



ECOOCENE

POLITCS

MIHNEA  
TĂNĂSESCU



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2022 Mihnea Tănăsescu



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Mihnea Tănăsescu, *Ecocene Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0274>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0274#copyright>. Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0274#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643147

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643154

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643161

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643178

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 9781800643185

ISBN XML: 9781800643192

SBN Digital (HTML): 9781800646803

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0274

Cover image: Anna Gatti

# 5. Ecopolitical Ethics, Part I

---

## Reciprocity

In the previous chapters, I started to sketch the ontological contours of a politics geared towards living, permanently, in the Ecocene. I also intimated that the importance of ontological description is in great part generated by the kinds of actions it makes possible. Though this account of the relationship between description and prescription risks being accused of committing the famous naturalistic fallacy (one cannot base ought on is), this is not so. Instead, I mean to draw attention to the features of description that are intrinsically tied to the mechanisms of power, and therefore to a great extent come to define prescription as well.<sup>1</sup> Now I want to shift towards developing two moral concepts that are crucial for a mutualist politics and that fit neatly within the ontological scaffolding already built: reciprocity, and responsibility (next chapter).

The idea of reciprocity is usually conceived of within a human-centered context, mainly because it is assumed that only humans can reciprocate, or that is to say, only human relationships can be built on the idea of mutual and commensurate exchange. It may be more easily accepted that certain kinds of animals reciprocate human actions, but reference to landscapes, rivers, plants, or apparently simpler animals as capable of reciprocity seems to have been largely regarded as nonsense in Western philosophical traditions. I suggest that this is so for two reasons: the relegation of anthropology to the margins of philosophical thought, and the dominance of recognition (whether implicitly or explicitly) in moral thought.

---

1 For a much more extensive treatment of the relationship between descriptions and prescriptions, based on a reading of Wittgenstein, see Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?* (2002). Also see my use of this discussion in Tănăsescu (2020).

This chapter argues that recognition is not the only, nor the best, way of conceiving of ethical relationships with environing worlds. To see this, we will have to take a serious look at philosophical traditions that center on reciprocity, and try to learn from them how this concept could work. I will also draw on the ontological foundations laid down earlier in order to build up the concept in ways that can facilitate a politics fit for the Ecocene.

\* \* \*

Part of the poverty of thought on reciprocity comes from the assumption that this term applies first and foremost to material exchange. The paradigmatic model here would be the exchange of gifts between two or more people, where one act of gifting leads to a reciprocal return. At most, this model can be extended to acts as such, though they may not contain the exchange of something. Acts of kindness, for example, can be reciprocated.

These senses are there, to be sure, but they do not exhaust the ethics of reciprocity. In fact, they obscure the many different ways in which reciprocal exchange is mostly non-material, that is to say, it is involved in practices and acts that do not have an immediate material gain as a goal. Even more crucially, it is also involved in perception as such, explaining in part how the perception of worlds works. In other words, there are ontological elements to the concept of reciprocity, and these are what some philosophical traditions have seized upon in order to build infrastructures of reciprocity that structure human interchange with the world.

This is not a question of juxtaposing 'Indigenous' and 'Western' philosophies in a binary and often caricatured way that is inimical to the recomposition and renovation of diverse practices. Instead, I am interested in following the thread of a concept as it appears through multiple instantiations, and these are to be found wherever they have manifested, whether through 'Western' philosophers or 'Indigenous' ones. These particular terms quickly outlive their usefulness and become stereotypical portrayals.

Especially when speaking about indigeneity, it is impossible to escape the colonial history that relegated anything substantially different to this category, while being completely blind to continuity, similarity, or

'indigeneity' within colonial nations themselves. In other words, there is no such thing as 'Indigenous philosophy', except as a hopelessly general term that wishes to distinguish itself from Western modernity. But as Chakrabarty eloquently points out, modernity is not really Western anymore, if indeed it ever was. Instead, what is meant by modernity is a way of thinking that is predicated, as I have argued via Debaise in Chapter 2, on the bifurcation of nature. If this is all that modernity is (and, of course, its attendant projects of development that make no sense without the bifurcation of nature), then there are non-moderns in Paris and moderns in the Amazon.

