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AVATAR

AND PHILOSOPHY

LEARNING TO SEE

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2014
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Registered Office

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PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Avatar and philosophy : learning to see / edited by George A. Dunn.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-94031-0

1. Avatar (Motion picture : 2009) I. Dunn, George A., 1957- editor.

PN1997.2.A94A95 2014
791.43'72-dc

232014016571

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: © Kanuman / Shutterstock.

Acknowledgments: I See These People

Many thanks to all the contributors to this volume for the hard work that made this book possible. Their insights have greatly enhanced my own appreciation of the philosophical dimensions of the fantastic world that James Cameron has created and I'm sure that they will do the same for you, our readers. Special thanks to Bill Irwin, the general editor of Blackwell's Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, who shepherded this project from beginning to end, and to everyone at Wiley who worked to bring this project to fruition, including Constance Sanstisteban, Lindsay Bourgeois, Allison Kostka, and Liam Cooper. Nick Michaud, Walter Robinson, and Ariadne Blayde also deserve special mention for their valuable assistance with important aspects of the project. Finally, I would like to thank my friend 毛一琼 (Grace Mao), for her steady encouragement: 加油!

Introduction: Time to Wake Up

Captivating movies are like dreams. They offer a break from our ordinary lives, a release from the stranglehold of mundane concerns, and a passport to fascinating worlds that exist only in imagination. This is all certainly true of James Cameron's spectacular 2009 film *Avatar*. Employing state-of-the-art digital effects, motion-capture photography, and other cutting-edge cinematic technologies, many developed just for this movie, Cameron and his team of artists, designers, and technicians created a lush world of breathtaking beauty, like nothing that had ever been seen on a widescreen before.

Heightening the dreamlike quality of the movie experience was Cameron's revolutionary use of 3D technology and the presentation of *Avatar* on gigantic screens in IMAX theaters – which, much like Jake Sully's avatar, enabled audiences to step outside of themselves and temporarily inhabit the jungles of Pandora. Immersed in this fantastic new world of floating mountains, hexapods, and bioluminescence, we shared Jake's feeling of ever-deepening intimacy with Pandora, curling up alongside him in a Hometree hammock and navigating the skies on the back of a great toruk. The beauty of *Avatar* and of Pandora left many moviegoers shuddering in pure awe. Some viewers even reported that they suffered bouts of depression as they went into Pandora withdrawal. After awakening from such a captivating and realistic dream, our everyday lives can seem grey and dreary by comparison. But, as Jake reminds us in the voiceover that accompanies the opening images of the movie, "sooner or later you have to wake up."

More than a dreamlike escape, *Avatar* is also an allegory for events in the real world. Critics and commentators have been drawn into heated debates about the movie's presentation of a wide range of cultural, social, political, and religious themes. *Avatar* is a feast for the eyes, but it also offers much food for thought on issues such as the health of our planet, imperialism, militarism, racism, corporate greed, property rights, the plight of indigenous peoples, and eco-friendly spirituality.

Just as Jake's rendezvous with the Na'vi and his experience of the astonishingly rich panoply of strange biota found on Pandora awaken him to a new view of the world while simultaneously reshaping his loyalties and priorities, so too our experience of *Avatar* can help us to see the real world more truly and perhaps even inspire us to change it for the better. "Everything is backwards now," says Jake at a crucial point in the movie. "Like out there is the true world and in here is the dream." "Out there" is the world of the Na'vi, with their deep reverence for life and their wisdom about how to live sustainably. "In here" is Hell's Gate – the sterile, artificial world fabricated by greedy human beings who have forgotten how to live in harmony with nature. Clearly Cameron is encouraging us to see the environmentally destructive aspects of modern industrial civilization as products of a deluded worldview, a bad dream from which we might be awakened.

