

On Desiring Nature

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Now that modern societies have at last more or less conceded the necessity for environmental sustainability, eco-philosophical inquiry can focus a little more concertedly on the question of what such sustainability would consist in – what exactly it would take to make our societies environmentally sustainable. A *prima facie* answer to this question seems ready enough to hand. Modern societies will become environmentally sustainable when they *fit into nature*, where by nature I mean the larger life-systems of the planet. Instead of monstrosly devouring these life-systems, as we are currently doing, we need to get ourselves into ecological proportion, so to speak, becoming biologically integrated into the biosphere as a whole.

True. But how might this be achieved? Two ways are usually cited. On the one hand we could rein in our desires and reduce our consumption, thereby lessening our impact on the biosphere. On the other hand we could continue to allow our desires free rein, yet find alternative, low-impact ways of satisfying them. So, for example, instead of reducing our energy consumption, we could switch to renewable energy sources. Or we could re-design the built environment so that it made use of natural energy flows. Buildings could, for instance, be designed to avoid artificial air conditioning by mimicking termite mounds, which use internal chimneys to regulate indoor temperature. Commodity production generally could be designed along biomimicry lines, so that artefacts were modelled on natural entities, where the design of natural entities does ensure that they can viably coexist with other elements of the ecosystem.¹

Obviously both these strategies – limiting desires on the one hand and satisfying them in harmless ways on the other – are commendable. They will reduce our impact on nature. But nature needs more than a reduction of our impact. Nature is not a given from which we can endlessly take, even if by doing so we do no harm. Nature has to be continually recreated, not from some source outside the system but from inside it, from the very entities that draw their life and sustenance from it. “Fitting into nature” then means more than merely not harming it, minimizing our impact on it; rather it means actively replenishing it, actively reconstituting the biosphere in everything we do. Ultimately this is a matter of wanting what the biosphere needs us to want. Our

¹ Biomimicry takes mechanisms found in nature and reproduces them in the design of artefacts. So, for example, paints have been designed to emulate the molecular structure of the lotus leaf, which is such that dirt particles cannot stick to it but are rolled off by raindrops. Surfaces treated with such specially designed paint are self-cleaning and thus do not require the use of chemical cleansing agents. For many examples of biomimetic design, see Janine Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2002.

desires have to mesh with the desires of other elements of the ecosystem in the sense that the effects of the actions we take to satisfy our desires must afford the very conditions needed by other elements of the system. This is how the biosphere works. Every being, in seeking its own good, is also serving the interests of others. So – one of my favorite examples – the bettong, a miniature kangaroo in Australia, wants truffles, and its digging for truffles aerates the forest soil in just the way necessary for forest health.²

In nature this intermeshing of interests has of course been achieved through natural selection: the bettong does not *choose* to want truffles; it has simply evolved to want them. Human desire on the other hand is patently not bound in this way. Our desires are mediated by culture and cultures vary across space and through time. In our present culture of consumerism our desires are deeply contrary to what the biosphere needs us to want: the actions we take to satisfy our desires generally do not create, as by-products, the very conditions required for the sustenance of other elements of the ecosystem. To the contrary, the actions we take to satisfy our desires generally bring about as their side-effects conditions inimical to other elements. To change this - to bring about the complete transvaluation of desires that would be required to re-mesh human desire in the biosphere, rather than merely minimizing the impact of our current consumer wants without significantly revising them - would involve a major cultural shift.

How could such a shift be achieved? How could we be induced to start truly and actively desiring what the biosphere needs us to desire instead of what we presently do desire?

Education is the solution usually cited in this connection. Sciences such as ecology and conservation biology are beginning to provide insight into the requirements of biotic systems. Some of this science is finding its way into sustainability programs in schools and local communities. Many schools in my home state of Victoria, here in Australia, for instance, are auditing their energy and water use, inaugurating waste treatment and recycling systems, establishing vegetable gardens and monitoring the ecological status of local waterways and bushlands. Students, duly educated, are beginning to modify their collective behaviour in response to the needs of the larger life-system.³

² Such digging not only provides aeration, but also improves the soil's capacity for absorption of water and minerals as well as creating suitable sites for seed germination and seedling establishment. This in turn furthers topsoil formation and health by providing a refuge for microorganisms. See Greg Martin, "The role of small ground-foraging mammals in topsoil health and biodiversity: Implications to management and restoration" in *Ecological Management and Restoration* 4, 2, 2009

