



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Plumwood, Val. "Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death."
Environmental Values 17, no. 3, (2008): 323-330.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6041>

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Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death¹

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ABSTRACT

In this posthumously published paper Val Plumwood reflects on two personal encounters with death, being seized as prey by a crocodile and burying her son in a country cemetery with a flourishing botanic community. She challenges the exceptionalism which sets the human self apart from nature and which is reflected in the choice between two conceptions of death, one of continuity in the realm of spirit, the other a reductive materialist conception in which death marks the end of the story of the self. Both perspectives structure out the basis of animal existence – that we are all food, and through death nourish others. She commends an animistic materialist approach, where life is seen as in circulation and where mortuary practices might affirm death as an opportunity of life for others in the ecological community.

KEYWORDS

Human exceptionalism, death, mind/body dualism, animism, ecological community, mortuary practice, narrative

1. FOOD/DEATH

Two encounters with death led to my becoming radically dissatisfied with the usual western selection of death narratives – both Christian-monotheist AND modernist-atheist. I think both major traditions inherit the human exceptionalism and hyper-separation that propels the environmental crisis. However, there are encouraging signs of a developing animist consciousness and mortuary practice that challenges exceptionalism and grasps human death in terms of reciprocity in the earth community.

Some years ago, as an already established environmental philosopher, I had a close encounter with food/death, death as food for a large predator. I was seized by a Saltwater Crocodile, largest of the living saurians, heirs to the gastronomic tastes of the ancient dinosaurs. By a fortunate conjunction of circumstances I survived – slightly tenderised, but basically set aside for another occasion. Since then it has seemed to me that our worldview denies the most basic feature of animal existence on planet earth – that we are food and that through death we nourish others. The food/death perspective, so familiar to our ancestors, is something the human exceptionalism of western modernity has structured out of life. Attention to human foodiness is tasteless. Of course we are all routinely nibbled both during and after life by all sorts of very small creatures, but in the microscopic context our essential foodiness is much easier to ignore than in one where we are munched by a noticeably large predator.

Modernist liberal individualism teaches us that we own our lives and bodies, politically as an enterprise we are running, experientially as a drama we are variously narrating, writing, acting and/or reading. As hyper-individuals, we owe nothing to nobody, not to our mothers, let alone to any nebulous earth community. Exceptionalised as both species and individuals, we humans cannot be positioned in the food chain in the same way as other animals. Predation on humans is monstrous, exceptionalised and subject to extreme retaliation. Horror movies, stories and jokes reflect our deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life: horror is the wormy corpse, vampires sucking blood and sci-fi monsters trying to eat humans (*Alien 1* and *2*). Horror and outrage greet stories of other species eating live or dead humans, various levels of hysteria our nibbling by leeches, sandflies, mosquitoes and worms. Dominant concepts of human identity position humans outside and above the food chain, not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity. Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. Human Exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten.

I vividly recall my own disbelief and outrage when confronted with being food for a crocodile. It was as if I had fallen into another universe, where I was just a piece of meat, all my special individual and species accomplishments subordinated to this one thing of being food! Certainly the predation experi-

TASTELESS

ence is profoundly disruptive of Human Exceptionalism, which remains an important force in our culture, and has profoundly shaped dominant practices of self, commodity, materiality and death – especially death. For an ecological culture, major rethinking is required.

The Western problematic of death – where the essential self is disembodied spirit – poses a false choice of continuity, even eternity, in the realm of the spirit, versus the reductive materialist concept of death as the complete ending of the story of the material, embodied self. Both horns of this dilemma exact a terrible price, alienation from the earth in the first case and the loss of meaning and narrative continuity for self in the second.

