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Nature, Identity and Meaning: The Humanising of Nature and the Naturising of the Human Subject

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Over recent decades it has become clear that aspects of our relationship to nature pose significant problems, not only for us, but for nature itself. Thus, it has imparted an urgency amongst environmental philosophers as incumbent upon them to consider the ways that we relate to nature and to ask what exactly each involves. Consequently, the concept of "nature" has become a central theoretical concern, not least in attempts to establish criteria for its moral consideration and subsequent preservation. What is surprising, however, is that although the catalyst for the preservation of nature is generally thought to have been instigated by aesthetic concerns, and is thought by some, therefore, to provide a natural foundation for its future flourishing, the irony is that aesthetic considerations do not achieve the kind of recognition or reputation that one might have expected.[1] Indeed, rather than embracing the role that aesthetic experience and value can play, the opposite tends to be rather more the case.

A major problem for those of a 'foundationalist' persuasion, for example, is that aesthetic value is irredeemably anthropocentric.[2] On this view it is not nature *in itself* that is valued, rather it is a value that is *projected* onto nature in an inescapably biased, preferential and utilitarian fashion. Even ostensible 'pragmatists' in the field, by which I mean those who advocate the essentiality of human experience and value, fail to acknowledge aesthetic experience in anything but a superficially 'thin' sense; that is to say, in the way they assume it to concern mere visual appearance or some *use* value, recreational for example, when it fits their ethical agenda.[3]

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1 See for example Eugene C. Hargrove, 'The Historical Foundations of American Attitudes', *Environmental Ethics,* 1 (1979), 209–40.

2 I am referring here to those philosophers who seek to establish some objective ontological basis for justifying, what they view to be, nature's 'intrinsic' value. See for example Eric Katz, *Nature as Subject: Human Obligation and Natural Community* (Lanham, 1997) and Keekok Lee, *The Natural and the Artefactual: The Implications of Deep Science and Deep Technology for Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford, 1999).

3 I am referring here, for example, to Alan Holland, Andrew Light and John O'Neill,

A similar situation can be identified in the recent increase of concern within environmental ethics for what are termed 'appeals to nature'; that is to say, claims that nature or a natural state of affairs possesses some significant value such that it should be weighed in moral decision-making and perhaps protected in public policy. These appeals are frequently raised by objections to the proliferation of certain biotechnological interventions – for example, the modification of genetic material, the practice of crossing species boundaries and cloning. What is noteworthy is that while objections to such interventions are regularly couched in aesthetic language (when they are condemned as violating the *sanctity* of nature, or as being *unnatural*) the question of what normative force, if any, these 'thick' aesthetic expressions may involve remains, largely, unexplored in aesthetically critical ways.[4]

What is perhaps more surprising is that in the discipline of environmental aesthetics itself, a field of endeavour dedicated to promoting an aesthetic agenda within environmental philosophy, there is, with notable exceptions, a prominent stance, known as scientific cognitivism, which takes the view that the *only* appropriate approach to the appreciation of nature is that provided by relevant knowledge about it, namely, that supplied by the natural sciences.[5]

1 The humanising of nature

The general significance of Ronald W. Hepburn's contribution to the aesthetics of nature resides in his timely and insightful grasp of the need for a different kind of aesthetic approach to nature from that of art. The basis for Hepburn's ideas here ostensibly established him as the founder of environmental aesthetics and what we now refer to as a 'contextually thick' aesthetic approach, which stands in stark contrast to those mentioned earlier. Hepburn recognised that a serious appreciation of nature requires an approach that

the authors of *Environmental Values* (London, 2008).

4 An example that illustrates my claim here is the approach taken by Alan Holland in his investigation of the term 'unnatural'. Alan Holland, 'Unnaturalness', *Ludus Vitalis,* 22 (2014), 205–25.

5 A notable proponent of this stance is Allen Carlson. Carlson has recently revised his views, however, since he now concedes that both aesthetic subjectivity and scientific knowledge can be accommodated in the appreciation of nature. Allen Carlson, 'Nature, Aesthetic Appreciation and Knowledge', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 53 (1995), 393–400. A notable exception to this stance is Emily Brady's non-cognitivist stance in 'Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56 (1998), 139–47.

accommodates both nature's indeterminate and varying character as well as our multisensory and diverse understanding of it. Thus, and in contrast to art's limited and determined context, the appreciation of nature is always provisional – always contingent on some 'wider context' of human experience. This wider context, as Hepburn illustrates, emerges through the subjectivising of nature, or, what he chooses to call, the 'humanising' of nature, where our aesthetic capacity for 'metaphysical' and 'cosmic' imagination can extend our perception in ways that allow for deeper and more nuanced insights.

