

# Demonic geographies

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*Demonic geography is an approach to practising human geography that operates from the premise that there are no such immaterial entities as ‘souls’, ‘spirits’, ‘minds’, integrated stable ‘selves’ or conscious ‘free will’. This paper elaborates the theoretical framework of demonic geography by spelling out how it is different from non-representational theory and by articulating it within recent developments in experimental psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind. Counterintuitively, the paper shows that the deflationary, materialistic ontology of human nature espoused by demonic geography need not lead to meaninglessness, unhappiness or the collapse of moral behaviour. Instead, subscribing to demonic geography opens up new ways to find meaning, to pursue happiness and to live the good life.*

**Key words:** *happiness, meaning, conscious free will, material turn, embodiment, human geography*

Space ... is no longer a by-product of something deeper or a convenient prosthetic or a concrete assay but, rather, pre-treated as it increasingly may be and made up of fragments as it undoubtedly is, *it is the very stuff of life itself*. And if we can get that sense of space right it might feel like something that is both caring and in need of care (Thrift 2006, 145; emphasis added)

The demonic comes from the Greek, and it refers to the dynamic of life – your demon is the dynamic of life. In our tradition we are so against the dynamic of life that we’ve turned it into a devil. Demon has negative meaning in our tradition. This is fantastic. (Campbell 1989, 90–1)

## Introduction

This paper critically engages with current research in psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind to show how these disciplines are developing a novel understanding of what it means to be human and of the sources of happiness: it is an understanding that discards the illusions of conscious free will, of souls and of an integrated coherent self. Since large segments of human geography are in the business of improving the lot of humans, and since the success of this noble enterprise hinges on an accurate understanding of what it means

to be human and of the major wellsprings of human happiness, it follows that we should take seriously the new picture of the human that emerges in these neglected research areas and work through its implications for geographical practices. To this end, the paper begins to chart the possible contours of a demonic geography, that is, of a humble, yet courageous, geography that hopes to break free from the past by tracing the spatiality of life without recourse to comfortable but obsolete illusions about our condition or about ways to better it. Demonic geography is an approach to human geography that uses recent scientific evidence to abandon folk psychology assumptions about human nature. Specifically, demonic geography discards extravagant, immaterial, transcendental, theistic notions such as ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, ‘mind’ and ‘conscious free will’ and replaces them with a fully materialistic, causal and mechanistic understanding of human nature and of brain processes. Demonic geography shares with non-representational theory the attention given to embodiment and materiality, but is different from it in significant ways. Non-representational theory was developed as a response against the excessive focus on representations that pervaded the new cultural geography of the 1980s and the 1990s (Thrift 1996). Among other things, it attempted to downplay the importance of representations and to highlight instead the explanatory power of practices and

performances. Unlike non-representational theory, demonic geography acknowledges that representations should be recognised as central to understanding human nature. Demonic geography as developed in this paper is not a response against excessive attention to representations, but a response against the entrenchment and pervasiveness of immaterial, mentalistic ontologies of the human carried by a family of counterproductive and antiquated concepts that include 'souls', 'minds', 'spirits', 'conscious free will' and the idea of a stable coherent integrated self.

Non-representational theory does not offer a strong, explicit disavowal<sup>1</sup> of such notions, not because it relies on them, but because from its very beginning it has been crafted as a response to an entirely different matter, that of the excessive focus on representations (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Vannini 2015). The reason demonic geography refuses to discount representations is two-fold. First, the totality of available scientific evidence from cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and the field of judgment and decision-making shows that various types of representations (concepts, beliefs, attitudes, mental models, narratives and scripts, images) are fundamental variables in the explanation of why, what and how humans decide, feel and act (Komer and Eliasmith 2016; Simandan 2016). Second, demonic geography provides an account of representations that is fully materialistic, causal and mechanistic: representations are (ever-evolving) populations of neurons and their inhibitory or excitatory synaptic connections (Thagard 2014).