Indigenous animist concepts of self and death succeed in breaking this pernicious false choice and suggesting satisfying and ecologically responsive forms of continuity with and through the earth. By understanding life as in circulation, as a gift from a community of ancestors, we can see death as recycling, a flowing on into an ecological and ancestral community of origins. In place of the western war of life against death, whose battleground has been variously the spirit-identified afterlife and the reduced, medicalised material life, the indigenous imaginary sees death as part of life, partly through narrative, and partly because death is a return to the (highly narrativised) land that nurtures life. Such a vision of death fosters an imaginary of the land as a nourishing terrain, and of death as a nurturing, material continuity/reunion with ecological others, especially the lives and landforms of country.

My proposal is that the food/death imaginary we have lost touch with is a key to re-imagining ourselves ecologically, as members of a larger earth community of radical equality, mutual nurturance and support. Re-imagining in terms of concrete practices of restraint and humility, not just in vague airy-fairy concepts of unity. Our loss of this perspective has meant the loss of humbling but important forms of knowledge of ourselves and of our world. We can learn to look for comfort and continuity, meaning and hope in the context of the earth community, and work in this key place to displace the hierarchical and exceptionalist cultural framework that so often defeats our efforts to adapt to the planet.

On the Human Exceptionalist paradigm, predation on humans reveals the whole condition of biological existence as an outrage, as some forms of vegetarianism seem to imply. I had the sense that my life was something I owned, and that the crocodile now outrageously demanded. After decades of reflection, I can discern a kind of fairness and sharing in all this, justice, and even a kind of democracy. As I see it now, on the earth community model, life *is* like a book, but not the kind of book you can own or buy. It's much more like a library book. You don't own it – it's borrowed from the earth community circulating library. Like a library book, you can only have it for so long, and exceptions to this rule are never made. Like a library book, it's subject to immediate recall by another borrower – and you haven't even finished reading/writing it! At-

tempts to excessively prolong or immortalise human life are attempts to steal the library book and cheat the earth community, to take nurturance from others but not to give it back.

2. ATHEISM, EXCEPTIONALISM AND HEAVENISM

The second experience that disrupted exceptionalist concepts of death was burying my son in a small country cemetery that was also a refuge for a remarkable botanical community. This experience suggested ways in which a radical animist reconception of identity can reimagine death in terms of a reciprocity ethic of mutual nurturance.

The exceptionalist denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our conventional death and burial practices – the strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent anything digging us up, supposedly keeps the western human body from becoming food for other species. The local bush cemetery I found for my son was a place which powerfully enacted the modernist dramas opposing exceptionalist heavenism to exceptionalist atheism. When I first visited the cemetery on a sunny autumn day, it seemed an extraordinarily serene and beautiful place, a place with a satisfying feeling of the acceptance of mortality. The wounds the old burials had made in the earth had long since healed, and only a few raw scars bore witness to recent ones. But the exceptionalist imaginary that theologian Norman Habel calls ‘heavenism’ had shaped the old memorials nearest the gate, which date back over a hundred and fifty years. From a distance, the tall pillars of marble or sandstone look eerily like pale shrouded forms, already freed from the clay, beginning their journey upwards. Most of these early modern gravestones bore inscriptions invoking a heavenly home, such as ‘Sleep on, dear husband, take thy rest/God called you home when he thought it best’. Many inscriptions insist that the earth is an inferior place, best left behind. ‘Mourn not for them whom god has blest/And taken to their heavenly rest/Freed from all sorrow, grief and pain/Our loss is their eternal gain.’

For heavenism, the earth is at best a temporary lodging; the true human home is beyond the earth, in heaven. Buried six feet down, the strong wooden or steel coffin aims to keep the heaven-bound body apart from the earth and other life forms for as long as possible and to preserve it for departure to its higher home. For this transcendental solution to the problem of death and continuity, we are split into an embodied and perishable part belonging to earth, and a thinking imperishable ‘spirit’ part belonging to heaven. Bodies must perish, but the soul, the true self, has eternal life in a realm apart. Such transcendental solutions to the problem of identity and continuity depend on denying our kinship to other life forms and our shared end as food for others. Heavenism is strongly exceptional-

TASTELESS

ist, and its funerary practices deplore or demonise materiality, hyper-separating the human body from the earth and hindering the decay that benefits other forms of life. The cemetery itself is exceptionalised as sanctified ground, in contrast to the profane or fallen zone beyond it.