Of particular significance, however, is Hepburn's grasp of a paradox set up by the very notion of humanising itself, since in the humanising of nature, as he recognises, the reverse may happen: it may be more like a 'naturizing' of the human observer as he puts it.[6] It is Hepburn's notion of our being 'naturised' that is especially compelling in the way it reveals a nature that is an intuitive source of self-understanding; a nature, in other words, with which we identify and to which we relate in ways that are self-affirming. On the account that Hepburn provides we not only constitute the nature that we experience but the perspective that it offers can be construed as the wider context to which we look for meaning in making sense of our lives. While it is clearly metaphysical, it offers, nonetheless, a deeply penetrating and insightful grasp of nature as it exists in itself. Although Hepburn considers the influence that this wider context of experience can have on the attitudes we take towards nature and the value we attribute to it, my aim here, while by no means exhaustive, is to consider some specific ways in which we become naturised and the meaning that this self-identification with nature can exert upon our lives.

2 The naturising of the human subject

Hepburn identifies three kinds of 'nature' relationship.[7] The first nature relationship places emphasis on ourselves. In this Wordsworthian relationship,

6 Ronald W. Hepburn 'Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* 5 (1963), 195–209, 201 and 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in idem, '*Wonder' and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), 9–35, 21.

7 The definition of 'nature' assumed by Hepburn throughout his work is stated in footnote 1 of his 'The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 3 (1963), 195–209. He writes: 'By nature I shall simply mean all objects that are not human artefacts. I am ignoring the many possible disputes over natural objects that have received a marked, though limited, transformation at man's hands.'

as Hepburn refers to it, we see ourselves as 'over-against' nature and regard nature as our aesthetic and moral educator from which we seek 'messages' of instruction or inspiration. The second is the kind of relationship where the emphasis is upon nature. Nature here is distinctly 'other' and separate from us; it is understood as 'other regarding' and can be a source of 'wonder'. The third type Hepburn identifies, and the nature relationship I consider here, is one where we seek a 'oneness' with nature. In this relationship we create as well as discover that we partly constitute the nature we experience and come to know. Although this relationship has several variants, it is one where we become aware that our situation is not properly described as being over-against or as distinct from nature but is concerned with a need to unify, a need for reconciliation and a suspension of conflict.[8] This nature relationship is to be distinguished, however, from one of 'mystical union' of a spiritual or religious kind where the subject–-object distinction is overcome.[9] In the nature relationship proposed here, while we retain the subject–-object distinction (while we retain a clear sense of the boundaries and differences that exist between ourselves and the natural phenomenon that we apprehend), it is one where we come to identify with nature in ways that can be self-affirming.[10] As Hepburn explains:

> an aesthetic appreciation of nature, if serious, is necessarily a *self-exploration* also; for the energies, regularities, contingencies of nature are the energies, principles and contingencies that sustain my own embodied life and my own awareness. […] The human inner life has been nourished by images from the natural world: its self-articulation and development could hardly proceed without annexing or appropriating forms from the phenomenal world. They are annexed not in a systematic, calculating, craftsmanlike fashion, but rather through our being

8 Ibid., 199. Hepburn illustrates that there is not a single type of unification or 'oneness' with nature but that several notions can be distinguished. While the formulations vary greatly and substantially among themselves the vocabulary of oneness, as the key aesthetic principle, is a recurrent theme.

9 Ronald W. Hepburn 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination', *Environmental Values,* 5 (1996), 191–204, 198.

10 In the context of environmental ethics, the distinction I make here is thought to be an important one since ideas concerning identification with nature can prove problematic with a tendency to default into two opposite extremes. For an informed discussion, see David W. Kidner *Nature and Psyche: Radical Environmentalism and the Politics of Subjectivity* (New York, 2001), 245–56.

> imaginatively seized by them, and coming to cherish their expressive aptness, *and to rely upon them in our efforts to understand ourselves.*[11]

In this nature relationship, as Hepburn posits, we seek out patterns, analogous forms, affinities, connections, consistencies, inconsistencies, congruities and incongruities that span both the organic, inorganic, animate and inanimate world. Hepburn sees this imaginative activity as playing a regulative role in the way that it allows us to relate natural phenomena to our own stance and setting as human beings, thereby allowing us to see ourselves in distinct and unfamiliar ways. Hepburn offers the paradigm case in aesthetic experience of a falling autumn leaf to illustrate this.

We could, he says, merely observe the falling autumn leaf as a small, fluttering, reddish-brown material object. But if we simply watch it fall without any thoughtful contemplation, it must be robbed of its poignancy, 'its mute message of summer gone, its symbolising of all falling, our own included.'[12] Or we might compare the veins in the leaf to the veins in our own hands and view them as symbolising a sense of continuity in forms of life. Thus to contemplate natural phenomena in this way can prompt in us a sense of shared vulnerability, a sense of the transience and brevity that distinguishes all living things including ourselves. I want to emphasise here, however, that we do not simply, or necessarily, seek out physical similarities or attributes in the natural phenomena under contemplation but rather identify with its comportments (its modes of being) even though the given phenomenon may be quite distinct and different from ourselves.[13] Given the foregoing Hepburn, nevertheless, thinks that there can be an 'incompleteness' about the contemplation of the 'particular' thing and that 'metaphysical' or 'cosmic' imagination can persistently prompt us to reckon with, or take account of, the wider context or setting of human life. To illustrate this view, he relates his experience as a lone tarn walker as dusk falls in the Lake District.

