

From experience to language : towards an affected and affective writing

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FROM EXPERIENCE TO LANGUAGE

Towards an Affected and Affective Writing: A Conversation with Tim Ingold

Interview: *Claire Vionnet*

Setting

I arrive at 2 pm at Tim Ingold's office in Aberdeen (Scotland). It is a gentle winter's day. The light green grass and the big trees in the garden that I see from the window contrast with the full bookcases of his office. The piercing shouts of the seagulls regularly break the silence of the place. I wished to ask Tim Ingold about the issue of affects, first because of my interest on the topic related to my PhD on contemporary dance, and secondly, because of his approach to writing. His texts always transport me into a flow of affects, although Tim does not develop a «theory of affects» strictly speaking. Contrary to other anthropologists who theorize on affects while publishing academic texts that lack any affective quality, Tim's writing is sensitive to me. My question was, then: how to write about affects? Or said better, how to develop a writing that can recreate the affective dimension of experience?

Conversation Being affected and perception

Claire Vionnet: I would like to start talking about the way we frame feelings by departing from what I am familiar with, dancing, which is an experience involving an intense sensitive/affective dimension. Since the beginning of my PhD research on contemporary dance, I have been struggling to frame the transformations going on in my body. Going through the anthropology of the senses and the anthropology of emotions (Héritier et al. 2004, Howes et al. 2014, Le Breton 2008, Wulff 2007), I was often frustrated in the sense that the theoretical frameworks did not mirror the complexity of my lively experience. Confused by the imbroglio of the terms available (perception, sensation, feeling, sentiment, senses, sensoriality, affect), I needed to clarify their use and their relationships to each other in order to find the right vocabulary to frame my phenomenal experience. The following questions do not aim to establish definitions and therefore, close meaning. Instead, I just want to shed

light on what the words refer to and stress their potentiality for producing thoughts and developing a writing faithful to what I have experienced.

So my first question to you, Tim, concerns your own interest in the affective dimension of life. It seems that you have moved, in the past years, from the key concept of perception (Ingold 2000) to the capacity of being affected. Since you focused in the past on doing and making (with the notions of skills/tools/materials), it is undergoing that seems to lie at the centre of your attention today. So how do you see the relation between perception and «being affected»?

Tim Ingold: I began thinking about perception in response to the ideas of James Gibson (1979). In his ecological approach to visual perception, Gibson imagines a world full of objects. So the perceiver is moving around in a world of objects and exploring and perceiving different things. Gibson was really insistent that perception is about movement, about action. To perceive, one has to move around things and pick up the information they afford. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that there is a certain asymmetry in this approach in the sense that while the perceiver is active, moving around and exploring, the things that he or she perceives are just objects, they are just sitting there.

So I began to think of a world in which everything is becoming, everything is moving, growing, flowing, exploring. We have then to move back or down from the question of how we perceive objects – be they tables or chairs or other human beings – to the question of how we perceive in the first place. And that brought me from Gibson to Merleau-Ponty, because whereas Gibson asks how is it possible that we can perceive objects in the world, Merleau-Ponty, in his phenomenology, asks how it is that we can see, how it is possible that we see at all, and not that we see *this* or *that*.

This comes down to thinking of vision or even light as a kind of sensory experience in which the world of the sensor and the sensible, the world of the person who is perceiving and the world that is being perceived, invade one another, begin to merge. So when I have my eyes open, it seems that where my head is, there is light, there is a world, the two things have come together. That, for me, is what we are talking about in relation to being affected or affect: that we have an experience of light, of sound or of feeling which has, then, to come prior to our awareness of *this* or *that* or the other thing. Only thanks to my experience of light can I see things. I cannot see things in the dark. The experience of light is the condition for my being able to see things – such as tables and chairs and other people.

In my thinking, I started from a Gibsonian view of perception, and moved to a more phenomenological view. This led to the thought that experience is something you undergo. But it is

something you undergo *actively*. You do it, you are doing this undergoing. In the things I have been writing most recently, I have been looking for a way to express this sense of active undergoing. I found it in the writings of John Dewey, in his *Art as experience* (1934). This is a recent discovery for me. So I am going back to his ideas about it. But that's really the shift from thinking about *how* we perceive objects – how do we perceive things, how do we recognize that something is a chair, a table or a person – to *how* is it possible that we perceive in the first place? What does it mean just to say «I can see»? That's where the affect, the undergoing comes in.

