

AN ECO-PHILOSOPHICAL RETURN TO METAPHYSICS AND ONTOLOGY: CONSCIOUSNESS IS NATURE'S NIGHTMARE

UM RETORNO ECO-FILOSÓFICO À METAFÍSICA E À ONTOLOGIA: A CONSCIÊNCIA É O PESADELO DA NATUREZA

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RESUMO

Este estudo revisita certos problemas de origem metafísica, linguística e ontológica, que emergem de uma análise ecológica e filosófica da origem do nosso entendimento e relação com a natureza. Antropomorfizando a natureza, como poderemos honrar o próprio “ser” da natureza? Quais relações estabelecemos entre natureza humana e o meio ambiente? Controlamos a natureza ou ela nos controla? Há relação entre percepção e consciência? Quais são os resultados do nosso distanciamento da natureza? Estas questões serão analisadas sob perspectiva filosófica e literária, distanciando de uma proposta estritamente empírica e pragmática, no intento de, antes do chamado por mais ação humana, propor uma dramática e necessária mudança de paradigma.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ecologia; metafísica; natureza; conhecimento; mudança de paradigma

ABSTRACT

This study revisits certain metaphysical, linguistic and ontological issues that arise from an Ecological and Philosophical approach to our understanding and relationship to nature. By anthropomorphizing nature, how can one genuinely honor nature's own being? What are the connections between human nature and the environment? Can we control nature or does nature control us? Is there a relation between perception and consciousness? What are the implications of our detachment from nature? These questions will be addressed from a philosophical and literary approach, refraining from proposing an empirical/pragmatic approach for the sake of proposing before claims of human action, a dramatic and necessary shift of paradigm.

KEYWORDS: Ecology; metaphysics; nature; knowledge; paradigm shift

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1.

In a collection by David Foster Wallace titled *Oblivion*, there's an intriguing piece called *The Suffering Channel*. The short story delves into the daily routine of the fictional *Style* magazine. It also intertwines an analysis of the "American way of life" with an intense and constant "play" with language that can make the reader both laugh and feel confused by its frenetic rhythm. This is classic Wallace-style. He also tend towards the punchline delivery, ending somewhere that makes sense given the discussion, but unexpected, nonetheless. Almost half way through the narrative, a puzzling sentence (apparently detached from all the former signs and signifiers inferred in the story through its intense language) is thrown in: "Consciousness is Nature's Nightmare". The narrator affirms that the mysterious sentence is the registered motto of "O Verily Productions", and that due to "complicated business reasons" (WALLACE, 2004, p.282) appeared in the company's colophon in Portuguese, but is presented in the story firstly in English.

The sentence only appears again at the very end of the story, this time in Portuguese, "*A consciência é o pesadelo da natureza*"¹ (Wallace, 2004, p. 328) and apparently has nothing to do with the totality of the narrative, as if it were a mere ornament. Ornament or not, this sentence intrigued me since I first read the story: why do authors insert these apparent clues, or traces, or vestiges into their narrator's fictitious mouths²?

¹ Intrigued by the sentence, I did a search on Google and found that, although there isn't absolutely any reference at all to this in David Wallace's collection *Oblivion*, the sentence "Consciousness is Nature's Nightmare" was originally written by the Romanian Philosopher Emile Cioran, and is in his work titled *Tears and Saints* (p.102). Perhaps David Wallace's narrator in *The Suffering Channel* is pointing in Cioran's direction when he mentions that the phrase is in Portuguese: there are several similarities between the Portuguese and Romanian languages. Unfortunately, by the time of the writing of this paper, the copy of *Tears and Saints* I ordered still hasn't arrived and I couldn't obtain any copies from libraries (even my university's library doesn't have a copy). It's interesting how sometimes books can hide from their potential readers, as if they wanted to keep a mystery or a secret away from them.

² In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard placed a chapter titled *Flood* right in the middle of the book, as chapter 9 of 15. Water usually represents life, and a flood, change. This insight isn't mine. I owe it to Prof. Sean Blenkinsop and my 921 classmates who talked about it. My many thanks to everyone for many ideas in this essay. My insight came after we discussed this in class: the flooded creek represents a drastic change in the narrative – as far as I interpret it, a shift from a poetic narrative/description of nature into the *Fecundity* (title of Chapter 10) of a more philosophical/transcendentalist tone in the narrative. Not that the poetic aspect isn't fertile. I just perceive it as a change in style, a different approach or method of inquiry into the mysteries of nature. This note is only to give another example of the clues/hints/traces that authors often insert in their narrator's mouths as if to offer a puzzle to a more serious/curious reader. I must also admit that what I claim

