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## NATURE AND HUMAN EMOTIONS

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An Appalachian heritage coupled with life in the West is the personal backing for the argument that follows. The West and the South are landscapes so stimulating in their working on character that some will respond sympathetically, others with suspicion, as I claim that an appropriate exchange between the person and the place is part of our emotional well-being. This argument seeks to be reasoned, but if it is mixed with emotion, that too is intentional.

**I. Passion in the Natural Environment.** Human emotions have their richest development in a social environment, and many emotions are known only there, such as jealousy or embarrassment. But emotions have a fundamental, "native" expression before the natural world, as with the shudder when staring into the starry night, or the quickened pulse on a balmy spring day. The tears of joy at birth and those of grief at death, though interpersonal, also flow as nature gives and takes away. Goose pimples sometimes rise when persons sing, "America, the Beautiful!" The physiological reaction is to a national heritage, but also before purple mountains' majesties and the fruited plains stretched from sea to shining sea.

Emotions are humane occasions, and some slip into the belief that they only properly obtain between persons, as when disgusted with, a sister. But persons do not, or ought not, to curse rocks. They may "give way" to emotions in I-Thou relations, but I-It experiences should be passionless. This view is a mistake, for our encounter with nature is as passionate as it is cognitive. This calls for an ecology of the emotions. At this point, some reply that emotions in primitive man were directed against nature in animism and superstition, but that modern persons have grown out of it. Ecology is not emotional; it is scientific. That is not entirely so; our argument here is rather that these passions have taken a more calculating form. If we consider Newton and his mechanistic universe, Darwin and his jungle, Marx with his dialectic of man laboring against nature, an existentialist in despair before an absurd world, a technologist craving for dominion over nature, or the ecologist rediscovering his earthen home, fearful of its destruction, we will see that our contemporary thinking often has an understorey of concern that is environmental.

Given evolutionary theory, genetics, biochemistry, and, more lately, sociobiology, it is difficult to think that our emotions have not been shaped

to fit us for the natural environment, and this in ways other than merely providing that cultural life in which we find protection against it. This does not require a perfect fit, for natural selection rough hews its creatures, and some misfitting is required if the system is to move. Also, once they have arrived, emotions may be employed in novel contexts. Still, the prevailing paradigms will hardly allow the anomaly that emotions have no survival value for appropriately judging the world, being a rather ineffective constitutional error. Everyone allows that the hand, brain, and senses have enormous survival value, not denied but extended in their cultural use, and so too with the emotions, as significant as is cognitive thought in directing those hands.

But no single account prevails as to how cognitive and emotional processes are coupled in that brain, and here too the human response to nature is implicated. Some hold that in the bicameral mind the left hemisphere is more linguistic, analytic, and conceptual, the right hemisphere more spatially oriented, perceptual, and holistic, and if so perhaps the more significant not only for our emotional life but for our sense of presence in the natural world. Others find lower, more anciently evolved portions of the mind, followed by intermediately evolved sections, and finally the higher reaches of the mind. The emotional life rises in the visceral intermediate mind, subtending the cognitive mind but governed only in part by it, and if so, our relations with the natural environment reach back into prelinguistic, though by no means unintelligent foundations of the mind. Humanistic psychologists are not less inclined to find in the unconscious the location of much that drives us, particularly of those deep substructures by which we are oriented toward the natural world. Any particular account may be revised; what is less likely to be revised is what is common to them all, that both our emotions and our attitudes toward the natural world are not formed only, perhaps not mainly, in that part of the mind which is dominantly verbal and cognitive.

Still, a philosopher ought to hope for some veridical unity in the mind, whatever its divisions, and to try to make explicit rationally what is so often tacit. Further, however much is precognitive, everyone knows how much our cultural conditionings—whether superstitious animism, Advaitan monism, romantic naturalism, existentialist nihilism, logical positivism, or Marxism—govern our tempers in the world. Our upsets follow from our mindsets, and we are aroused to act in accord with what we believe. It is in a blending of thought, affection, and willing that the epistemic powers of the mind lie, and we need accordingly a philosophical account of a suitable emotional response to nature.

