

Ecological Being

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Ecological Being

Abstract:

This article develops an understanding of ecological being that, we argue, is based on the ontology of relation. We make a conceptual distinction between subject-based and relational ontological forms. While these ontological forms co-exist in everyday life, we argue that ecological awareness arises only from the time and space of relational ontology. Ecological awareness involves open response to difference. When awareness is an attribute of a subject, the other is seen from the perspective of the subject's identity. By contrast, the awareness arising through a relation, is ecological because difference is not locatable, it is both inside-and-outside. We develop a relational understanding of ecological being by drawing on research we have undertaken at Bondi Beach, Australia. For this research, we interviewed people who, every day, all year round, engage in recreational activities. Through an analysis of these beach experiences, we consider the ways in which ritual practice allows for a transformation to the relational state that entails ecological being and awareness.

Keywords:

Ecological being, response, ritual practice, Buber, Bondi

Ecological Being

This article develops an understanding of ecological being based on the ontology of relation. We make a conceptual distinction between subject-based and relational ontological forms. While these co-exist in everyday life, we argue that ecological awareness arises only from the forms of time and space that are associated with relational ontology. Ecological awareness involves open response to a difference or otherness that is not locatable, that is inside-and-outside; ecological responsibility is this response. Our argument is that this responsiveness is not possible with a subject- and human-centred form of being, for, when awareness and responsibility are attributes of a subject, the other is seen from the perspective of the subject's identity. The implication of this argument is that ecological awareness and responsibility are not possible when conceived as an interaction between identities, such as 'the human' and 'the environment'.

We will develop a relational understanding of ecological being by drawing on research we have undertaken at Bondi Beach, Australia. Bondi is only seven kilometers from the CBD of Sydney. Facing south-easterly, toward the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean, the beach consists of a kilometer long crescent of sand between two rocky headlands. A cliff-face path connects Bondi to a long coastline of beaches to the south. The surrounding area is one of the most densely populated areas in Sydney, and this

population is augmented by a great number of tourists who are drawn to Bondi in summer. For our research, we interviewed 30 people, ranging in age from their 20s to their 80s, who, every day, all year round, engage in recreational activities such as soft-sand walking and running, cliff-path running, swimming across the bay, yoga, body and board surfing. Through an analysis of these beach experiences, we consider the ways in which ritual practice allows for a transformation to the relational state that entails ecological being and awareness.

In line with our concern with relational ontology, our methodological approach is phenomenological. Phenomenology is a methodology that allows a participatory understanding: through a living, embodied relation, knowing is *of* and not *about* the world (Bachelard 1969: xi-xxxv; Merleau-Ponty 1962: vii-xxi). Our task, accordingly, is to evoke the lived experience of our interviewees, so that the reader might get a feel for the experience (Bachelard 1969: 13). We aim to do this by giving a range of descriptions of people's experiences of beach practices. Each interviewee has their own words, their own examples; each practice is particular. We hope that by reading *between* these experiences, readers will themselves be able to participate in these experiences.

Martin Buber's I-Thou

In order to explain the distinction between subject-based and relational ontologies we will draw on the work of Martin Buber. Relational approaches can also be found in the work of people such as Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty. What characterizes all of these thinkers is the claim that relation logically precedes identity and subjectivity. What makes Buber especially interesting is that he explicitly sets out the differences between identity and relational logics.

In his book *I and Thou*, Buber describes different ways of encountering a tree. When in what he calls an I-It form of being, a subject in a world of objects, Buber says he can see a tree as picturesque, admire its vitality, classify it as a species, study it as a type, see it as an example of a scientific law or turn it into a number. He might also, we could add, see the tree as an endangered species whose preservation is his responsibility. In all of these cases ‘the tree remains my object, occupies space and time’ (2004: 14). Reified, the tree, like the subject, is locatable in Euclidean space and linear time. This is the representational categorised world of identities, the I-It world in which the incomparability of a particular encounter is reduced to the sameness of the already known.