The later (post-1920s) mortuary practices further from the gate express the exceptionalist dynamic in different terms. Gone are the pale standing ghosts, the pointing stone fingers – in their place lies a grey regiment of massive concrete slabs, their rectangles, straight lines and polished surfaces marking the starker vision of modern rationalism and reductive materialism. These memorials are silent about death, the big taboo topic of modernity, and their minimal inscriptions rarely give away more than names and dates. The now-massive slab even more emphatically hyperseparates the human dead from their surroundings and prevents the decaying body from nourishing other forms of life. The expressive poverty of these hyper-expensive memorials represents the silence at the heart of the modernist reductionist paradigm and its concept of death. Their anti-life function is intensified by modern herbicide technology: many slabs are surrounded by large bare areas, where all encroaching vegetation has been poisoned and nothing now can grow.

This lifeless zone is the modernist, concrete expression of the transcendent ideals which continue to hyper-separate human and nature and conceive death as apart from and opposed to life. Its mortuary practice expresses human exceptionalism and the Cartesian project of defeating human mortality not by religion in the afterlife but by a technological-medical war against nature in this life. As I wrote of reductive materialism, 'Contemporary western identity has rejected the otherworldly significance and basis for continuity, but has given it no other definitive meaning, provided no other satisfactory context of continuity or embeddedness for human life' (Plumwood 1993: 101). Modernity, despite its pride in throwing off the illusions of the past, has failed to provide an ecological or earthian identity or narrative to replace the heavenist one. 'To the extent that death can express a unity with nature, it is a unity with an order of nature conceived as dualised other, as itself stripped of significance, as mere matter ... death is a nothing, a void, a terrifying and sinister terminus, whose only meaning is that there is no meaning.' The old narratives of post-earth transcendence are dead, but modernity has not replaced them by any meaningful or comforting new ones about earthly life. Hence the modernist avoidance around death these memorials so clearly express.

On this analysis, reductive materialism and associated reductive forms of atheism are not a rejection of the heavenist problematic so much as a continuation and even affirmation of it in an amputated form – a reversal in which the original spirit/matter split is maintained but the previously devalued side (the body, materiality) is now affirmed – without however the fuller reconception of materiality required for a genuine healing of the dualistic problematic. A good

deal of contemporary atheism, humanism and materialism expresses only a truncated dualism and disillusioned heavenism, failing to provide alternative reshaping narratives of meaning, comfort and continuity for self and body. (So this kind of materialism is NOT A BOLD NEW BEGINNING, as it usually claims, but is haunted by its lost former half). What I am arguing here is that an ecological understanding of the self can point towards such reshaping narratives and practices, of which we stand so greatly in need.

It is these conventional dualised choices – spirit or matter – that have framed the central dilemma about death as now conceived in the west: the choice of (narratives of) alienated *continuity* versus reductive-materialist *discontinuity* – the supposed finality of material death, or the narrative of no narratives. On the second, immanent choice of reductive atheism and materialism, the human body is still seen as being peripheral or inessential to identity, so no continuity beyond death can be based on it. Interviewed shortly before her recent death, and openly avowing her atheism, movie star Katherine Hepburn was seen as courageous in her averral that ‘death is final’ ... there is nothing beyond. The death of self (self lying in individual consciousness) is final and complete. Reductive materialism is marked especially by the Finality Thesis, the claim that death is the final END OF THE STORY. It is this loss of story, the narrative of no narratives, that is expressed in the massive mute modernist headstones.