**II. Emotions of Discontinuity: The Nature We Resist and Fear.** We now suggest the coordinates on which to map these emotions, testing with

enough instances to see whether our encounters with nature do go into place on such a framework. Those divisions within the brain are made yet more complex by recognizing that we are not of one mind towards nature. In one sense this is analytic, for any emotions necessarily can be plotted on a graph with positive and negative fields. But in a deeper sense this dichotomy is a synthetic judgment, describing the way the world is, with our minds evolved accordingly. In emotion we are aroused for approach or for withdrawal. The oppositely phased natural world is full of helps and hurts, and hence our ambivalence.

That we should fear nature is axiomatic to the biological essence of life. A counter-current to entropy, life is a contest where the organism builds itself up against an environment pressing to undo it. Life protests until it loses, and so, at those levels of life where emotions appear, a chary fear is, alas, the only finally relevant emotion. The child is born into the world angry, we leave it in pain, and every intermediate emotion is in a matrix of privations. Hence Dewey held that emotion is always a state of conflict, and psychologists describe us as being "full of defenses." This fear of nature can be pathological and disorganizing, but such upset is the error of the healthy baseline emotion by which we anxiously preserve this discontinuity between the organism and physical nature,

Humanistic psychology adds the notion of a centripetal self maintaining its integrity against the centrifugal wildness. Each species, each individual sets a boundary between itself and the rest of nature, and in humans that discontinuity is enormously greater than elsewhere. The developing child separates his "self" as a form disarticulated from the spatio-temporal environment. This *spiritual agency* is the distinctly human genius, wrested from nature, and, except as we insist otherwise, the accidents of external nature will destroy it. Our emotions fence in this ego. That includes much exhilaration in this exodus from nature, in the power to be by being over against nature. We delight in personal narrative as we learn to map and travel through the world. This is the elation of auto/bio/graphy, not yet intellectual in the child, often not in the adult, but always existential and impulsive from our psychic depths.

The impact of wilderness on the American mind illustrates this psychology as it empowers a society. The pilgrim, the settler, the explorer—all were admired for their prowess against their environment. The wild continent was tamed, forests cleared, roads built, rivers bridged, and often in the name of religion, for the Judeo-Christian faith urged the conquest of nature and redeeming of the fallen world. Scientists and engineers, physicians and farmers, as they have conquered famines, sickness, and natural disasters, remain heir to this hope of gaining security by overcoming

a threatening nature. The primary emotion here is a masculine courage. The sagas of the pioneers are spine-tingling, and in Scouting or Outward Bound our youth still seek the outdoor experience as bracing and even therapeutic. An early and provident fear of nature is felt by all roused to work for shelter or to prevent hunger, by all wary of natural hazards, by all who button up before winter. In this, the ego boundary must also be maintained in competition and cooperation with other egos, and so an elaborate superstructure of emotions emerges within culture. But this is always within the fundamental tension of the self against the natural world.

Indeed, we have become modern just as we have become very clear about this struggle and kept our nerve in it. Modernity began when Descartes divorced mind from matter, and the self was already lonesome in Newton's mechanistic universe. In Darwin's jungle that alienation greatly increased, under the variant dualism of the organism struggling against its world. If man has no horns or fangs, he has his hands and brain. Marx dealt with the hands, Freud with the mind, interpreting each as an organ of combat with the environment. As had Darwin, Marx found that man rises up out of nature to be set in dialectical struggle with it by means of his laboring, and such "laboring" always gives Marxist logic an emotional dimension. The class struggles are the cultural superstructure, since the products of labor are inequitably distributed, but the passion with which Marxism opposes social injustice is a function of its underlying conviction that man has to earn his way against nature.

For Freud too, the self evolves out of nature but is set against it. Because it cannot survive alone, the self consents to the restrictions of civilization, confined to culture because nature poses far more terror. "Nature rises up before us, sublime, pitiless, inexorable." "She destroys us, coldly, cruelly, callously. ...It was because of these very dangers with which nature threatens us that we united together and created culture. ...Indeed, it is the principal task of culture, its *raison d'être*, to defend us against nature."<sup>1</sup> But there we find too short-lived a security, and we unconsciously generate the illusion of religion (differently but not unlike the way in which Marx held that frustrated laborers accept the opiate of a heavenly father). Freud hopes to cure this illusion and to leave us rational, with science as our savior instead. But he knows that in the end, "obscure, unfeeling and unloving powers determine men's fate."<sup>2</sup>