Practising demonic geography may often feel like going through hell. It is initially upsetting to entertain the thought that there is no immaterial, eternal 'me', that there is no driver in the driver's seat and that discarding beliefs in souls entails abandoning hopes for finding one's 'soul mate'. The cultural prevalence of extravagant beliefs in 'souls', 'minds', 'conscious free will' and 'spirits' means that attempts to uproot them will likely be met with many layers of resistance because many of our other beliefs are built on this questionable foundation (Shiah 2016). If, however, one persists in this therapeutic process of unlearning, one may find demonic geography a liberating experience, an experience that refreshes one's life and that reveals new ways to pursue meaning, purpose and happiness.

In the remainder of this paper, I develop the evidence-driven theoretical framework of demonic geography by engaging with recent work in psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind. Specifically, the next section disentangles the three-way relationship between hedonism, virtue and meaning-making, and its impact on happiness. This opening move will then provide the groundwork for questioning, in the second section, who the bearer of happiness is, if neuroscientists and philosophers of mind<sup>2</sup>

are correct in telling us that we all are bodies without souls (i.e. that the mind/body dualism is untenable, see Trautteur 2009; Huang and Bargh 2014; Thagard and Wood 2015; Wegner and Gray 2016; Komer and Eliasmith 2016; Caruso 2017). Finally, the conclusion will show how a demonic geography that exploits the fact that humans are at the same time a part of their environments and apart from them, can offer alternative ways to pursue meaning, happiness and the good life.

## Hedonism, virtue and meaning-making

Martin Seligman (2002 2008; for empirical support, see Vella-Brodrick *et al.* 2009; for limitations, cf. Disabato *et al.* 2016) has produced an evidence-based argument for the need to discriminate the vague conceptual space of 'happiness' into three distinct understandings. Each of these understandings derives from particular assumptions held about how to become happy. Thus, the first assumption equates happiness with the sum of pleasures one experiences in one's life. This hedonistic perspective proposes that in order to be happy one has to minimise the amount of pain and maximise the amount of pleasure (Bentham 1993). Hedonism, however, has been criticised by humanist scholars for reducing the human being to an animal in search of sensual pleasure (Paulson *et al.* 2016). Whereas a long string of pleasurable indulgences does not necessarily lead to an overall feeling of happiness with one's life (Baumeister *et al.* 2013), recent experimental evidence suggests that being in a good mood is causally related to increased feelings that one's life is meaningful (King *et al.* 2016). The various doubts about the effectiveness and morality of the hedonistic approach have ushered in a renewed interest for the other two understandings.

One of them is the eudaimonic understanding of happiness (Ryff 2013), launched in the writings of Aristotle (cf. Kraut 2015, for an overview), who argued that *eudaimonia* (the good life) emerges from the exercise of strengths and virtues and the contemplation of the good, the true and the beautiful. In psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) has collected multiple types of empirical evidence that support Aristotle's original insights and prompt their further development in an unexpected direction. He introduces the concept of flow, in order to capture the quality of affect that characterises one's total absorption in a task as one exercises one's virtues. Individuals engaged in the kinds of activities they like the most forget the passage of time as they become completely immersed in their work or hobby. They do not feel happy in the strict sense of the term; instead, happiness is felt afterwards, as they recollect the intense and passionate struggle of dealing with the challenges raised by their work

(Csikszentmihalyi 2014). The two conditions necessary for flow to emerge are the focus on something that is truly interesting for the individual and the existence of a level of challenge that is neither too high nor too low (see, for example, the case of video games in Shaw and Wharf 2009). That ideal level of challenge pulls the individual beyond herself (onto place) and stretches her abilities in such a way that the work receives her undivided attention. A climber beautifully describes how happiness appears when one's psychology and physiology merge onto the surrounding geography:

You could get *so immersed in the rock*, the moves, the proper position of the body, that you'd lose consciousness of your identity and *melt into the rock* and the others you're climbing with ... you are not quite sure whether you are moving or the rock is ... You are climbing yourself as much as the rock ... If you're flowing with something, it's totally still ... Lack of self-awareness is totally self-aware to me. (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 185; emphasis added)

