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Weak Panpsychism and Environmental Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Weak panpsychism, the view that mindlike qualities are widespread in nature, has recently been argued for by the prominent ecofeminist Val Plumwood and has been used by her to ground an ethic of respect for nature. This ethic advocates a principle of respect for difference, the rejection of moral hierarchy and the inclusion of plants, mountains, rivers and ecosystems within the moral community.

I argue that weak panpsychism cannot, convincingly, justify the rejection of moral hierarchy, as it is compatible with it. Also the intentional criterion of mind, employed by weak panpsychism, which includes teleology, has the counter-intuitive implication of giving machines moral status. I cast doubt on the claims that (i) intentionality is a necessary condition for moral status and that (ii) it is sufficient for the ascription of agency. It is suggested that any account of intentionality that allows it to be predicated of mountains, rivers etc. would be widely, and correctly regarded as a reductio of that account. Finally an aesthetic reinterpretation of weak panpsychism is offered.

KEYWORDS: weak panpsychism, assimilationism, dualism, intentionality, agency.

1. INTRODUCTION.

Panpsychism (the doctrine that mind or soul is not just confined to the human but also inhabits all natural phenomena) is not regarded as viable by many contemporary philosophers. They would regard it as a reductio of any theory of mind if it had such an implication. Yet within environmental philosophy it has refused to lie down. Jay McDaniel¹ and Charles Birch² (influenced by Whitehead) have argued for it. Timothy Sprigge³ has put forward a version of it. More recently Val Plumwood⁴ has grounded an ecofeminist ethic on a position she calls 'weak panpsychism', and it is this that is the focus of this paper. She claims that other environmental ethics (eg. deep ecology, various kinds of moral extensionism, 'process' philosophy) fail to provide for a genuine respect for nature, as they are

vitiated by an oppressive hierarchical dualism. But an ecofeminism that grounds itself on weak panpsychism, Plumwood says, can break free from moral hierarchy and dualism, and provide for a genuine respect for nature. I shall argue, amongst other things, that Plumwood's weak panpsychism does not guarantee an escape from hierarchy; neither is it clear that mindlike properties are as widespread in nature as Plumwood wishes to believe.

2. STRONG AND WEAK PANPSYCHISM.

Whereas strong panpsychism, according to Plumwood, is 'the thesis that consciousness is fully present everywhere and present especially in nature'⁵, Plumwood's weak panpsychism is the view that each natural entity has its own distinctive mindlike properties. One of her objections to strong panpsychism is that it fails to respect 'difference' because it sees consciousness as essentially 'humanoid' in form. Thus, if strong panpsychism is used to justify respect for the natural world, a natural entity would deserve respect insofar as its consciousness resembled human consciousness. This would be 'assimilationist' (i.e. assimilating the natural to the human) and thus a failure to appreciate and respect the essential differences between humanity and nature (i.e. a failure to 'respect difference'). Weak panpsychism, on the other hand, can ground 'respect for difference' as it grants that natural entities have mindlike properties that belong to them intrinsically and distinctively.

Weak panpsychism, though, must not only be capable of grounding respect for difference but also of supporting biospherical egalitarianism. As I have argued elsewhere⁶, ecofeminism's critique of dualism presupposes a commitment to the moral equality thesis (the thesis that all natural entities whether human or non-human should be granted equal moral status). The dualistic conceptual framework that pervades Western culture and only allows us to think in terms of moral hierarchy, so ecofeminists claim, must be replaced by a conceptual framework that endorses the moral equality of all natural entities. Weak panpsychism, then, must be capable of sustaining equal moral consideration and respect for all mindlike natural entities (whether human or non-human). A natural entity's moral entitlement is not only to have its differences recognised and respected, but also to have its significant needs considered as being of equal moral weight to the significant needs of others.

3. WEAK PANPSYCHISM AND INTENTIONALITY.

Plumwood's weak panpsychism rests on the claim that mind is essentially characterised by intentionality, and that intentionality is 'spread throughout nature'.⁷ Intentionality provides an 'overall ground of continuity' such that there

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is no 'break between the human and the natural based on the possession of mind'.⁸ And, crucially, it also provides a ground for 'difference' and thus for 'respect for difference'. A key passage goes as follows:

Because intentional systems are differentiated in terms of kind rather than of degree of variation along the same axis, it is possible to conceive much of the field in terms of a non-hierarchical concept of difference rather than of an experiential meritocracy with humans at the top.⁹

The rejection of moral hierarchy, it seems, is grounded on the claim that intentional systems differ in 'kind' rather than in 'degree of variation along the same axis'. For Plumwood a genuine respect for the natural world must be based on an acknowledgment of and respect for such differences in kind. To argue a case for respect based on the degree of variation along the same axis would be 'assimilationist' and a failure to escape from the oppressive dualism that afflicts Western culture.