My intent isn't to do a strict analysis of the short story. What I will try to do may be erroneous, may be a risk, but I sense it can also (perhaps) be a contribution to the current eco-philosophical conversation: by separating David Wallace's intriguing sentence from his short story, I plan to re-interpret, (dis)connect and intertwine the sentence with themes selected from eco-philosophical classics read in the *Seminar in Philosophy and Educational Theory* course taken at SFU this Summer semester. I plan to do the analysis using a Metaphysical-Ontological perspective (trying to think the relation between nature and consciousness, and consciousness of nature, from a non-empirical, non-analytical perspective, that is).

2.

One possible interpretation of "Consciousness is Nature's Nightmare" is that being conscious of nature is a nightmare for nature. Evernden (1993, p.x) affirms that the environment is never isolated from belief, and that a discussion on environmentalism is inevitably an account of the relationship of mind to nature. Between our perceptions and expectations and the moral commitment to particular beliefs and institutions, is the environment, is nature. By perceiving the environment around us, we interfere in its natural ways, most times harming the land by cutting trees, killing animals, for instance. I'd like to point out that there is a fine line between perception and consciousness here, that I will address in detail further. We also have this egocentric drive to think that we control nature, that we are superior to other living beings because of our ability to manipulate the natural world. Every time I think of the human pretentiousness of superiority and the thought that we control nature, Nietzsche's *Perspectivism* in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense* comes to mind. In this unfinished essay, the philosopher affirms that "if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world." (NIETZSCHE,

as my insight can also be someone else's: I honestly don't remember if I thought that by myself or if I heard it somewhere (perhaps in class?) and then revisited the book to verify the insight. The later hypothesis seems to be somewhat closer to the truth, though.

1873,p.1) The human tool to interpret nature, the intellect, is also this “terrible master” that imprisons us into our own perspectives: “this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it.” (NIETZSCHE, 1873, p.1)

Nietzsche’s affirmations bring to mind what I imagine is Paul Shepard’s central thesis in *Nature and Madness* (1998): in certain moments of time³, human societies perceived that there are certain needs that are inherent to “human nature”, and they established a system of beliefs that solidified the ways in which we relate to nature in order to generate a cycle of interdependence and consumption based on a distant, objectifying relation to nature:

(...) characteristic subjectivity and behaviour of adolescence. Perhaps the most peculiar of these features is a regression to certain infantile traits: playfulness with sound making and word meanings; body sensibilities and self-consciousness; “acting out” of feelings and emotions; extreme variability and instability of moods; a reinvigorated fraternal and paternal attachment; and fantasies of power and heroics. In addition, the adolescent typically is preoccupied with larger questions: the meaning and purpose of life; concepts of infinity, space, time and God; and the ideal human relationship and community. Piaget speaks of this as a formal or abstract level; others call it symbolic thought. (SHEPARD, 1998, p.64)

Shepard’s description of the human adolescent behaviour seems similar to what we understand about the philosophical (and to some extent, the religious) activity: the philosopher is the one preoccupied with the so-called “big questions” of existence and God. Perhaps the philosopher is the most infantile of humans - after all, his core activity consists in asking like a child, being curious and naive like a child. Nietzsche has us returning to childhood as well but not in an infantile version thereof. The curiosity of the philosopher may parallel that of the child (in that everything can be questioned, etc.) but does that mean

³ Shepard analyzes “The Domesticators” moment (first agriculturists), “The Desert Fathers” moment (the shock between religions and ideologies generate environmentalist determinism by denying life its affirmative/flourishing aspects), “The Puritans” moment (increase of abstract/religious thinking toward nature) and the “Mechanists” moment (increased urbanization, deeply organized societies). Although the final tone of Shepard’s hypothesis is somber, he seems to point in the direction of what we currently call the *cultural commons* as a safety net for humans and nature to interact in peace and in prolific, life-affirming ways: “An ecologically harmonious sense of self and world is not the outcome of rational choices. It is the *inherent possession of everyone; it is latent in the organism*, in the interaction of the genome and early experience”. (SHEPARD, 1998, p.128, my italics).

that the behaviour is childish, or that the questions themselves are infantile (an incessant wonder for the sake of filling the air?) And are the child's questions also "big philosophical questions"?