Within the world of I-It, relation is logically secondary, arising from the coming together of previously separate things. But, Buber says, this world of bounded things is not the only world. ‘When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his

object....he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation' (2004: 12). With reference to the tree, he says:

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. ...

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it

(Buber 2004: 14)

When Buber says that he can become ‘bound up in relation’ to the tree, he is referring to the directness of what he calls an I-Thou relation. While I-It is in the order of representation, I-Thou involves the reality of presence.

With all deference to the world continuum of space and time I know as a living truth only concrete world reality which is constantly, in every moment, reached out to me. I can separate it into its component parts, I can compare them and distribute them into groups of similar phenomena, I can derive them from earlier and reduce them to simpler phenomena; and when I have done all this I have not touched my concrete world reality. Inseparable, incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, it gazes upon me with an awesome look. (Buber 1966: 22)

The significance of being ‘in relation’ with the tree hinges on the preposition *in*, which can be used in either a Euclidean or an ecological sense. In the former sense, *in* implies containment: there are insides and outsides demarcated by walls. Just as chalk is *in* a box, the tree is *in* the categories and spatial boundaries that define it. But in the ecological sense, *in* implies participation and implication. When we are *in* life, or *in* the world, we are *in* a relation that does not locate insides or outsides or identities. The implication of this is that the I of I-Thou is ontologically distinct from the I of I-It. While I and It are separate entities, I and Thou are parts of a relation; this I is I-and-

Thou. The tree is not there, at a distance from my here; all there is is *here*, here-and-there, a presence that involves Buber-and-tree. This is an experience of same-and-different, in which it is not possible to locate same or different. It is the state that we understand to be ecological being.

For Buber, I-Thou is the basis of responsibility: to be responsible is to respond.

‘Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding’ (1966: 20). Where there is a subject who assumes responsibility for an other, there can be no genuine responsibility, for ‘the tree remains *my* object’ (2004: 14, emphasis added). A response to otherness or difference only arises through being ‘bound up in relation’ with the tree, so that the tree is not a separate thing but a living presence, a relation of I-and-tree. *In* relation, call and response cannot be located in Euclidean space and linear time: the difference that calls-and-responds is here-and-there, occurring in the real lived present (see Buber 2002: 3).

Transformation

We found in our interviews that people consistently focused on the theme of transformation, on an ontological change that involves a change in the experience of space and time.

If you encourage people who say they are not well to try walking, they usually find they feel ok. We all agree that there is something magic about here and we don't know what it is. And you can't name the reason for coming down because one name would never be sufficient; it is as though you're forever amazed by it. ...You are in this great big wide-open space and your little problems, they just suddenly become very tiny. You are away from where these problems exist usually, because they are somewhere else, and so you can see them in a better perspective. (Lill)

You just think of what is on your mind and then, by the time you've walked a few laps, you feel a bit more relaxed. Then you jump in the ocean and you come out and it is like, *abh*. To go in the water is like a cleansing. (Flynn)

Diving into the water is a real release. It is like a cleansing effect on your body and soul. It's funny: if I have any problems I've got to work through, then I always work through them better down here when I'm running. It just takes your mind off whatever, you know if your foot's sore or if you're thinking about bills you have to pay. I just relax. It is a very good way to put things back into perspective. You realise that this place is going to be here and these rocks are going to be here a long time after I'm gone, and it will still be here a long time

after my great grandchildren will be gone, and it is a humbling sort of experience. It just makes you realise that things are not so important. (Jon)

I just love the feeling of it. When you are running, it is just beautiful. You're free and happy; running is very meditative, very, very meditative, and so you just get into your own zone. You are in the moment, although you can wander off and you allow yourself to wander off. So sometimes you are just looking at the wonder and splendour and beauty of being down. I love the outdoors and sometimes you are very here. ... It gives you clarity and broader perspectives. You meet a lot of people down here, even though we are all similar in that we all love exercise and love being down here, we all come from different places and different angles, so you get a broader perspective from that. (Delphine)