3. ANIMIST DEATH: ANOTHER STORY

The thesis of finality shows clearly how both conventional theist and conventional atheist positions collaborate in the conception of matter as a reduced sphere inessential to the self and completely ‘left behind’ in the ending that death is supposed to represent. Because of course *the body* does not just ‘end’ – it decays or decomposes, its matter losing its prior organisational form and taking on or being incorporated into new forms in a sharing of substance/life force. Lots of linking, afterlife narratives here!

The finality thesis depends on a covert continuation of the heavenist identification of self with spirit, and on a thoroughly reductionist and denarrativised understanding of the body and of materiality that results from spirit/matter dualism. The finality story subtly accepts the dualist-Cartesian proposition that our essential element is consciousness, so when that finishes, so must ‘we’. With the end of consciousness, we are confronted unavoidably with the end of self. A more fluid and embodied concept of self and its boundaries can be employed here to suggest a complex narrative of continuities, in which the story goes on, although no longer mainly a story about human subjects.

There are then important differences in the reductionist vs non-reductionist account of the afterlife. *Heavenism expresses exceptionalism in its concept*

TASTELESS

of afterlife in an exclusively human realm utterly apart, while reductionist materialism treats the afterlife in terms of absence, nullity. For an ecological, animist materialism, however, the afterlife is a positive, ecological presence, positive traces in the lives of other species – not no story, but another, continuing story.

The recognition of life as in circulation and of our death as an opportunity for other life can discourage the human greediness and ingratitude that tries to grasp for eternal youth through transcendence, privilege and technological mastery. At the individual level, death confirms transience, but on the level of the ecological community, it can affirm an enduring, resilient cycle or process. Thus the cemetery of my first visit revealed a route to healing grief through the joyful vision it offered of death as a flowing on into, even a journey into, a tranquil and beautiful landscape. The tranquillity proved illusory, but not the background vision of burial and bodily decay as the ground of entry to a sacred ecological community.

Corresponding mortuary symbolisms and grave practices might aim to nourish rather than exclude other life forms, affirming rather than demonising our transition to the non-human in death. It is encouraging to note then in my son's cemetery, the hint of an emerging post-modern mortuary sensibility in the establishment of a lawn cemetery. This at least accepts that living things should grow from the grave. Is the consciousness worm at last starting to turn, with an acceptance of the idea of human recycling beginning to challenge entrenched norms of human apartness represented by the concrete slab?

It is of course not the use of stone itself, even in its subjugated, instrumentalised modern form as the concrete slab, that is the problem, but rather the way stone has been mobilised by our split culture in the service of Human Exceptionalism in an effort to exclude and deny life ('the world of changes' in Plato's terms) and to associate the human essence with an unchanging order of eternity. This use of stone to affirm transcendence of life forgets that we are bodies, plain members of the ecological order, and that our life is a gift from an embodied community of prior others we must nurture. The use of stone to confirm transcendence forgets that stone is the earth's body (or rather, skeleton), and like other skeletons, prone to decay. It also forgets the reptiles, for whom stone is generally splendid habitat. On a recent visit to my son's grave to pull out thistles, I was pursued by a tiny, exquisite dragon lizard, flashing its thorny orange mouth in a show of defiance. A gravestone – or even a concrete slab – can make a fine lizard hunting and basking spot, and can easily be redesigned to incorporate a small reptile shelter. (Let's get the reptiles back into the garden!)

The reconception of death and the sacred in terms of an animist or ecological materialist imaginary calls, then, for different philosophies, sensibilities and iconographies of death from those normalised in our culture, ones that can reverse the burial place as a site of union with the prior sacred presences of earth

rather than as set apart from it, and can honour the dissolution of the human into the more-than-human flux. Overcoming the Human Exceptionalism that has had such a deep hold on western consciousness is the crucial pre-condition for such an animist-materialist spirituality becoming available to us emotionally and culturally.

NOTE

¹ This article first appeared in The Forum on Religion and Ecology Newsletter, October 2007 (<http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html>). The editors of *Environmental Values* thank Whitney Bauman for his help in arranging its publication in the journal.

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