

Humanity as a layer: What is below?

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7th Nordic Conference on Philosophical Practice

Nature and the practice of philosophy.
What is the relation between the status of humans
and the conception of human beings towards nature?

Reykjavík
June 9^h and 10th, 2017

Dear guests,

I am very pleased to be with you here tonight to discuss philosophical practice, nature and humans. As an academic philosopher – or a philosopher in the academia – I may be more concerned with teaching philosophy and writing philosophical papers (to establish a respectable academic profile) than practicing philosophy. I have done a fair share of teaching conventional philosophy to philosophy students; subjects such as logic, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and political philosophy. Such teaching involves much philosophical practice since it is, in my mind, impossible to teach such topics without philosophizing about it at the same time. But now I work at the School of Education at the University of Iceland and I don't teach these conventional topics anymore and my students are not philosophy students. In fact, many of them are determined to avoid philosophy and tell me, without being asked, that they are awful at thinking philosophically. So, what do I do? What is my role as a philosopher teaching courses that are only marginally philosophical to students that are determined to avoid philosophy?

I

It may appear that I am the wrong person in the wrong place and it is certainly a common view that students who are heading for a teaching job or intend to work in education in one form or another need something more practical. I often hear that students need some tools to deal with the reality that will meet them. Be that as it may, I think am in the right place. Whether I am the right person in that place is for others to judge. My role is not to advance theory, or to make my students aware of the great tradition of philosophical thinking and writing, nor is it to make them skilled at logical reasoning. I think my role is perhaps first and foremost to encourage my students to be open for questions, make them a little more perceptive of their environment and themselves, and teach them to be appreciative of ignorance. To illustrate what I mean I shall tell you little bit about an outdoor course in leisure studies two years ago and then reflect on two books, one old and the other not so old. The course involved a three day hike with around 20 students and three other teachers.

The hike took off in a typical Icelandic manner. The schedule was to be on the move from Wednesday to Friday but on Wednesday after noon the Icelandic Meteorological Office issued a wind and rain warning for the area so that plans had to be changed. The organizer of the course had wanted me to join the team of teachers since I was a philosopher and had written quite a bit about philosophy of nature. It was, however, not clear to me what it was that I should teach. In fact, when I agreed to join the team, I had no idea what I would do. Shortly before the course began I came across a book by a French philosopher, Frédéric Gros, titled *Philosophy of Walking*. Well, we were going to walk and I would trot along as a philosopher so I thought the book might be of some help. It turned out to be a great help – at least for me –

for it helped me to formulate a few themes that I talk about with the students. The first chapter of the book is titled “Walking is not a sport”. There we were, many quite sportsmanlike, wondering how to pass the time around the campsite where we had put up our tents despite the fierce wind and pouring rain. We could not move on to the next location until the third day when the wind and rain had subsided. I thought this was a good message: Walking is not a sport. It is not about winning, it is not about getting somewhere within a time-limit, it is not about mastering certain technique, and it is not about getting to a hard to reach destination. And it is not about having the smartest gear. It is simply about walking – putting one foot in front of the other. It is so simple that anyone can do it and, moreover, one can do it without the slightest intention of becoming better at it. So, that was my first message: Lets walk, and let’s keep it as simple as that.

The students were of various capabilities when it came to hiking. Some were rather experienced and took the course as a simple and fun way of earning credits. For others it was quite a challenge and for a few of them it involved considerable courage. When preparing for the hike to our next campground, which we expected to take a whole day, I found a second message in Gros’ book: slowness. The night before the hike I read out a considerable chunk of that chapter. One message from Gros’ book was that among the benefits of walking – one of the things that make walking so wonderful – is that it is the slowest way of traveling. I also discussed with them the idea that slowness is not the opposite of speed but the opposite of haste (p. 36). And when in a haste, we lose sense of time, we don’t pay attention to ourselves, we get lost. We somehow came to the conclusion that a person who wants to live a long fulfilling life should live slowly. Many years in a haste may only add up to a short life for time gets lost and the life therewith. The next day when we were taking off, several of the students – especially those less experienced – would recall the discussion to remind themselves that during the hike it would be perfectly fine to go slowly.