Anyhow, this adolescent behaviour culminated in an excessive exploration of nature and its resources, and in an intense objectification of this external "other than human". David Orr, in *Earth in Mind* (1994, p.101), asks when did philosophy cease to be the love of wisdom and aspire to be a science? When did philosophy lose its life-affirming connection to the "exterior otherness", the environment? Hollingdale, in an introduction to Schopenhauer, traces this separation all the way back to the Socratics. There seems to be a move away from the world because it is simple, obvious and stable towards a focus on ideas and forms, or the world of creativity. In some ways, Hollingdale's hypothesis offers a better parallel to Shepard than our common desire to blame all scientific progress on Descartes.

Seeing nature as an object "other" than human, losing this sense of connection, of being part, humans became more religious. We became these strange beings constantly torn apart from our origins: on our birth, we're separated from our mother, then, we're separated from our infantile imagination and curiosity, on a next moment, we're separated from the environment around us. Several figures became notorious seekers for re-connection with nature, with life. In this sense, they are profoundly religious. In Latin, religion reads *re-ligare*, which means to re-connect. Lewis Hyde (2002, p.xxiii) says of Henry David Thoreau, the great American transcendentalist who spent a good part of his time in the wilderness of Walden Pond: "it was Thoreau's great gift to wake us to 'our own losses'. Not losses simply – we all have those – but the losses we do not even remember."

The sense of having lost something, or this sense of being detached from the totality of "being" (to speak a bit to the Ontological problem I propose) seems to me even stronger when I read authors that try to use intense metaphors in order to describe their feelings toward nature. For instance, I'd like to reflect upon two short excerpts from Annie Dillard and Aldo Leopold:

It is winter proper; the cold weather, such as it is, has come to stay. I bloom indoors in the winter like a forced forsythia; I come in to come out. At night I read and write, and things I have never understood become clear; I reap the harvest of the rest of the year's planting. (Dillard, 1998, p.40)

Our grandfathers were less well-housed, well-fed, well-clothed than we are. The strivings by which they bettered their lot are also those which deprived us of pigeons. Perhaps we now grieve because we are not sure, in our hearts, that we have gained by the exchange. The gadgets of industry bring us more comforts than the pigeons did, but do they add as much to the glory of the spring? It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all preceding caravan of generations: that men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. (LEOPOLD, 1953, p.116-7)

If on one hand, Dillard has a more poetic tone, and uses paradoxes and linguistic challenges to try to communicate her experience, Leopold's lament of better times also brings a somewhat poetic tone in his sober/solid attempt to express the joy and gratefulness of being one with nature. What I'm trying to say is that the human use of language is also an element from nature, but, to use Evernden's terms, we insist in "cutting the vocal chords": our own and the environment's. There's nothing more natural than professing a word. In Nietzsche's terms: "What is a word? The image of a nervous stimulus in sounds. But to infer from the nerve stimulus, a cause outside us, that is already the result of a false and unjustified application of the principle of reason" (NIETZSCHE, 1873, p.2).

Paul Shepard also seems to see an Ontological connection between nature and language (be it human language or not):

Human power over nature is largely the exercise of handcraft. Insofar as *the natural world poetically signifies human society*, it signals that there is no great power over other men except as the skills of leadership are hewn by example and persuasion. (...) Thenceforth *natural things are not only themselves but a speaking*. (SHEPARD, 1998, p.8-9, my italics)

This suspicion that perhaps language, rationality and control over nature are elements closer to the environment than perhaps we'd like to admit, leads us to the next Ontological (and Metaphysical) question to be explored: and what if nature has its own consciousness and we're just mere pawns in the game of life?

3.

I'd like to return to Cioran's/David Wallace's enigmatic sentence "Consciousness is Nature's Nightmare" and offer another interpretative (ah, the beauty of language!) possibility (amongst several other possibilities that I now invite the reader to think about). Firstly, I interpreted the sentence as an ecological message: human consciousness is a nightmare for nature, because humans objectified and interfered in nature. Now, I offer a twist: a nightmare is the product of the mind. It's usually the mind processing negative information to which one reacts with fear, sorrow or even grief and pain. So what if this enigmatic phrase is suggesting that human consciousness is nothing more than a nightmare dreamt by nature? If we consider that nature is dreaming, we can say that nature has its own source of consciousness, and let's suppose (to play Metaphysics and Ontology again) that nature is this sleeping being, dreaming its will to power, dreaming its desire to live and affirm itself in the cosmos, and human consciousness is an outcome of negativity, of non-being forces that are also life, but that are inherently driven to influence and dominate (or to think it dominates) nature.