But what are these differences in kind? Where do they reside? There is, says Plumwood, 'a high level of differentiation between different sorts of mindlike qualities'.¹⁰ Intentionality is an 'umbrella' term 'under which shelter more specific criteria of mind such as sentience, choice, consciousness and goal-directedness (teleology)'.¹¹ She goes on to say that animals and humans have certain intentional capacities in common (e.g. sentience, volition, emotion); that second-order capacities (e.g. second-order desires) may be possessed only by humans; that animals possess 'certain sensory and intentional capacities' that humans do not; also some animals have capacities for decision, choice, imagination that other animals do not. The differences in kind Plumwood has in mind, then, appear to be differences in *kinds of intentional capacity*. Sentience, choice, volition, second-order desires etc. are *kinds* of intentionality. Presumably Plumwood's motive for stressing the different, varied and overlapping ways in which different kinds of intentional capacity are distributed across humans and animals is to avoid the charge that she is, herself, distributing 'intentional systems' along the 'same axis' and thus endorsing assimilationism and hierarchy.

Teleology plays an important role in Plumwood's delineation of weak panpsychism. She claims that to 'all living creatures we may clearly ascribe a teleology or overall life-goal'.¹² However she does not restrict teleology to living creatures only. One of her motives is to produce a highly inclusive ethic (intentionality is 'spread throughout nature'); so teleology is ascribed, not only to plants ('fully intentional systems'), but also to valleys, rivers, stones, ecosystems, habitats and places. Mountains, she claims

present themselves as the products of a lengthy unfolding natural process, having a certain sort of history and direction as part of this process, and with a certain kind of potential for change.¹³

There is, she says, 'an extended family of teleological concepts'.¹⁴ Some of these may involve consciousness, but others involve non-conscious processes 'such as function, directionality and goal-directedness of a self-maintaining kind'.¹⁵ So teleology, it seems, is not just one *kind* of intentional capacity but can, itself, be broken down into different kinds of goal-directed process. Plumwood has to commit herself to this internal differentiation of teleology, for if she did not she could be seen as advocating a difference along the 'same axis', an 'assimilationist' view that she thinks leads to, and sustains, moral hierarchy. If teleology *is* an intentional capacity shared by *all* types of living creatures and 'inherent' in *all* natural processes (including the inanimate), then her argument requires that all those entities deemed to be worthy of equal respect must instantiate different kinds of teleology. That they all manifest teleology provides the ground for the claim of 'continuity'; that they all manifest different kinds of teleology avoids assimilationism and provides the ground for the claim of 'difference'.

Importantly, then, Plumwood sees these claims about intentionality and its kinds as sustaining the rejection of moral hierarchy:

Thus we can distinguish, without ordering in a hierarchy, items within a complex differentiated field in which mind is expressed in a family of related intentional concepts.¹⁶

Plumwood's weak panpsychism is, then, intended to provide good grounds for a highly inclusive ethic based on the continuity of intentionality across the human and non-human spheres and also for equal respect based on differences in kind. Does it succeed in doing this?

First I will indicate some internal difficulties in Plumwood's position: particularly that weak panpsychism, as she outlines it, is compatible with moral hierarchy. Secondly I want to express some doubts about the project of grounding a highly inclusive environmental ethic on the claim that plants, mountains, places rivers etc. are intentional (let alone 'fully intentional').

4. INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES.

It is far from clear that Plumwood's weak panpsychism points unequivocally in the direction of moral equality rather than moral hierarchy. Her account of the different 'kinds' of intentionality appears compatible with the latter.

She hopes to defeat any compatibility with hierarchy by claiming that her account of these different 'kinds' makes it inappropriate to think of these kinds as on the same 'axis' i.e. they cannot be placed on a 'graduated' scale and thus cannot be compared in terms of their *degree* of intentionality and/or teleology. Her thought is that, if this is the case, then it will not be possible to place the 'owners' of these kinds of intentionality (i.e. humans, animals, plants, mountains

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etc) on a graduated scale either, and thus it will be inappropriate to rank them. There will be no basis on which they can be judged as morally unequal. But do these claims make such an ordering inappropriate?

