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Preface

As speakers of English, German, or Romance languages it is hard for us to conceive of the world as flux, the flow of all, with no or only a quite secondary idea of individual things that persist through their changes. In *Language and the World: Essays New and Old* I've tried to make it possible for you to enter that way of encountering the world with essays by linguists and anthropologists who have described people who talk and live with that conception. That is important and useful background, but not essential, for I have set out the basic idea of the world as flow in the first two chapters. In this volume I hope to explore more clearly that conception by asking how we can reason in accord with it.

This is an attempt, a first attempt as far as I know, to give a systematic analysis of how to reason that is not tied to our European languages, to step out of our language conceptions and habits. Consider then this work as a bridge, a chance for us as speakers of languages that focus primarily on the world as made up of things to begin to see the richness and complexity of encountering the world as the flow of all, the one and not many. The contrasts, often unsettling, can lead us to understand better how we encounter and reason about the world as made up of things.

> The world is not digital; the world is analog.
> —Peter Adams

> We do not live in the world. We make a world in which we live.
> —Arf

> A wink is as good as a nod to a blind man.
> —traditional

> It's like trying to change bicycles in the middle of a river.
> —anonymous

1 Flux and Continuity

We have two great certainties in our lives. We are certain that all changes, that nothing stays the same, that all is flux. This is our first experience of the world, our earliest perception. And later we have the certainty that some things persist, some things are the same. The ball we played with yesterday is the same we have in our hand today, this house is the same house. The certainty that things persist in time is overlaid on our certainty that all is flux, for we believe in the continuity of the ball, the house, though we know that they are not the same: the ball has been scuffed, the house has been painted. Our certainty that things persist is contradicted by our understanding that all is flux, but we hold to it nonetheless. We construct our certainty in the persistence of things from our experience of the flux, learning quite young how to establish correlations, equivalences, sameness of things. This is the same ball, the same house, where we learn that what we mean by "same" depends on the kind of thing.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our certainties about ourselves. Nothing is more certain to us than that we change: we cut a finger, we get a haircut, we cannot see as well as we once did, we have a backache, we limp, we squint when we could see so well before. And we believe differently now: we see our first love so differently, we remember and understand the job we left, the friends we still have from former times in a very different way, all summed up in "If I knew then what I know now . . .". We know we change, but our greatest certainty, beyond the certainty that we change, beyond the certainty that all is flux, beyond the certainty that things persist, is that there is an "I", a me, a single person that persists, that unifies the changes in our physique and the changes in our perceptions. This "I" we are certain of from the time we first become able to formulate the idea when we are very young until we lose the ability to formulate the idea when we are very old.

There is, or sadly I should say was Juney. She was a black and white border collie. The first day I met her my neighbor, an elderly lady, had just got her from a relative who didn't want the dog and who had kept Juney tied up. My neighbor asked me to tie Juney in my yard while she had some relatives over because Juney was too active, a young dog, almost a puppy, and wild. I tied her up in my yard and went to pet her. She bit at me, afraid, unhappy to be tied up again. That was Juney on that day. And the Juney of each day thereafter, slowly learning to trust me, going for a walk with me every day. And the Juney of two years later, who would pass up her food to go for a walk with me, who would not go into my neighbor's home at night but would lie outside my kitchen window looking up at me. There was one Juney, I say, knowing that there was a unity, a single Juney, that somehow, some way, unifies each of those daily Juneys. The closest we can come to recognizing in our talk both our certainty of the unity and our certainty of the flux is to use a single name, "Juney".

2 The World as the Flow of All

The world is made up of things: rocks, tables, dogs, people, stars. Of this we are sure, for we have words for all these and many more.

We know of process and change, too. For example, suppose I show you an apple. It's round, red, shiny. I take a bite of it. It's changed—no longer round, no longer red and shiny where I bit into it. I take another bite. The apple has changed some more. I take another bite, and another, and the apple has changed a lot. I give the core to my donkey. The apple is all gone.

The apple changed. But is that the apple I started with? If one apple changed, it wasn't what I first showed you, it wasn't what I bit into the second time, it wasn't the core. It must have been something beyond all those, somehow beyond any particular time, something that persists through all "its" changes. Talking of change we find ourselves talking about things beyond any particular time.

Change, we feel, is not real like things are real, like rocks, tables, dogs, people, the sun. The sun? Everything we know about that fiery ball tells us that the sun is a process: nothing endures in it, not shape, not form, not even molecules—only the process. A rock, too, is process, changing, never stable, though we don't notice the changes. The difference isn't that the sun is a process and the rock is a thing; the difference is the scale of time over which we note "changes".