The preceding sentence makes sense because of the fact that 'Paris' and the 'Amazon' have become placeholders. I hope, by the end of this argument, that this kind of sentence will make much less sense, as we will have become accustomed to thinking of details, differences and similarities to such an extent that 'Indigenous' and 'Western' can no longer apply to imagined geographies that flatten volumetric worlds. Instead of using this false juxtaposition between supposed enemies, I want to think about both what may be useful in the concept of indigeneity, and where the lure of modernity may reside. I will start here with the concept of indigeneity, leaving the lure of modernity for the next chapter.

There is a need to think through risky concepts even though they carry with them colonial histories that may perpetuate themselves. The risk must be met so that, with enough vigilance, key notions can turn a new page and mean something new, just as revolution shifted from meaning the return of the same to the irruption of the spectacularly new (Arendt 1963). Being indigenous has had, in colonial history, a stubborn and dangerous association with nativism. Instead, it can signify reciprocal relations between lands and their inhabitants, with no nativist criteria whatsoever. In that sense it can move from a racialized term, to one of political ethics.

This movement from one meaning to another is not arbitrary: the seeds of plasticity are internal to the term, or more precisely to the forms of life that it inhabits. It is through Indigenous practices that we see how racialized notions are not intrinsic to their lives, but rather hail from colonial legacies. It is from particular Indigenous people that we learn what makes them indigenous in their own eyes, namely genealogical

relations to particular lands and particular communities of beings. But this is not a return to some mythical kernel that magically survived hundreds of years of colonialism. No, it is always about reinventing.

Nandita Sharma, in *Home Rule* (2020), shows persuasively how the concept of the indigenous native, as well as that of the migrant, are inseparable from the history of the passage from empires to nation states, a history largely coinciding with the core of colonial expansion. She argues that “those categorized as Indigenous-Natives were subject to a new imperial regime of ‘protection’, one that worked to enclose them within ‘custom’” (23). The association of natives with some form of “harmony with nature” also owes its existence to the imperial creation of native reserves. This particular history of enclosure and the subsequent “protection” of native populations in designated areas has also been decisive in the history of nature conservation until today (see Chapters 2 and 4). In other words, how colonial power has thought about nature (as an ‘out-there’ to be protected) has everything to do with how it thought about Indigenous people (as people fundamentally belonging to nature, and therefore with no history).

The way in which colonial power perceived the relationship between people and different places is crucial for understanding the nativist undertones of indigeneity. Sharma shows how, in the case of the category of migrants, states conceptualized them as out of place, whereas the Indigenous natives were considered as in place. It makes sense to think about the importance of place in the creation of these categories, but I think that the suggestion that states perceived a tight fit between different kinds of populations and different places does not quite touch on why the notion of place is instrumental.

The idea of being out of place relies first and foremost on a concept of place. This is precisely what the migrant threatens, an idea of home, an abode, a place in other words that is already somebody else’s. On the other hand, the idea of place is *not* that which allows states to literally create the categories of natives and migrants. The post-WWI shuffling of ‘national’ populations feeds the deceptive idea of place as employed by budding nation states. It is precisely not the determinacy and detailed context of particular places that counts. Instead, it is an empty idea of space, of flat and vacant (and therefore easily appropriable) territory, that the nation states are working with. In this sense the migrant is not

out of place, but rather *unplaceable*, that is to say a figure that is radically spatialized, to such an extent that it cannot come down to earth and find a place.

It is the supposed native that is always already in place, though here again this is misleading: the native is *placeable*, not already in place, otherwise how could someone become native, and how could reservations that bear only tangential relationships with self-defined territories be constructed? At the base of the migrant—native dialectic that state power has depended on, as Sharma brilliantly shows, is a dialectic of space and place within which these categories operate. In this sense, native Indigenous individuals are seen as always already belonging to a place (an idea that thrives today in the notion of harmony with nature, for example), but this can only be so—from a nationalist perspective—because of the very possibility of being moved about in an abstract space in order to emplace a tangible space. What is sorely missing here is the multiplicity of places and the volumetric nature of space, which allows for the development of myriad relationships, relationships that have no connection whatsoever with racial categories or with forms of nativism. For indigeneity to be de-nationalized, in this sense, it has to break through the space—place dialectic of the state and instead insist on relationality itself as carrying the infinite work of emplacement. There is nothing but dynamic fitting, because there is no such thing as an unplaceable creature.