One reason for thinking they do not is that the continuity claim, as Plumwood formulates it, *does* allow us to make comparisons between natural entities in terms of their degree of intentionality. For example animals, both human and non-human, can be compared in terms of the *number* of intentional capacities they have. Here number of intentional capacities becomes the axis, and natural entities can be 'graduated' according to the number of intentional capacities they have. Weak panpsychism, then, can be compatible with the claim that humans are morally superior to plants just because humans have many kinds of intentionality whereas plants have only one, i.e. a particular kind of teleology. (I do not want to defend, here, the implicit claim that mere number of intentional capacities justifies differences in moral status. However I do think it has some role to play in supporting our intuitions about such differences; perhaps along the lines that the greater the number of intentional capacities a being has the greater the range of its welfare interests.)

Furthermore there is another way in which weak panpsychism is compatible with hierarchy. A moral hierarchicalist might want to argue that the *same kind* of intentional capacity is instantiated in a more complex way in one organism than in another. For example whereas an acorn can have no other goal than of becoming an oak, humans can choose their goals, can choose to have more than one goal, and can have conflicts between goals which they can attempt to resolve by appeal to higher-order goals. Thus goal-directedness is a more complex intentional capacity in the latter than it is in the former. This undermines Plumwood's view that, by introducing a distinction between kinds of intentionality, 'graduation' along the same axis can be prevented; for it is still possible to compare the same kind of intentionality along an axis from simple to complex.

Plumwood might reply by saying that her claims about the impossibility of 'graduating' different kinds of intentionality do apply when we compare, say, second-order desires with teleology rather than one *kind* of teleology with another. Perhaps it is right to imply that all we can, or ought to do, is just marvel at the manifestation of the former in a reflective human and at the manifestation of the latter in a daisy; and that it would be illegitimate to claim that one manifestation was 'superior' (or higher up some scale) than the other. There is some truth in this. The fact that a machine possesses some second-order capacity does not, in itself, make us want to say that it is more intrinsically valuable than a daisy. Perhaps, in themselves, these manifestations give us no basis for a ranking.

There seems, though, to be an oddity implied by Plumwood's view: namely that humans, animals and plants are presented by her as no more than sites where independent intentional capacities reside (or as 'bundles' of intentional capacities). As it is each intentional capacity, in itself, that is the object of our respect,

she appears to be asking us not to respect the humans or animals *themselves*, but to respect their independent intentional capacities. But surely an individual human or a higher animal constitutes a *particular individual integration* of intentional capacities and it is *this* (or the potentiality for this) that we respect. Plumwood's view has removed from the moral scene particular individuals as the objects of moral respect and substituted unattached and unintegrated intentional capacities. Plumwood, perhaps unwittingly, seems to be implying a reductionist view of both humans and higher animals. However, if the need for an integrationist view is admitted, then the way seems open, once again, to claim that intentionality and hierarchy are compatible. For now we have another axis along which to 'graduate' intentionality: namely on the complexity of the integration of intentional capacities.

Plumwood might claim in response that the attribution to her of this reductive view is a misreading, and that a correct reading is that, whatever particular intentional capacities intentional systems have, they all share one overriding characteristic for the sake of which these particular intentional capacities are organised i.e. teleology. What makes animals, plants, humans, mountains different, then, is that they each constitute a different kind of teleological system. On this view respect is owed to the system and not to the particular intentional capacities that inhere in the system. However, supposing this is her view, it does not prevent placing systems on an axis (the simple-complex axis) and grading them accordingly. This response may defeat the 'reductive' implication, but it does not defeat the claim that Plumwood's view is compatible with moral hierarchy.

Plumwood's weak panpsychism, then, does seem compatible with moral hierarchy because it does allow us to 'graduate' natural entities along similar axes, these axes being the number of intentional capacities possessed, the internal complexity of an intentional capacity (e.g. goal-directedness) and the complexity of the integration of intentional capacities. And, of course, it is to such differences that hierarchicalists typically appeal to justify their ordering.¹⁷

There is a general dilemma inherent in Plumwood's strategy that lies in the difficulty of reconciling the claim that humans and 'earth others' are intentional (the continuity claim) with the claim that they cannot be compared along the same axis (the difference claim). If the continuity claim is true then humans and earth others must have certain features in common by virtue of which they are both intentional. But once this is granted then they can be compared in respect of how far they exemplify those features i.e. they can be placed on the same axes. If the difference claim is true (i.e. that humans and earth others cannot be compared along the same axes) this has to be because they are radically different in kind. But if they are radically different in kind the claim that humans, animals, plants, mountains etc are intentional becomes implausible since they would have insufficient features in common to justify such a view.