Your mind switches off and you go into that sort of contemplation where it is not actual thinking, but somehow and I'm not too sure how I can describe this, but your mind seems to be free of boundaries, and sometimes all sorts of inspirational thoughts will come into your mind. (Jack)

You get into a zone or whatever and suddenly all these ideas start flowing and you become really creative. It is just a chance for me to think. You know how you get clutter in your mind? I do anyway, and I'm all over the place; but this gives me a lot of clarity. It is a chance to dream in a daydream-like state. (James)

When you do come down, it is like you are discovering it again and it is, ‘Oh, oh, oh: that’s right!’ and you see little things you’ve missed, and you say, ‘Oh, hello you’, and you just get totally struck by the beauty of it. It is much more than exercise. I can’t imagine getting a similar feeling running on a gym treadmill for 40 minutes. You need to live in the time that you are at, in the place where you are, and let yourself do that, let go a bit. I think that when people come down every day something happens every now and again that breaks through complacency, because we are lucky to live in this great place. (Katrina)

In describing the state of being that they experience on the beach, these people also indicate the qualities of the state from which the beach routine ‘releases’ them. They refer to conditions in which they have things on their mind, when they are worrying about things such as ill-health, bills, sore feet. When they speak of ‘getting things in perspective’ they are remarking on the narrowness of this state: they are so fixated on things with which they are identified that they cannot see what is actually present. For example, if, while he is running, Jon is fixated on his sore foot, he is distanced from ‘the time and place where he is’ (Katrina), closed off from life’s flow. His identification with his sore foot as an obstacle to his projects makes him a separate subject, located and bounded in abstract Euclidean-linear space-time. In this state, he would experience the beach as a distance to be traversed, the sand as a surface on

which he is running, and his foot as a pain to be managed. He is in the ontological state of Buber's I-It.

People use the expression 'getting things in perspective' to describe the realisation that they are really *here*, at the beach, that *this* is reality and that the things they were fixated upon were subjective projections. Perspective comes when they have, as Katrina says, 'let go' of their narrowing identifications, and come into relation with the world, *here, now*. The 'breaking through' of which she speaks is a shift from the 'complacent' notion of the sameness of every day to the grateful and wonder-filled state of appreciation of the 'incomparability' of every day; the 'release' is a shift *into*, and not away from, 'reality' (Buber 1966: 22).

The clear perspective discussed by these interviewees involves a change in the experience of space and time. When people think about perspective in Euclidean terms, they are thinking of a view from a fixed location, but when people on the beach use the term, we think they are using it in an ecological way. When, for example, they talk of 'clarity' they are talking about a state of being that is 'free of boundaries'; they are referring to a connected space-time where there are no locatable viewpoints. In Delphine's phrase, to be 'here' is to have both clarity and broader perspective; to adapt Buber's phrase, when the beach-goers experience *here*, the world

gazes upon them with the same awesome look with which they gaze upon the world. The experience of being able to see from all angles and times at once cannot be understood in Euclidean-linear terms; it is possible because, in ecological space-time, *here* is here-and-there and *now* is now-and-then. This is an experience of an I-Thou relation.

People have a range of words and expressions to describe this relational state: ‘cleansed’, ‘released’, ‘relaxed’, ‘in this great big wide-open space’, ‘in a daydream-like state’, ‘free of boundaries’, ‘creative’, ‘humble’, ‘forever amazed’, ‘totally struck by the beauty’. We think all of these terms suggest an open state of being. Because the boundaries that produce the subject have been suspended, people are empty, no-thing, and receptive. The world flows through them. Phenomena in the world are no longer experienced as nameable things, located inside or outside. Instead, in a state of no-thingness, people have an awareness of phenomena without self-consciously defining them (Buber 2004: 12).