Sharma argues that ideas of Indigenous nativism are inseparable from those of autochthony, literally meaning someone who “sprung from the earth”, that is to say who naturally belongs to a place (40). “Autochthons were defined not only as ‘springing forth from the land’ but also as *immobile subjects*. In being so closely associated with a place, Indigenous-Natives were natured” (41, emphasis added). The idea of immobility plays a key role in the construction of nativist indigeneity, and in the fencing off of radically different possibilities of being. In much Indigenous politics today, the unreflectively assimilated idea of Indigenous-Native insists on rootedness to a particular land. This does two things: it encourages fantasies of harmony, and it effaces the history of migration that defines *any* people. In other words, the idea of inherent rootedness sits very uneasily with actual human history.

Much of the history that Sharma explores can be denied power by thinking differently about what makes someone indigenous. There is

an undeniable lure to the idea of belonging, and surely it is not *that* that needs to be denied or thrown out altogether. But are there ways of belonging, and in that sense of being indigenous, that can escape reproducing the racialized nativism that initially gives meaning to these terms? Can one belong without positing a migrant that, definitionally, does not? I think the answer is yes, particularly if we move away from state-level dynamics that perpetuate nativist tropes, and towards philosophical practices that remain fluid, multiple, and free from racialized categories.

Māori philosophy and practice are excellent sites for exploring the possibilities of being indigenous in non-nativist ways.<sup>2</sup> Instead of looking towards an idealized past that naturalizes people in place, Māori philosophies are rather concerned with recuperating pasts from the perspective of the relations they promise. They are also excellent philosophies for starting to explore the idea of reciprocity which, as I will argue, is at the core of a concept of belonging that is open, changeable, multiple, and fundamentally non-nativist.

\* \* \*

Aotearoa or New Zealand is one of the last lands to be settled by people.<sup>3</sup> Until about 800 years ago, there were no *mammals* on those islands at all, because none had been able to reach them. The reason for this is quite simple, if one considers the location of Aotearoa in the middle of the biggest and most turbulent ocean in the world. The eventual settlement of the islands by people appears then all the more improbable. Polynesian navigators achieved this astounding feat by taking their navigational cues from the stars, winds, currents, birds and whales. When they finally saw, on the horizon, the long cloud formations that are indicative of land, they knew they had reached something interesting. The islands became known as Aotearoa: the long, white cloud.

The relatively recent settlement of these lands allows for a contemplation of the rapidity of cultural evolution. Māori became

---

2 Surely not the only philosophical tradition appropriate for this task. But one must start somewhere, especially so as to avoid speaking in generalities that would cover all 'Indigenous philosophy'.

3 What follows in this section is based on independent fieldwork carried out in New Zealand, as well as consultation of original sources and Māori scholarly work.



Māori<sup>4</sup> after that initial settlement, and constructed philosophical, legal, political and social traditions within a voluminous space that was completely different, in almost every way, from the Polynesian islands of their ancestors. In a very real sense Māori became native to Aotearoa in a relatively short period of time, and this can only appear surprising from the colonial vantage point of a strict relationship between places and people. If, on the other hand, we adopt the volumetric thinking developed in the first chapters of this book, we are in a position to appreciate the inventiveness and creativity of Māori philosophy without being incredulous about its relatively short history, and without essentializing it as a necessary expression of the land.

Between this first settlement and the European one started with Cook's expedition landing in 1769,<sup>5</sup> Māori developed a series of philosophical concepts that were instrumental to their making a home in a new land. In particular, Māori ontology developed in radically relational ways that explain the enviroing world in terms that embed human action within infrastructures of reciprocity. To be clear, this does not mean that Māori were "in harmony with nature", or that there is something about the racialized category of Māori that is somehow more in tune with the environment. The first mass extinction of New Zealand's megafauna followed Polynesian settlement, an outcome that was but the latest in a long history of extinctions triggered by human settlement. Instead of facile notions of ecologically benign natives, Māori philosophy develops ways of acting in the world that conceptualize human behavior as inherently ecological, that is to say as always already participating in wider processes that define the very nature of the human.<sup>6</sup> This offers much more solid foundations for thinking our way through the Ecocene.