In a like manner, we talked about solitude – of walking alone – and also about silence. All this has some value in itself. It is valuable to learn to walk slowly, to feel alone (even while walking with a group of people) to pass along in silence and to engage in an activity that is not sport. But my hope was also that all this might contribute to something more, namely that at least some of the students would find themselves *in* nature and, perhaps, feel some affinity with the places through which they were passing, slowly and at times in silence. I have no idea whether any student felt this way, or whether any of them has since then gone on walk and experiences such emotions. But I can hope.

II

Now I would like to turn my attention to one of the greatest philosophers of nature from the 20th century, Aldo Leopold. He was not a philosopher by training but through his engagement with nature he became one. Way back in 1948 he wrote a truly remarkable book, *A Sand*

County Almanac. The book was first published in 1949, a year after he had died fighting grass fire on a neighbors' farm. Towards the end of *A Sand County Almanac* – actually after the almanac itself – there is a short essay called “Conservation Esthetic”. Aldo Leopold begins this essay with the following observation:

Barring love and war, few enterprises are undertaken with such abandon, or by such diverse individuals, or with so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism, as that group of avocations know as outdoor recreation. It is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature. (p. 165)

And then he asks the following question:

But wherein lies the goodness, and what can be done to encourage its pursuit? (p. 165)

The essay then is an attempt to answer this question and to illustrate the importance of understanding its urgency. Leopold begins his exploration by noting how diverse the category of the so-called recreationists is: duck-hunter, bird-watcher, a motorist who covers all the national parks in one summer (and then heads south for Mexico City), a professional who works through conservation organizations “to give the nature seeking public what it wants, or to make it want what he has to give” (p. 167). He then notices that all these activities are organized around the appropriation of some physical thing, be it a duck, a fish, some plant specimen, a bucket of mushrooms, a photograph, etc. These things may have some value, as food for instance, but that is usually negligible. Most of those who go to great efforts trying to catch a fish in a river are not short of food. And more so today than in the 1940s when Aldo Leopold was writing his almanac. One thing to which Leopold wants to draw our attention is that “all these things rest upon the idea of trophy” (p. 168) which “attests that its owner has been somewhere and done something – that he has exercised skill, persistence, or discrimination in the age-old feat of overcoming, outwitting, or reducing-to-possession” (p. 169). There is nothing wrong with seeking trophies. We do it all the time but, as Leopold observes, a problem arises when it becomes a mass endeavor.

... mass use tends to dilute the quality of organic trophies like game and fish, and to induce damage to others resources such as non-game animals, natural vegetation, and farm crops. (p. 171)

But mass use does not only dilute the quality of such trophies, it also dilutes the opportunities for solitude. When campgrounds, trails and toilets are spoken of as development of recreational resources, those are spoken of falsely with respect to this component.

Such accommodations for the crowd are not developing ... anything. On the contrary, they are merely water poured into the already-thin soup. (172)

Although Aldo Leopold devotes the first part of the essay to the problems of recreation – in particular, the problems having to do with the success of promoting the outdoors, the wilderness, as a valuable venue for recreational activities – he is not a pessimist. Perhaps he

would be one if he were to see the present day mass tourism, large-scale developments, and immense projects undertaken in the wild (or what used to be the wild). Quite to the contrary, he is rather optimistic and his optimism derives from a component that is present in many recreational activities, even if only as a minor ingredient. This component is the perception of the natural processes. He then goes on to say that recreation is not the outdoors but our reaction to it, and the quality of the experience depends not on the quality of what is seen (or smelled, or heard, or tasted, or touched) but on the quality of the mental eye with which it is seen. Continuing this line of thought, Leopold comes to the conclusion that:

The only true development in American recreational resources is the development of the perceptive faculty in Americans. All of the other acts we grace by that name are, at best, attempts to retard or mask the process of dilution. (p. 174)

Leopold then connects this component of perception to what he calls husbandry which he says is “realized only when some art of management is applied to land by some person of perception” (p. 175). Towards the end of the essay he reflects upon the situation of his time:

The disquieting thing in the modern picture is the trophy-hunter who never grows up, in whom the capacity for isolation, perception, and husbandry is underdeveloped, or perhaps lost ...

