. Kathleen Wood is completing her PhD dissertation on 'rewilding' herself and the land she lives on in North Carolina.

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