The first mood here is one of being resolute against the storm but later we discover that the storm is raging within. We suffer, and lest we suffer the more, we organize ourselves creatively for a while, kept in a broken wholeness by just this apprehension. But afterwards we are gripped by loneliness, overcome by pathos as clods fall over the coffin at a mother's grave, or, as in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, when the cold, grey sea

flows over us. Even these emotions belong, for we are not human until we can be uneasy, and we hardly want that "eternal note of sadness" entirely taken from life. Still, there is a breaking point, and, unless there are other emotions to relieve the tragic sense, it alone makes us ill. So the modern mind has become unnerved, for all its boldness, increasingly competent, decreasingly confident, and the strong arm of the laborer becomes a fist flung into nature, protesting with a god-damned scream, Sartre's *Nausea* or Camus' *Sisyphus* portrays this *angst*. The Buddha was right, the natural *samsara*-world is suffering, *dukkha*, a pathetic place through and through, where the self is driven by its thirst, *tanha*, libido. The whole of it, to borrow a place name from the Virginia pioneers, is a "Dismal Swamp." But we have no *nirvana* in which we can put out our passions, we are caught on a wheel of hurt, until a not so distant day when, for the individual, death will extinguish those passions, and a much more distant day when, for the race, nature will put all passions out in that universal heat death which the physicists expect and the biologists fear.

What was earlier a healthy, composing fear of nature seems, under theories that overexplain the offensiveness and underexplain any attractiveness in nature, to have gotten us *lost* on a "darkling plain." Lostness in the wild is, by all accounts, an intensely emotional state which breeds irrationality and disorganization, and in which we become our own worst enemies.

**III. Emotions of Continuity: The Nature We Embrace and Love.** That we can be upset when *lost* depends upon a baseline emotion of being *at home*. Our homes are cultural places in their construction, but what we add again is that there is a natural foundation, a sense of belongingness to the landscape. For all those boundaries which we defend against the external world, our emotions are not confined to those of separateness, but we know the bitter with the sweet, the rose with its thorns. Is this sheer ambivalence, or can we redescribe that opposition under a larger ecology?

The American settlers found that they had no sooner conquered a wilderness than they had come to love a land. Theirs was a promised land, even though they fought for it, nor are these biblical allusions incidental. After the conquest, there was time to rejoice in the sunshine and the rain, in seedtime and harvest, in peaks and prairies, in the orchard in bloom, in the smell of the new-mown hay. "We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand!"<sup>3</sup> Millions learned that chorus, sung in voices not less rousing as it was transposed from Oklahoma to Iowa or the Sierras, though it may not be incidental that it was sung first in the Indian territories. But East or West, and not only transcontinentally but globally, we have never far to seek for such emotional satisfactions.

Few persons want their environments without landscaping, without trees and grass, flowers and gardens, lakes and sky. Of those drawn to the city for livelihood or security, the vastest portion elect the *sub-urbs* so as to remain also near the country, in some place not consummately urban, but where there is more green than anything else, where, with the neighbors, there are fencerows and cardinals, dogwoods and rabbits. For most Americans the ideal life is not so much urban as it is "town and country." We cherish our hills of home, our rivers, our bays, our country drives. Most of us identify so with some countryside that we get a lump in the throat when we must leave it, or when we return after an absence. We have deep affections toward persons and communities, but our affections toward the city, *per se*, are usually exceeded by those which we have towards the landscape.

The notion of evolved fittedness includes congeniality, as well as opposition, but Darwin never quite said this. Nature is not a home ready to hand and we must live in what psychologists call "built environments," urban and rural. Yet this is subtended by the earthen life-support system of which we have again become so aware, and these connections are not only biophysical, they are psychological. If we are emotionally built so as to draw together socially against nature, we also are emotionally built so as to be attracted to skies and plains, pets and flowers, mountains and beaches, waterfalls and meadows. Some may say that this is just a matter of taste and frills, but we have to add that such matters, especially those that influence our moods of well-being and upset, not only have a significant psychological reality but even reveal truth about the world. Why should we ever have evolved the aesthetic sense, if it but makes us freaks of nature? Our emotions defend the organic self, but they also stretch it out to integrate it into its place.