Ritual practice

The question arises: how does this transformation to a relational state come about if it is not brought about by a subject? The answer is implied in the previous quotations. Katrina says ‘when people come down every day something happens every now and again that breaks through complacency, because we are lucky to live in this great place’; Flynn says ‘by the time you have walked a few laps, you feel a bit more relaxed’. As these interviewees suggest, the transformation is brought about by the very *practices* of coming down every day and doing laps.

I come to the beach every morning at 7 o’clock. Religiously, raining, hail, snow. That air is just gorgeous. It comes off the water every morning and it is a really beautiful place to go and embrace the world first thing. You wake up in the morning and the first thing you go down there and it is different every day, so when it’s raining or if it’s cloudy the weather is always different and the waves are always different and the ocean’s a different colour, every day. (Barry)

I seldom miss doing it. Sometimes I will be walking down Bondi Road with my scarf around me and all my jackets and my umbrella up and it will be raining and I’m thinking, ‘This is really stupid, you know, what’s the point in this?’, but at least I get a walk down there and so many times I have actually got here and gone into the toilet to change and still thinking, ‘Oh, I don’t know if I want to

do this', but then the rain stops and then I just do my walk, so it is very seldom that I don't. (Lill)

Every day we go how lucky we are and you go, rain, hail or shine....When you are walking out of the house on a really cold, windy, wet day, you think you are mad and you put lots of layers on, and when you actually start running you strip them off and it is actually really beautiful because you know you are alive and it is just an incredible feeling of strength that you get from running and the wind is blowing and the rain is in your face and you just keep going. It's perfect.

(Delphine)

In the morning you feel pain in your joints, and especially here in my cruciate ligament, and I have to be careful of those things. So you run for 10 to 15 minutes and it is hard, and so for 10 minutes I stop. And then I come back and it is hard, and then I always want to stop but there's a battle with my mind and everything. Then normally the third and the fourth ones are the best ones, and then you get into this breathing and suddenly it is like meditating, and then I don't think about it, and I just listen to my breathing and that is all. I don't think about anything and it is very good. It is a bit like yoga. (Alvin)

I think that like meditation it is about being able to lose yourself: the conversation in your head stops for a little while and that can happen either by

being quite still or by having some bodily rhythm like swimming that just calms the mind. (Michael)

I think there is a general consciousness about fitness and I think it is fitness that brings people to the beach. But the people that I see there often, it is not just fitness, and they are really drawn to it and it is like, yes, you just have to go. (Ben)

These interviewees highlight the ritual quality of their practices. As rituals, these practices are repeated; they feel strangely required; and, they involve ontological transformation. *Every* day people feel *called* to undertake the same ritual without being able to ‘name the reason’: people ‘are really drawn to it and ... you just have to go’. As Ben suggests, people have certain goals and purposes, such as fitness, but there is something else that calls them to the practice; indeed, as Lill implies, the initiated beach person is one who recognises that named reasons ‘would never be sufficient’, that the openness of being ‘forever amazed’ is the key to the morning ritual. It is the devotional aspect of daily beach rituals that releases people from the self-absorption of personal intentions and preferences into openness. On any day they may feel that it is too wet or too cold to go to the beach, but they surrender this subjective judgement to their sense of an order that is more and other than their ‘little problems’ and desires, an order to which they belong as relational beings.

The unnameability of this experience points to the relational logic involved in being called. The call can only be heard by a being in a relational state, an I-and-Thou. A call does not come from an identifiable thing but from an ecological order that has suspended boundaries; it comes as much from inside-and-outside. In other words, the being that responds is not identifiably separate from the being that calls. Furthermore, there is no sequence of call and then response. Buber describes this call-and-response as 'being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one' (2004: 17).

It is the non-finite or no-thing logic of this state that explains why there is 'no point' to ritual practice, why the practice is not a means to an end. As Lill says, from the perspective of people who justify what they do by what they achieve, her sense of responsibility to the ritual is 'really stupid'. In other words, we are dealing with a transformation that is not linear progress: people are changed into a relational form that is always already present; these rituals reveal to people, as if for the first time, where they already are (see Eliot 2000: 38).