The trophy recreationist has peculiarities that contribute in subtle ways to his own undoing. To enjoy he must possess, invade, appropriate. Hence the wilderness that he cannot personally see has no value to him. Hence the universal assumption that an unused hinterland is rendering no service to society. To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on the map is useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.

Aldo Leopold then concludes that “recreational development is a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind” (p. 177). Recreational development, in this sense, is an educational endeavor. When walking with the group of students two years ago it was an education of this sort that I was hoping for by talking about slowness, solitude and silence.

III

My attempts at educating the perception of my students while walking were probably not very productive. Whatever my own skills, three days is a short time. But where in the modern educational systems do we find the kind of education Aldo Leopold was calling for? And, also, where do we find educators that are capable of promoting this cause?

These questions may seem to have a rather quick and simple answer: (i) The education we are talking about has a name, “environmental education”, (ii) we find it in many ordinary schools, from preschools through secondary schools and within some disciplines in universities, and (iii) there are teachers who specialize in exactly this kind of education. Well, only if things were this simple. I don’t deny that there is such a thing called environmental education, which is found at all school levels and taught by skilled and committed teachers.

But most of the time it is not the kind of education that Aldo Leopold was asking for, and even when it is, the learning is often undone right away through other subjects and other activities in schools.

To explain my pessimism I turn to David Orr for insights. Orr begins his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect* with four essays under the heading “The problem of education”. In the first essay, “What is education for?” Orr distinguished four myths of education. (i) The myth that ignorance is a solvable problem, (ii) that with enough knowledge and technology we can “manage planet earth”, (iii) that knowledge, and there through human goodness, is increasing, (iv) that the fragmented modern curriculum can be restored, (v) that the purpose of education is to give students upward mobility and success, and (vi) that contemporary (western) culture represents the pinnacle of human achievement (p. 8-12). I am sure we all recognize these myths – whether or not we recognize that they are myths – and they all mitigate against the educational project for which Aldo Leopold was calling. And to these myths I could add the seventh component which, sadly, is not a myth. Namely that the basic function of the educational system is to cultivate the attitude of the trophy-hunter. Through graded tests, awards, scholarships, competition for places and merits, competitive research funds, and more of that kind the educational system from primary school up through university is organized around a conception of education as a perpetual trophy-hunting. This applies to environmental education no less than education in other fields. The combination of the six myths and the reality of education as a perpetual trophy-hunt has led to some intractable paradoxes in education. Stephen Stirling points to some of them in his book, *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*. He writes:

Western education is presently characterized by a number of paradoxes, which raise some profound questions about its role. Firstly, for nearly thirty years education has been identified in international and national policies as the key to addressing environment and development issues, and latterly to achieving a more sustainable society. Yet most education daily reinforces unsustainable values and practices in society. We are educated by and large to ‘compete and consume’ rather than to ‘care and conserve’. Secondly, education is, as never before, subject to unrelenting emphasis on inspection and accountability in the name of ‘quality’. Yet dysfunction, stress and the pressure to compete are widely compromising the quality of educational experience and the lives of educators and learners. Thirdly, governments are concerned about the ‘socially excluded’, drop-outs from schooling and ‘failing’ schools and higher education institutions; yet policies which force institutions to compete mean that the advantaged ones get better and richer while the disadvantaged ones become further disadvantaged and receive blame for failing. (Sterling, 2001, p. 21)

According to the myths, education will provide solutions to the environmental problems, as to any other human problems. However, the reality is different. In *A Sand County Almanac* Aldo Leopold called for science of land health (Leopold, 1949) but, as Orr remarks, no such

science has been created in the half century since Leopold's writing (Orr, 2004, p. 10). Shall we then conclude that our educational systems are good for nothing? I don't think so. I think they are good for many things, although they have, by and large, failed for the most important ones. But that is not the worst thing. What is really scary is that educational systems all around the globes, which already suffer from the ailments just mentioned, are deliberately and systematically pushed towards further and more thorough failure.