One of the basic concepts of Māori philosophy is the idea of *hau*. This is the idea that things, as well as people, are traversed by animating

---

4 The name Māori does not accompany the first settlers of the islands, of course. It is a self-given name that post-dates European settlement. It simply means normal, ordinary, usual, and is the name that the first settlers of Aotearoa gave themselves once there were newcomers to distinguish themselves from.

5 This subsequent feat of navigational prowess is also in great part owed to Polynesian sailors. As documented in Salmond (2017), Tupaia—a Polynesian high priest and expert navigator—was the guide and interpreter of the expedition that eventually reached Aotearoa.

6 The nature of the human, in this sense, is as changeable as the surrounding ecology. An ecological and relational understanding therefore does not preclude the possibility of humans driving animals to extinction.

forces that account for their vitality and power. As Salmond explains, *hau* is “the wind of life that activates human and non-human networks alike, animated by reciprocal exchanges” (2017, 3). This should not be taken in the materialist, Cartesian sense of there being a ghost in the machine. Rather, *hau* denotes the observable fact that networks are birthed and sustained through exchange, such that participants themselves cannot be conceptualized outside of the relational forces that enliven them. I want to stress here the eminently empirical nature of this concept: it is based on observation, as opposed to being deduced from some higher metaphysics.<sup>7</sup> *Hau* is what Māori postulated to account for the empirical intermingling that generates liveliness in the world.

The idea of *hau* is in another sense taken literally when Māori greet by touching noses, therefore intermingling, through their breath, their *hau* (in the Māori language, the same word is used for both breath and this other concept).<sup>8</sup> This gesture of intermingling points towards the interpretation of *hau* as a relational feature, and not something that resides *within* things, conceived independently of their relations. In fact, Salmond presents *hau* as an ontological category, because in Māori cosmology it “emerged at the very beginning of the cosmos” (11). In other words, it is not a feature of human exchange, exemplified through the intermingling of breath, but rather a feature of the world as such. That is why humans participate in the exchange of *hau*, because it is what structures the volumes of the world as such.

To say that *hau* is an ontological category is to recognize the structuring role of exchange in all ecological processes. That Māori society comes to be predicated on ritualized exchanges (of gifts or insults, cohesion or fighting) is simply a result of the underlying structure of a world that cannot sustain itself outside of constant exchanges of energy, in one form or another. The Māori universe is not simply added to a world defined through exchanges, but rather is itself an expression of that world, a way of structuring it. Māori ontology is, as de Castro and Salmond insist, not a “world-view”, but rather the description of “a world objectively from inside it” (Salmond 2017, 14). And this world is entirely structured through relationships.

---

7 This is what I have argued, through the work of Drury, is the vocation of ecological science.

8 There are obvious parallels here with the Latin *anima* or the Greek *pneuma*.

“The Māori universe is a gigantic kin, a genealogy” (in Salmond, 14). The term *whakapapa*, translated as genealogy, denotes the idea that people (and everything else) exist in dense networks of relations, such that “it is the relation itself [...] that is ontologically prior” (17). But crucially, these relationships are much more similar to the ecological ideas of change and impermanence than the fixed relations of hierarchical ontologies. From the point of view of any being, there is an unknowably vast network of relations that animate them, and this network can be selectively used, and is constantly changing. The participation of particular beings in ontological networks is neither elective (one cannot exist otherwise), nor necessary, in the sense that no single relationship supports, or nurtures, the whole. This is very important to recall when thinking about ideas of responsibility (developed in the next chapter).

The ontological commitments of *whakapapa* are made crystal clear in Māori oratorical arts. When speaking in a public capacity (for example in the *marae*, the community gathering house), the orator starts with a recitation of *whakapapa*, in order to situate themselves in the relational network that makes the event of the speech possible and ties all participants together (whether for the first or *n*th time). But a speaker need not have a fixed recitation that she can use indiscriminately; it is not as if I would be obliged to present myself as the son of my father on every occasion, something that in patriarchal societies, for example, would be a requirement. There are no such formal requirements of content, but only of form: the speaker starts with the greatest level of abstraction and zooms into her own being, defined through relations across scales. But what other beings, places, landscapes, and so on are called into genealogical relation is a question that the orator can decide based on the audience and the occasion of the speech.