The advantages of flow are three-fold (Csikszentmihalyi 2014): it is the best way to escape boredom (Anderson 2004), it generates a feeling of accomplishment and happiness in its wake, and it is the type of mental state that maximises one's work productivity. More recently, the Hungarian-born psychologist has expanded his reflections on flow and proposed the concept 'vital engagement' as a complement to it. Vital engagement (Csikszentmihalyi 2014) refers to the general positive effects on one's life resulting from having found one's vocation. Individuals who are passionate about a given topic or cause derive meaning from working on it and organise their lives around it. Often, they found their spouse and friends in circumstances related to their passion and this further provides a sense of integration and unity to their lives.

The third understanding of happiness, going beyond both the pleasurable life (hedonism) and the good life (eudaimonia), is that of a meaningful life (Seligman 2002; McAdams and Guo 2015; Pyszczynski *et al.* 2015). Philosophers, psychologists and geographers agree that it is in the nature of humans to make sense of things and to extract meaning from dwelling in place (Pierce *et al.* 2011; Simandan 2011a 2011b 2011c 2013a 2013b; Malpas 2015; Jones 2015). Those individuals who feel that they have a mission in life and who see themselves as a part of something larger than themselves tend to rate their satisfaction with life very high (Haidt 2006; Bering 2006 2010). Ever since the earlier writings of the Frankfurt School (for an overview, see Nealon and Irr 2012), humanist intellectuals have deplored the 'mass society' and the alienation brought

by it in the lives of millions of people. The relative decline of religious commitments combined with the erosion of traditional communities has deprived many individuals of a sense of belonging and has led to the proliferation of 'infrasecular geographies' (della Dora 2016; see also Bartolini *et al.* 2016; Sutherland 2017). In Erich Fromm's terminology (cf. McLaughlin 1998), people in the 20th century gained negative freedom (freedom from the pressure of entrenched cultural norms), without winning positive freedom (freedom to do something meaningful and fulfilling with their newly acquired liberty). This explanatory framework, although not as powerful as it used to be in the 1960s and the 1970s, still makes it possible to account for the apparent paradox that the frequency of depression and suicide in advanced capitalist societies has increased despite the parallel increase in material wealth (Layard 2010; Hidaka 2012; O'Donnell and Oswald 2015; Balayannis and Cook 2016). More recent research on meaning (Wegner and Gray 2016; King *et al.* 2016) has unravelled the fact that individuals derive meaning from a plurality of mundane engagements, and not from some singular grandiose answer about the meaning of life. Of specific interest for social and cultural geographers is the observation that different spaces of engagement provide complementary sources of meaning and that people have highly specific profiles of their spaces of engagement (Chater and Loewenstein 2016; Martela and Steger 2016). Thus, a worker in a steel factory might find meaning from his family space (fathering children and feeling part of the wheel of life) and from his political space (being a vociferous trade unionist and a member of a political party), whereas a painter would derive the meaning of her life from the single-mindedness with which she engages the spaces of the canvass.

## Bodies without souls

Really interesting questions begin to appear when one starts to factor in the affect-laden discursive construction of meaning and its 'haunting' quality (Wennö and Holmgren-Troy 2008; Okon-Singer *et al.* 2015; Simpson 2016; Wegner and Gray 2016). We use perception, language and emotion to extract a pattern from the spaces within which our lives unfold. There can be no meaning without a pattern (Chater and Loewenstein 2016). The way the human brain works is such that any new information must be made to make sense by matching the pre-existing patterns in the brain (Thagard and Wood 2015). The process of matching continuously changes the brain and who we are. Given three consecutive events x, y and z, and the state of the brain just before moment x labelled B, a human being will

