

# Foreword

## The Experience of Nature: Phenomenologies of the Earth

### On Wild Ethics

Phenomenology, as a style of refection and a practice of life, invites us to drop beneath our accepted abstractions (to suspend our inherited notions and theoretical conceptions) in order to pay close attention to our directly felt experience of things. It asks us to notice the way that the surrounding world and its manifold constituents spontaneously *disclose themselves* to our most immediate awareness. Phenomenology invites us to trade in our concepts for fresh percepts, to trade theoretical schemata for the difficult articulation of our ongoing experience of the real in its inexhaustible strangeness.

Our lives unfold in continual contact and interchange with elemental presences at once oddly familiar and uncannily other. The practice of mindful, phenomenological attention strives to respect this strange otherness—whether of a phenomenon that is fluid and dispersed or one that is neatly bounded, whether it is glimpsed in the surroundings or felt in the depths of our own person. In the hands of some phenomenologists, such a practice involves a resolute refusal to totalize the other—a refusal to completely define or delimit the phenomenon as though it could be fully possessed in thought.

After all, when we consider the visible and invisible earth around us as though it were an object—when we conceive of nature merely as an objective set of mechanically determinate processes—we tacitly remove our thinking selves from the world we inhabit. We pretend that we are not palpable creatures co-evolved with the rest of earthly life, but are rather disembodied minds pondering reality from a god-like position outside that reality. In this manner, we free our thinking selves from any responsibility to the rest of the biosphere; we give ourselves license to engage other animals, plants, landforms and natural elements merely as resources waiting to be used by our species, as a clutch of fixed and finished entities waiting to be manipulated and engineered to suit our purposes. To look upon any being strictly as a definable object is to sever the possibility of real relationship with that being, and so to forestall any need for ethical reflection.

If, however, we acknowledge the myriad presences around us not just as passive objects but as material subjects in their own right—as open-ended beings with their

own inherent spontaneity and active agency—then we swiftly become aware of the relationships that we sustain with those beings. Only then, when we allow the things their own enigmatic dynamism and responsiveness, do we notice that we inhabit a common world. And of course it is not only the other animals, plants, fungi, and microorganisms with whom we actively share this world; it is also glaciers and gathering thunderclouds, the asphalt street underfoot and the surging seawater short-circuiting the nuclear reactor. In truth, every aspect of the sensuous surroundings can be experienced as an active, animate power, able to sense the beings around it and to influence them in turn.

When we speak of the biosphere in this manner, not as an inert collection of passive and determinate objects but as a *community* of animate material agencies (of corporeal subjects or bodies), we straightaway begin to feel ourselves as members of this community, and to wonder about the quality of our relations with the other beings in our neighborhood.

Such an approach demands great care and lucidity on the part of the would-be practitioner. In careless hands, phenomenology can risk assimilating the wild multiplicity of things into too human a register, one not fully awake to the divergent weirdness hunkered or leaping within things, their outrageous differences from one another and from us. An insectivorous bat unable to trust its echolocation skills, confounded by the airborne fungus rapidly spreading through its colony; a Lincoln penny recently unearthed in the flowerbed; the clacking antlers of two bull moose; a series of earthquakes provoked by hydraulic fracturing: each phenomenon, when we draw close to it, organizes the things around it in odd and often incommensurable ways. The real value of allowing some degree of spontaneity and agency across the full range of phenomena is the opportunity it affords our own body to participate, to enter into relation, to feel out the divergent ways in which specific things resist our advances—the utterly unique way each entity has of torquing our assumptions, and returning us to ourselves transformed. It offers a nuanced way of discovering difference...

The intuition that we inhabit a breathing cosmos—the awareness that the sensible things around us are, like our own organism, sensate and perhaps even sentient powers—is common to the discourse of a broad array of indigenous, traditionally oral cultures. For in the absence of intervening technologies, the human senses cannot help but encounter the world as a tangle of animate and expressive entities. Since humans are bodily creatures thoroughly embedded in the sensuous cosmos, we are able to encounter things only from our limited angle or perspective in the midst of those things. Hence, we never directly experience another entity in its totality—we can never completely penetrate or plumb the secrets of another being.

Each thing that we perceive has its accessible aspects and its hidden aspects, its bright facets that capture our attention and its unseen dimensions that lure us deeper into participation. Our perception of any presence is thus not an instantaneous event but rather an unfolding interaction—a living interplay wherein a thing first “catches our eye,” or subtly beckons to our body, to which we reply by focusing our gaze upon it, or reaching out to touch it, whereupon the other replies by revealing some further facet of itself, and so we are drawn ever deeper into a carnal conversation with the unique allurement of this lichen-encrusted boulder or that fungus-ridden tree stump. Bodily perception reveals the things around us not as inert or inanimate

chunks of matter but as enigmatic, elemental presences that draw us into relation, coaxing our attention or repulsing our curiosity, dazzling us with their resplendence or dulling us with their plastic sheen.

To speak of the world solely as a cluster of neatly defined objects and determinate, quantifiable processes is therefore to deny our direct experience: it avoids (and consequently stifles) our instinctive, sensory engagement with things in favor of a set of mental abstractions. It is a way of speaking, and thinking, that closes down our animal senses.

To speak of this earthly cosmos, on the other hand, as a living field of relationships between beings—each being with its own openness or creativity—is to speak *in accordance* with our creaturely senses, and with our spontaneous bodily experience of the world around us. It is a way of speaking, and of thinking, that enhances our sensory rapport with the sensuous terrain; a way that holds us in conscious relation to the elemental realities that enfold us. By acknowledging the inherent ambiguity and enigma of the myriad beings that surround us (by acknowledging that we can never fathom all the secrets of even a single blade of grass), such a way of thinking engenders humility, and a steady wonder—the exuberant heart of a wild ethics.

At this curious moment in the world's unfolding, when human violence toward other humans is matched only by our violence toward the living earth—with terrestrial and oceanic ecosystems rapidly collapsing under the weight of our steady assaults, and with countless species tumbling into oblivion as a result of our arrogant disregard—it is now evident that our *own* species must undergo a sea change if anything of beauty is to survive.

If we wish to bring humankind into a new reciprocity with the rest of the biosphere, then we will need to release ourselves from the tyranny of outmoded concepts, and remember ourselves as a part of this breathing planet. We will need to renew our felt experience of the land as a complex of sensitive and sentient powers, as a boisterous community of beings in which our own lives are participant, and to which we are beholden. This primordial form of experience, which returns us from the pretense of disembodied detachment to our corporeal situation in the midst of the here and now, engenders a new respect and restraint in all our actions. Divesting ourselves of our abstractions, honoring the enigmatic otherness that things display when we meet them in the depth of the present moment, enables an attentive and ethical comportment in all our endeavors, an empathic attunement to our surroundings and a compassionate intention to do least harm.

For too long many of us have withheld our allegiance from the sustaining earth, reserving our faith only for a mystery assumed to reside entirely *beyond* the sensuous. To return to our senses is to remember an older, indigenous faith that we have never completely lost—our animal body's implicit faith in the solid ground underfoot and the renewal of light every dawn, its faith in mountains and rivers and the cyclical return of the salmon, in the silent germination of seeds and the unseen, imperturbable wind. It is this animal fidelity to the breathing earth, so easily overlooked or forgotten, that unites us with countless other species—and it remains the ground of every lasting ethic between persons, and between peoples. A faith in the wild and shadowed goodness of the earth.

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