C.V.: Could you specify the difference you see between perception and vision more precisely?

T.I.: Well, the simple answer to that is that vision is just one particular modality of perception. The beauty of the word perception is that it is not specific to the modality of the visual. It could be auditory, it could be visual, it could be haptic, it could be taste, whatever you like. The word perception doesn't make any distinction between the modalities, whereas vision is clearly specific. It is a curious fact that most literature in the psychology of perception writes only about vision, while the other modalities have been very largely ignored. A lot of work is needed to correct that. It is not accidental, I think. Visual perception has always taken first place in psychological discussions because psychologists tend to imagine that seeing involves creating a mental image. This, of course, is not necessarily so; nevertheless, the assumption is that seeing is more imagistic, whereas hearing and feeling are less so. Since psychologists tend to think about perception in terms of the creation of images, they naturally concentrate on vision. But I don't want to have to separate these things; we can move across the different modalities quite freely, and in practice they are always combined anyway.

About the word affects

C.V.: In the second part of *The Life of Lines, about weathering* (Ingold 2015), you frequently use the verb «to affect / to be affected». How does your perspective compare with the notion of «affect», as developed by Massumi (2002) or Seigworth and Gregg (2010), which refers to a vital force and intensity that evokes relationality and in-between-ness?

T.I.: I think of affects in terms of what things do and what they do to us. So although the word is a noun «affect», it comes from the verb «to affect» or «to be affected by» something. The way I am using it is probably not particularly different from the way that Massumi would use it or any other affect theorist. It has become a very fashionable word at the moment and everybody is talking

about the theory of affects, as if it were a new thing. I don't think it is. I think affect is a perfectly good word that we can use to verbally describe a *feeling* for things. But I do want to make a very clear distinction between *affect* and *emotion*. I use the word affect rather than emotion because emotion is always understood to be something internal, which is then *expressed* in somebody's activities. The beauty of the word affect, whether used as a noun or as a verb, is that it avoids this internalist assumption that you get with the notion of emotion. Affect is simply the way I respond to things or am affected by them in the world. So it's pretty close to *feeling*, and I like feeling too because it is something you do with things rather than something inside you that you express. Feeling comes from the verb to *feel*, which is not specific to touch. You can feel something visually, you can feel it in an auditory way, you can feel it through touch. But feeling is not the same as touch. You can't touch the wind for example, but you can certainly feel it. Feeling and affect are for me pretty much the same thing.

C.V.: It is interesting because to feel in English is different from to sense, whereas in French we have only one word «sentir». Do you know when people started to talk about affects so much that we are now talking about an «affective turn»?

T.I.: I'm not sure. I haven't traced any intellectual genealogy. I am sure some of it comes from Deleuze. And Deleuze must have borrowed it from Spinoza, so there is some sort of intellectual genealogy. Most often you use words because they seem like the right words to use. Affect is a perfect ordinary word in our language and you use it to do a job. Then you suddenly find that some academics have decreed there is a thing called «affect theory». I don't like that. I just want to use the best words I can find to convey what I mean. I don't want a theory of affects. As soon as you do that it removes affect from experience and turns it into this hypostasized thing you can theorize about. I don't want a theory of emotions either!

But in *The Life of Lines* (2015), where I have spoken of *affects*, I have been talking about the unison of the affective and the cosmic. In a way this comes from Merleau-Ponty. I simply wanted to talk about the way in which, in perceiving the world, we spill out into the world itself and the world spills into us and therefore there is a sort of merging in our experience of this *feeling-full* life, this *affective* life, and the world we inhabit. It seemed like a good word to use. That's all.

C.V.: I was using affect more as a synonym for emotion rather than feeling...

T.I.: Maybe it just depends on how you use it. The way I use it, I would certainly not conflate affect with emotion, except perhaps in a colloquial sense. When psychologists

talk about emotions, they usually mean some kind of interior mental – or maybe bodily – state, which is then expressed in behaviour. And I definitely don't like that idea. I don't want the idea that *what we do* is an expression of what we feel inside. I want to say that *what we do* is *what we are*. So if I am angry, and you can see that I am angry – because of the way I am throwing my arms around and shouting – then it's not that I've got something inside and using a loud voice or waving arms to express it. Rather, my anger is the loud voice. It exists in the action itself. And therefore, you can perceive it quite directly. You don't infer from my behaviour that I might be feeling angry inside. You actually perceive my anger *in* my loud voice and gestures, which means that other people are often better witnesses of our affective condition than we are ourselves.

