

Interview Dr. Michał Sikora and Martin Lee Mueller, PhD

In the context of the internship „challenges and goals of ecophilosophy”, 20-24 May 2024

Michał Sikora (MS): What message does Arne Naess's philosophy of nature have for the planet and Western civilization?

Martin Lee Mueller (MLM): I believe that every generation needs to rediscover and critically reclaim the basic teaching of Arne, which was that life is deeply interconnected, nonhierarchical, and fluid. In such ways that any single moral center – particularly all forms of anthropocentrism – cannot be justified either ontologically, epistemologically or morally. What this means specifically, in place, in historically contingent situations, must be revealed specifically in each context. That takes philosophers proper, and it takes a whole community of actors, intellectuals and craftspeople, professionals and laypeople, adults and children.

MS: In your book "Being Salmon Being Human. Encountering the Wild in Us and Us in the Wild" you are strongly inspired by the geophilosophy of your mentor - David Abram. How do you understand this intellectual trend?

MLM: If you by this trend mean phenomenology in the wake of Heidegger – Merleau-Ponty and then Abram, then I would think that it is a larger project of bringing the breathing subject from its Cartesian exile and back into ... the world ... the flesh ... breathing landscapes ... breathing bodies. Back inside the depths of local terrains, seasons, moodscapes. Back into a more full-bodied participation between the human animal and the flesh of the biosphere.

MLM: Surely, also, David thinks of himself as a geophilosopher, as you point out. Important resonances include the return to Earth – geo, ge, Gaia – as the predominant local for thinking philosophically. The living Earth as the foremost responsibility of philosophy, in all its complexities – between geology and evolutionary processes, between ecology and behavioral biology, including all forms of human expressions of aliveness – art, language, law, education, sociology, medicine, politics, history and other forms of narrating our belonging inside the larger narratives that constitute this living Earth, etc.

MS: What have you learned by listening and observing nature?

MLM: What have I *not* learned?

Yesterday as I sat with our local fjord, I learned some entirely new nuances about the true depth of the interdependency between human bodies and the water ocean, and the air ocean.

In a way, there is a question inside your question that I find more relevant than giving you a specific answer. The question inside your question is, „Is it possible at all to learn from listening to the land (and the seas, and the air)?“ And, for that matter: „And why does it matter?“ I believe part of our work as ecological philosophers can be to take these questions very seriously. To explore them together. Unpack them in their rich nuances. The short answer, it seems to me, is that all learning originates from this deeper conversation *between* our bodies and the breathing landscape. But again, this would need unpacking, else it might end up being a slogan with little content. So let me volley this one back to you: What do you think is the relevance of asking these questions, and how do they matter in your own locale, in your own community, in your own historical and socio-political situatedness?

MS: Do you believe that the fight for animal rights and environmental protection will ever end?

MLM: If you're asking a political question here, my guess is as good as anyone's. I'd probably say, it likely won't ever end. Not in any foreseeable future. I find that impossible to imagine. Then again: I don't think that that's the end of the conversation. True cultural emergence comes from the experience of very real impossibilities. Wicked impossibilities. Just because it seems impossible now to imagine that we will ever put an end to all forms of animal abuse (too many structural imperatives uphold the structural abuse), doesn't mean that we do not have a chance anyway. I believe it rather ought to be an encouragement: We have got to do real transformative work across all levels of culture. Including reimagining our ontologies of belong and interbeing. And, coming from that rich groundwork, that rich metabolizing (fungal kind work. Mycellial kind of work), that rich decomposing and deconstructing and fermenting and letting die and heating up the compost of old structures and compositions and narratives and social contracts and habit and so on, coming from all this, recomposing entirely transformed cultures of belonging. From that point of view, I guess my answer is a both-and. No, I find it entirely impossible to imagine. And yes, I find it entirely important to go about reimagining it anyway. Moving toward that impossibility. In full acceptance of the uncertainties and all the very very real roadblocks and pains and horrors and traumas. That's just the nature of transformative work. Of true emergence.

MS: How to practice ecophilosophy effectively? How do you do it in Norway?

MLM: Oh gosh. You tell me. One important theme we discussed during your internship here, of course, was the importance of making the thinking matter. Mattering the thinking through concrete, local initiative. Grounding the thinking. In place. In breath. In real relationships between breathing bodies. In community. In landscape. In riverscape. This, too, is part of the phenomenological project as I understand it. It doesn't complete itself in writing or in any other form of abstract thinking. It completes itself in qualities of relationship, concretely. And from there, feeds back into the most abstract realm of thinking in which habits can be broken up and decomposed, etc., as we have been discussing. There is a reciprocity between reflection and action that seems to matter a great deal. Such as in the case of our local river initiatives, or the initiatives we are trying to establish through ANCEP.

MS: You have mentioned several times that the wisdom of indigenous peoples is important to you. Why?

MLM: Your questions are huge. But of course they are important, too. It is difficult to unpack this question in any meaningful way in just a few sentences. As a philosopher, I come to the question of indigeneity as a question not of historical contingencies first and foremost. I come to it from the angle of indigeneity as being-of-place. What has it meant for any group or affiliation of humans to actively pursue the possibility of becoming-of-place, even in the face of all the vast migration patterns throughout the millennia, ever since humans walked out of Africa some 60,000 years ago. My starting point is sometimes simply this, that we were at some point newcomers to nearly every place we now inhabit. That indigeneity is both a recurrent problem and an enduring possibility. Coming-into-place is a universal possibility that is principally open to any culture in any historical epoch.

This a-historical approach to the question is not an answer to all the very real historical and often ongoing injustices, of course. But it does provide a kind of open space for reflecting on the possibility of becoming-of-place in a less heated way. It brings some calm into the question. So that we may ask, over time, what would be the conditions for each and every one of our multi-cultural communities to develop the necessary nuances in our languages, our practices, our socialities, our technologies, our legal systems, to allow us to become place-responsive ... indefinitely. To create complexly layered cultures of belonging, even in the face of contemporary migrations, uprootings, ecological transformations, open conflicts, etc.

You see that you are poking into a wasps nest. I cannot possibly answer the question. Not here. I can only sound out a few of the most obvious resonances inside the question.