Historically, this practice was used by Māori chiefs to extend or restrict networks of influence according to their political motivations. Because there are no patriarchal or matriarchal requirements, chiefs could use any branch of their extensive family tree to claim a genealogical connection with a distant ancestor, whether this took the form of a person, a mountain, a river, or something else. Salmond explains that “in Māori oratory, a speaker often begins by reciting the names of the main mountain, river and ancestor in their home territory, binding people together with land, ancestors, mountains and rivers as *tangata whenua* (people of the land)” (48).

*Tangata whenua*, or people of the land, is composed of *tangata* (people) and *whenua*, which means both land and placenta, an etymological clue that suggests the kinds of relations that this ontology allows. Local, or native, people are thus in light of the particular relations that they entertain with the land, and in light of the genealogy that they can selectively activate. It would be wrong to think that the idea of genealogy ties native claims to birth too strictly. Obviously, birth does play a role, but genealogical links are also often *built* through alliance, whether this be marriage or the exchange of particularly important gifts (material or not). What is more, genealogical lines intermingle at a distance, as the becoming-kin of relatives also affects my own genealogical relations. In other words, there is no prohibition in the Māori world of becoming native, inasmuch as one is willing to enter into constitutive genealogical relations with a vast network of things.<sup>9</sup>

One of the guiding principles of action within this relational universe is the idea of *utu*, or reciprocity. As already explored, this idea is implied in the *hau* of the world. Put differently, reciprocity is not a vectored relationship between two parties alone, but rather a *constant exchange* that is a logical necessity of the way the world works. Unlike in hierarchical ontologies, like the well-known Great Chain of Being (see Descola 2016), Māori reciprocity is radically equal, relying on “balanced exchange”. This meant that whatever was received by someone had to be commensurately returned, whether in objects, partners in marriage, insults or compliments, favors or betrayals. Marcel Mauss famously developed the idea of reciprocity in relation to gifting. One of the central tenets there, something picked up and developed further by Derrida (1995), is the idea that the gift obliges the recipient in a way that is fundamentally unpayable, such that each successive return of the gift (each revolution) entrenches relationships further through incurring a profound debt (also see Chapter 7).

This sense of reciprocity is telling, though in no way fully commensurate with the ontological *utu* of Māori philosophy. Indeed,

---

9 Salmond argues precisely this point when saying that “for Māori at that time [of initial contact with Europeans], it was possible for a pakeha [white stranger] to become Māori—i.e. a normal, ordinary person, bound into the whakapapa networks by acts of friendship and alliance” (p.145). Rejoining Sharma, there are no migrants in the Māori universe.

gifting obliges the recipient to participate in the reciprocal infrastructure that the gift itself sets up. In this sense, one of the longest-standing (and still very much current) claims of Māori against European settlers is the latter's failure to reciprocate gifts (of land, access to resources, and so on) that Māori have offered in the past, always with the understanding of a commensurate return through the generations (*utu* never expires, as it were). But besides the obligation that gifting imparts on participants, *utu* also points towards the tantalizing idea that reciprocal exchange is not just about human relations, but rather structures worlds as such.

Reciprocity becomes a way of paying attention to and registering what counts, both in the ecological terms developed in Chapter 3 and in ethical terms, that is to say what is worthy of being treated with the respect inherent in paying attention. There is no *a priori* limit to this process, as it is rooted in a constitutive ignorance that is perpetually open to new assemblages. The intuition that *utu* is part and parcel of the structure of the world, that is to say that exchange is inseparable from the manifestation of the world, is not just part of Māori philosophy, though it is extensively developed there. As I will argue, it is also part of the margins of other philosophical traditions, as well as the indigenous (that is, land-based in genealogical ways) practices of diverse people, including in colonial nations.

The ontological level of reciprocity is ethically developed by Māori thinking in terms of commensurate and balanced exchange, that is to say an obligation to return the gifts that one receives, in whatever form. This kind of obligation can lead to both deep-seated concern for the well-being of the relationships in which one participates, as well as cycles of revenge for the commensurate return of insults and misfortune. However, there is no necessity to develop the ethics of reciprocity along the lines of *balanced* exchange, and in an ecological sense Māori philosophy itself does not do that: the idea of reciprocating insults, for instance, seems to be reserved for human relations; it is not as if Māori would be obliged to cut down a tree whose branch wounded someone. Instead, an ethics of reciprocity achieves three things: it embeds all creatures within the enviroing world in a fundamental way; it foregrounds human ignorance of the vastness of the networks that support all life, human included; and it foregrounds the necessity of

paying attention to environing relations in order to increase the number of things that matter.<sup>10</sup>