While the very process of going to the beach every day opens people to the possibility of this change of being, practitioners have to await a transformation that cannot be guaranteed. It is, moreover, a change that is brought about by the practice and not the practitioner: it 'happens' (Katrina). At the beginning, Alvin's practice, for example, is an effort, 'a battle with his mind'. In this state he is a wilful subject: he wants to stop

because of the pain, and he wants to keep going, perhaps out of a sense of pride. At the same time, we imagine, Alvin experiences beneath this battle of wills a patient trust that does not crystallise into an identified desire, a sense that it is just good to keep running. And then, when he does run further, whether from pride or patience, he leaves himself open to the effects of practice.

Alvin, like many interviewees, compares his beach ritual to meditation practices, and, like others, makes a reference to breathing: 'Then normally the third and the fourth ones are the best ones, and then you get into this breathing'. We can imagine that by attending to each breath, and bringing himself back to the awareness of breathing in and breathing out when he is distracted, Alvin finds his willful mind is calmed. The practice of this breath or this step brings him into the reality of the lived present. When he is pushing himself to run, he would have a sense of abstract time, of time being too fast or too slow. With the practice, however, the breath or the step becomes the unfolding of time: time slows as it becomes the non-linear present, and space expands into the immediacy of here-and-there. Being is transformed into the nothingness of presence, a state that is experienced as simultaneous emptiness and fullness. As effort gives way to ease, Alvin finds himself running: through the practice, he has become a running being rather than a subject who is running. Instead of the running taking his strength, Alvin would feel the strength flow through him. Delphine puts it this way: 'it is just an incredible feeling of strength that you get from running

and the wind is blowing and the rain is in your face and you just keep going. It's perfect'. The point is that, as Buber puts it, the 'life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone' (2004: 12): there is not always a subject of an activity and not always an object. Alvin and Delphine *are* running.

All of our interviewees say that this moment of transformation comes as a surprise and they speak of this experience with wonder. They are surprised at their surprise. Katrina can help us again here. She says 'when people come down every day something happens every now and again that breaks through complacency, because we are lucky to live in this great place'. Katrina is making the point that ritual repetition, far from reinforcing a sense of sameness, allows for a sense of surprise and difference. This occurs because ritual allows people to see the world as it is, rather than in terms of their subjectivity. Instead of judging the day in terms of their preconceptions, about the weather, for example, they find themselves in a state where they can see the 'beauty' of this rainy day. Barry says

You wake up in the morning and the first thing you go down there and it is different every day, so when it's raining or if it's cloudy the weather is always different and the waves are always different and the ocean's a different colour, every day.

The logic here is not simply that years of practice have given people a greater ability to distinguish qualities of this day by comparison with other days; it is that practice, by bringing them into the present, allows them to meet the incomparability of *this* day.

Katrina, like all our interviewees, associates a sense of wonder with a sense of gratuity and gratitude. To realise that *this* is how the day is is to appreciate its gratuity, its irreducibility to any cause or classification. Gratuity is distinct from the notion of arbitrariness, which derives from comparison. Rather than the arbitrariness of ‘why is the day like this, rather than like that?’, gratuity comes with a sense of ‘this is it; this is right’. Thus gratuity is associated with a sense of gratitude for the incomparability of the day; it makes our interviewees realize how ‘lucky’ they are to be part of this life that is bigger than that of any subject (in Jon’s words, it is ‘a humbling sort of experience’).

Ecological being

In discussing ritual practice, we focused on the time of ontological transformation. In this section, we will develop an understanding of the ecological qualities of relational states, focussing particularly on space. All of our interviewees emphasized their ‘connection with the elements’.