For example, I can't see my facial expressions. You look at my face and you say: «he's angry». But I can't see that. Psychologists often think I have some privileged access to my own mental states because they're inside me and not inside you. It's actually the opposite: you have better access to the way I feel than I do because you can see it. That's why feelings are inherently relational and not individual. I think this affect theory thing is part of a general move to a relational way of thinking in the social sciences, to realizing that one's condition is revealed to others in a relational engagement of some kind.

C.V.: My next question concerns the difference between verbs and nouns to frame things. How does the verb to affect / to be affected work better than the noun affect?

T.I.: If possible, I always go for verbs rather than nouns, because it ties in with the idea of life as something we do. All the way through I've been trying to use verbs wherever I possibly can. That's the simple answer.

C.V.: How do you see the link between affects, senses, feelings and sensations?

T.I.: In a way, these are all different words for the same thing. You can't say «we've got affects here, we've got feelings there, we've got sensations over there». We cannot clearly distinguish between them, prior to connecting them up again. Affects and feelings for me are pretty much the same thing. *Sensation* is a little more difficult. Many psychologists use the term «sensation» to refer to the effect of an external stimulus that in itself is meaningless or has no value attached to it. So they might say that on a sunny day I have a sensation of bright light, referring simply to an effect triggered by solar radiation as it strikes photoreceptive cells at the back of the retina. But this, in itself, doesn't mean anything.

According to cognitive psychology, we are continually in receipt of sensations and our mind gets to work in processing them into percepts. I am against that way of thinking. The idea is that our senses are keyboards which are played upon by external stimuli, and that our mind subsequently interprets the resulting sensations. I think that it is quite wrong. Rather for me, the senses are means by which we actively explore the world. We use our eyes to watch, to look, we use our ears to listen and so on. It's not that my body is surrounded by all these keyboards and that visual stimuli are playing on the visual keyboard, aural stimuli on the hearing keyboard, and so on, that these keyboards are sending messages to my brain, and that my brain is then processing everything. The alternative is to say that the eyes, the ears, the mouth, and so on are all organs of a body that is active and exploratory in the world. That's what Gibson argued, and I still agree with him.

Affects in the framework of circulation and flows

C.V.: *Affect is often used within a vocabulary, a framework of circulation and flows (gas, liquids, vibrations, frequencies). In your writings, affect is related to air, breath, wind, atmosphere (Ingold 2015). It looks as if anthropologists have been trying to fill the gap between the elements, a space that we have considered «empty» until now. You seem to be interested in capturing the liveliness of this space through reflections on air, atmosphere, sound/silence and light, and by doing this, you want to overcome the paradigm of «bounded entities». Like the metaphors of flow and stream, does «affect» also frame your idea of continuity between subject and environment?*

T.I.: Yes, I want to move beyond ways of thinking that imagine a world entirely in terms of relations between persons and things, persons and objects. That's the source of my dissatisfaction with much of the traditional discourse of aesthetics, which has adopted the term *atmosphere* to describe the way a person might be affected by the aura of a thing – like a painting, for example.

So people like Gernot Böhme (2017), who has written a lot about atmosphere, reason as follows. Suppose I am sitting here in my office and there is a painting on the wall; the painting is giving off a certain aura. It's colourful. Filling the space between me, as a subject, and the painting, as an object, is what Böhme calls an *atmosphere*. But the trouble with this notion of the atmosphere, in my estimation, is that it leaves out the air. It imagines a body here, bounded by the skin, and a painting over there. There is an intervening space, a gap, of some metres. But what's actually going on in that space is

irrelevant. There's just an interaction between me and the painting. The *affective* atmosphere, then, is generated in the space of that interaction.

It seems to me however that the body is not contained in that way. Topologically the human body is very complicated. The skin is not simply an outer shell because it keeps folding in to form the lungs and other orifices that make it possible for us to breathe, to undergo metabolism: we also have to eat; we have to defecate. We have to do these things; otherwise we couldn't live.