Formal education is to a large extent premised on the assumption that ignorance is a solvable problem. This is myth (i) from above. Orr says that ignorance is rather an inescapable part of the human condition. I think we might take this one step further; much of formal education is premised on the assumption that the human condition is a problem that needs to be solved. In the opening paragraphs of *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt begins by reminding the reader that the first satellite had been launched into the sky in 1957. She then notes that the joy over this achievement was not triumphal.

... it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which rilled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth." And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's great scientists: "Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever." (Arendt, 1958, p.1)

The second myth, that we can manage planet earth, is alike in its misconception of the human condition. Orr notes, in relation to it, that "it makes far better sense to reshape ourselves to fit a finite planter than to attempt to reshape the planet to fit our infinite wants" (p. 9). My grandfather once told me a story about one of the first car owners in the rural north-west where he grew up and lived as a young man. This man had bought himself a lorry but, unfortunately, he was extremely clumsy as a driver. And once driving along the narrow roads in the hilly land the car fell off the road and tumbled down a hill until it stopped wheels up in a ditch at the bottom. Crawling out of the car – for he was as fortunate as he was clumsy – the man was heard mumbling: "Finally I managed to stop it". Managing planet earth is like sitting in a car which is tumbling down a hill and try to be in control.

When we think of managing planet earth we perceive nature as an external thing that is potentially within our domain of control. With infinite power and infinite knowledge there might be some hope in succeeding in that task. But even so, such a management task would be no ordinary task of managing one's backyard or, say, even a whole national park, for it would involve managing the lives and deaths of other people. And not just the lives of other people but of *all* people. And that is not some technical job but a moral one – and only to be trusted to someone who is, on top of being infinitely wise and infinitely powerful, infinitely good.

The third myth, that knowledge is increasing and through increase in knowledge also human good – flourishing or well-being – does, in like manner, lead us astray. As Orr points out, “some knowledge is increasing while other kinds of knowledge are being lost” (p. 9). Orr elaborates on this but I want to pause a little here, reflecting on one of the hopeful things Aldo Leopold wrote about in the *Almanac*.

The last decade ... has disclosed a totally new form of sport, which does not destroy wildlife, which uses gadgets without being used by them, which outflanks the problem of posted land, and which greatly increases the human carrying capacity of a unit area. This sport knows no bag limit, no closed season. It needs teachers, but not wardens. It calls for a new woodcraft of the highest cultural value. The sport I refer to is wildlife research. (p. 184)

So, would not more knowledge which came about as a product of this kind of sport be knowledge that would at least potentially increase also the human good – contribute to flourishing human life on this earth? I think it certainly would have such potentiality. But, unfortunately, I am not optimistic that formal education promotes this sport. And outside the educational circles, those forms of outdoor sports which turn a blind eye to wildlife seem to have the upper hand. Why is this kind of sport so rarely part of formal education? I shall mention two reasons for this. The first one is we might call moral since it has to do with our conception of nature as a commodity. The second one is conceptual and has to do with the way in which we tend to approach nature in an attempt to understand it.

The moral reason stems from the fact that science is a major economic activity driven by concern for utility. Anyone who has applied for a research grant knows this – we always have to indicate how useful the proposed research will be. It is also familiar to those trying to attract students to classes. For this reason, nature as an object of scientific research is commonly considered a resource from which some potential but tangible good might be drawn. Aldo Leopold raised a similar concern saying: “Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” (p. viii). To this I would add the observation that the good life is not considered a tangible good for the purpose of most scientific research.

The conceptual reason has to do with the way in which we (humans) approach nature as an object of study. We do this through conceptualization for we know of no other way. We invent words like “ether”, “atom”, “mass”, “flora”, “species”, “continent”, “solar system”, etc. Some of these concepts turn out to be useful, others turn out to be a total fiction and fall out of use. But however these constructions fare, whether we manage to say something true using them or not, they are the result of our attempt to bring the unknown into the realm of the known, bring what is distant into proximity, find structure and organization in the manifold – or as the Greeks would say: make cosmos out of chaos. The traditional way of doing this involves making a sharp distinction between nature as an object of study and ourselves – the researcher and the researched are two distinct things. When the researcher goes about her

things, she is not herself part of what is under scrutiny. Nature is studied as something that we can set apart from our own lives, some external object. In this sense nature appears as a stranger. Through research we try to get familiar with it, but we do not let it into our home. After all, it is not part of our lives, it is some distinct thing. This means that the moral norms which govern our actions and lives in general are not derived from our relation with nature. They originate within human community and culture in isolation from nature and apply to nature only derivatively, if at all.