I love it, love it. I love the connection with the elements. I love running on a stinking hot day; I don't like the cold too much but if there is a lightning storm around, it is fantastic: it just gives you so much energy to run. When I'm running, I look at the water a lot and I watch the waves. I try to listen to it and focus on it. Then when you finish running, and you dive into the water, there is this relief.

(Jon)

I actually feel physically and mentally better the moment that my toes touch that sand and when my toes hit the sand there is just this amazing sort of release. It is the sand that is magic for me. I think it is the sand between my toes that does it because I do just feel this amazing feeling once my feet are in the sand. You see people running in shoes and I think, "Take your shoes off, feel it, it is beautiful".

(Lill)

Running in the sand is a sensual experience and it is almost like, even though we can't fly, it is like being a bird in a sense. I love the water. It is calming and I feel open and free and expansive. I don't like being closed up. I can think, not the way I think when doing a mathematical problem, but in a way where I become more open, more creative, more intuitive. I think my intuition becomes stronger when I'm near the ocean. (Leanne)

The rhythmic sounds of the ocean drown out background sounds. It could be almost like a mantra, which is a regular sound and can bring your brain waves down to a different level. The ocean has movement which allows you to off-load your emotions onto that emotion, and you can be in tune with it. Even the waves that come in and out, that reflects your moods too, as they go in and they go out. (Flynn)

At this time of year, it is pitch black at the time I run, completely dark, and I go for a run from Bondi up along the cliff path, which has a whole lot of steps. After a while you know it so well that it doesn't matter if it is dark: you know where you have to duck your head because the cliff hangs over and you know where the water washes over the path. (Katrina)

You are always responding to something. It is not only repetitive swimming actually; you are also responding to the waves, responding to the environment, and that is what makes it really different and special, other than just going for a run on the road or going to the gymnasium. (Paul)

Swimming [across the bay] is also nice as your goggles are clear and just watching the bottom is really lovely. You can see little rays and see the fish and if you swim in close enough on a not-too-big day, you can see the swell of each wave

move the sand around and you could be flying over some sandy desert or something. It can take you to all of those places. (Michael)

Lill describes the moment of her feet touching the sand as ‘magic’ and an ‘amazing sort of release’. Others speak of the moment of diving into the water as a ‘relief’ (Jon), or as having an opening, ‘expansive’ effect (Leanne). In highlighting this moment of contact with an element, our interviewees are pointing to a change in bodily being. The experiences of release and opening suggest that this transformation involves a relaxation of boundaries, allowing the skin to be open to ‘feeling’: the skin ceases being a barrier and becomes a connection. When Lill’s skin is sensitized, she can ‘feel’ it feeling the sand; she would be feeling both skin and sand simultaneously and would be unable to tell which is which. She would feel the element on the inside as she feels her skin from the outside; as her foot sinks into the sand and finds support, there is a perfect fit, without any sense of surface.

In this experience, where there are no locatable insides and outsides, the relation between element and skin has the quality of what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh or the intertwining:

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box.

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is

flesh? ... There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.

(1968: 138)

The transformation experienced by people on the beach involves, then, a change in body from a bounded form to the relational form of flesh (cf Buber 2004: 14). Not a definable thing, flesh has a primal, elemental quality:

The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element', in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is ... a sort of incarnate principle... . The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 139)

To give a sense of the everydayness of this primal state of elemental being, let's imagine Jon's experience of catching a wave. Standing in the water, Jon would not be observing the on-coming wave over 'there', at a distance, an estimated velocity and a height; he would instead be connected to the wave, in an I-Thou encounter. He would feel the wave's speed, its height, its depth and its break on the 'inside', which is simultaneously 'outside', as there would be no border distinguishing his 'inside' from the wave 'outside'. In other words, the wave is not 'there' but here-and-there.