engage event  $y$  with the state of the brain  $B + x$ , and event  $z$  with the state of the brain  $B + x + y$  (Komer and Eliasmith 2016). In a very fundamental sense, humans are always in the making, and what we are going to do next is a function of the interaction of our previous brain state with that which has just happened (Thagard 2014). The brain is a silent self-organising structure that systematically feeds the awareness of any living being with the illusion of *conscious* free will and the illusion of an *integrated* self (Wegner 2002; Bering 2006 2010; Trautteur 2009; Huang and Bargh 2014; Churchland 2015; Thagard and Wood 2015; Bear and Bloom 2016; Wegner and Gray 2016). One may say 'I am trying to make sense of  $x$ ', but the neuroscientific evidence makes it clear that there is no such thing as 'I'. That is to say that there is no mind *independent* of the brain and there is no homunculus or *driver* in one's brain to coordinate what the brain does. The brain works in such a way that it fools the living being with the fantasy of a 'soul' (i.e. disembodied, ethereal mind), of some Platonic entity separate from the flesh. Brain researcher and philosopher of mind Susan Blackmore vividly describes her long and frustrating struggle with these recalcitrant illusions:

I long ago concluded that free will must be an illusion, and so over the years I have practised not believing in it. Eventually, with long practice, it becomes perfectly obvious that all the actions of this body are the consequences of prior events acting on a complex system; then the feeling of making free conscious decisions simply melts away ... What could a self be? The essence of consciousness is subjectivity, and subjective experience seems always to imply someone who is having the experience; in other words, a self. But what sort of a thing could be the experiencer of experiences? And – even worse – what could such an experiencer correspond to in the brain? ... I long ago concluded that there is no substantial or persistent self to be found in experience, let alone in the brain. I have become quite uncertain as to whether there really is anything it is like to be me. Yet, unlike the illusion of free will, I have not (yet?) found that all sense of an experiencing self disappears. Although it does often depart, leaving only multiple experiences without anyone having them, the sense of 'me' tends to pop easily back into existence. (2006, 8–9)

It is not ethereal selves or souls who make meaning, but our brains. This disenchanted anti-humanist view of meaning-making opens up new possibilities for understanding space, distance, place and the geography of becoming (Ash and Simpson 2016; May and Thrift 2001; Simandan 2002 2010a 2012 2016; Wright

*et al.* 2016). We are not carried by our bodies in this world; we are nothing more but our bodies. In line with the centrality of ideas of embodiment in non-representational theory and feminist geography (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Colls 2012; Longhurst and Johnston 2014; McKittrick 2006; Vannini 2015), this recasting of the human condition in the light of neuroscientific research might help us redefine our participation in the world. Each of us is a process that defies thermodynamic death by sucking good quality energy (food, oxygen) from our surroundings and using that energy to create a structure (our bodies) that is at once highly differentiated and highly integrated (Heylighen 2008). And when we die, that structure quickly (cremation) or slowly (putrefaction in the grave) is dissipated back onto the very surroundings which made possible its existence (see also Romanillos 2015). But this view is not depressing at all, for it contains an answer to the aforementioned lamentations of the Frankfurt School. The answer lies in us having a dual nature. The body-without-a-soul model of the human being makes it apparent that we are at the very same time a part of our environment and apart from it. Put differently, in order to be apart, we must be a part, because our 'apartness' exists only in so far as we are able to suck energy from what is around us (Heylighen 2008; Peacock 1999). If meaning is essential for happiness (King *et al.* 2016), and feeling a part of something larger than oneself is essential to meaning (Haidt 2006; Bering 2010), then an awareness of the geographical post-phenomenology of the self-less human sketched in the above comments might help re-enchante the lives of those who have lost their faith (Ash and Simpson 2016; see also Churchland 2015 and Caruso 2017, for a related discussion of 'neuroexistentialism'). Oftentimes, we tend to think of geography as some grand project aimed at solving humanity's big problems (e.g. Sheppard 2015), but this stance might obliterate the more modest, yet more palpable, achievements that this discipline could produce for the happiness of the specific individuals who hide below the grandiosity of the label 'humanity' (Simandan 2011a 2011b 2011c; Olson 2016). Consider this old African story:

One day the animals called a contest to measure their strength. Animal after animal displayed their strengths. Monkey leapt high and swung from tree to tree. All of the animals applauded his strength. Then Elephant leaned against the same tree and uprooted it, raising it high above his head. The animals agreed Elephant was stronger than Monkey. Man said, 'I am stronger still', but the animals laughed – how could Man be stronger than Elephant? Man was angry at their laughter and produced a gun. The animals ran away from Man forever. Man did



not know the difference between strength and death. And to this day, they fear his ignorance. (Simmons 2001, 179–80)