5. RESPECT AND ASSIMILATIONISM.

Plumwood also faces a problem in justifying respect for nature. It seems that the basic ground for extending respect lies in the continuity claim. But if this is the case she is guilty of the same offence of which she accuses others, i.e. assimilationism. The claim that intentionality is spread throughout nature (the continuity claim) can only succeed in justifying respect for nature if some argument is offered for respecting intentionality. The most obvious kind of argument is a consistency argument. If our respect for other humans is grounded in respect for their intentionality, then consistency demands that we should respect intentionality wherever it occurs. However Plumwood cannot make use of this kind of argument without being guilty of assimilationism. She attacks moral extensionists like Singer¹⁸, Regan¹⁹ and Taylor²⁰ as assimilationist precisely because they use such an argument.

The only other alternative available to her is to justify respect by appeal to the 'difference' claim. The problem with this is that if intentionality itself is not the characteristic that justifies the extension of respect it is hard to see how mere difference can justify it. Plumwood, of course, intends 'difference' to defeat assimilationism while allowing the 'continuity' claim to justify the extension of respect; *yet*, as noted above, she accuses moral extensionists like Taylor of being guilty of 'assimilationism' when they use precisely the same form of argument as she does. Taylor argues for the extension of respect to all organisms on the grounds that they are teleological (a fundamental characteristic shared by both humans and non-humans) and is accused, by Plumwood, of assimilationism and a failure to respect difference. In fact there is nothing in Taylor's account of teleology that is incompatible with the view that different organisms manifest their teleology in different ways; and it is clearly implicit in his view that such differences should be respected. In the absence of producing some other argument for justifying the extension of respect, it seems that we must regard Plumwood as offering an extensionist argument of a similar kind to Taylor's.²¹

Plumwood might claim, in response, that she is not basing her rejection of moral hierarchy solely on the 'continuity' and 'difference' claims, but also on her extensive critique both of the western philosophical tradition and of alternative environmental philosophies.²² She might claim that her critique of this tradition and these philosophies as 'dualistic' has demonstrated the wrongness of moral hierarchy. However this would be to beg the question; for Plumwood's critique *presupposes* the wrongness of moral hierarchy rather than demonstrates it. To say that an environmental philosophy is dualistic is to claim that it endorses moral hierarchy, but it does not establish that moral hierarchy is wrong. Unless and until weak panpsychism can sustain the moral equality thesis the critique of dualism remains interesting but lacks justification.

The reductive view outlined above (i.e. that humans and animals are no more than bundles of intentional capacities) raises a question about what Plumwood

means by 'respect for difference'. Robin Dillon has drawn a distinction between care respect and Kantian respect.²³ Care respect is based on sympathetic attention to distinctive individuals to ascertain what our moral response to them, if any, should be. Kantian respect, on the other hand, ignores individuality and requires us to see individuals as instances of some abstract attribute (eg. rationality) the possession of which justifies similar moral treatment. Within the context of feminist ethics it is care respect that is typically seen as underlying respect for difference; whereas Kantian respect is typically seen as antithetical to respect for difference. Plumwood's respect for intentionality seems closer to Kantian respect than care respect, as her respect for difference principle is respect for different kinds of intentionality, i.e. an abstract attribute, and not respect for distinctive individuals. This suggests that she is not offering the standard feminist interpretation of the respect for difference principle (i.e. rather than respect for *individual* difference her principle is respect for *groups* identified according to their possession of kinds of intentionality). If this is true then her ethic will not be sensitive to individual differences within groups unless it is supplemented by some further principle(s).