In an analysis of the autobiographies of three hundred geniuses, Edith Cobb concluded that they characteristically recall from their middle childhood a period "when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of profound continuity with natural processes." It is to this encounter that, in the creativity of their adult years, "these writers say they return in memory in order to renew the power and impulse to create at its very source, a source which they describe as the experience of emerging not only into the light of consciousness but into a living sense of dynamic relationship with the outer world. In these memories the child appears to experience both a sense of discontinuity, an awareness of his own unique separateness and identity, and also a continuity, a renewal of relationship with nature as process."<sup>4</sup> We are genetically prepared for this exchange with nature, yet it is so innovative that each individual becomes virtually a species in itself. The child is exalted by a

rediscovery of those powers of autonomous agency in which the race has evolved, but the dominant impulse is a sense of immanence in the natural process, more relational than oppositional, more romance than tragedy. To finger a stick, to throw rocks into the creek, to build a fire, to run with a dog across a field, to watch the sparrows—all awaken a sense of wonder at both the natural drama and the part the person is permitted to play in it. Nature is a foil for the self, yet so diversely so across the many cultures and centuries of these geniuses that any environmental determinism is discredited and replaced with an environmental reciprocity.

In his autobiography, Carl Jung recalls being gripped in early childhood by the large stones in his family garden, and returning there to regain those emotions in his adult years. With advancing age, he developed an intricate symbolic relationship with the stone "Tower," a rustic house which he himself built by stages on the scenic upper lake of Zurich. In this rural place, he writes, "I am in the midst of my true life, I am most deeply myself. ... At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing in the Tower that has not grown into its own form over the decades, nothing with which I am not linked. ... Silence surrounds me almost audibly, and I live 'in modest harmony with nature.'" Later, in retrospect, he concluded, "The world into which we are born is brutal and cruel, and at the same time of divine beauty. Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning is a matter of temperament. ... I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle. ... There is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is enough to set these emotions of continuity and discontinuity, like the *yang* and the *yin*, forever in symmetry and oscillation, cautioning only, to follow that Taoist metaphor, that the nature we oppose is not itself evil, but that the good lies rather in the creative tension of order and disorder. Still, the *yang* and the *yin* tended in the East to cancel each other out and to leave an ultimate nothingness, overcome by that Buddhist *sunyata* before which some rejoice and others recoil. Our Western accounts find more historical development, more novelty, and even hope for progress. The vector is superimposed on the circle so as to form a rising spiral. The person is an evolutionary thesis of nature, set in antithesis to it, and yet drawn toward synthesis with it. But the socialists in their present dialectical struggles have neglected that original thesis and consuming synthesis. Or, for those who prefer scientific to philosophical and religious metaphors,

nature offers both resistance and conductance to life, and currents, whether biological, psychological, or electrical, can flow only as aroused and energized in the interplay of both,

Nature is the bosom whence we come and go, and we here want to put in place those emotions that gather round the name "Mother Nature," even if one can make out no Father God, those emotions which Freud thought so misplaced. These emotions cheer for the natural parenting, for those generative, sustentative energies of this earthen home, productive forces strikingly present in the only nature we know in any complexity and detail. Life is something nature hands us, and, given these brains and hands, genes and blood chemistries, life remains nine parts natural for every one part it becomes artificial. We are born clean of culture, for any culture can be emplaced in any newborn, though we are not humanized without such education. But we are not born clean of nature, and in any cultural education we do ill to neglect those emotions which are native to this birth. We are born to die, but it is life rather than death which is the principal mystery that comes out of nature, and our emotions are stirred proportionately. The myth of Antaeus is true: man is an invincible wrestler, but loses his strength if he takes both feet from his mother earth. Adam lost his Eden when he spurned it, and fell into labor and pain. Human emotions fit us for defending the self, aloft and transcendent over nature, but they ought still the more to fit us to that natural environment which transcends us. These are emotions that we all live *by*, but they are emotions that some of us live *for*.

#### NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. W. D. Robson-Scott (New York: Liveright, 1955), p. 26f.
2. Sigmund Freud, "The Question of a *Weltanschauung*," trans. James Strachey, in *Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1964), XXII, 167.
3. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*
4. Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). The quotation is from Cobb's synopsis of her book in *Daedalus* 88 (1959), 537-548, specifically p. 538f.
5. Carl G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 225f, p. 358f.