While enjoying the contrasts between the undulating landscape and the smoothness of the water, the tiny addition of the moon's reflection on the tarn prompts what he describes as 'a momentous change' in his perception.[14]

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11 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot, 2001), 1–15, 5–6. (My emphasis – F. S.).

12 Ibid., 3.

13 Of course, we also identify comportments in nature that are perceived to be distinctly different from human behavior, but I do not consider these in this essay.

14 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values,* 7

No longer a lone tarn walker, he describes his aesthetic experience as one who now walks the surface of the planet suspended in a space that it shares with other heavenly bodies, planets, satellites and stars. He now sees his sense of bodily size, scale and position as determined by his relationships with these things. Compared to the immensity and seeming timelessness of the celestial bodies that surround him he comes to see planet Earth as a 'temporary' home. Indeed, as he suggests, should we take the perceptual standpoint offered by 'terrestrial evolution', importing even rudimentary evolutionary knowledge, we might come to recognise the sheer chanciness, randomness even, in which all entities and beings have come into existence including the planet itself.

The outcome of Hepburn's perceptual experience here is clearly one that emerges as a consequence of his metaphysical imagining triggered by the sudden appearance of the moon's reflection on the tarn. Of course, this is not to suggest, as Hepburn would agree, that his aesthetic experience of the landscape could not have remained a purely sensory one, delighting, as he clearly does earlier in his experience, in the distinct and ambient qualities of his physical surroundings. While we often do experience natural surroundings in this purely sensory way, delighting in the sheer beauty of its forms, colours, scales, ambiance and so on, throughout his work Hepburn is concerned to show that our aesthetic experience of the natural world is not limited to the merely sensory. Indeed, he thinks we need to acknowledge a duality in our aesthetic appreciation of nature, a sensuous component and a thought component. There is first a sensuous immediacy; we may be taken aback, for instance by the rolling away of cloud or mist from a landscape. Most often, however, an element of thought is present as we implicitly compare the *here* with *elsewhere*, *actual* with *possible*, *present* with *past* and so on. As Hepburn emphasises we are not mere detached, passive viewers since we carry with us the whole of our experience and not just what is experienced at any given moment. Thus he distinguishes between the 'trivial and the serious' in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. We want our experience to be of nature as it really is, not merely to consist of agreeable sensory stimuli or reverie: 'an aesthetic approach to nature is trivial to the extent that it distorts, ignores, suppresses truth about its objects, feels and thinks about them in ways that falsify how nature really is.'[15]

Nevertheless, he asks, does it follow that in the interest of 'depth' one must cancel out, or at least qualify, every response of simple delight to beast, bird, lake or meadow? There is certainly conflict here he thinks. While to seek out

(1998), 267–79, 273.

15 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 4.

depth would seem to rule out optimistic falsifications, we surely cannot claim that a consciousness of nature's dysteleology, or the threat of impending harm from industrial pollution or climate change, or from a recognition that nature may be drastically altered or destroyed in the more distant future, must always predominate in any aesthetic experience. He thinks it is a disturbing proposal if taken literally. Would it not be a self-sabotaging of aesthetic enjoyment as such? And, of course, such thought components do not always destroy or sabotage aesthetic experience. But if we are tempted to abstract from, attenuate or mute the disturbing thought content in any such case, is that not to move some way towards the trivial end of our scale? Can nature be made aesthetically contemplatable only by a sentimentalising, falsifying selectivity that ignores such realities? Hepburn believes that a serious aesthetic appreciation of nature necessarily falls between these extremes. If, for instance we can celebrate nature's overall animation, its vitality *creative* and *destructive* in indissoluble unity we may be able to reach a reflective equilibrium that balances vitality against melancholia, disillusionment or repulsion.