Sorting out dreams from reality has long been a preoccupation of philosophers. That's one reason why *Avatar* has generated so much interest among warriors of the "egghead clan," including the contributors to this volume. In the pages that follow, philosophers weigh in on many of the most contentious moral and political issues raised by the movie, addressing topics such as environmental ethics, colonialism, war, and the conduct of corporations. But *Avatar* also provides fodder for reflection

on a host of distinctively philosophical questions concerning the relationship between mind and body, personal identity, the possibility of truly knowing an alien civilization, empathy, aesthetics, science, technology, religious attitudes toward nature, and our experience of the world of the movies. Could *tsahey*lu (the bond) really be possible? Is a mind something that can be transferred from one body to another? Are trees really “just goddam trees”? Or might there be more to the world than what we can know through the methods of empirical science?

James Cameron is currently working in New Zealand on three sequels to *Avatar*, which will further explore the Pandoran biosphere and, according to early reports, will introduce a new indigenous undersea culture dwelling in Pandora’s oceans. These new films will make use of pioneering methods of underwater motion-capture photography that represent a major leap forward in film technology. Another dreamlike extravaganza – endowed with the power to provoke a response that is at once visceral, emotional, and intellectual – surely awaits. If we only focus on the visual aspect, though, we’ll miss more than half the picture. We need to keep our mental muscles in shape to think about the philosophical implications of Pandora. So, while we’re waiting for the next installments of James Cameron’s epic cinematic wakeup call, let’s start reading!

George A. Dunn

Part I

**Seeing Eywa: “I'm With Her, Jake.
She's Real!”**

1

The Silence of Our Mother: Eywa as the Voice of Feminine Care Ethics

George A. Dunn and Nicolas Michaud

“If there is a hell, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora,” Colonel Miles Quaritch informs the new arrivals to Hell’s Gate. Yet Pandora reveals itself to Jake Sully as an enchanted world of wonder. Can Pandora be both a heaven and a hell?

Quaritch depicts Pandora as a living nightmare, a den of horrors where every conceivable danger lurks. Pointing toward the jungle, he warns the new arrivals: “Out there, beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes.” To his mind, Pandora is a deadly arena with enemies at every turn. Not only does the planet harbor a race of hostile humanoids with natural endowments and fighting skills that make them “very hard to kill,” along with a dizzying assortment of other hostile life forms, but even the atmosphere itself is poisonous. To survive in such an environment, you must harden yourself, so you’ll be mentally prepared to do whatever it takes to stay alive. “You’re on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen,” Quaritch grimly reminds the new arrivals. “Respect that fact, every second of every day.” The upshot of his ominous “old school safety brief” is that a healthy dose of fear is an indispensable tool for survival in this pitiless place. Let down your guard and Pandora will “shit you out dead with zero warning.”

After listening to Quaritch’s description, we might be surprised to learn how very differently the Na’vi view their world. Of course, like Quaritch, they “respect” Pandora, but

not as a powerful foe. They know the perils of their environment every bit as well as Quaritch does, but fear doesn't define their relationship to their world. Above all, they revere Pandora – and Eywa, the deity who pervades and animates the planet – as a source of life, a nurturing mother, a provider, and a protector. Pandora, for them, is more than just an arena of deadly conflict. It's first and foremost a place of caring.

How Can You See, with Jujubes for Eyes?

That Quaritch and the Na'vi have such divergent views of the natural world may have something to do with the very different *social* worlds in which those worldviews were born. The militarized precinct of Hell's Gate epitomizes the conventional idea of a "man's world" – a place where your status depends on demonstrating courage, strength, and endurance in the face of adversity. It's a contentious world that is forever sorting its denizens into winners and losers. Jake's voiceover at the beginning of the movie nicely sums up the ethos of this place, at the same time as it lays bare his own fiercely competitive temperament: "I became a Marine for the hardship. To be hammered on the anvil of life. I told myself I could pass any test a man can pass." And the world that does the hammering is, according to this hardcore Marine, nothing short of "a cold ass bitch." Of course, to describe Hell's Gate as a "man's world" is not to deny that a tough gal like Trudy Chacón can more than measure up to its demands; but she's clearly in a minority. The military personnel on Pandora is overwhelmingly male. By contrast, the world of the Na'vi is much more feminine. Na'vi women are equal partners with their men and are just as capable as their male counterparts. And as the *tsahìk* (spiritual leader) of the Omaticaya clan, Neytiri's

mother Mo'at exercises an unrivalled degree of power and influence due to her ability to interpret the will of Eywa, the Na'vi's female deity. With their devotion to Eywa – their “Great Mother,” who connects them to each other and to everything else on Pandora – the Na'vi embrace an ethic that is distinctly maternal.