To try to make my inquiry more clear, I'd like to quote *in extenso* the insight that Michael Pollan had when he was working in his garden:

On this particular May afternoon, I happened to be sowing rows in the neighbourhood of a flowering apple tree that was fairly vibrating with bees. And what I found myself thinking about was this: What existential difference is there between the human being's role in this (or any) garden and the bumblebee's? If this sounds like a laughable comparison, consider what it was I was doing in the garden that afternoon: disseminating the genes of one species and not another, in this case a fingerling potato instead of, let's say, a leek. Gardeners like me tend to think such choices are our sovereign prerogative: in the space of this garden, I tell myself, I alone determine which species will thrive and which will disappear. I'm in charge here, in other words, and behind me stand other humans still more in charge: the long chain of gardeners and botanists, plant breeders, and, these days, genetic engineers who "selected", "developed", or "bred" the particular potato that I decided to plant. *Even our grammar makes the terms of this relationship perfectly clear: I choose the plants, I pull the weeds, I harvest the crops.* We divide the world into subjects and objects, and here in the garden, as in nature generally, we humans are the subjects. But that afternoon in the garden I found myself wondering: What if that grammar is all wrong? What if it's really nothing more than a self-serving conceit? A bumblebee would probably also regard himself as a subject in the garden and the bloom he's plundering for its drop of nectar as an object. But we know that this is just a failure of his imagination. The truth of the matter is that the flower has cleverly manipulated the bee into hauling

its pollen from blossom to blossom. The ancient relationship between bees and flowers is a classic example of what is known as “coevolution”. (POLLAN, 2001, p.xiii-iv, some italics are mine)

Throughout *The Botany of Desire*, Pollan analyzes the evolutionary relation between humans and plants, associating a plant’s genetically-developed characteristic with the desire that humans have to extract pleasure from that plant. By trying to extract pleasure from the plants, human beings act like bees, developing, replanting, modifying and making the plants reproduce: “All those plants care about is what every being cares about on the most basic genetic level: making more copies of itself.” (POLLAN, 2001, p.xv)⁴

In my opinion, the most intriguing part of Pollan’s hypothesis consists in the part in which he asks what *was* the knowledge that God wanted to keep from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? (POLLAN, 2001, p.176) He says that this Biblical passage is a metaphor of the aforementioned detachment that humans have from nature (in Evernden’s terms, we’re “Natural Aliens”):

The *content* of the knowledge Adam and Eve could gain by tasting of the fruit does not matter nearly as much as its form – that is, the very fact that there was spiritual knowledge of *any* kind to be had from a tree: from nature. (POLLAN, 2001, p.176)

It’s also intriguing to think why nature would provide humans with intoxicating substances. Pollan’s theory is that it’s because nature can generously share it’s transcendence with us: “The experience of the sublime is all about nature having her way with us, about the sensation of awe before her power – about feeling small.”

In a camping trip to the wilderness of the Sunshine Coast in BC that wrapped up our *Seminar in Philosophy and Educational Theory* course, I experienced a different kind of awe when confronted with my mortality and nature’s grandiosity. Walking into the wild through rough trails full of stones and snow for a couple of hours, carrying a fair amount of weight, I felt insignificant beyond nature, my heart was filled with fear, in the sense of having a reverential awe of nature. This fear, this respect is what keeps me moving and seeking for reconnection.

⁴ Pollan analyzes the following desires and plants: Sweetness/The Apple; Beauty/The Tulip; Intoxication/Marijuana; Control/The Potato.

With this study on Eco-philosophy, I'd like to invite the reader to rethink his relation with nature, with the environment. It's past time for us to rethink our actions and our destructive objectification of nature and admit the possibility that we *are* also nature. In Nietzsche's terms, we must de-deify nature and naturalize humanity. After all, nature

(...) is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of those things; it does not by any means strive to imitate man. None of our aesthetic and moral judgements apply to it. Nor does it have any instinct for self-preservation or any other instinct; and it does not observe any laws either. Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word "accident" has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type. Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances; matter is as much of an error as the God of the Eleatics [Parmenides]. But when shall we ever be done with our caution and care? When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to "naturalize" humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature? (NIETZSCHE, 1887/1974, p.168-9)

Nature is this magnificent being that we anthropomorphized in order to seek understanding of. But I really wonder if we aren't perhaps condemned to non-understanding because we're only products of a bad dream. In Ontological terms, we'd be the non-being force that allows nature to be – and, together, being and non-being, we dance around the stars allowing life, this mysterious and uncanny "thing" to just live itself through space, beyond time, through time.

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