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) approaches the kind of reciprocity that I have described using different sources and practices, namely the relations that constitute soils. Discussing the work of soil scientists, she shows how scientific practice itself is pregnant with the kind of insight structuring Māori philosophy. One of the ways in which this is the case is through the idea that humans are not only “an unbalanced irruption in soil’s ecological cycles” (193). Instead, “notions of humans *being soil* thrive outside science”. She further points to the indispensable fact that this “outside science” is a space inhabited by scientists themselves when they step away from their institutional roles as guardians of a bifurcated truth.

Thinking of humans as analogous to soil highlights their web-like interconnection, with a vast number of creatures making up precarious wholes. And it requires an exchange between soils and humans that erases the supposed boundaries between these constructed realms. In this context, reciprocity becomes “multilateral and collectively shared” (192), because upholding the exchanges that structure the world cannot be the work of any one individual, a concept whose relevance diminishes towards non-existence in this way of thinking.

Soil scientists are able to make many previously unknown relations matter. Puig de la Bellacasa gives the example of Elaine Ingham, a soil scientist also known as the Queen of Compost because of her hands-on work with communities. Simple devices of sampling, for example, become crucial in informing participants about easily unseen participants, and this expands the ways in which care can be extended to soils. But this care is not the same as a responsibility for the soil. It is an injunction to participate in the cycles that make and remake soils, in full consciousness of the fact that it is impossible to count all participants that matter. This is why, in discussing Māori philosophy, I insisted on the idea that reciprocation is a formal affair, concerned with perpetuating exchange itself. But it cannot control the composition of relations. It can

---

10 This latter injunction is to be understood on the background of a potentially infinite number of relations that are in constant flux. This, as I will argue, complicates greatly the idea of balance that often accompanies notions of reciprocity as well as particular strands of ecological thought.

only commit to ritualizing infrastructures of reciprocity that embed the necessity of exchange within everyday practices.

\* \* \*

An onto-normative concept of reciprocity is not entirely foreign to Western philosophy. As the example of soil science shows, it is not foreign to current practices either. In strictly philosophical terms, one of its best expressions is to be found in the work of Merleau-Ponty. Its eco-ethical deployment has been significantly developed by David Abram. Here, I want to take stock of their particular contributions to a robust concept of reciprocity.

There are several ideas that Merleau-Ponty developed that are of direct relevance to the present discussion. First among these is the notion of the reversibility of perception. Simply put, this is the idea that perception makes no sense for the model of a subject perceiving a world. In that model, all of the power inherent in perception is on the side of the subject, “in the head” as it were, while the object is passive and therefore plays no constitutive role in the experience of perception. What Merleau-Ponty shows is that this is a truly strange idea, because it takes for granted the incredible accomplishment of perception, namely the embedding of the perceiving subject within an enviroing world.

Instead of thinking about perception (which is routinely biased towards the visual) as a vectored relation, it makes more sense to think about it as reversible: whoever is perceiving can only perceive inasmuch as they themselves are part of someone else’s perceptual field. This is the idea of reversibility, that is to say that seeing presupposes being seen, smelling being smelled, touching being touched. So, every time I touch something, ‘my touch’ already involves the idea of being touched, of my own body being an object of perception. More profoundly, the reversibility of perception suggests that perceiving creatures are embedded in the world such that they are subjects and objects simultaneously. There is in perception a fundamental reciprocity between perceiving and being perceived.

“Looking and listening bring me into contact, respectively, with the outward surfaces and with the interior voluminosity of things [...]” (Abram 2012, 123). Acts of perception, in this model, are not acts in the intentional sense, but rather ways of participating in the world.

Perceptual participation comes with the embodied assumption of a voluminous and synaesthetic envioning world, one that is only flattened by a failure to pay adequate attention. But in every smell, sound, and touch there resides the implication that what is perceived possesses an inscrutable depth formally similar to my own.