Could differences in male and female temperaments give rise to different ethical outlooks? That was the thesis of psychologist Carol Gilligan in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, which has come to be regarded as a watershed in the history of thinking about gender issues. Whereas men tend to view life as a contest in which individuals constantly attempt to advance themselves at each other's expense, women more typically view themselves as intimately tied to larger interpersonal networks sustained by relationships of care and intimacy. According to Gilligan, these two ways of situating ourselves in relation to the world have given rise to two distinct “voices,” masculine and feminine, each of which is associated with a different approach to moral decision making.

The masculine voice puts a premium on *justice* – in particular, on protecting individual rights and on appealing to abstract rules in order to adjudicate conflicts. Principles of justice are important because they allow us to manage our conflicts without having to break out the poison-tipped arrows on a regular basis. We can define justice in many different ways, but in the modern world it has become common to think of justice as consisting in a set of rules or principles that aim to safeguard the rights and to balance the legitimate interests of all people, impartially. One of the most influential theories of justice is known as “contractualism,” which likens the demands of justice to the terms of a contract that we have entered into with each other. We all give up our rights to do whatever we please, we agree to live under a set of rules that apply to everyone

as free and equal individuals, and we receive the benefits of social cooperation and a guarantee that our rights will be protected just so long as we don't interfere with the rights of others.¹

The feminine voice, on the other hand, bears a remarkable resemblance to the voice of Eywa, since it focuses not on refereeing disputes, but rather on the *care* that sustains the web of concrete relationships in which people can flourish. "Our Great Mother does not take sides," Neytiri tells Jake. "She protects only the balance of life." We can think of these two voices as belonging, respectively, to the impartial judge and the caring mother. Gilligan argues that men tend to gravitate to the "justice perspective" and women to the "care perspective," though both genders are sufficiently versatile to approach questions of morality from either perspective.

The problem, according to Gilligan and many other feminist critics, is that almost all of the ethical theories that have dominated Western philosophy until quite recently have been one-sidedly masculine: they view conflict as the fundamental fact of society and morality as a way to manage our skirmishes and prevent them from getting too destructive. In short, these "masculine" ethical theories express a view of society not unlike the view of Pandora expressed by Colonel Quaritch. Imagine a different sort of "old school safety brief," one that someone like Quaritch might give not to new arrivals on Pandora, but to individuals on the threshold of adult life in the human world:

You're not in diapers anymore, ladies and gentlemen. You're in the adult world, where you're just one among many individuals, all fighting to get ahead and prepared to eat your eyes for jujubes if you get in their way.

Truth be told, this isn't a bad description of what we see of life on Earth in the opening sequence of the movie, before Jake leaves for Pandora. And in such a world, where "the strong prey on the weak" and interpersonal conflict is both inevitable and, as Jake's brother Tommy discovered, sometimes deadly, a morality focused on rules that insure fair treatment for all has an obvious appeal. Fairness matters greatly to Jake, as we see when he brings his fists to the defense of a young woman who's being bullied by a man in a bar. As Colonel Quaritch says: "You've got obey the rules." In this case, though, it's not "Pandora rules" but rather the rules of morality that offer us our only hope for survival in "the most hostile environment known to man" – the human social world! However, while conflict may be an undeniable fact of social life – as well as an ineliminable feature of the natural world on both Earth and Pandora, as Jake discovers in his very first outing beyond Hell's Gate – this is by no means the whole story. Both the Na'vi and the terrestrial proponents of feminine "care ethics" help us see the bigger picture.