If we just stay with breathing: I am continually breathing in and breathing out. So are you. Our breaths, which are invisible, are nevertheless mingling somewhere. We tend to be aware of only one half of the body: that's the bit we can see. But there's the other aerial half that we can't see. You cannot have one half without the other. I want to bring into our understanding of the atmosphere this zone of intermingling, and it is largely an aerial one.

Affects and intersubjectivity

C.V.: *Your writings seem to focus particularly on the relationship between a person and his/her environment – correspondence or resonance are probably the words you would use – and the way we are affected by trees, wood, wind and the tools that relate us to our environment (the axe, the blind man's cane). What about affects within intersubjectivity?*

T.I.: I don't think I leave that out. Or at least, there is nothing in the way I write about perception which excludes relations among people. While it's probably true that I spend more time talking about trees, that doesn't mean the people are left out! It means that our relations with trees are just as social as our relations with people. But I do have a problem with the notion of intersubjectivity. I have tried to substitute for intersubjectivity the notion of correspondence.

There are two reasons why I have a problem with the notion of intersubjectivity. One is that I don't see how you can have intersubjectivity without the human subject, yet along with many others, I have been doing my best to dissolve the distinction between subject and object. For example Michael Jackson (1996), a very wonderful writer for whom I have enormous respect, simultaneously argues *against* the idea of the human subject vis-à-vis a world of objects, but *for* the recognition of intersubjectivity. And I say: «how can you argue for intersubjectivity if you are against the subject?» I think we need a different concept. There is a problem with the notion of the human subject because it tends to imply a mind in a body.

There is also a problem with the *inter-*, which means between *this* and *that*. This is the second problem with «inter-subjectivity». I have used the analogy of a river. Imagine a river flowing along. It has a bank on one side and a bank on the other side. You could cross a bridge from one bank to the other, going *across* from A to B, or you could take a boat or swim, joining with the river current. In that case, you're not going from bank to bank but – like the river waters – you're going *along*, in-between. *Inter* for me carries the connotation of A to B, between this and that, whereas I wanted a concept that would allow us to go along with the river itself. This is what I have called *midstreaming*. *Inter-* and *mid-*: that's the difference between *between* and *in-between*. Life goes along in this in-between, where people are continually answering to one another. For this I use the term *correspondence*.

Writing with affects

C.V.: If the capacity to be affected is intrinsic to human experience, then fieldwork also implies an affective experience for anthropologists. Affects relate them to their environment and interlocutors. Unfortunately, because of the academic language that is required of us (of objectification and distanciation), felt affects often disappear from ethnographic accounts. As a result, the «form» (of language) drowns the «content»: affects that the anthropologist tries to capture are neutralised by the coldness of scientific writing. On the contrary, your writings seem to reflect the sensitive/affective part of lived experience. For example, I feel a lot while reading your texts; you manage to avoid the problem of how to write about sensitive matters with non-affective language. Affects in your writings are not represented (by words that stand for them), but verbally performed. How do you achieve this liveliness through writing?

T.I.: Most academic writing, even when it is done by anthropologists, is very sterile. Even if affect comes into it, the anthropologist as ethnographer ends up writing *about* affect. The language used loses its affective tone, or tends to do so. You end up with a style of writing that is very dry. A few writers, particularly in human geography, have begun to experiment with other ways of writing. Some of these experiments work better than others. But there is a real problem with academic writing.

One indication of the problem is that people keep telling me that what I am writing is very poetic. And I think: «well, if that's poetry, what are we to do with everything else?» We are stuck with the notion that writing can either be academic, in which case it is propositional – that is, *about* things – or it can be poetry, in which case it's affective and musical and sonorous and carries in its pronunciation and its performance the feelings it conveys. We know that good poetry is

like that. It doesn't set out to describe things in propositional terms, but in the very sound of its words it evokes the feelings the poet wants to arouse.

The problem is to find a way of writing that is, in some sense, intermediate between the two. How can we write with our own voice? You can write with your voice and I can write with mine, just as our handwriting is different. But how can we be ourselves in our writing? How can I feel that it is my hand, and my mind, that writes? How can we do that but at the same time remain scholars? How can we achieve a depth, richness, and precision of understanding that marks us out as intellectual craftspeople?

