Web of nature

Description

Networks are everywhere. â??Always think of the universe as one living organism,â?• said Marcus Aurelius the Stoic philosopher (and Roman Emperor â?? one of the good ones), â??Remark the intricacy of the skein, the complexity of the webâ?• (73).

Iâ??ve referenced this before. The sentiment is simple: if you only realised how interconnected your circumstances were to the rest of the world then you would be content with your small place in the organic order of things. So thereâ??s a psychological, if not moral, dimension to net philosophy.

In search of networks

In order to identify a network, all you have to do is find some entities that you want to regard as distinct (for this purpose), and then identify some relationships between them. Geometrical and spatial relationships will do.

So thereâ??s a network in my neighbourâ??s garden as the apple tree is next to the birdbath, which is next to the pond, and the apple tree is next to the plum tree, which is next to the rose bush.

The network is more obvious if you draw it as nodes (the objects) and lines (arcs) connecting them (as the relationships). The netscape gets more interesting if there are flows between the objects, or at least dependency connections. Thereâ??s no requirement that the relationship arcs are of the same kind or scale.

It doesnâ??t take much net thinking before you see networks everywhere, and of huge complexity, should we choose to identify and draw them, model them in a computer, turn them into a circuit, or attach numbers to the nodes and arcs and perform calculations with them.

The web to which the Stoics referred was probably less dynamic, contingent and open to invention than what I have just described, and more in line with the idea of perfect ratios, where elements are in some kind of ideal relationships to one another, such that the removal of one part upsets the symmetry of the whole â?? as dictated by Alberti.

Dependency networks in nature are presumably like that. Fertilizer runoff poisons coral. The coral provides a habitat for other living things, that are part of a food chain. So effects propagate through networks. That kind of thing.

I donâ??t think networks in nature are difficult to identify. Nor is it difficult to justify network models of relationships in nature, though they become complicated, depending on what the network model is for. Much has been written about complexity and chaos in natural systems.

The Internet of natural things

In the digital age, the things of nature are increasingly subject to digital flows. Sensor networks populate natural environments, as in cities. Nature is under surveillance with cameras secreted in trees, burrows and under the sea to monitor creature movements. Landscapes get mapped by remote sensing. Pets and wild animals are tagged. Databases and classification systems link together the things of nature.

According to some, the network idea itself, as well as its exemplars, have undergone transition. Biologist and cultural theorist, Donna Haraway, identified a series of transformations from â??comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks I have called the informatics of

dominationâ?• (161).

One of the major differences now is that: â??No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common languageâ?• (163).

So networks are inevitable. Itâ??s just that now they tend to unify, totalize and render things under a certain kind of control. Thereâ??s a political (feminist) agenda to Harawayâ??s provocations, that feeds into her idea about the disruptive nature of the human-machine hybrid that is the cyborg, that we are all in a sense becoming:

> â??I prefer a network ideological image, suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic. â??Networkingâ?? is both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy â?? weaving is for oppositional cyborgsâ?• (170).

Networking as a form of weaving is interesting. On weaving and cyborgs see: Network notion, and Whatâ??s wrong with posthumanism.

References

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Note

- I took the coral reef picture through glass at an aquarium in Monaco.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. Internet of things
2. networks

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