The Gifts of Our Mother

"Try to see the forest through her eyes," Grace admonishes Jake. Through Neytiri's eyes Jake will learn to see heaven on Pandora, while the belligerent Quaritch can never see anything but a hellish landscape of danger and strife. Neytiri's more benign vision of Pandora comes into clear focus for Jake at a crucial moment during his training, when the two of them spy on a mother viperwolf playing affectionately with her pups. Previously known to Jake only as a vicious killer, his onetime deadly foe is surprisingly revealed to be a tender caregiver. However, to peer into this corner of the viperwolves' world requires a stealthy approach. Jake and Neytiri must keep a respectful distance

so as not to provoke another attack like the one Jake clumsily incited on his first night in the forest; for even the most tender caregiver can turn into a ferocious killer when the welfare of her children is at stake. That's a lesson that Quaritch learns all too well when his assault on Pandora unleashes the fury of Eywa. Quaritch lands on a planet full of life, diversity, and communion, but all he can see is conflict and opportunities for violence. What he never seems to realize is that the violence of Pandora, cruel and merciless though it may be, is in the service of something that his jujube eyes can never see – the tender care that Pandoran creatures extend to each other.

Despite the description that Jake offers early in the movie, Pandora is more than “just another hellhole” where mercenaries and miners do dirty jobs and get handsomely remunerated for their troubles – a world of “hired guns, taking the money, working for the company.” Beyond the grubby pursuit of self-interest at Hell's Gate lies another world of breathtaking beauty, where everything is deeply interconnected, each being living from energy that it “borrows” from others and that it is bound in due course to “give it back.” The metaphor of borrowing, which Neytiri uses to describe the connection between all living things on Pandora, may sound superficially like the same contractual tit for tat that governs the relationship between the Resources Development Administration (RDA) and its hired guns. That, at least, is an interpretation that fits with the justice perspective, with its focus on fairness and reciprocity. There is, however, a crucial difference between the Na'vi worldview and this contractual model. The Na'vi seem to regard the borrowed energy that nurtures and sustains their existence as a gift of Eywa, their Great Mother. And, ironically enough, the name human beings chose for the Na'vi's world is Pandora, a Greek name meaning “All-Gifts.” But the “sky people” seem to lack a full

appreciation of the implications of that name, not recognizing that the proper response to a gift is not a jealous sense of entitlement but rather heartfelt gratitude, which is most genuinely expressed as a desire to give back.

Reflecting on mothers and their gifts brings us to the heart of the care perspective. Proponents of care ethics like to remind us that, long before we were in any position to demand justice, insist on our rights, or enter into contracts, we were entirely dependent on the maternal care we received from our mothers or other primary caregivers. As vital to our existence as their relationship with Eywa is to the Na'vi, these caring relationships are not about satisfying the terms of some contract or ensuring that neither party encroaches on the rights of the other. Instead, the hallmark of the caring relationship between a child and her caregiver is the profound bond between two hearts – like *tsaheyilu*, but without neural queues – an emotional attachment that makes the parent especially sensitive to her child's needs. Nor is it a freely chosen relationship between equals who have calculated the costs and benefits of cooperation. As the parent opens her heart to the child, she realizes that she can't detach herself from this relationship without damaging her very identity and her integrity as a person. Moreover, she recognizes that being the stronger party in the relationship doesn't necessarily give her the upper hand. It's the needs of her child, the more vulnerable party, that dictate what she must do.

If not for these unchosen bonds of care, the sort of relationships that the justice perspective believes lie at the heart of morality couldn't even get off the ground. Consider Quaritch, who has spent his entire adult life wrangling with powerful opponents and coming out on top through his own ingenuity and strength. Hard as it is to imagine, even this stalwart warrior began life – to quote William Shakespeare (1564–1616) – “mewling and puking in the nurse's arms,”

only much later becoming “jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon’s mouth.” Had he survived his final smackdown with Jake, Quaritch might have eventually found himself once again in a state of utter dependency, a physically frail old man, “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything.”² Of course, Quaritch might put it differently. In his own poetic voice, he might say that he entered this world a “Shavetail Louie” and that in the course of time this world will “shit him out dead.” But the point is the same: those self-sufficient individuals whom the justice perspective imagines us to be represent at best only one stage of our lives, which is wedged between long periods of dependency. Perhaps Quaritch’s contract with the RDA includes provisions for his geriatric care, but the care he received as an infant was presumably not given to satisfy the terms of a contract. If it was like the care most of us received, it was a gift of love.