Hepburn invites us to consider another aesthetic example that illustrates the kind of reflective equilibrium of which he speaks. He asks us to consider the fresh green potential of early summer with the vitality of its bird song, its teaming insect life and its warming sun. Even in this positive perceptual frame we may yet come to see it as no more than a short interlude between the inertness of winter and the decay of autumn. It is easy to suppose how this latter 'thought component' can turn into a more metaphysically imaginative one. Set this landscape in the wider, perceptual, context of space and time, and the reality presents a perspective where life's resurgence may be perceived as ephemeral and fragile. Indeed, when contemplated in the wider cosmic context, it may prompt one to see that life cannot be sustained except in conditions of the utmost rarity. So poignancy – a threatened even doomed quality – may be imparted to the setting. If, however, we allow our imagination to become increasingly metaphysical we might, more optimistically he suggests, come to see nature as revealing its true self as it always is, as fundamentally fecund, its wintry inertness no more than a period of inactivity, the contingent condition for ever more resurgence. Thus we may come to realise how the vastness of an expanding universe with its hugely dispersed occupants is the necessary, contingent and, therefore, benign condition of the life we now enjoy and contemplate in this early summer setting.[16] What Hepburn

16 Hepburn, 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination', 196.

is spelling out here is 'ingredient in his experience', as he puts it, 'not propositions of scientific cosmology or metaphysical theory' but what he calls the 'posture of consciousness' to which they condense.[17]

To speak of nature is to speak of the only ultimate source of all creativity, of all potentiality, evidenced by the diversity, complexity and uniqueness of the beings and entities that the planet supports. As noted earlier, however, this 'creative' aspect of nature's persona stands in stark contrast to its 'destructive' persona which can be seen, for example, as indifferently destructive of long evolving species through climate change, earthquake, volcanic eruptions, vast tidal surges, in competitive defeat or the impact of bodies from beyond the Earth. While these aspects of nature's destructive persona may remain elusive to many of us, nature's destructive persona can be patently grasped, for example, in the everyday experience of predation of one form or another.

It can be seen, for example, in witnessing the fox's steely-eyed stare at the unsuspecting rabbit and the finality with which it is despatched; or the spider poised to spring upon the hapless fly held fast by its web; or the decimation of long established trees by pathogens of various kinds. Or to use Hepburn's example, the snapping up by a bird of a brilliantly coloured butterfly newly emerged from its chrysalis before it has barely tried out it wings. Such experiences may prompt thought on how the well-being of each particular entity depends upon its preying successfully on others. But it can also prompt us to see the destruction of the huge potentiality that exists in nature; the potentialities of individual beings and entities started and quickly brought to a frustrated end; as well as the suffering inflicted endlessly by one entity upon another including our own species. The notion of suffering would seem to be a distinct characteristic of nature's destructive persona. As Arthur Schopenhauer attests:

> If the immediate and direct purpose of our life is not suffering then existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world: for it is absurd to suppose that the endless affliction of which the world is everywhere full, and which arises out of the need and distress pertaining essentially to life, should be purposeless and purely accidental. Each individual misfortune, to be sure, seems an exceptional occurrence; but misfortune in general is the rule.[18]

17 Ibid.

18 Arthur Schopenhauer, 'On the Suffering of the World' in idem, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London, 2004), 3 (Aphorism §1).

While Schopenhauer sees suffering as an inevitable constituent of existence, he thinks that human suffering is the greater by virtue of our capacity for thinking and reflection, qualities that he claims are limited in non-humans. Nevertheless, all beings and entities, including human beings, inflict, and are afflicted by, suffering of one kind or another. Like non-humans we are subject, not only to all manner of parasitic entities – mosquitoes, fleas and ticks to name but a palpable few – but to predatory beings of various kinds. Although in contemporary life we may be less prone to the threat posed by wolves or bears, lions or sharks should we find ourselves thrust unexpectedly into some wilderness area, Alaska for example, like the characters portrayed in the film *The Edge* (1997) we might, to avoid starvation, be driven to hunt for any prey available to us or be forced, as they are, to snare and kill the Kodiak bear that stalks and threatens to devour *them*. In contemporary life, of course, this is a far cry from everyday experience. We may choose, for example, to be vegetarian thus avoiding inflicting suffering on non-humans beings but for the most part this choice is conditional on a vast, plentiful and ready supply of fresh vegetables, pulses and grains. In an environment limited or devoid of such ready staples the harsh reality is likely to be the case of 'eat or be eaten'.

As Hepburn recognises, although the suffering inflicted by such predatory entanglements can prompt a 'disquiet' in us that is hard to reconcile in aesthetic experience we can, nevertheless, capture and accept nature as it is 'on its own terms' – the 'real work' of nature 'of beak, tooth and claw.' As bleak and difficult as we may find such experiences when we contrast the diversity and fecundity of life forms in, say, a tropical rainforest, with the sheer scope and scale of the mutual predatoriness of the beings and entities that inhabit it, we come to realise the contingency of nature's creative and destructive modes of being which, although seemingly ambiguous, we can yet identify with and relate to in our attempt to understand ourselves.