Our focus in our language is on the world as made up of things, on stability in the flow of our experience. Still, we have some sense in our lives of flow, of flux, of change, of process. And we have some hints of that in our language.

Suppose you're in my living room with me, and I look out the window and say,

It's raining.

Yes, that's true. But what's raining? There's no "it": the weather isn't raining. The weather is rainy; the weather doesn't do anything. The word "it" is a dummy, there because in English every verb requires a subject. I could have said just

Raining.

You would have understood me. It's clear I'm talking about now, which is all the "is" in the original sentence tells us. And it's clear I'm talking about there, outside the window, though in English we don't require any word or phrase to mark that.

On a winter day I might point and say "Snowing", and you'd understand me. That's complete, clearly true or false, though it doesn't look like a sentence in English. Or I could say, "Sun-ing" or "Breeze-ing", which are odd, but once you've got the hang of my talking this way, you'd understand me.

If we were at my friend's apartment in the city, I might look out the window and say,

Running.

You'd understand me. It sounds odd because I haven't said who or what is running. That seems essential when we talk English because verbs are descriptions of what's happening to or because of a thing. Yet running is running, whether it's one person, a dog chasing a cat, or lots of people in a marathon. I don't describe all when I say "Running", but we never describe all. What I've said is true or false, enough to communicate.

Looking out my window at the patio at home I could say "Barking" and you'd understand me. On another day looking at my dogs I could say, "Sleeping". These are process words, and used this way they begin to become part of a way to describe process without a focus on things.

After a rain, as I look out at the patio I might say "Mud". Mud isn't a thing. We don't say "There are three muds out there." We say "There's some mud", because mud is a mass. Water, gold, snow are masses, too. We know they're some of the world, different from things. Every part of mud is mud, while no part of an apple is an apple. Processes are like that, too. Every part of raining is raining, and there's no smallest part of raining, for a single drop of water is not raining.

Starting to see the world as process-mass, I look out the window and say, "Dog-ing". You'd understand, though it seems incomplete. One dog or many dogs? What's the dog doing? We need a verb and an indication of singular or plural when we talk in English. Yet if I say, "There's a dog", the verb is just "is". The dog is there, it exists there, that's all. "Dog-ing", understood as about there and now, does that as well, though it doesn't say whether there's one or many, whether alive or dead, whether big or small. Much is left out, but much is left out of our description "There's a dog."

I could turn, and looking around the room say, "Table-ing". You'd understand. An odd way to talk, but true. Or pointing to the next room I could say, "Woman-ing". Odd too, incomplete, but true. We are beginning to see the world as made up of processes.

Processes? To say that is to slip back into thing-talk. This process, that process, one process, two processes, a fast process, a blue process. No. To see process in the world there are not processes, just process. The world is flux. Words like "raining", "sun-ing", "running", "dog-ing", "mud-ing" describe the flow of all in some context. They don't pick out separate parts of the flow any more than "Pacific Ocean" and "Baltic Sea" pick out parts separate and distinct from the water that covers the earth.

To talk of the world as the flow of all we can borrow and modify some words from English like "raining", "running", "dog-ing", "mud-ing", "woman-ing". We add "-ing" to remind us of our new way of talking, of seeing. When we specify a context, we have a "sentence" that is true or false. Pointing out the window now, if I say "Cat-ing", that's false. And just as "Raining" is true or false, "Woman-ing" is true or false, and "Mud-ing" is true or false.

I could point to my patio and say "Brown-ing" and that would be true, for my old brown dog Birta is there. We can use "Brown-ing" as much as "Dog-ing" to describe in the flow of all. There is no distinction between what we call adverbs and adjectives because there are no nouns and no verbs, no words for things and what is done by or to them. There are only words meant to describe in the flow of all.

This seems far from how we understand the world as made up of things, more like a vision that a mystic might try to convey. Yet it is the basis of many spoken languages, such as Navajo and Chinese.

In this book I will show how we can develop ways to talk and reason about the world as the flow of all, describing but not partitioning. In doing so we will come to a better understanding of this way of being in the world and also a better understanding of how our own language directs us to experience the world as made up of things. These ways will not be the whole story of talking and reasoning about the world as the flow of all but a guide to help us grasp the basic outlines. We will find that the understanding of the world as the flow of all is not mysticism but a change of grammar.

In *Language and the World: Essays New and Old* I and others investigate this different way of encountering the world and show how it leads to differences in how we live. That book is important not only as motivation for developing ways for reasoning about the world as the flow of all but also as a guide for how to think of the world as the flow of all. Here it is enough that you have some idea of what will be the basis of our work on how to talk and reason about the world as the flow of all.

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There is no end, no beginning, but only the flow,
the becoming that is always becoming.

from "She Who Loves the Lowest"
in *The BARK of DOG*