

Mr Messy and the Ghost in the Machine: A Tale of Becoming Well

Preface: This story is a metaphor, always entered into in the middle by the reader, designed primarily as a tool to encourage further exploration into relational thinking for therapeutic applications. It is appropriate for practitioners of any type of therapy and a nudge and tease for anyone thinking of transgressing or breaking free from clinical Cartesian staticity embedded within the modern medical model. Mr Messy is always a haecceity more than a quiddity and follows the complexity of Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) rhizomatic pathways (or alternatively the wayfaring lines of Tim Ingold's (2011) fungal myceliums) in order to explore a creative alternative to the temporally static and internalised understandings of the 'bounded self' in traditional psychoanalytic and therapeutic design and practice. The story also borrows heavily from process externalism (see Manzotti, 2011) and extended mind theories (see Clark and Chalmers, 1998) now evident in enactivist and/or embodied cognition models of philosophy of mind. It is not meant to explain or analyse, it is merely productive and creative.

For those of you who are not familiar with Roger Hargreaves' 'Mr Men' characters, I urge you to [re]discover them. Although this particular tale takes a divergent course away from Hargreaves' intended story, I would like to point out that it is in no way intended as a criticism of the original Mr Messy story as I grew up with very fond memories of him and his colourful companions. However, I was brought up as a male in a patriarchal society! There are legitimate criticisms of these books including the later additions of the 'Little Miss' series (see Ruth Whippman's (2012) critique in the Huffington Post and the critique by Feminists on Children's Media, 'Little Miss Muffet Fights Back', for an alternative version from 1974).

Enjoy!

Mr Messy and the Ghost in the Machine

Mr Messy was a very messy person. In fact he was so messy that he resembled a knot; a bundle of pink lines that had no beginning and no end. The place which he called home was also exceedingly messy. It was so messy that there was no space at all. It was covered in webs that [intra]related everything in a meshwork of fine silken lines. Everything in this place leaked, including him, and it seemed as though everything moved...nothing was still. It was all in constant transition. In fact it was difficult to know what was what or if anything was anything! For example, it was difficult to tell the difference between inside and outside, even regarding Mr Messy himself. You couldn't tell his top from his bottom, his mind from his body or even his body from everything else. It was all very confusing.

Even so, Mr Messy was comfortable being messy. With every passing moment in time, the pink bundle of knots that he thought of as 'him' was becoming messier and messier, a palimpsest of threads that transacted with the threads of previous messiness. He was always involved in a process of becoming.

Unfortunately for him, one day he crossed lines with two occidentalists, Mr Neat and Mr Tidy, who wanted nothing but to iron out Mr Messy so that he looked more respectable. This was for his own good, they said, so that he could fit in with all the other Mr Men who all had very well drawn bodies so you could tell the difference between their outside and their inside, their minds from their bodies and clearly see what characters and identities they were all supposed to represent. Mr Nosey was quite clearly nose-y...he had a big, long nose! Mr Tickle was quite clearly designed for humorous antics...he had incredibly long arms! And then there was Mr Happy who was perhaps the ideal Mr Man. He was a shining example of what Mr Men should ultimately aspire to be...happy! What was Mr Messy? It was difficult to tell with no beginning and no end! All the other Mr Men had gardens with clearly defined boundaries (just like their bodies), so you could tell the difference between

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natural and unnatural things and one Mr Man's property from another, you know, just in case there was ever a problem with what belonged to who or who belonged to what!

In order to straighten him out, they told Mr Messy of a story about a ghost who lived in a machine that controlled everything the machine did in order to give it agency. This ghost wasn't made of matter like you and me, but of nothingness that resided somewhere in the machine's pineal gland, located in its brain. 'How funny', thought Mr Messy, 'that nothingness could be 'located' in a space'! Don't forget that Mr Messy's home had no space at all as it was full of threads of materials...just like him!

After a long and deliberated discussion, My Neat and Mr Tidy had managed to persuade Mr Messy that the ghost in the machine was a metaphor for all the Mr Men, including him. 'He' was the machine! At first this idea scared Mr Messy as he didn't really like the thought of a ghost in his brain! But Mr Neat and Mr Tidy calmed him by giving him some methylphenidate!