6. THE 'MACHINE' OBJECTION.

An objection that is sometimes voiced to extending moral considerability on the basis of teleology is that it might imply that certain kinds of machines are morally considerable.²⁴ Typically those trying to defend the teleological criterion against the 'machine' objection accept that it would be a powerful argument against them and they try to formulate the criterion in a way that would exclude machines. Not only do they regard it as counter-intuitive to give machines moral status, but they realise that it would also undermine the practical coherence of their environmental philosophies, in that they would appear to be obliged to protect technology, the advance of which they typically regard as environmentally destructive. Plumwood, in contrast, is happy to accept that the teleological criterion allows machines into the moral realm, and does not see this as a reason to reformulate or reject it. 'Even the machine itself', she says, 'is not as 'dead' as the mechanistic world-view has led us to believe, and can outrun extensional description'.²⁵ She goes on to link this claim with her critique of dualism. 'We should not aim to replace the dualism of reason and nature by a new dualism of the organic/mechanical, in which moral status is achieved against an excluded and alien class in the form of the inorganic and mechanical world'.²⁶ I do not intend, here, to enter into a debate as to whether a machine 'can outrun extensional description'. Instead I am going to contend that our intuitions against welcoming machines into the moral community are so strong that it makes such a debate irrelevant. If it were shown that machines are intentional, this should not

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lead to their inclusion but should lead to the rejection of the intentional criterion (a point I shall return to below).

There are many thought experiments that can be devised whereby we are forced to make a choice between saving the life of a human and stopping the destruction of a machine, however complex and sophisticated, and it seems to me that in all of them we are never in any doubt about which choice is *morally* required. Of course we may well experience a sense of loss and regret at the destruction of complex and sophisticated, or simple and elegant, machines; but this will be based on the aesthetic and functional value they have for us and not on any moral value. Aesthetic value gives us strong reasons against destruction but cannot outweigh significant moral needs. Forced to choose between slashing Picasso's *Guernica* and slashing a human it is quite clear what we should do. We may also explain our regret at the destruction of a machine by reference to its 'importance'. This, though, will refer not to its intrinsic moral importance but to its instrumental importance in performing some function for us. In such cases we *are* faced with a moral dilemma. The choice, though, is not between a morally valuable machine and a human, but between two sets of human needs: those the machine is instrumental in satisfying and those of the human whose life is in jeopardy.

As we have seen one of Plumwood's objections to excluding machines from the moral realm is that it involves setting up a dualism between the organic and the mechanical. Here the desire to welcome the machine into the moral realm seems more motivated by a hostility to drawing moral boundaries of *any* kind than by any attempt to plumb the intrinsic nature of the machine. 'Dualism' and 'exclusion' have come to be evils that must be avoided at all costs; or so it appears. Surely this is to reverse the proper order of argument. Dualism and exclusion are wrong if, and when, they lead to the denial of moral status to those who *ought* to have it. The fact that a class of entities is excluded is not a reason for their inclusion. Dualism is castigated just because it is a conceptual scheme that is committed to having criteria for drawing moral boundaries.

It is worth pointing out, moreover, that weak panpsychism, itself, is committed to criteria for drawing moral boundaries. It is committed to a dualism of the intentional and non-intentional. Weak panpsychism's dualism will exclude coke bottles and cupboards, even if it does not exclude computers and tractors.

7. INTENTIONALITY, AGENCY, AND MOUNTAINS

I now want to consider Plumwood's claim that intentionality (and agency) is widespread in nature. I shall express some hesitations I have about accepting this claim. But I shall also suggest, in agreement with Plumwood, that there is a strong case for preserving mountains etc., and that ascribing intentionality to natural objects, *if taken metaphorically*, does indicate what *part* of that case is.

Plumwood appeals to a paper by Martin and Pfeifer²⁷ to add support to her case that intentionality is not confined to the psychological (i.e. humans and animals). In it they maintain that most recent accounts of intentionality are such that they allow causal dispositions to count as intentional. They see this as a weakness as it leads to panpsychism. They say:

For some this may be a happy result – for us it is a *reductio ad absurdum* and an invitation to look elsewhere for an account of the intentional.²⁸

Plumwood welcomes it precisely because it does lead in that direction. For her it is a happy result. Is it a happy result or a *reductio*? It is not within the scope of this paper to enter into the lengthy and detailed debate on the nature of intentionality that occupies philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists. I merely want to draw attention to the central issue in this debate and make two points about it.

The central issue is whether the intentionality characteristic of mental states is irreducibly linked to concepts like consciousness, experience and phenomenology and therefore explicable through some analysis of what they involve; or whether it is more appropriately given a functional explanation.