³ For details of Australian Sustainable Schools programs, see www.environment.gov.au/education/aussi/index.html and www.ceres.org.au/education/External_programs/Sustainable_Schools

The science is crucial, and the education programs that flow from it are invaluable. But they are unlikely in and of themselves to bring about the wholesale transvaluation of desires that deep sustainability requires. Desire is after all not such an easy thing to educate. Desire is inextricable from emotion: love and hatred, fear and aversion, anger and tenderness - all such emotions inform and are informed by complex textures of desire. Our desires are accordingly unlikely to be shifted unless our emotions are shifted, and emotion is not likely to be shifted in a fundamental way by science. This is because, firstly, science addresses itself exclusively to the intellect, and while emotion is by no means impervious to reason, rational argument is notoriously ineffectual in bringing about deep-seated emotional change. Secondly, science is profoundly dualistic in its representation of nature, in the sense that it represents nature in purely materialist terms. This is as true of ecology as of other sciences: ecosystems are figured as purely physical systems, devoid of inner correlates such as self-mattering and self-meaning. How then can we expect *people*, whose values and deepest motivations are shaped within meaning-systems, to become emotionally engaged with systems which are represented as wholly lacking in self-meaning? To ask humans to allow their emotions and hence their desires to be shaped by the activities of ecological entities which are “blind”, in the sense that they are moved merely by physical causes rather than by meanings, seems to be asking us to give up meaning in favour of the meaninglessness of mere matter. This is surely, in effect, asking us to give up nothing less than our humanity. No wonder people resist the call of deep ecologists and others to “ecological selfhood”, if this is what ecological selfhood implies! If it is to be possible for humans truly to “fit into nature”, in the sense of wanting what nature requires us to want, then we shall have first to reconceive of life-systems as meaning systems – as systems which, like human systems, are imbued with psycho-activity as well as physicality, with subject status as well as object status. In other words, setting aside the dualist understanding of nature encoded in science is a pre-condition for allowing our emotions to be engaged by nature and hence for a transvaluation of desires to occur.

Assuming that we do set our dualist assumptions aside, at least experimentally, in the interests of deep sustainability, what would then need to happen for us actually to become emotionally engaged with nature?

First-hand observation in the field may be a key. By this I mean not experimental manipulation of natural entities for the purpose of answering preconceived questions about them – the kind of observation mandated by science. Rather I mean something more akin to the nature-watching of field naturalists. Patiently and unobtrusively observing a family of wrens in one’s garden or the activities of a spider in the corner of one’s garage or the changing seasonal theatre of one’s local creek may induce, in time, a sense of involvement with these existences. If a neighbour’s cat slaughters the wrens or a visitor stomps on the spider or a local factory dumps chemicals in the creek, one is likely to become upset. This kind of “loving attention” or “attentive love”, as feminist theorists have described it⁴, has the effect of making natural entities

⁴ For an account of loving attention, see Sarah Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking”, *Feminist Studies* 6, 1980, 342-367; and Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985. Goethean science offers another epistemology of loving attention. For a treatment of this epistemology, see Isis Hazel

morally salient to us: to the extent that we have become emotionally invested in their lives, we shall want to protect them from harm.

However, while an overall attitude of attentive love may induce us to limit our impact on nature, to conduct our own lives in ways that do no harm to nature, it is not calculated actually to reconfigure our desires, to re-pattern them in the radically new and creative ways that would be required if they were actively to replenish and serve the needs of nature. Attentive love may, in other words, induce us to rein in our desires but it is unlikely to be powerful enough in its effects to bring about a complete transvaluation of desires, in accordance with the requirements of “fitting into nature”. It still leaves us, so to speak, on the outside of the system, looking in sympathetically, even cherishingly, but as spectators, rather than as actors within the system, shaped in our inmost impulses by its imperatives.

To situate ourselves psychically as actors within the system, with a view truly to “fitting into nature”, we need, I think, to take a further step, one that could be described in terms of *synergy*. By synergy I mean, very precisely, the coming together of two or more parties in such a way that the self-meanings they bring to the encounter become mutually inflected and enlarged by the communication that takes place between them. Through synergy, self-meanings become mutual rather than exclusively self-referencing, and in the process such meanings are enlarged and transformed. Out of these enlarged self-meanings, new patterns of desire arise, patterns which bind into their texture the signatures of the other parties to the encounter.