Mr Messy asked if anything else had this ghost in their machines, you know, like dogs, fleas, trees or blades of grass? 'Of course not', was the resounding reply, 'they weren't drawn the same way at all, that's what distinguishes Mr Men from 'nature', including all the things we Mr Men make, like technology, buildings, cars and Sherbert Dips!'.

'But I thought 'everything' was natural as it is all part of the biosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere or atmosphere', queried Mr Messy.

'Oh no!', laughed Neat and Tidy, 'nature is that green stuff out there, you know, stuff that's natural...natural stuff!'.

Mr Messy thought for a moment, 'Hmmm! This was so well explained and very convincing.'

And with that, Mr Messy agreed to have a full makeover. It took ages to convert Mr Messy to a more recognisable form. There was so much mess and knot to untangle that Mr Neat almost gave up. But with the help of huge amounts of colouring in (make-up, media saturation and fashionable

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accessories) and boundary defining line drawing (pharmaceutical sponsorship, counselling, antidepressants and antipsychotics), Mr Messy no longer resembled a knot. In fact, he was so neat and tidy that he was given the new name of 'Mr Man'!

With their mission complete, Mr Neat and Mr Tidy smugly made their exit and left Mr Man to reflect on his newly given identity. How normal he was! How smooth. How round. How identifiable. How defined with an inside and outside. How full...like a big pink dot!

How...ever, Mr Man felt anxious! He didn't feel as related to everything else as he once had. All the threads that made him aware of what was happening within the rest of his environment, like a spider in her web, didn't seem to be working. In fact, he had no relations at all. Now, he just had a static sense of himself, detached from other objects that were outside of this new boundaried, full dot with a ghost rattling around somewhere inside his pineal gland!

His doctor told him to take a cheap holiday to Magaluf, you know, to take his mind off things and try to fit in just that little bit more! So he did (because his doctor obviously knew more than he did about these medical issues)! But as he was flying over France via one of the more eclectic/eccentric airlines (Deleuzian Airways) and across the line of flight of the aircraft, after flying over a thousand plateaus through this weather world high in the sky, he saw a beautiful rainbow. He wondered if anyone else saw it the same way he did or even if anyone saw it at all. If they didn't, did it even exist? Just then, he remembered something that his neighbour, Mr Man...zotti had told him about rainbows that made him question Mr Neat and Mr Tidy's story of the ghost in the machine.

'You see', explained Mr Man...zotti, 'a rainbow is not an object in the sky that can exist alone without someone or something to perceive it. Nor is it an image, magically conjured up in the brain by the mysterious non-physical stuff that resides somewhere in the pineal gland. The rainbow is a process of physical transitions and transactions that take place along the threads of light (or lines of flight) and pink threads of Mr Messy'.

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‘Aha!’, exclaimed Mr Man, ‘this is what Mr Man...zotti meant by my mind being ‘spread’ both in the environment and in my knotted self’.

Mr Man thought of his old teacher, Mr Gibson and his theory of affordances that were neither objective properties nor subjective properties; or both if you like! ‘I wonder if this is what he meant?’ thought Mr Man.

As Mr Man disembarked the plane, he had one of those rare moments of existential clarity as he noticed himself walking down the plane’s steps to an ecology of mind (which reminded him of another teacher, Mr Bateson, a favourite of his). It all started to make sense at last. If the mind was not just ‘in’ the brain as a separate information processing system that was cut off from the rest of the environment or a magical, non-physical entity that resided somewhere in the pineal gland, then Mr Neat and Mr Tidy’s tale must be just a ghost story designed to turn Mr Messy into a solid, easily definable object like the other Mr Men.

You could say that Mr Messy had finally ‘seen the rainbow’ and was free from Cartesian thinking forever. He was no longer set in stone with a solid, unchangeable shape or colour like Mr Happy or Mr Strong, just because that was the way he was drawn or the way the other Mr Men saw him. Just like his departed friend Mr White had told him, he could be whoever he wanted to be. In fact he chose to no longer be pink, he chose to be all In...gold! And from that moment on, *he* chose *her* own (neverending) story and became a nomad because they are always ‘in the middle’!

...to be continued...always...

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