3 Nature's 'otherness'

As the foregoing suggests, although we can experience a sense of self accord even in disquieting moments of aesthetic reflection, such experiences can on occasion, nevertheless, be dashed, confronted or frustrated by the sudden perception of nature as somehow 'other' – as somehow 'different', as 'separate', from ourselves. This fluctuation in perceptual experience can lead to

the kind of ambiguity evident in much theoretical thinking on the concept.[19] While Hepburn recognises this difficulty, he rejects the idea that nature is categorically 'other'; that the aesthetic attitude should be a sense of 'being outside', of 'not belonging'; a nature that is ultimately 'unknowable' of which we were never a part as one theorist proposes.[20] A sense of nature's otherness, nevertheless, can prove something of a paradox and is difficult to dispel in aesthetic experience.[21]

Citing Marcel Proust, Hepburn draws on a familiar, intimate object to illustrate this seeming paradox:

> It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognise that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body.[22]

Since our body is the most familiar case of taking up the impersonal into the life of personhood, Hepburn feels it is a good starting point for illustrating the ambiguity that perception of this kind can create in our aesthetic experience. 'The body is both that through which our purposes and discoveries of meaning are achieved and expressed, and that whose failures can not only frustrate particular purposings and searchings for meaning, but also bring down the organism as a whole.'[23]

Disorder in our body's functioning quickly shows us the limits of our power over it; instances, for example, where we are brought down by indeterminate malignancies or where our body presents some inherent malformation, deformity or disfigurement of some kind. Such occasions not only provide the sharpest reminders of the vulnerable and temporary nature of human life but, as Hepburn suggests, may prompt a resentment in us, if an unreasonable one, that 'my body's fate has to be *my* fate.'[24] Thus to perceive our body in this

19 For example, see Steven Vogel, 'Why "Nature" Has No Place in Environmental Philosophy' in Gregory E. Kaebnick (ed.), *The Ideal of Nature: Debates about Biotechnology and the Environment* (Baltimore, 2011), 84–97 and idem, 'Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature', *Environmental Ethics,* 24 (2002), 23–39.

20 I am referring here to Stan Godlovitch, 'Ice Breakers, Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics', *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11 (1994), 15–30.

21 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 5.

22 Quoted in Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life' in idem, '*Wonder*', 155–85, 155–6.

23 Ibid., 156.

24 Ibid.

way, as Proust clearly does, might indeed be to see it as somehow 'foreign' or 'other'. Even if nature may appear other to us, we are no less connatural with it. We do not 'simply look out upon nature as we look at the sea's drama from a safe shore: the shore is no less nature, and so too is the one who looks.'[25] Thus, according to Hepburn, it is not to have nature's foreignness or otherness overcome; rather, if we allow ourselves perceptual freedom, we may come to see how our body's sense of otherness is not best understood as strange or foreign as Proust would have it. It is merely the way in which, on occasion, we perceive our relationship to it – in the way we perceive it to possess an authority over which we have no agency or ultimate control. It is to recognise, in other words, the ineffable and contingent forces responsible for our physical existence and is thus a comportment of nature with which we identify and relate in a self-affirming way. Aesthetic reflection on a familiar feature of our anatomy may illustrate this.

Consider if you will that puckered bodily indentation, or protrusion, depending on which type you may have, located on the abdomen, that collects lint and even, so we are told, is home to an entire ecosystem of microbes, namely the navel or bellybutton. Notwithstanding our recognition of it as the physical remnant of our connection to our birth mother it may yet strike us as a curious anomaly. But should we dwell upon it in perceptual experience we might come to see how possession of this curious feature implies a contingency of an ineffable kind since to be born of another human being, who was also born of another human being and so on leaves us without an intelligible end. But as Hepburn, albeit in a different context, suggests maybe we force an end, or maybe we are forced to an end by the thought that 'not everything can owe its existence to something else that there must exist some radically different, non-contingent mode of being, not contingent but necessary, "necessary being": but one that quickly fades into near total mystery.'[26] Thus mystery here, as Hepburn implies, is seen as the only intelligible conclusion. In his morphology of plants, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe reaches a similar conclusion referring to the inexplicable aspect of a plant's ontology as its 'immaterial power'.[27] Indeed, it is a claim that is correspondingly supported

25 Hepburn, 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', 5.

26 Although of equal relevance here the context in which Hepburn makes these comments is to be found in his posthumous paper titled 'The Aesthetics of Sky and Space', ed. Emily Brady, *Environmental Values,* 19 (2010), 273–88, 286.

27 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'Preliminary Notes for a Physiology of Plants' in *Goethe's Botanical Writings* (Hawaii, 1952), 92. Goethe's immaterial power is the 'morphotype' which is not reducible to the constituent physical parts of an organism's

by David Cooper who argues that the ineffable – the mysterious – constitutes what he describes as the 'measure of all things'.[28] Thus mystery, on this view, can be seen as constituting a fundamental characteristic of all evolved beings and entities without which nothing that exists, as Goethe claims, can be properly understood.

4 Mystery and the unbidden

An aspect of nature's creative persona that illustrates this feature is its capacity for spontaneous resurgence or renewal. Should we perceive this capacity, however, in a way that goes beyond its ability to restore or renew, namely, its capacity to 'overcome', as it were, we may be prompted to see this faculty in a different light, in ways that can have some deeply disturbing inferences.