Accordingly, when Jon moves, he does so proprioceptively ('intuitively', 'in-tune with'), without any need for conscious action. Likewise, when Katrina runs in the dark

she ‘knows where to duck [her] head’ without conscious thought because the cliff is not an It, but is instead part of her, as she is part of it. These are examples of what Bateson calls an ‘ecological mind’, a mind that is not located in a subject but is distributed through open feedback networks. These feedback networks cannot be understood simply as links between separate entities, for the non-Euclidean nature of the networks themselves makes it impossible to define entities (Bateson 1972).

We have described as primal the state that suspends borders. By this we mean that relation is the *precondition* of subject-based, bordered states: the categorized world of identities is an abstraction from the world of living relations, from lived time and space (Buber 2004: 18, 27-28). Indeed, it is only because of the primacy of relation that we are born into and experience a *world*. An important implication of this is that, since human life is dependent on and part of a life that is not identifiably human, the human is primarily comprised of the non-human – the food we eat, the air we breathe, the chemistry of our bodies. While this is uncontroversial as an abstract claim, Buber’s significant point is that, in a relational I-Thou state, we have direct experience awareness of this life that is human-and-non-human. Moreover, Buber argues that it is only when in this state that it is possible to know the world of differences, the world as it really is, the ‘concrete world reality’ (1966: 22; cf Merleau-Ponty 1962: 355).

Our interviewees are alluding to experiences of life that is human-and-not-human when they emphasize the elemental mixedness of their experiences. When Leanne says that ‘running in the sand ...is like being a bird’, she is simultaneously grounded and flying, an earth-air creature; when Flynn and Jon run in tune with the waves, they are sand-water creatures; and, when Michael glides over the rays as they glide through the sand, he is ray and bird, and ocean, and desert (Bachelard 1968, 1969, 1971, 1983, 1988). This experience, *here, now*, Michael says, ‘can take you to all of those places’: in the form of elemental being, these people are experiencing what Serres describes as an elemental connection with ‘the whole universe’ (1995: 29; cf Bachelard 1971: 174-182).

These experiences of immersion in the elements, of being at home in the world, indicate the ecological nature of an I-Thou relation. It is the non-finite or nothingness quality of I-Thou (Buber 2004: 12) that allows people to be open to feedback from the environment, from the undefinable networks to which they belong. The implication is that this feedback comes from an environment that is human-and-non-human. Elemental experiences at Bondi, allow people to come into relation with an environment that is human-and-non-human. They find a sense of life that is more primal than their subjectivity.

When preoccupied by purposes and problems, when full of human identity and subjectivity, people are blocked from life's flows. Even if their purposes are avowedly 'ecological', they will be projecting human definitions onto the differences of the world. True ecological awareness comes from an 'ecological mind', which is not located in the mind of a subject. Ecological awareness comes with ecological being.

Conclusion

This understanding of ecological being has significant implications for contemporary concerns about human responsibility for the environment. While this article is not the place to develop these implications, we will, in conclusion, briefly indicate what is at stake.

Where there is a subject who assumes responsibility for an other, there can be no genuine responsibility in Buber's terms, for, in an I-It form, the other 'remains my object', a separate thing, abstracted from living reality. This helps make sense of one of the major conundrums in environmental debates: 'the environment' or 'nature' for which a subject is responsible is presumed to be non-human, and yet such classifications and definitions are necessarily human and subject-centred. In other

words, supposedly pure nature, separate from the human, turns out to be human-centred projection.

The recognition of the co-existence of different forms of being offers a way through this dilemma. We have argued that a relational ontology is the basis of ecological forms of being that are experienced in everyday life. Ecological being is human-and-non-human, open to and part of the world of undefinable differences. In other words, since ecological being participates in the world to which it responds, the difference that calls(-and-responds) is here-and-there. Genuine ecological responsibility arises not from a subject but from this relational form of being. Furthermore, because it suspends subjective projections, ecological being can respond to the incomparability of a particular situation. As Buber insists, this does not entail a rejection of I-It principles and classifications. Rather than being categorically imposed, however, the real meaning of principles is rediscovered in the *here, now* of a direct encounter.

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