This idea greatly resembles the animism discussed earlier via the work of de Castro. Abram argues that “direct, prereflective perception is inherently synaesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies” (130). The interiority of creatures in general is met half-way by the idea of reversibility of perception, because if we suppose other beings are capable of perceiving us as an object, than we are already very close to considering their internal scaffolding as fundamentally similar to our own.<sup>11</sup> It is this fundamental similarity that also connects the formal reciprocity of perception to the ethical idea of reciprocal relations across milieus. Merleau-Ponty introduces a further notion that is able to deal with this complex back-and-forth of perception: instead of talking about objects and subjects, he speaks about the *flesh* of the world.

The choice of word here is very telling: the flesh, as I argued when discussing the concept of ecology in Chapter 3, already points towards the depth and aliveness of the envioning world, a world that is inseparable in biotic and abiotic forms given that it is produced by their constant exchanges and interactions. On an ethical level, this opens up two related possibilities: that the envioning world contains an infinite number of significant relations, and that the flesh of the world obliges human beings to pay attention in a way that may identify new relations that count. In other words, human beings may have a duty to pay attention to the envioning world in such a way as to discover the multiplicity of relations that sustain them, and that they sustain, under conditions of constant (alas, increasing) change. It is this duty that works on the basis of ontological reciprocity.

Through these remarks I merely wish to draw attention to how Western philosophical traditions have not been entirely blind to the intuition that the world is defined by aliveness of a kind that is

---

11 This recalls both the discussion of multinaturalism, and of the concept of vulnerability developed in Chapter 3. There are also obvious similarities with the concept of *hau*.



vulnerable in the double sense developed earlier: it is always changing and fundamentally open, while being structured in ways similar to the interiority of being human.

This last point is made abundantly clear by Eduardo Kohn when recounting the advice he received from a travel companion to sleep in his hammock face-up, such that the jaguar may recognize him as a person, and not a thing: ““If [...] a jaguar sees you as a being capable of looking back—a self like himself, a *you*—he’ll leave you alone. But if it should come to see you as prey—an *it*—you may well be dead meat” (1). This kind of insight is also at the root of much of the most creative ethological studies of the past decades, particularly those exploring primate worlds (structured, as it turns out, around moral and political considerations; see De Waal 2007). In fact, the sciences partly responsible for the bifurcation of nature are themselves starting to question the world in ways that betray a fundamental shift away from bifurcation.

What is interesting in Kohn’s remark is the reversibility of the act of seeing, which means that the act itself doesn’t just connect, but rather constitutes, the subjects through their involvement in the act. It is a matter of *seeing*, of paying attention in a certain kind of way, of extending Abram’s unreflective, direct perception (which works through the flesh of the world) into a reflective future. It is this paying attention that constitutes subjects on all sides, and it is a paying attention that works through biological manifestations but is not limited, in important respects, to particular configurations of flesh. Plants may pay attention in this kind of way as well, for example, though they may do so in ways that are multiple, corresponding to their very communal way of assembling. If, instead of assuming bifurcation, we assume deep continuity and indeed reciprocity as the very fabric of the world, we may even be in a position to extend concepts such as politics in new and interesting ways: plant democracy, primate oligarchy. Rafi Youatt (2020) suggests as much in thinking about how, in light of reversibility, we may be able to apply political concepts to non-human worlds. This kind of paying attention simply means operating on the perceptually based assumption that the enviroing world is composed of an infinite variety of agents.

This leads Kohn to argue that “how other kinds of beings see us matters” (2013, 1). But who does it matter to, and what does it matter

for? Following the idea of reversibility, it matters because it is a crucial part of the world, of a world, of any world. How other beings see us is part and parcel of the fabric of existence, and not knowing that part is like being in Plato's cave, ignorant of the colors that nonetheless permeate existence. This kind of ignorance, born out of not paying attention, has practical and political consequences, becoming a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: we may end up acting in ways that ignore the liveliness of the world, and in so doing we end up impoverishing the world around us further. Cora Diamond uses D. H. Lawrence's discussion of men hunting gorillas to express the point that such actions as shooting baby apes in the arms of their mothers reveals a fundamental "deadness of spirit": they are based on deep ignorance as to the fundamentally reciprocal relations to which perception itself condemns us. Above and beyond any calculations of interest, we are obliged to decry this kind of deadness of spirit precisely because it does not pay attention to the fundamentally reciprocal structure of, in this case, being a human and being a gorilla.