In the film *Jurassic Park* (1993), for example, we might come to view nature's capacity to overcome in the way that Jeff Goldblum's character Dr Ian Malcolm does when, in response to a scientist's absolute certainty that a population of *only* female dinosaurs can never reproduce, Malcolm retorts that we cannot doubt nature's ability 'to find a way'.[29] It is perhaps this notion of nature finding a way that can prompt in us the sense of 'promethean fear', the 'holy dread', of which some writers speak,[30] since it can strike home to us, not only the contingency of nature's ineffable, mysterious forces but the absolute unpredictability of these forces, not least in the potential of nature, should it be tested, to 'bite back' in unforeseen and potentially apocalyptic ways.[31]

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development no matter how apparently archetypical this stage may seem.

28 David E. Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery* (Oxford, 2002).

29 'Life finds a way', as he says. Although this claim is made by a fictional character about fictional creatures, it has some credence in reality. A recent incidence of nature 'finding a way' for example is evidenced in the case of the 'virgin birth' of wild Sawfish in Florida for which scientists remain baffled since the incidence of parthenogenesis is a rare phenomenon in the wild. Cf. Hannah Devlin, 'Sawfish escape extinction through virgin births scientists discover', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015.

30 I refer here to Bernard Williams, 'Must a Concern for Environment be Centred on Human Beings?' in idem, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge, 1995), 233–40, 239 and David Wiggins, 'Nature, Respect for Nature, and the Human Scale of Values', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100 (2000), 1–32, 27.

31 The phrase is often used by those who oppose industrial agriculture for example in the way that they view it as defying the laws of nature. See for example Michael Pollan, 'Our Decrepit Food Factories', *Sunday New York Times,* 16 December 2007.

Although mystery lies beyond our awareness in every direction, Hepburn believes that even if it proves difficult to articulate, it can be integrated within our life world rather than be allowed to obliterate it.[32] Indeed, in our attempt to overcome the inarticulate nature of the ineffable, we reach for metaphors that provide the ability to speak of it in concrete ways, for example, when we refer to it as 'source', 'font', or 'spring'. One metaphor that Hepburn employs is to see nature as 'gift'.[33]

To see nature in this way is to see it as something unreservedly given and can be likened, therefore, to the material gifts we receive in the way that they are often neither sought nor welcome, like those day-glow socks from that well-meaning aunt. In this regard the metaphor of nature as 'gift' not only captures the contingency of the ineffable but it also captures a related idea that I find particularly penetrating, namely, what is described as an 'openness to the unbidden', to the unpredictable potentialities and outcomes mentioned earlier.[34] Of course, as in the case of the day-glow socks, what nature bestows upon its beings and entities can often be unsought, unwelcome and, what is more, beyond our agency to predict or control. Although an openness to the unbidden necessitates, an openness to the unpredictable it also implies an openness to *all* possible potentiality including the rare and astounding capabilities evidenced by the diversity, complexity and distinctive uniqueness revealed by the vast and varied forms of life that populate our planet including our own species.

5 Uniqueness and selfhood

Indeed, we might allow that a being or entity's uniqueness is perhaps one of nature's most notable characteristics. Notwithstanding the collective unity of a given species, its individuals are unique amongst their kind and this is most evident amongst human beings. A person's singular uniqueness is frequently, and perhaps most patently brought home to us, in their dying. An individual life lived but once, and one that will not be repeated, makes the end of that life

32 Cf. Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics: Philosophical Understanding and Misunderstanding' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 130–47, 145.

33 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 113–29, 117.

34 The notion of 'the unbidden' is used by Michael Sandel who attributes it to the theologian William F. May. Cf. Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

prodigiously poignant such that in honouring its passing we often reach for language that acknowledges its unrepeatable uniqueness, for example, when we speak of the person as holding a 'sacred' memory for us. The sense of a thing's individual uniqueness is related to its sense of selfhood, its sense of self-determination, its sense of autonomy. In establishing justifiable criteria for nature's moral consideration recognising the 'autonomy of nature' is something that several environmental theorists feel to be of primary importance.[35] But as in the sense of nature's 'otherness' as I have illustrated, the sense of nature's autonomy is not a distinction that separates the human from the non-human; rather it is a mode of being which we identify as a constituent of both human and non-human beings and entities.

