

from "History is a Weapon" by Dorothy Allison

The horror of class stratification, racism, and prejudice is that some people begin to believe that the security of their families and communities depends on the oppression of others, that for some to have good lives there must be others whose lives are truncated and brutal. It is a belief that dominates this culture. It is what makes the poor whites of the South so determinedly racist and the middle class so contemptuous of the poor.

It is a myth that allows some to imagine that they build their lives on the ruin of others, a secret core of shame for the middle class, a goad and a spur to the marginal working class, and cause enough for the homeless and poor to feel no constraints on hatred or violence. The power of the myth is made even more apparent when we examine how, within the lesbian and feminist communities where we have addressed considerable attention to the politics of marginalization, there is still so much exclusion and fear, so many of us who do not feel safe.

I grew up poor, hated, the victim of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and I know that suffering does not ennoble. It destroys. To resist destruction, self-hatred, or lifelong hopelessness, we have to throw off the conditioning of being despised, the fear of becoming the *they* that is talked about so dismissively, to refuse lying myths and easy moralities, to see ourselves as human, flawed, and extraordinary. All of us—extraordinary.

<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/skinall.html>

Awe and Re-imagination

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

29 December 2019

at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

INTRODUCTION: A Re-cap concerning Awe

This month the theme has been Awe. So far, I've talked about awe as an emotion that can cut through ego-formations and help us toward getting outside our own obsessions—that "conditioning" that Dorothy Allison writes about—and into fresh ways of thinking and feeling.

Also, I've looked at how we create awe—either through experiencing nature or through the natural disposition of human beings toward fetishizing objects. A couple of Sundays ago I pointed out that we make objects special by the story that we attach to them—"This isn't just any ol' dead-person's jawbone, this is the jawbone of St. Francis!" (Uuuh! Awe!)

I pointed out that this propensity runs through the gamut of objects, from a grandmother's ring to a special place, to sacred relics, to a flag or national identity, to the universe.

Today I want to think about how we become overawed: imprisoned by fetishized objects, and in ways of seeing, and in dominant narratives.

A touchstone for that is the reading this morning and the quote from writer Dorothy Allison that is in your order of service this morning: "Two or three things I know for sure, and one is that I'd rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me."

How we are imprisoned and how we can break free?

ONE: The Basic Questions

Two very basic questions are the foundation for humanist ethics: The first is “What is my truth?” and the second is: “How should I treat others?”

“What is my truth?” and
“How should I treat others?”

These two questions are intertwined – commitment to our individual truth leads to meaningful and compassionate action for the sake of others. Most Humanists hold onto the Platinum Rule: Treat others as they would like to be treated.

Humanists come to that conclusion because of how we view reality. There are, after all, several ways to see reality.

If we believe that a particular sort of god created a hierarchical universe in which some people inherently mean more and deserve more than others, we will act in a particular way. US founding-father John Adams wrote, “God Almighty has decreed in the creation of human nature an eternal aristocracy.” That’s one way of seeing things.

If we believe there is no god – or at least no god that directs human history – and that the universe is a series of random or chance events, we will act in another sort of particular way, since we know that we are the only ones who can take care of each other. As the feminist ethicist Carol Gilligan puts it: “an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence – that no one should be hurt.”

Or as Confucius saw it, “self-regard” (*shu*) leads to “other-regard” (*zhong*).

And, of course, there are many, many ways of living between those two world-views.

Where are you?

What is your truth?

TWO: Being in Being Itself

In theology and philosophy the consideration of the question of being itself is called ontology. If you’re not interested in theory, there’s no particular reason to remember the word, but, like a pancreas, you have one even if you don’t know you have one. (Un-like a pancreas, you can operate on your ontology without anesthesia.)

Ontos–O-N-T–O–S–derives from the Greek word for “being;” and *logy* derives from Greek, “study of.” Ontology is the study of being, or the study of what is.

Ontology has traditionally been studied under the rubric of metaphysics, since central questions include what exists and what does not exist, and does more than one realm of being exist?

In addition, ontological practice has considered which qualities place things into which categories, if and how hierarchy exists, and why (leading to “top-down” and “flat” ontologies). John Adams believed in a top-down ontology. Carol Gilligan believes in a flat ontology.

As a bottom line, all individuals and groups must decide the nature of being in the natural world and the nature of being in the social conditions they find themselves in (or have others decide it for them). With that determination, action is possible in the reality imaged by a particular ontology. As I said, everyone has an ontological stance, often without considering its implications.

One ontological position claims that there is a rational god who created the universe and rules over it, creating the conditions that we experience. That’s the cosmos of John Adams. It’s the cosmos of Evangelical Christians.

This is the pre-made coat that Dorothy Allison refuses to put on. It’s the reason Allison is the co-founder of a body-positive and sex-positive group called the Lesbian Sex Mafia.

One ontology would say that Dorothy Allison was born poor because she deserved to be born poor. That she was born with a gender that is absolute. That she was born with a body-type that deserves shaming. That she was born with sexual preferences that are absolutely forbidden. That she brought sexual abuse upon herself.

This is the ontology that Dorothy Allison was born into. As she grew up, she realized that this is not her truth. She refused to put that coat on, choosing nakedness instead.

The traditional Western ontological view is that reality is made up of particulars—the attributes of objects. These attributes have describable natures. And those natures are determined and absolutely set. Deviation, says this way of seeing being, is perversion.