\* \* \*

Ethically speaking, the paradigmatic case of reciprocity, and of its debt that can never be repaid, is that of the giving of life. Every living thing is in this sense radically indebted; this kind of moral indebtedness may even be said to be part and parcel of the fabric of the world, given the necessity of birthing. The indebtedness of birth reveals the impossibility of *balanced* reciprocation. In fact, this impossibility has taken shape in many different social groups throughout history in the idea that one is primarily indebted to the land that sustains them.

In the discussion of Māori philosophy, I mentioned that the expression people of the land—*tangata whenua*—uses the same word for land that is also used for placenta. *Tangata whenua* are, then, the people who nurture through the umbilical cord,<sup>12</sup> as it were, and not necessarily native or racialized people. Those who participate in the life of the land

---

12 In Intermezzo I, I discussed land practices in Valle D'Itria, an area within the Murgia of Southern Italy. One of the important towns in that area is Locorotondo, which in Italian simply means "the round place", an innocuous description of the shape of the town. In the local dialect however, the town is called *U'Curdunn*, which means "the umbilical cord". These kinds of clues show the deep affinity of land-based cultures in a variety of locations.

in a way that benefits directly from its multiplicity of relations, are people of the land. But this participation also imparts a duty to explore the possibilities for reciprocal exchange, such that the vitality that is received from and through the land can be reciprocated through acts that enhance the vitality of the land itself.

The idea of balance sits uneasily within this kind of reciprocal exchange: there is no sense in which the gifts of the land can be commensurate with those of people, or vice versa. Instead, balance can be interpreted structurally, as the very functioning of reciprocal exchanges themselves, and not as quantifiable and strictly comparable in terms of amounts or kinds of gifts. The point, therefore, is neither to give back to the land *the same things it gives*, nor to give back in ways that would uphold a supposedly natural balance, but rather to simply be preoccupied with the idea (and its practical consequences) of giving back. What that may be is always context-dependent and works differently at different scales. The fundamental point is to simply understand the very being of humans as already involved in reciprocal relations that, when reflected upon, impart a duty to enhance the worlds around us. How to reciprocate is a question of logistical importance, and therefore one that is to be decided on in specific cases.

Belonging to (a) particular land(s) is about what one *does*, not who one is. There is no point in insisting on the primacy of *being* a native in the Ecocene; the point is to constitute ways of acting that bring one—anyone—into reciprocal relations with the land. That kind of mutually beneficial action is what may qualify the terms ‘native’ or ‘local’. One belongs, then, inasmuch as she contributes to the well-being of the world that she inhabits. It goes without saying that one can (and routinely does) inhabit multiple worlds, and that this kind of belonging is always subject to change.

Being indigenous can then approach the Māori meaning of genealogy, that is to say the capacity to act in a way that upholds genealogical relations to the land. Everyone can become indigenous everywhere, inasmuch as they enter the genealogical web of particular worlds via reciprocity. Re-learning ways of living and hybridization between worlds is crucial for all people in the Ecocene. Tāmami Kruger, a Tūhoe leader largely responsible for the legal recognition of Te Urewera, the ancestral home of his people, insists on the duty of Māori themselves

to re-learn ways of being that respect the philosophical notions that we have explored. It is not as if the ethnic category of Tūhoe comes with preset instructions as to how to act in the world; what being Tūhoe gives is a privileged access to particular lands, and to a particular line of inheritance that can be a guide for future living arrangements.

Reciprocity as a generalized impulse has never entirely disappeared anywhere where modernity has grown thick. What has happened, in the modern world, is that the infrastructures of reciprocity have been buried. That is what needs rebuilding, so that this most fundamental impulse can be expressed again (at all levels, and among non-human entities and processes themselves). It is not enough to “raise awareness”, because the intrinsic nature of reciprocity is clear enough, and still visible in the ways in which people talk about valued natural objects (for example, how farmers speak of olive trees; see *Intermezzo I*). The political task is to build up its infrastructures, such that enhancement of the environing world is possible at all levels.

I have argued that reciprocity, built on the foundations explored earlier in this book, can be renovated as a political and ethical concept able to guide socio-political arrangements in the Ecocene. Now, I want to turn to a complementary notion that can work alongside reciprocity in spelling out an ecopolitical ethic: responsibility.