While John Duns Scotus called a thing's uniqueness its 'thisness', Gerard Manley Hopkins chose to call the absolute selfhood of a thing its 'inscape'.[36] According to Hopkins a thing's 'inscape' is found, not by analysis, but by a balance between attention and receptiveness. He reasoned that if you attend to things with wonder they will reveal something of themselves:

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> […] myyself it speaks and spells,
> Crying What I do is me: for that I came.[37]

Similarly, in relating her encounter with a cock pheasant, Kathleen Raine illustrates how she comes to recognise its selfhood in a particularly intense way:

> The fear that I felt at the otherness of his life
> was part delight in his beauty, part awe in the presence
> of his touch-me-not, his 'I am that I am'. Every creature
> has a measure of power peculiar to itself and to its kind.[38]

Immanuel Kant presents a similar view in his proposition that a bird's song if imitated by man would strike us as wholly destitute of taste.[39] Kant's supposition is that the bird's song is not beautiful in some purely auditory sense since

35 Thomas Heyd, *Recognising the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice* (New York, 2005).
36 Cited in Michael Mayne, *The Sunrise of Wonder: Letter for the Journey* (London,1995), 219–27.
37 Ibid., 223. Mayne cites from Gerard Manley Hopkins' *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*.
38 Ibid. Mayne cites from Kathleen Raine's *Farewell Happy Fields: Memories of Childhood*.
39 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (1790; Oxford, 1952), 89.

if it were humanly replicated it would cease to be so. Rather the implication is that its beauty is a measure of the bird's unique and ineffable power. As the foregoing examples illustrate, sustained attention to the physical features and attributes of natural beings and entities can prompt insights of selfhood that resonate within us as 'selves', as persons, as identities.

Although by no means an exhaustive account, I have illustrated how in our being 'naturised' we come to recognise and identify with nature's creative and destructive comportments in a self-affirming way. I have shown how our capacity for imaginative engagement can not only allow for the aesthetic integration of disparate and disquieting modes of nature's being, but also how it reveals a nature that is of ineffable contingency, of seemingly unlimited potentialities of creation, re-creation and renewal. I have also shown how it reveals a nature that is fraught with unpredictable and destructive possibilities and outcomes; of disease and affliction, of transience and untimely death, of precarious struggle and untold suffering. You will recall that in the naturising of the human subject Hepburn claims that our motives are in part the desire for a certain integrity or truth; for a sense of coherence or unity, in other words, for a sense of meaning. Given the latter account of nature presented here some might ask where the meaning for which we seek is to be found.

6 Context and meaning

Although Hepburn recognises that some critics would argue that this latter view of nature can be self-defeating, destructive to meaning, and can lead to a sense of futility and despair, in truth, he mostly rejects this.[40] The outcome need not lead to a 'thoroughgoing pessimism' but can instead make us aware that meaning is derived from recognising, even if tragic, the limitations and constraints of our material world, of our 'limited intelligibility and the unalterable contingency of value.'[41] Indeed it is Hepburn's view that to *deny* that we

40 To illustrate Hepburn's anticipation of this situation, I draw your attention to some relatively recent philosophical exchanges on the subject between Alan Holland, John Cottingham and Robin Attfield. Alan Holland, 'Darwin and the Meaning in Life', *Environmental Values,* 18 (2009), 503–18; John Cottingham, 'Reply to Holland … The Meaning of Life and Darwinism', *Environmental Values,* 20 (2011), 229–308; Alan Holland, 'What Do We Do about Bleakness?', *Environmental Values,* 20 (2011), 315–21; and Robin Attfield, 'Darwin, Meaning and Value', *Environmental Values,* 20 (2011), 309–14.

41 Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life', 172.

can properly be concerned in aesthetic experience with 'how things actually are' would be to leave us with an unacceptably 'thin' version of aesthetic experience. Nature need not be misconceived in order to furnish ways for self–understanding. The more serious our engagement, the more earnest will be our regard for the integrity, 'the proper modes of being', as he puts it, that distinguish natural phenomena for us. What is more, our ability to engage with nature in this way is not arbitrary, pointless or self-destructive since the insights gained can be an irreducible source of self-understanding.

Although the most meaningful life is not necessarily ruled by a single aim or inspired by a single unifying ideal, Hepburn sees the search for meaning as deeply concerned with a struggle to unify. In our search for meaning – as Hepburn and several other writers suggest –, we tend to look outside ourselves, to seek some wider context that provides a sense of pattern to our lives.[42] I have proposed elsewhere that it is nature as Hepburn reveals it here that likely constitutes this wider context of human experience, indeed I go so far as to propose that it could be construed as constituting a fundamental dimension of our collective identity which, although innate in our consciousness, can exert significant influence on our attitudes and values.[43] It is a view that Hepburn would seem to imply in his suggestion that this wider context of experience plays a regulative role 'pulling a life away from the fragmentation that can threaten to destroy its identity.'[44] The well-integrated life, as he maintains, shows consistency and does not suffer from what he terms 'crises of self-identity'.[45]

The nature that Hepburn presents here, while clearly metaphysical, bears a remarkable likeness in its creative and destructive comportments to the nature that Charles Darwin documented. Yet throughout his account of nature, Hepburn rarely mentions the term 'ecology' or makes any attempt to describe it in ecological terms. Rather, as I have illustrated, his account emerges in our aesthetic experience and perception of natural phenomena which, amongst

42 See, for example, Robert E. Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 40 and Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 40.