Doing geography can be a therapeutic process and we should become open to this possibility whenever we write and teach (Bondi 2005; Mullings *et al.* 2016; Philo and Parr 2003; Simandan 2013a 2013b; Wright *et al.* 2016). I use this African story in my teaching because, unlike recent environmental data, it goes straight to the heart of my students. Instead of subtly accusing them of environmental irresponsibility, the story helps them discover the fundamental tension we have to live with: to be apart (i.e. to exist), we have to be a part of our surroundings, and we have to suck the energy of those surroundings, while making sure that they are kept alive (Hovorka 2017; Peacock 1999; Singer 2015; Wilson 2017). Demonic geography's attending to this tension articulates well with conceptual developments that try to make sense of life in the Anthropocene, such as Paul Adams' (2016) inspired account of place as an 'enviro-organism' and Derek McCormack's (2017) post-phenomenological elaboration of the concept of circumstance. When all is said and done, it might be the art of wisely managing this tension that geography is supposed to offer.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I began to tentatively trace the contours of a demonic geography, that is, of a materialistic, deflationary geography that *lives the fact* that 'space ... is the very stuff of life itself' (Thrift 2006, 145). To be sure, demonic geography is humble. Its humility ensues from its admission that it is written by, and writes about, bodies without souls. It presumes that there is no such thing as conscious free will (while acknowledging its powerful illusion) and no ethereal things such as souls or minds. From the perspective of conventional social scientists and legal scholars, it might look like a demonic discipline indeed, but this time with 'demonic' as a synonym for 'diabolical' or 'nefarious'. However, I think demonic geography only seems diabolical. The fact that it discards the illusions of an integrated self and of conscious free will does not mean that it discards the respect it pays to life itself or the fascination it has with the human condition. Japanese samurai warriors used to say that one has to learn to die before going into a battle. Geography and the social sciences might have to learn to die if they are to win their battles for a better world. Letting the convergent developments from psychology, neuroscience and the philosophy of mind sink into our brains may amount to letting some of our most entrenched illusions die. If we are in the business of

improving the lot of humans, we could start modestly, by learning the new picture of the human that emerges in these academic disciplines (Huang and Bargh 2014; Thagard and Wood 2015; Wegner and Gray 2016). This is no easy task, because we are not babies any more. We have already learned stuff about human nature, but the problem is that it might have been the wrong stuff (Churchland 2015; Bear and Bloom 2016; Caruso 2017). And unlearning is slow, frustrating and uncertain, like trying to get rid of old tenants (Clark 2009). Nevertheless, engaged as we may become in the act of unlearning, we could come full circle and realise that humans – these bodies without souls – want to be happy (Baumeister 2016; Shiah 2016). At the level of the individual, we could, perhaps unwisely, opt to let the matter of subjective well-being to psychologists and neuroscientists, despite the fact that the body is an accepted scalar level of analysis in contemporary geography (Johnston and Longhurst 2016; Olson 2016; Simandan 2010b). But, as social geographers remind us (Smith *et al.* 2009), above that basic scalar level, the quest for collective well-being clearly becomes part of our responsibility.

## Notes

- 1 Although familiar with the deflationary metaphysics of mind and personhood inspired by recent advances in the cognitive sciences, Nigel Thrift prefers to 'hold to a sense of *personal authorship* ... because how things seem is often more important than what they are' (2008, 13). His account seems evasive and uncommitted, in that it avoids both the stronger statement 'I believe in conscious free will' and its equally strong opposite 'I don't believe in conscious free will'
- 2 For a review of arguments that claim that empirical research in psychology and neuroscience remains compatible with beliefs in conscious free will, see Walter (2014) and Shepherd (2015). For an argument that the belief in conscious free will is empirically unsupported, but nonetheless evolutionarily adaptive, see Smithdeal (2016).

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