I like the idea of the scholar as an intellectual craftsman. It comes from the appendix to a book by Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). The appendix is called «On Intellectual Craftsmanship». He's talking about sociology and explaining how it should be understood as a craft, in which the practitioner seeks perfection in what he does. I think of writing as a craft like that. I can only be satisfied with something I have written when it feels right to me, when it feels like something I've written, that I'm not imitating anybody else. It is how I feel it, but it is also right and true, true to myself and true to what I'm writing about, to what the theme of the writing is. That's something that we can aspire to.

This is not poetry but it's not academic writing in the traditional sense either. And it's incredibly difficult to do. This is the main thing. People see writing that looks fluent and reads well. And they think: «I wish I could write as easily as that». And you have to answer: «It's not easy, it's difficult, really hard to pull off». One must be very respectful towards words. I get rather annoyed with academics who will insist that the trouble with words is that they can't capture feelings. That's why we need embodied practices, they say, because words never get it. I don't think we should write off words like that. Words are beautiful things. They are like gemstones: they capture the light and refract it in multiple ways. They have so many facets. We should really honour them, rather than saying «words are no good, we have to go back to performance». No: words are good, but we have to be really respectful and careful in the way we use them, to use just the right word for the right place.

This is not just about the different shades of meaning a word carries; it is also about how it sounds; sometimes even about what it looks like. But certainly, how it sounds. I read a passage to myself. If there is something wrong with the rhythm, or with the intonation, or if it just doesn't sound right, then I know something has to be fixed. You have to bring a kind of musical sensibility to writing. Poets know this instinctively, but academics tend not to understand. However, it took a long

time before I could begin to think to myself: «what I have written is something I have really written with my voice and my hand». It's a matter of finding who you are. I think I've more or less found it now, but you never find it finally.

Just recently, I have been writing an essay that addresses the work of a well-known Italian artist, Giuseppe Penone. It's a wonderful work; I like it. But I didn't want to write *about* the work; I wanted to write *with it*: to explore the same themes that the work explores. And I found it very difficult. I had to conclude in the end that the reason why I found it so difficult is that there's a way in which words always want to unravel the density of experience. It's like taking a closely woven textile and pulling it apart. When you've pulled it apart, it no longer has the density, the richness it began with. It's really difficult to write in a way that doesn't do that. Indeed it might be impossible.

C.V.: I know you like writing by hand...

T.I.: Yes, if I just had the time. I am not writing by hand very much now and I regret it. I know I am not writing by hand because I am short of time. I'm having to take shortcuts. But still, even if I'm doing my writing eventually on a keyboard, much of it is forged as sentences in a notebook. For that, I use a pencil. I am writing the sentences over and over again with a pencil in my notebook until I get them right; only then do they get typed. So I am moving back and forth between handwriting and typing.

C.V.: How differently do you experience writing from typing?

T.I.: There is a big difference for me, partly because I've never learned to type properly. I am a slow typist. I'm always hitting the wrong keys and making spelling mistakes and have to go back to correct them. For me, typing gets in the way of the immediate flow from one's mind to the page. If I'm handwriting I don't have to worry about this. I rarely make spelling mistakes. I don't have to stop to think where to put my fingers. So it flows. If I had learned to type properly as a young man, I might have experienced it differently. But as it is, that's the big difference for me. As handwriting flows, it carries myself in, I go directly on to the page without any interruption. But I experience the keyboard as a barrier; it gets in the way all the time. I find that frustrating.

Thinking with others

C.V.: A certain number of thinkers have influenced your reflections on the topic of affects, like Lars Spuybroek, Michael Jackson, Alfonso Lingis, Jan Masschelein, Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel

Serres, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and John Dewey. *Could you select two names from that list and explain how they inspired you?*

T.I.: They've all been influential in one way or another: Merleau-Ponty (1945) in particular. I didn't really start working with his ideas until the mid-1990s, by which stage I had been working with Gibson quite a lot. Working through Merleau-Ponty's writing established the distinction, right from the start, between what it means to perceive *this* or *that* in the world, and what it actually means to *perceive*. And that takes one straight into all these questions of affect. So Merleau-Ponty's work in the phenomenology of perception was really critical.