In what could instances of synergy between humans and nature consist? It is perhaps relatively straightforward to imagine such interactions between humans and certain communicative creatures. Some musicians, for example, have written about making music with birds or whales.⁵ Such encounters are likely to be potent. Imagine the experience of musically improvising with, say, a songbird - realizing that the bird is sharing a little of its self-meaning with you, that it is responding communicatively to your musical rhythms and that together the two of you are creating something which is larger than either of you yet which still bears within its patterns the musical signature of each of you. Such an experience is likely to expand the horizons of your expressiveness, binding the repertoire of feelings expressed by the songbird into the repertoire of feelings musically expressed by you, bringing you inside the songbird system, activating in you the feelings that shape that system.

It is less straightforward to provide examples of synergy with the life system at large. Setting our dualist assumptions aside and allowing that the world is potentially communicative and responsive to us, we will have to imagine forms of *address* conducive to self/world encounter.

Brook, “Dualism, Monism and the Wonder of Materiality as Revealed through Goethean Observation”, *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature* 6, 2009. Ecological philosophers such as Aldo Leopold and John Rodman advocate yet another version of such an epistemology.

⁵ See, for instance, Jim Nollman’s on-line Interspecies Newsletter; also his book, *The Charged Border: Where Whales and Humans Meet*, Henry Holt, 1999.

At this point the quest for deep sustainability perhaps intersects with the practices of religion or spirituality. For one way it may be possible for us to address the world is via *invocation*, in other words by asking the larger scheme of things to manifest its self-meaning to us.

How might the larger scheme of things be expected to respond to invocation? Traditionally, in spiritual contexts that allow for such response, it does so through meaningful conjunctions, serendipitous or synchronistic arrangements of circumstances. In this sense the “language” of the world is a concretised and particularized one. It is the language of poetics, of imagery, of meaning conveyed through the symbolic resonance of *things*. It is in such language then – traditionally a language of poetic narrative – that our invocations may need to be couched. It follows that in any society in which desire is reconfigured truly to “fit into nature”, the ultimate frames of reference may need to be poetic ones; science together with other forms of thinking and knowing may need to be subsumed under and oriented towards larger poetic narratives.

When I address the world by way of a narrative frame of reference, a story with the kind of poetic undertow that characterized the numinous legends and tales of ancient societies, and when the world responds to me with an emanation of circumstances clearly referenced to that same story, I cannot help but be smitten. The response of the world is unmistakable in its poetic appositeness, an appositeness already familiar and recognizable to us from the night-time realm of dreams, or those dreams at any rate imprinted with the strangeness of a source beyond the circle of ordinary experience. And there is in this appositeness, in the attunement of this response to the particular poetics of our call, a rightness, a directedness to the meanings at our own most personal core, that draws us inescapably into intimacy. Each time the world arranges itself with poetic intent, each time it manifests in the poetic image of our invocation, it is as if it presents itself to us for the very first time. It is as if the veil of the ordinary is drawn aside and a mythic world that exists only for our eyes, pristine and untouched, still dripping with the dew of creation, is vouchsafed to us. There is such intimacy in this revelation, such incomparable largesse in the gift, such breath-taking unexpectedness, we cannot help but to surrender to it. Thereafter we will become as infatuated, at some level of function, as a mystic, holding the world as a beloved in our hearts despite the undiminished perils, griefs and trials it presents to us in our everyday transactions.

Invocation in the present sense may be practised privately or collectively. Contemporary examples of collective practices include forms of invocation involved in bioregional rituals - ceremonies or festivals enacted to celebrate place or landscape or other aspects of the greater life-system. One such festival, a classic spring paean to regeneration and renewal, is held every year in my own inner-city neighbourhood.⁶ It is organized by CERES, the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies, our local environment park, situated on the banks of the Merri Creek in Melbourne. The purpose of the event is to welcome back to the creek the beautiful little azure-blue bird called Sacred Kingfisher. The Sacred Kingfisher migrates all the

⁶ See, for instance, Freya Mathews, “Singing Up the City”, PAN Philosophy Activism Nature 1, 2000.

way down from south-east Asia to its ancestral nesting grounds in southern Australia, but decades ago it disappeared from the Merri Creek, due to urbanization and industrialization. However, after community-run revegetation projects have brought indigenous vegetation back to the Merri, the kingfisher has returned.