The first point is that whichever side of the issue they are on most parties to the debate would regard it as a *reductio* if their accounts of intentionality implied that rivers, mountains and places were capable of mental states. Of course this point is an appeal to authority rather than an argument. However, when those at the very heart of the debate share this strong intuition, it does suggest caution in accepting Plumwood's weak panpsychism.²⁹

The second point concerns the underlying philosophical motivation for this debate. What motivates it is essentially the quest for the best explanation of mental states and there is rarely, if ever, any suggestion that if that best explanation led us to regard machines as intentional this should lead us to include them within the moral community. Plumwood's motivation, though, is essentially moral. What is at stake for her is whether we should adopt a highly inclusive environmental ethic and the assertion that intentionality is widespread in nature is seen as a way of justifying such an ethic. As we have seen, if machines turn out to be intentional she would not regard this as an unhappy result, i.e. she would not be led to revise her intuition that possession of any kind of intentionality is sufficient for inclusion within the moral community. That most parties to the intentionality debate are silent about any moral implications of this debate suggests that the possession of intentionality might not be as crucial to moral status as Plumwood believes. (After all even the most ardent advocates of Strong AI have not seriously argued for the liberation of computers.)

Our attitude to androids seems to support this. When the pilot in the film *Aliens 2* is torn in half our first reaction is one of moral horror. However, once we see that it is not composed of blood, bone and tissue but of wires etc, is not

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suffering and is indifferent to the damage inflicted on it, we lose any moral interest in it. If a functionalist account of intentionality is correct, then the android pilot has a sophisticated array of intentional capacities. But we have no moral concern for it.

It might be replied that this example does not show that intentional capacities are insufficient for moral consideration, but only that certain *kinds* of intentional capacity must be present if our moral sympathies are to be engaged. Specifically an entity must be capable of caring about what happens to it. If the android had this capacity then it *would* awaken our moral concern.³⁰ This reply is not open to Plumwood, however, for she is explicitly committed to the view that *any* kind of intentional capacity deserves moral respect.

A further issue is whether Plumwood is proposing that intentionality is sufficient for moral concern, or both necessary and sufficient. If she is proposing the latter then a challenge could come from those who propose that sentience is the minimum qualification for entitlement to moral concern (e.g. Bentham, Singer); for it is plausible to argue that sentience, contra Plumwood, is not an intentional capacity. Raw sensations of pain have no representative content. They are not directed at anything or 'about' anything.

There are two lines of defence to this. One is to claim 'pain' does involve some representative content, though of a very minimal kind, and therefore is minimally intentional. This line, though, would not be consistent with weak panpsychism's claim that 'kinds' of intentionality cannot be quantitatively or qualitatively compared; for the idea of *minimal* intentionality obviously involves some such comparison. The other is to acknowledge that pain is not intentional but argue that it becomes morally significant when it becomes the object of an intentional capacity (e.g. it is thought about) and is experienced as happening to the 'owner' of that capacity. On this line pain in itself is neither intentional nor morally significant. It only assumes significance when 'owned'.³¹ This line of defence would involve Plumwood in relinquishing the claim that pain is intentional, but allow her to retain the view that intentionality is both necessary and sufficient for moral concern. However it would not be a defence that she could embrace and remain consistent, for it implies that only those creatures capable of 'owning' their experiences fall within the moral realm i.e. only humans and possibly some higher non-human mammals have the higher-order capacities necessary for ownership.

Another line that might be taken is to argue that pains are intentional but this property does not give them their moral relevance. Rather, the qualitative feel of pains makes them morally relevant. If pain did not produce discomfort it would have no moral relevance. If this line were taken (and it is a line that I find intuitively plausible) then this would imply that intentionality is not a necessary condition for moral status.³²

There are, then, three points arising from the intentionality debate.

- 1) If an account of intentionality implied the truth of weak panpsychism this would be widely regarded as a reductio of that account, and this suggests that weak panpsychism is not a plausible position.
- 2) The android example suggests that it is the kind of intentional capacities an entity has that is crucial in determining its moral status. Not any kind of intentionality will do. An entity has to be capable of caring about what happens to it.
- 3) Given that it is hard to resist the view that sentience is a qualification for moral considerability, then, even if experiencing pain were an intentional capacity, this feature of pain does not determine its moral relevance.

There is a further reason why weak panpsychism fails to be morally persuasive: it adds no morally relevant information about nature to the stock that we already have. It merely redescribes what we already know. Take its description of mountains and ecosystems. Plumwood says:

Mountains...present themselves as the products of a lengthy unfolding natural process, having a certain sort of history and direction as part of this process, and with a certain kind of potential for change.