43 Although we tend to identify ourselves as 'human' beings, my contention is that we also, first and foremost, identify ourselves, as 'nature' beings, that is, as 'natural' beings which I argue can exert significant influence in shaping our attitudes and values. Fran Speed, 'Nature qua Identity: Nature, Culture and Relational Integrity' in Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson (eds), *Land & Identity: Theory, Memory, and Practice,* (Amsterdam, 2012), 67–89.

44 Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life', 160.

45 Ibid., 158–9.

other things, involves the importing of components external to, and quite distinct from, anything actually present in the reality apprehended. But do we doubt that Hepburn's aesthetic account of nature constitutes anything less than Darwin's account? Do we doubt that it presents a nature as it exists 'in itself'? Are we obliged to accept, as the scientific cognitivists would have us believe, that the only appropriate approach to appreciating nature 'on its own terms' is through knowledge provided by the natural sciences? Although Hepburn does not reject the idea that information provided by scientific instruments and data can enhance aesthetic experience, he feels that we are not obliged to 'think in' what threatens to fragment or overwhelm the experience itself. The qualities that we appreciate aesthetically do not, as Hepburn states, appear in the scientist's inventory of what fundamentally exists in nature. Indeed, the scientist's own understanding is itself expressed in terms known to be metaphorical- like wave, particle, black hole and string. These terms are drawn from life experience although scientists know well enough that these do not simply map on to the features of nature itself. It follows that nature–in-itself is still not being directly described. To realise this, as Hepburn says, is to grasp how much greater is the gap between aesthetic perception and the nature we think we perceive. What is more we do not create and project aesthetically relevant properties onto nature as some foundationalists claim; rather our perceptual apparatus gives us the sensitivity to discriminate and apprehend them as features of our world. 'The fact that these do not show themselves when we explore reality in the objective manner by the methods of science tells us not that they must be the product of our "projection", but only that those are not the methods and instruments which reveal them.'[46]

Human experience, Hepburn urges, is as much a part of reality as a galaxy or a stream of photons. Nature as it is in itself cannot exclude what we realise in our perceptual experience of it. The choice is not between reality and illusion; reality is not in question since we start with reality and it is never abandoned or betrayed. Rather, our choice determines how reality will differentiate itself for us.[47] To move towards greater subjective intensity need not correlate with movement away from the truth to illusion, but towards a fuller grasp of the truth. Whatever the causal relations between the known and the unknown, these dependencies do not entitle us, Hepburn urges, to judge the phenomenal, 'unreal' or to place it low in a scale of degrees of reality. 'All we perceive

46 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 16–37, 28.

47 Ibid., 27.

from our own perceptual standpoint is actual, is nature, is *being*. […] So understood, it remains a proper object of aesthetic concern.'[48]

7 Conclusion

In establishing criteria for justifying nature's moral consideration, as I stated in my introduction, the concept of nature has proved to be of particular theoretical concern in environmental philosophy. You will recall, however, that while the task has given rise to a variety of theoretical stances and approaches, they tend to undervalue aesthetic considerations or employ them in a superficial way; while a notable stance in the discipline of environmental aesthetics itself largely rejects the kind of subjective, or humanising, approach that Hepburn advances in favour of one that relies, almost exclusively, on scientific knowledge.

The significance of Hepburn's ideas rests not only on his insightful recognition of the need for an aesthetic approach that is contextually thick but is one where he recognises how our self-identification with nature can provide a source of profound meaning. What is more, the nature that his approach reveals while not limited to scientific explanation alone is one, nevertheless, that we inherently recognise as a nature as it is in itself.

While my aim here has been to consider some specific ways in which we become naturised and the potential meaning that our self-identification with nature can afford, I have noted how Hepburn, throughout his account, touches upon many of the criteria with which several environmental theorists take issue in their attempts to justify nature's moral consideration. It is my view, therefore, that Hepburn's account not only offers a perspective that illustrates how many of the legitimate concerns that these theorists raise can be overcome or reconciled but provides a valid basis for considering what normative force, if any, the concept of nature and its derivative expressions may involve.

I want to add that it is a source of continued wonder to me that although it was Hepburn's concern for the neglect of natural beauty that prompted the eventual establishment of environmental aesthetics as a discipline, his seminal contribution to the aesthetic appreciation of nature has not achieved the degree of influence in environmental philosophy that one might have hoped

48 Hepburn, 'Data and Theory in Aesthetics: Philosophical Understanding and Misunderstanding', 145–6.

for, or indeed, expected. It would be of considerable loss, if the discipline continued to underestimate the potential insight that Hepburn's humanising account of nature offers both aesthetic and ethical enquiry.

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