Thousands of local people attend the festival, and are welcomed to country by indigenous elders and dancers. Hundreds of performers participate in the ceremony, including children from schools all around Melbourne. These children have special parts to play, dressing up as frogs and insects, birds and spirits of the creek. They all learn the Kingfisher Boogie, a little dance that imitates the characteristic call and shake of the sacred kingfisher. Each year a different Dreaming story, offered by local Indigenous elders, provides the theme for the large-scale performance that weaves these Dreaming elements into a contemporary narrative of regeneration and belonging. Each year, too, the event becomes more ceremonial, with the audience being invited to participate in ritual gestures, such as taper-lighting, and ritual processions, so that despite its trappings of telegraph poles and urban horizons, the creekside becomes, by nightfall, eerily evocative of an archaic setting, with devotees walking and dancing amongst sacred fires, invoking the spirits of their homeplace. Invoked in this way, implicitly or explicitly, the site responds, with dazzlingly synchronized poetics. One year the performance, based on a Dreaming story of Rainbow Woman, culminated in an actual rainbow framing the dancing ground. Another year the “audience” was invited to process along the creek to plant lighted tapers in a mound of sand that represented the home of departed souls. A tree stood beside this sacred mound. A harpist sat beneath this “spirit” tree, playing watery music for the returning souls. When the sand-mound was filled with burning tapers, the spirit tree itself burst into ear-splitting song, as thousands of cicadas chose it and only it, at that moment, for their evening vocals. In such ways each year the poetics of the festival script are enlarged by the poetic contributions of the “en-chanted” site, and the resulting “performance” is uncannily potent and numinous.

Of course festivals are not the only forms of poetic address to world. Many activities can assume an invocational significance if undertaken with appropriate intent. Pilgrimage, for instance. In China, one of the original and most ancient sites of pilgrimage, mountains have always been the pilgrim’s destination. China’s official religions, Daoism and Buddhism, have situated their temples and monasteries, and dreamed up their gods and immortals, to fit in with this tradition. Nevertheless, it was originally the mountains themselves that were the sacred objects.⁷ But the act of pilgrimage can awaken a communicative dimension in any landform. Pilgrimage can, in other words – like many other forms of invocation – “sing up” the world, as indigenous people here in Australia say. I myself experienced this when I undertook, with two pilgrim companions, a walk to the source of our Merri Creek. The journey to the headwaters took us seven days. Along the way we were showered with unexpected synchronicities, poetic interceptions and revelations. The little creek responded to our “singing” like a true goddess, with poetic gifts and graces in

⁷ See Susan Naquin and Chun-Fang Yu, *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992

abundance that transformed our modest outing into something larger than we could have imagined.⁸

Traditional cultures, especially indigenous ones, have always understood the efficacy of invocation in eliciting poetic responses from the world. This, rather than a wish to manipulate reality by sorcerous means, has probably been the impulse behind much that we in modern civilization regard as “magic”. In modern civilization, magic in its instrumental (sorcerous) sense would appear to have been completely superseded by science, but that should not blind us to the (arguably) reliable efficacy of invocation, nor to the metaphysical implication of this efficacy – that it points to the psychophysical nature of reality. To experience for ourselves the intimately apposite poetic responsiveness of place or landscape to our communicative overtures, of creek or river or mountain to our pilgrimage, is to be shifted on our metaphysical moorings. It is to feel graced, even loved, by world, and flooded with a gratitude, a loyalty, that rearranges in us the deepest wellsprings of desire. This communicativeness that can be called up anywhere, any time, is surely related to the poetic dynamic at the core of reality that Aboriginal people here in Australia call “Dreaming”. Once we have discovered this intimate and responsive core for ourselves, we might begin to feel towards the world the way Aboriginal people feel towards their Dreamings. Psychoanalyst Craig San Roque has poignantly described this feeling:

“‘Dreaming’. You hear them talk about it, this sweet thing. Sometimes they call it ‘The Dreaming’⁹ an approximation for the English language speakers, sometimes in Arrernte they call it ‘Altjerre’ or in the Western Desert language ‘Tjukurrpa’, or the Warlpiri, ‘Jukurpa’. What does this really mean, this state of things which brings tears to Paddy Sims’ eyes, seated cross legged before a canvas, singing quietly, painting ‘The Milky Way Story’. This thing which women depict and men define in sand-drawings, deft fingers moving upon canvasses stretched on the bare ground, or smudged on a backyard cement slab near the Todd River? Tjukurrpa, land claims, faraway looks, marking this rock and that, casually. Reverence, breaking into song in creek beds, shrugging, walking off. Tjukurrpa, lightly held, with a gravity so exquisite, so solid, so omnipresent. Tjukurrpa, perhaps the most misunderstood, most ignored, most beautiful, most mysterious, most exploited, most obliterated phenomenon in this country.”¹⁰

Through communicative encounters with a world that seems so readily to entwine its poetics with ours, apparently simply for the joy of wrapping us and itself in layer upon layer of narrative meaning, we might come to share those faraway looks, that dreamy-eyed love that binds Aboriginal people so indissolubly, so unnegotiably, to “country”, to world. This will be the “background love”, akin to the background radiation in physics, that emanates from our contact with source, and within the field of which all our specific day-to-day desires are constellated. But how transformed our

⁸ See Freya Mathews, “The Merri Creek: to the Source of the Given” in *Reinhabiting Reality: towards a Recovery of Culture*, SUNY Press, Albany New York, 2005

¹⁰ Craig San Roque, “On Tjukurrpa: Painting Up and Building Thought”, *Social Analysis* 50, 2, Summer 2006, 148

day-to-day desires will be when constellated within this field! All our desires will now be referenced to this background desire for the poetic attention of our world. Our sense of self will be inflected with desire for this attention; our activities will aim to attract the beam of this great significance into every corner of our lives. With the potential for illumination by this transformative light, our instinct for survival will find a new context and the opinions of our fellows will no longer serve as the exclusive yardstick of our personal significance. Gone then will be our anxiety about the image we cut with others, and with it our hankering for the endless accessories and commodities that announce our social status and so drive consumerism in our present culture. Gone too, in this poetic effulgence, will be our susceptibility to the trivial indulgences and tawdry trinkets of such consumerism, the endless repetition and distraction parading as variety. For our aesthetic delectation there will instead be a feast of unique beauties, both miniature and vast, as well as the enthralling poetics of encounter itself, of unfolding intimacies with an array of differently-bodied presences. Our desires will have been realigned, expanded, tuned to new and larger possibilities of self-actualization through poetic engagement with the multi-minded reality of a psycho-active universe. Framed by such a larger, essentially erotic, poetics of existence, our day-to-day desires, and the day-to-day practices that spring from them, will indeed become aligned with the intrinsic psychodynamics of nature.

In conclusion then, it has in recent years become clear, as a result of the environmental crisis, that a re-negotiation of our modern civilization's relationship with reality is required. Ecology has thus far provided a key to this re-negotiation. But ecology is still a science and in that sense perpetuates the materialist premise of science: ecology is the study of living systems under their purely physical or causal aspect. Insofar as human culture is a meaning system however, it cannot, as we have seen, properly be subsumed under a purely physico-causal system. If human culture is to fit into nature, actively replenishing and recreating it, as true sustainability requires, human desire must become inherently contoured to the needs of nature. For this to occur, nature must be understood by us as structured by meanings as well as by physical causality: reality must be recognised as a psychophysical system with an inner, poetic aspect as well as an outer, causal one, capable of capturing and commanding us emotionally as well as making a claim on our moral consideration. We might use the term *ontopoetics* to denote both the order of meanings that structure this inner aspect of being at large, on the one hand, and the practices by which we engage with this order of meanings, on the other.¹¹ In that case we might say that while the science of ecology, with its ethics of restraint, has defined the first phase of the re-negotiation of our relationship with reality, a cultural project of *ontopoetics*, with its goal of the wholesale transvaluation of desires, may be integral to the second, upcoming phase, of what can no longer be termed merely an environment movement, but must be revisioned as a revolution in the very context of meaning for human cultures.

¹¹ For an introduction to the idea of *ontopoetics*, see Freya Mathews, "Invitation to *Ontopoetics*", *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature* 6, 2009.