A more recent Western view has been called “process ontology.” In this way of seeing reality, objects appear as they appear at this moment, but they may well have exhibited different attributes in the past and may demonstrate still others in the future. It’s all a process—change. This way of viewing reality says, “Yes, there are poor people and oppressive social structures, but the people affected don’t deserve it; and perhaps we can do something to alleviate the suffering and oppression.”

This way of viewing reality says, “Yes, there are body-types that are socially-conditioned to be considered attractive and body-types that are socially conditioned to be considered un-attractive, but that’s a misguided social norm.”

This is the place where newer ethical positions such as virtue ethics and ethics of care have been operating.

Many conservatives believe in the first ontology I mentioned. Many liberals believe in the second. Again, those are the opposite poles and there’s lots of variety in between. But you get the point.

THREE: Turning the Object Around

Now notice that both of these ontologies have an implicit bias toward human beings. In both ways of seeing reality, reality is as human beings perceive it, and other beings have lesser understandings, and rocks don’t have any understanding at all.

This worldview has led Western cultures to treat the planet and its living things as commodities. Raw material.

But there is a new ontology in town. The latest speculation on the nature of being is called “object-oriented ontology.” Object-Oriented Ontology (“OOO”) accuses traditional understandings of being as anthropocentric. For Triple Os, all objects are equal in value. That’s why it’s called “object-oriented.”

You are probably way ahead of me here. “Object-oriented ontology” is not much more than a complex Western philosophical way of stating that age-old pantheistic truth: everything is sacred. Object-oriented ontology harkens to animist and pantheist understandings of reality.

It’s only that the OOOs carry that a bit further, claiming not only the equality of all things, but the moral imperative to preserve and cherish all things.

Part of this novel way of seeing objects is the concept of “hyper-objects.” Hyper-objects are “things” such as “humanity” and “society” and the internet and climate change. Object-oriented ontology is here to point out that, without noticing it, we consider these huge things “objects” and then sit there stunned—overawed—by how big and complex they are.

Part of the problem is that we are accustomed to seeing large things as more than the sum of their parts. But object-oriented ontology asks: What if abstract “wholes” such as “humanity” and “nature” and “climate change” are actually less than the sum of their parts? What if the *parts are always greater* than the whole?

One of the main theorists of hyper-objects is Timothy Morton. He has written several books with titles such as *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*.

You can find several of his lectures on YouTube. Morton gives several examples of hyper-objects and then considers them closely. Take married couples as an example.

A couple is a hyper-object. We even come up with names for some of them —“Brangelina” for example. But now consider this hyper-object more closely. In terms of US tax law, for example, married couples are considered one-and-a-half persons: less than two. Also notice that a couple is considerably more fragile than one person or two separate people. That’s why there’s an entire industry for marriage counseling!

But then we are also learning that individuals are not quite as solid as we once thought. What about all those microbes? The term “microbiome” was coined only in 2001, but this understanding has revolutionized medicine and psychology. Are our microbes doing much of our thinking for us? We don’t know! As Timothy Morton phrases it: “Personhood then is also in the mesh—it may look solid from a distance, but as we approach it we discover that it is full of holes.”

Now apply this way of seeing to the global climate crisis. “The global climate crisis” is a hyper-object, and “solving” “the global climate crisis,” as long as we see it as one big huge and terrible thing, is impossible. This way of thinking has led many people to despair:

“Why bother recycling?”

“Why bother reducing my meat consumption?”

“Why bother driving less and biking more?”

“I’m only one person, and this is SO big!”

But what if the huge hyper-object we call “the global climate crisis” is less than the sum of its parts?

After all, one of the reasons it has taken humanity so long to grow concerned about the global climate crisis is that the huge object we call “climate change” comes to us only in discreet events—a hurricane here, a drought there. So, what is killing people—a hurricane, or the global climate crisis?

The answer isn’t so clear.

But also notice that we can’t “fix” a hurricane or a drought. These discreet events are beyond our power. But the hyper-object “climate change”? Perhaps that can be fixed because it’s actually many objects and less than the whole.

Another example: the United States is a hyper-object. Is the United States more, less, or equal to the sum of all its parts—its people; its natural beauty; its natural resources; its animals . . . and on. And where do those social norms that denigrate so many people actually reside? Is fat-shaming a hyper-object? “The economy” is certainly a hyper-object: the economy can be “great” and there can still be people unemployed or under-paid.

Do hyper-objects exist at all? What would it mean for a hyper-object such as “the global climate crisis” to exist or not exist?

This way of thinking quickly gets involved in metaphysics. Is the concept of “god” a hyper-object?

This way of thinking reveals the extreme human-centeredness of most of how we think—object-oriented ontology reveals the “othering” of . . . just about everything.

And with the non-human animals dying and the seas rising, it’s about time we figure out how to respect them.

What if we go around thinking that the whole is always less than its parts?

Then we have to start noticing the parts. And that makes real the Seventh Unitarian Universalist Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

CONCLUSION: Keep Asking Those Questions

"Two or three things I know for sure," Dorothy Allison writes, "and one is that I'd rather go naked than wear the coat the world has made for me."

As Dorothy Allison says, "history is a weapon." Tradition is often a weapon as well. As for me, as soon as I got old enough, I got into my car and drove out of rural America. I couldn't be who I was there.

And I hope Confucius was right about that: by saving myself, I have been able to help others.

So, those basic questions never stop being appropriate:

"What is my truth?"

"What does that truth mean for myself and for others?"

Keep asking.

SOURCES

On hyper-objects

<http://cyborganthropology.com/Hyper-objects>

Timothy Morton, "Personhood" [Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World](#)

Ethics of care <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-of-care>

Care Ethics from the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/care-eth/>

www.FirstUnitarian.org