It’s easy for adult men like Quaritch to forget their dependence on the care of others, which may in turn cause them to imagine social reality to be much more conflictual than it really is. As Carol Gilligan observes, “women perceive and construe social reality differently than men.”³

Since the reality of connection is experienced by women as given rather than freely contracted, they arrive at an understanding of life that reflects the limits of autonomy and control. As a result women’s development delineates the path not only to a less violent life but also to a maturity realized by interdependence and care.⁴

Historically, women are the ones who have had the most intimate experience of care, since they have traditionally been the ones tasked with providing it for children, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly. If the justice perspective was born of the experience of men in the rough and tumble

world of “territorial threat displays,” where you better “keep your head on a swivel” and keep an eye out for hostiles at every pass, the care perspective reflects an experience of the world much more familiar to women, where nurturing and responsive care, rather than disputatious jousting, are the anchors of daily life.

The Work of Our Mother

Reflecting on how philosophers have traditionally thought about ethics, feminist philosopher Nel Noddings tells us: “One might say that ethics has been discussed largely in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, and justice. The mother’s voice has been silent.”⁵ The Na’vi, though, can hear their mother’s voice and so seek to emulate her practice of caring.

The philosopher Sara Ruddick (1935–2011), one of the pioneers of care ethics, identified three activities at the core of what she calls “maternal work”: preserving the life of the child, fostering the growth of the child, and training the child for social acceptability.⁶ When Neytiri undertakes the work of teaching Jake the ways of the Na’vi and imparting the skills he needs to both survive and flourish in the environment of Pandora, she’s engaging in this very same sort of “maternal work” – a fact that’s underscored by her initial characterization of him as “like a child.” And, according to Ruddick, this practice of mothering is of singular importance not only because it answers to the vital needs of the child – and childlike adults, such as Jake – but also because it cultivates certain valuable moral and intellectual qualities. In particular, the mother must develop a sensitivity and responsiveness to the “nature” of the child, for “children are nothing before they are natural, and their growing is a work of nature. When children

thrive, it is nature that thrives.”⁷ And, through her loving attention to the nature present in the child, the mother may come to acquire an appreciation of nature in general that allows her to see it as something much more than a menacing arena of conflict. As Ruddick explains:

The settled antagonism of treating “nature” as an enemy is at odds with the engaged, sometimes adversarial, but fundamentally respectful relation to “nature” characteristic of preservative love, even more with the “natural” beneficence underlying growth.⁸

The preservative love that informs maternal work involves taking what is given by nature, safeguarding it, and helping it to realize its full natural potential. For the Na’vi, to engage in the work of nurture and care is to participate in the work of Eywa in her unending effort to sustain the conditions under which her children can flourish.

Nel Noddings is a philosopher who has drawn from the maternal perspective to develop another influential account of caregiving, which highlights the caregiver’s need for what she calls “engrossment” and “motivational displacement.” We are “engrossed” in the “cared-for” to the extent we’re able to occupy her perspective, which requires “stepping out of our own frame of reference and into the other’s.”⁹ As the Na’vi would say, we must truly “see” the other, for recognizing her needs is an indispensable precondition of caring for her properly. Then we can give ourselves over to “motivational displacement,” in which we are motivated by the needs of the other rather than merely by our own desires. Such empathetic engagement with other beings, including other species, seems to be the hallmark of the Na’vi way of being in the world. Consider a Na’vi who seeks to ride an ikran (mountain banshee): if she approaches the ikran simply as an object to bend to her will, she’ll never be able to make the bond. When the ikran