

THE TREENESS OF A TREE

A tree may be sacred, as among the Stoics or different cultures of Aboriginal peoples, or mere matter. When thought of as mere matter, we may see a tree as so many board-feet of lumber or rolls of paper in waiting—"a standing resource" as Heidegger states in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology?" Our understanding of things—according to Heidegger—depends on the concepts we have embedded in our historically variant worldviews and languages.

Neil Evernden's redescription of the tree (see textbook page 279, question 1) offers a modern reconfiguration along the lines of Einstein's force-field model of gravity (i.e., as something we fall into orbit with due to the warping of space). It shows how a tree could be thought of as an energy field, drawing moisture and exchanging oxygen for carbon as light streams in (photosynthesis).

In *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*, environmentalist David Suzuki cites this reconceptualization as a step in the right direction toward appreciating our interdependence with trees for our health and future livelihood.

Evernden's reference to "being itself" draws on Martin Heidegger's ideas. (See textbook page 105 for Heidegger's concept of being, in contrast to Plato's.) As in the force-field model of gravity, in Heidegger's ontology and epistemology, humans (*Dasein*, we who find ourselves 'being here') are joined with things, or reside with them, inside language. Heidegger's view contrasts with Descartes': instead of the tree being 'over there,' so many metres away from a person, Heidegger's model suggests that the perceiving subject (a person) is united with the object (a tree or any other thing) perceived through the advent of the thing coming into presence and appropriation within language.

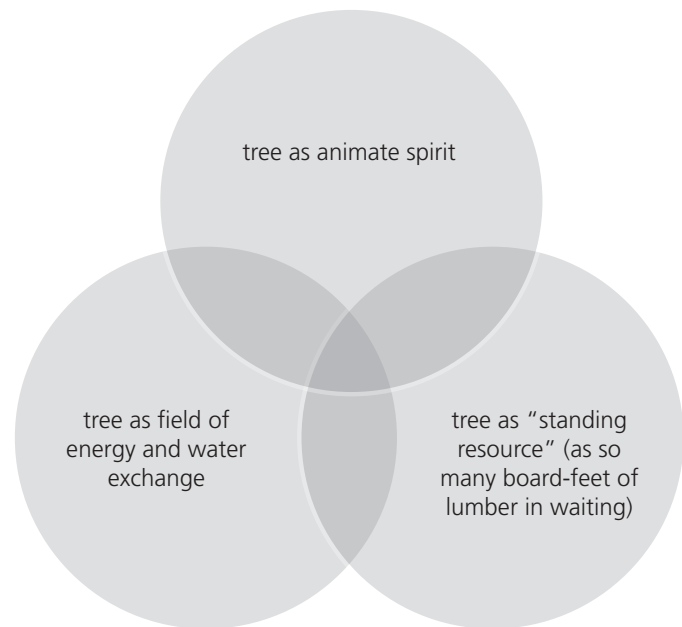
Heidegger overcomes the subject-object duality through language as a unifying matrix: As a perceiving subject, you are not outside or inside the object you see. Heidegger would say that you are 'with' a tree, in the sense that it resides with you in language.

Heidegger's concept of truth, as 'unconcealing' things (aletheia), calls for letting things be or 'caring for and sparing' beings, realizing at the same time that as hard as we might try not to project our habitual concepts onto them, we are always seeing them through our concepts and grammar. Things are always mediated by language instead of perceived directly.

Heidegger's idea of 'releasement' has a Zen flavour to it, calling on us to allow for new possibilities of being, such as when poets give us new concepts of things. Such creation is always a covering-over or concealment, however, and so, at the same time, the moment of truth contains erasure or obfuscation of beings.

Exercise:

Write your own poetic reconception or redescription of something, such as a tree.



This graphic organizer shows the same chunk of carbon (a tree) as viewed through three worldviews or paradigms.