This stranger in our lives – nature – tends to act up and make problems. So, we come to the conclusion that she is not welcome, that she does not respect our customs and we must learn to control it (as if it were a “misbehaving” child in a class). Thus, we curse when we see that the paint is wearing off our house and we have to spend both time, effort and money on remedying the problem. And around the house some grass appears where it is not supposed to be so we spend hours tearing it up or, given up on the manual labor, we apply some herbicide and simply kill it. Such situations are indicative of things not being as they are supposed to be. But what this really shows is simply that people tend to conceive of houses as non-natural objects. Natural objects are subject to constant process of generation and destruction while it is typical of cultural objects that they are conceived of as imperishable – something that will live on forever.

In our sober moments we know that nature is not a stranger, that it is not acting up, that it is not misbehaving. It is just nature. And, again in our sober moments, we also know that we are part of nature – natural beings made of earth, water, air and fire – and subject to all the same laws. (That is why the very idea of managing the planet earth is so ridiculous.) But because we understand nature as some external thing we are easily lead to this view.

IV

Our cultural tools, whether concepts or customs, are like layers that we place over nature to make it understandable, recognizable, predictable, controlable, and so on. We do this not to manage the planet, but to manage our own living on the planet. These are like signposts which we use to find our way around. So, we have concepts such as that of a forest, a lake, a coast, a sea, etc. All these are essential for our living in nature. But once we get used to these concepts – or rather, once the words become familiar and we become fluent in using them, the danger is that we treat a forest just as a *forest* – something general, not something of individual quality and character. When that happens, a forest becomes a replaceable thing since there is nothing individual about it. Thus, our symbolic structures – our concepts, maps, signposts, and labels of great variety – which are so essential in our attempt to cut through the chaos and relate to nature may turn out to be a double edged sword. The words may freeze our thoughts into ready-made constructs (like instant food) and blur our perception. We may not see in the forest a whole world of its own, and we may fail to see how utterly different one forest is from

another. I take it that this is what Aldo Leopold was talking about when he said that the only true development in recreation would be to cultivate the eye, i.e. to cultivate the perceptual skills of people.

Perception relies on concepts. But perception also needs attention, patience and openness. These are cognitive qualities that an attentive observer of nature must have. But these are not enough, for even the attentive, patient and open minded observer will fail to comprehend the manifold if she does not relate to nature – if nature does not stir in her the emotions of attraction, love, respect and humility (Jordan and Kristjánsson, 2015). In the introduction to his *Almanac* Leopold wrote:

When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impacts of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. (viii-ix).

We associate humanity with our cognitive, creative, emotional and moral capacities. Our humanity may serve us well in living in a community with nature but only if it is fairly balanced between those different aspects. Justice, as Plato maintained long time ago, is a matter of harmony. But, we add, not only harmony in the soul but also harmony with nature (see Jordan and Kristjánsson, 2015).

We must be open to nature showing us something that we did not expect, something new and stunning and even uncomfortable. Our conceptual and practical tools which are the products of some of the most amazing human ingenuity have served us well in understanding nature. But we have also used these very same tools, in conjunction with the Protagorian idea that man is the measure of all things, to cover the rough natural world with a smooth human layer. This layer is made of frozen words, frozen ideas, frozen thoughts, and we skate along not paying attention to what is below. One role for a philosopher, and an important one, is unfreezing these words, ideas and thoughts, like Socrates did in the heyday of philosophy. Let me finish by quoting Hannah Arendt on exactly this point.

The consequences of [this unfreezing] is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, value, measurement of good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handy you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking ... has roused you from your sleep and made you fully wake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other. (Arendt, p. 175–176)

So, here is a role for the practicing philosopher. Bring people together and help them share their perplexities concerning nature with each other. If all goes well, we may perhaps unfold some of the myths of education, also develop the perceptive faculties, including the aptitude

for emotional attachment, and even get closer to developing the virtue of harmony with nature.

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