...Forest ecosystems can be seen as wholes whose interrelationship of parts can only be understood in terms of stabilising and organising principles...³³

Her claim is that the causal processes shaping mountains and ecosystems constitute a 'kind' of intentionality. But this claim points to nothing that we did not already know about them; they are merely being redescribed as intentional. This is a purely verbal manoeuvre and it is hard to see how it could act as a reason to persuade us to change our moral attitude to them. It will be said, in reply, that in calling them intentional our attention is being drawn to a continuity between 'us' and 'them' and this *is* morally persuasive. But is our attention being drawn to a *real* continuity? The same substantive differences between 'us' and 'them' remain. We have capacities to choose, hope, imagine, anticipate etc; they are shaped by causal processes. Nothing new has been discovered by labelling these capacities and processes 'intentional': this is highlighted by the fact that we are also asked to acknowledge that 'us' and 'them' instantiate radically different kinds of intentionality. The persuasive force of these claims can be paralleled by imagining trying to persuade a committed Cartesian, who believes that chickens are automata, to agree that they deserve moral consideration on the grounds that automatism is a kind of soul activity.

Plumwood also believes that weak panpsychism legitimates the extension of the language of agency to all natural entities. Earth others are described by her as 'creative', 'originative', 'self-directed', 'autonomous' and 'agential'. At one point she says we should regain our 'sensitivity to the particularity and agency of place'.³⁴ At other points she refers to trees as exercising choice and of stones

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not wanting to be moved. 'We already have', she says, 'much of the vocabulary of natural agency'.³⁵ Agency, for Plumwood, is legitimately, and literally, ascribable to trees, mountains, rivers, ecosystems etc.

I can find no argument for this ascription. There is merely a slide from talking of entities as intentional, to talking of them as agential and autonomous. The assumption seems to be that intentionality is sufficient for agency. But is it? Isn't it rather that it is necessary but not sufficient?

One problem in answering this is pinning down the relevant sense of agency. Clearly one of Plumwood's motives in attributing agency to plants, mountains and ecosystems is to underpin and justify their inclusion within the moral community. She wants to harness the moral attitudes we normally have to those we think of as agents (*because* they are agents) and deploy them in a more inclusive way. This is why she talks of trees 'choosing' and stones 'wanting'.

The sense in question appears to be what I shall call 'shaping agency' – the capacity to shape the nature of one's being in the world through imposing one's desires and choices on it. But it is not at all clear that every exercise of an intentional capacity implies a capacity for this kind of agency. For example, in perceiving a tree, although I am active in its perception in the sense that I can be said to have successfully classified an aspect of my experience, my success is not subject to my choices and desires. I cannot shape my being in the world through the exercise of choice and desire in such a way as to expunge the tree from my experience. However much I may choose or desire otherwise the tree is there for me. The thought here is that certain intentional capacities are too passive and involuntary to be aspects of 'shaping agency'. The same claim could also be made with respect to certain ways of experiencing emotions eg. fear is intentional but passive. In other words I am not convinced that possession of an intentional capacity implies agency (in any morally relevant sense) in the possessor of that capacity.

7. AN AESTHETIC RE-INTERPRETATION OF WEAK PANPSYCHISM.

Finally I shall offer a brief re-interpretation of Plumwood's argument along aesthetic lines.

A distinction can be drawn between those aesthetic features of a work of art that can be seen, heard, felt etc as being 'in' the work (but are not intrinsically related to seeing the work as expressing intentionality) and those aesthetic features that are necessarily tied to seeing the work as having its genesis in, and being a project of, human intentionality. Positive examples of the first kind of feature might be 'a marvellous blueness', 'a soaring melody', as well as 'grace', 'elegance', 'complexity' and 'unity'. Positive examples of the latter might be 'sincerity', 'irony', 'subversive quality', 'disturbing apocalyptic vision' and 'morally profound'.

