

**BOOK REVIEW: *Grounding Knowledge: Environmental Philosophy, Epistemology and Place*
by Christopher J. Preston (2003) University of Georgia**

Of all the books I have read so far in this epistemological train, this one most closely adumbrates the specific goals of my doctoral program. These goals involve finding the references and developing the languaging to articulate the intuition that the total nature of the places in which people live is intimately connected with their worldviews and their potentials for self-actualization. People and places co-evolve and co-create one another. The implications for the ecovillage designer are that places can be purposefully imbued with characteristics – physical, social, and cultural – that can have a significant effect on the quality of consciousness of the inhabitants. This argument, once fully developed, will be used to justify advocating the profusion of “ecovillages” on the grounds of “maximizing human potential.”

Mr. Preston provides a wealth of useful information to help substantiate my argument. In his effort to participate in creating a post-modernist theory of knowledge he states: “Such an epistemology insists that the physical realities of the environments in which beliefs are formed are relevant to the ways people know. It refuses to let knowledge float free of its connections to our embodied and embedded nature in the physical world” (p. xi). Contrary to the epistemology we have inherited, “[t]hought, knowledge, and belief are not products of mind alone but expressions of its integration and participation with the physical world that lies around it” (p. 2).

This sense of participation within/in/as the world is vital for “enactivist” theories of cognition. “As empirical studies of mind have granted increasingly more significance to embodiment, and as epistemology has become increasingly more richly naturalized, reason has started to look like an activity of engagement and involvement with the world rather than as a detachment from it” (p. 114). Preston substantiates his claims by interweaving quotes from a wide range of thinkers – all the way from philosophers like Kant and Quine to body theorists like Johnson and Gibson to dialectical biologists like Levins and Lewontin to feminists such as Haraway and Harding. What results is a well-researched, richly textured, ultimately legitimating account for the necessity of pursuing what could be called an “epistemology of place.”

Preston helps me to define and support my goals when he says, for example: “different environments have the potential to create different and valuable cognitive structures” (p. 139), suggesting that specificities in the physical structure of environments can influence specificities in the structure of thought processes. But I don’t think he goes far enough – not as far as I’d like to go anyway. At one point he actually appears to be apologizing to the feminists for being so bold as to suggest that there could be natural conditions as well as socio-cultural conditions

effecting knowledge and belief formation. As an environmental philosopher with the tacit goal of justifying the non-instrumental value of nature, Preston often resorts to the image of the now mythical “wilderness” as the ultimate source for knowledge claims, then contrasts this image with the ubiquitous “urban” environment to demonstrate the diversities of possible knowledge. One gets the feeling that the author is suggesting that by physically moving back and forth between these two extremes, the mind will have access to diverse and equally relevant sources of knowledge, as if any environment – and the associated thoughts produced – is as good as another. What about people growing up in suburbs?

While paying lip service to ideas like co-creation, co-evolution, co-participation, I wasn’t convinced that Preston is yet *living* this kind of relationship, as a fully embodied mind, but is still more like just *thinking* about it. I thought he missed the important opportunity to stress the “re-inhabitation” of particular places as the strategy for producing a multitude of diverse, specifically place-based, sources of knowledge. In my writing I will pick up where Preston left off.