Lars Spuybroek is another name on my list. I encountered his work much more recently, particularly his book *The Sympathy of Things* (2011). I think this book is a masterpiece in terms of understanding the affective relations we have with architecture. He's mostly talking about the Gothic and about John Ruskin, because that's his area of expertise and interest. The key word for him is *sympathy*. He uses it to talk about the ways in which materials and people and vegetation and landscapes can all go along together and feel for one another. I think it's remarkable and goes far beyond all the other writing coming out these days on vital materialism, new materialism, thing theory, object ontology and so forth. So Merleau-Ponty was an early influence, Lars Spuybroek a very late one. All the other authors lie somewhere in between.

C.V.: It's interesting that there are not many anthropologists in the list of thinkers you mentioned earlier.

T.I.: I've often asked myself about this. I have always thought of myself as an anthropologist; however, I have had the feeling, over the past ten or twenty years, that I have gone one way, and mainstream anthropology another. I'm not too worried about this, it doesn't matter in itself what subject one is affiliated to. So I have found myself wandering around in many other disciplines. I have enjoyed doing that.

Looking back, it sometimes seems to me that many of my anthropological colleagues are rather stuck in a rut. I am concerned about just how insular anthropology has become, because it's not very good for anthropology's public image. We do need to get out more. In anthropology we have important things to say and we should be in a position to say them. This means being more open to other disciplines than we are at present.

One reason why anthropology has got closed in, I believe, lies in its obsession with ethnography: this is something else I have written about. Limiting anthropology to ethnographic

study actually prevents us from opening up to other disciplines and to bigger debates in the way we should. I think we all have to admit to more intellectual ancestors than we do, and we shouldn't always be going back to the same people, the same ancestors. Other writers could give us a lot more inspiration.

C.V.: What kind of alternative do you see to ethnography?

T.I.: Anthropology is «a generous, open-ended, comparative and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of life in the one world we all inhabit». That's my definition of the subject. Ethnography is a faithful, accurate, precise description of life as it is lived and experienced by some people somewhere, sometime. These are different things. The anthropology that I want to develop is a speculative and experimental (albeit not in the scientific sense) inquiry into what the conditions and possibilities of life might be. We can learn from the people among whom we have worked; their experience and ideas can help us in our speculations. We need to ask: «How are we going to live in this world?» Anthropology has crucial contributions to make to the questions of *how* we are going to live, *how* we are going to relate to our environment, *how* we are going to organize ourselves, *how* we are going to live with a reasonable code, *how* we are going to look after the planet.

We have to address all these questions. Anthropologists can address them in a way no other discipline can, because we have been taught by so many people around the world and have so many different experiences to draw on, so much to learn from. But it's no good if we just limit ourselves to *describing* those experiences. We have to draw on them, to take what we have learned from all the conversations we have had with people in order to suggest or speculate on possible ways of living, possible answers to the questions of how we should live. That's the greatest question of our time: *how should we live?* Anthropology should be proposing possible answers to that question. But so long as we limit ourselves to ethnography, as long as we say «our job is simply to account for, understand or interpret others' lives», we cannot begin to speculate on how life should be lived. I think that's precisely what we should be doing, and where anthropology goes beyond ethnography.

Of course, there are lots of other ways of doing anthropology, not just ethnographic. Archaeologists are doing archaeological anthropology. You can do anthropology of the ancient world by drawing on classical sources, or you can do it or through theatre or through dance. There are many different ways in which you can do anthropology, ethnographic research is just one way. I feel that anthropologists have been less than ambitious in projecting or portraying what we can do.

The reason why I still stay in anthropology and still consider myself an anthropologist is that no other discipline allows one so much intellectual freedom to do one's own thing and follow one's own bent. In a sense, if what I'm doing doesn't look so much like anthropology, it is precisely because I am an anthropologist and anthropologists are allowed to do this. If I were in history or psychology or economics, I would probably feel much more constrained in what I could do and even in what I could think. I am astonished when I encounter colleagues in some other academic disciplines and discover just how closed and regimented they are. They say things such as: «We like what you say but we couldn't write that, we wouldn't get published». There are very tight constraints. Anthropology is great in the sense that anything goes as long as it's not racist or colonialist, and so long as it is ethical. I appreciate that freedom very much.

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