I wish to maintain that something analogous to this distinction holds for our aesthetic appreciation of nature. We can appreciate the look, sound, smell etc. of things in nature e.g. the deep orange-brown of autumn leaves, the sound of gently-lapping waves, the overwhelming vastness of a landscape. We can also view natural objects as if they were projects undertaken by Nature. In other words we can see the underlying causal processes that produce and shape natural phenomena like mountains, rivers, seas, ecosystems etc. *as if* they were intentional. When this happens aesthetic properties analogous to ‘sincerity’, ‘irony’, ‘subversive quality’ etc. as possessed by works of art become perceptible in nature. The language we use to describe nature is rich in such aesthetic attributions. For example a mountain can be a ‘brooding presence’; it can be ‘hostile’; it can ‘encourage us to explore its slopes’, ‘console us’, ‘play tricks on us’, ‘outwit us’, ‘frighten us with its awesome power’ etc. Here the mountain and the causal processes that affect it are viewed as if they manifested a deep, complex and, perhaps, awesome and mysterious psychology. However, although these aesthetic properties are analogous to those possessed by works of art, we should not forget that works of art are projects of ‘intrinsic’ intentionality, whereas mountains are ‘projects’ of ‘as-if’ intentionality.³⁶ We should not allow our attribution of these aesthetic properties to nature to beguile us into the literal ascription of intentionality and agency to it. This, though, does not imply that our aesthetic appreciation of nature is less than genuine.

It might be said that basing a case for the preservation of a mountain on an aesthetic response to its as-if intentionality is to mount a very weak case, especially as I have earlier committed myself to the view that aesthetic considerations, however deeply-appreciated, do not outweigh vital human interests. Obviously much will depend on the account of ‘vital’ that is offered. It is my view, though, that aesthetic considerations are not the only ones to be taken into account in any case for preservation. We must also take into account other, non-aesthetic losses that might be inflicted on current and future humans, *and* the damage likely to be inflicted on non-human conscious creatures. Also there is truth in Thomas Hill’s view that some acts of environmental damage violate ‘ideals of human excellence’.³⁷ We ‘let ourselves down’ when we destroy a mountain in order to quarry rock to build motorways.

NOTES

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¹ McDaniel 1983.

² Birch 1990.

³ Sprigge 1991.

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⁴Plumwood 1993.

⁵Plumwood 1993: 133.

⁶Andrews 1996.

⁷Plumwood 1993: 134.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Plumwood 1993: 135.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. How should we understand the term can in this quotation? It could mean 'logically possible' i.e. on the basis of the claims made about the intentionality of nature there is nothing that makes it logically impossible to regard all items as morally equal. As I have argued that the critique of dualism presupposes a commitment to the moral equality thesis, I am putting a stronger interpretation on 'can'. I am interpreting it as 'must' i.e. the claims about the intentionality of nature make it the case that it would be morally and conceptually wrong to order natural entities hierarchically. The weaker interpretation would not be consistent with Plumwood's hostility to moral hierarchy.

¹⁷See Rollin 1981 and Johnson 1991

¹⁸See Singer 1993.

¹⁹See Regan 1984.

²⁰See Taylor 1986.

²¹Plumwood says that achieving the correct balance between continuity and difference is difficult. Although she is committed to the view that there is a correct balance it is not easy to gain a clear idea of what it would be to achieve it. It seems to me to be unfair to Taylor to claim that he must *always* fail to achieve it.

²²Plumwood 1993, chapters 2, 5, 6, 7.

²³Dillon 1992.

²⁴Cahen 1988 and Kaufman 1994.

²⁵Plumwood 1993: 136.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Martin and Pfeifer 1986.

²⁸Ibid., p. 551.

²⁹This leads us into a philosophical impasse for Plumwood does not share this intuition. Where parties to a philosophical dispute disagree over the fundamental intuitive touchstones to which appeal should be made to test the adequacy of a claim, or theory, it becomes difficult to know how to proceed further. What sometimes happens is that one party accuses the other of a failure of imagination or of being locked into a metanarrative that makes them blind to certain kinds of possibility. This leads on to the further question of the epistemic warrant for particular imaginings and metanarratives and how we can answer this without invoking the very intuitions that are at stake eg. I can imagine a stone as mindlike and develop an account of intentionality that endorses that imagining; or I can locate myself within a metanarrative that sees all nature as suffused with mindlike qualities – but is my imagining or the metanarrative appropriate to the way the world is or mere anthropomorphic projection? What other way of answering this do we have other than to appeal to the very fundamental intuitive touchstones that are at stake?

³⁰ This takes us back to the heart of the intentionality debate for it is John Searle's contention that an android can only act *as if* it were intentional and thus could only simulate caring about what happened to it (Searle 1990). It is noticeable that Frankenstein's monster does awaken our sympathy just because we do believe it genuinely cares about its plight and is not just simulating.

³¹ See Harrison 1989.

³² I found Crane (1998) helpful in formulating this point.

³³ Plumwood 1993:135.

³⁴ Plumwood 1993: 136.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ For this distinction see Searle 1990.

³⁷ Hill 1983.

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