

Living nature

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Listening

Can we who live on nature's dole
inspect each detail, state its role?
How can we know,
through nature's show,
what makes the world act as a whole?

Traditional conceptions speak of nature as essentially 'alive', as somehow acting from a consciousness that lives both in our personalities and in the world outside.

How can this be possible? What kind of life can be expressed in objects like rocks and mountains, which are inanimate?

A delicate question is raised here, about what's meant by the word 'life'. Most obviously, the word refers to what we see when we look into living things. And that looking is reflective. When something is alive, it is understood reflectively, through an attitude of listening to what it has to say. It is here treated as an expression of underlying life, with a living meaning that may be understood by falling deeper back into one's own experience.

On the other hand, when something is a lifeless object, we understand it differently. It is then a piece of world, interacting with other such pieces, so as to make up the world at large. Seeing objects in this way, we take a different attitude towards them. Our attitude is not here one of listening. Instead, it is an attitude of saying and deciding: as we fit objects and their interactions into our pictures of the world, and as we use these pictures to decide our aims and actions.

Unfortunately, there is an inherent problem with all such pictures. As they are used, they get imposed on what they show. And they are artificial constructions, built by our minds and bodies, from bits and pieces of perception. As we impose these pictures, we are telling stories, about a world that has been partially perceived and put together by imagination in our minds. Accordingly, the stories aren't quite true. They do not tell us everything. Nor are they free of bias and distortion, which can build up in course of time, as the pictures get filled in.

To some extent, as new experience is perceived, we learn by fitting new perceptions in, thus filling in and reinforcing previous pictures of the world. That way, we take experience in, but also may habituate distortions that become engrained into our picturing.

So sometimes we fall back upon a more essential way of learning, where we turn in reflectively from our accepted pictures and their stories, to ask what nature has to say. This is again an attitude of listening, in which it is implied that nature somehow speaks to us, as if it were alive. The speaking here is impersonal, as Einstein sug-

gested rather beautifully, when he said: ‘Nature hides her secret by her essential loftiness, but not by an intended deception.’¹

What could it mean, to think of nature as ‘alive’? Is it just a poetic metaphor, through which some scientists indulge themselves, when they are not being properly scientific? Actually, that kind of dismissal is neither fair nor accurate. There is a more rational way of looking at our persistent sense that through our observations of an ordered and meaningful world, nature shows us its own kind of life.

In fact, no matter what we look at, we may or may not see it as alive. The way we see it depends on how we look.

For example, consider a human face. On the one hand, it can be seen as a formal arrangement of features, which are related to each other in space and time. We can go on to think that these features are activated by physical and chemical activity in muscles under the skin, in nerves that stimulate the muscles, and in a brain from which electro-chemical impulses travel down the nerves. But so far we are looking only at relationships and interactions between objects and events. The face is still described as a mere arrangement, moving in relation to other such arrangements, in external space and time. Until we see some further meaning in these changing arrangements, we do not see them as alive.

When a face is seen as alive, some living meaning is seen expressed, in the formal arrangement of features. Through this expression, the face shows feelings, thoughts and perceptions: which we understand by reflecting back from the arranged features, into our own experience of perception, thought and feeling, in our own senses and minds.

Such a reflection back is essential to what we mean by the word ‘life’. If something is alive, it expresses an inner meaning, which we understand by reflecting back within ourselves. And if something expresses such an inner meaning, we think of it as alive, or at least as expressing life.

For a second example, consider a sentence that’s read in a book. As a formal arrangement of letters and words, it is clearly not alive. And it isn’t brought to life by a merely formal analysis of its grammatical construction, nor of its semantic concepts, nor of some deep logical structure that is unearthed from it. But it does come to life when it is read with an understanding that refers to one’s own experience and thus brings a natural response from one’s own feelings and thoughts. Then one sees in it an inner meaning that makes one treat it as a living statement, not as a mere arrangement of words or represented concepts.

But what about an inanimate object like a rock? How can one see any life in that? Unlike our human bodies, a rock doesn’t have any organs of sense or faculties of mind. At least, we don’t normally recognize any such faculties in it, not even in the most rudimentary form. And if no living organisms have interfered with the rock, no sensual or mental faculties are expressed there, as in a printed book.

Still, as with everything else, there are two ways of looking at a rock. One can picture it and describe it, as an arrangement of features; or one can look at it more deeply, in a way that awakens one’s intuitions. As one looks more deeply, mere pictures and descriptions are left behind. Alternatively pushed and pulled, by feelings of

¹ ‘Die Natur verbirgt ihr Geheimnis durch die Erhabenheit ihres Wesens, aber nicht durch List.’ (Quoted at the beginning of Abraham Pais, *Subtle is the Lord...: The Science and the Life of Albert Einstein*, Oxford University Press 1983)

puzzlement and beauty, one is led to find correspondences and symmetries: which show an underlying kinship and harmony, between the rock and other things.

Thus the rock is seen to express an inner meaning, as a manifestation of nature. And this inner meaning is understood by reflecting back into the depth of one's own experience, thereby implying a profound kinship between the rock and oneself. Here, the rock is understood on the basis of its kinship with oneself, and so is all of nature.

But that reflective kinship is exactly what characterizes our understanding of living beings. In that sense, both rock and nature are being treated as alive.

Learning

Our minds know nature bit by bit,
but can't quite make the pieces fit.
Each goal we choose
means that we lose
all else that's left outside of it.

As we perceive the world, what common kinship could we share with all of nature? According to traditional conceptions, that common kinship is life itself, an underlying ground of consciousness which is each being's real self. As the *Kaushitaki Upanishad* puts it:

But then, in truth, life in itself
is consciousness, the real self:
which holds this body all around
and causes it to rise, alive.

from 3.3

It's from this ground of consciousness that life is expressed, in ongoing actions. And the expression is through mind. Here, a brief description is provided by the *Prashna Upanishad*.

It is from self that life is born.

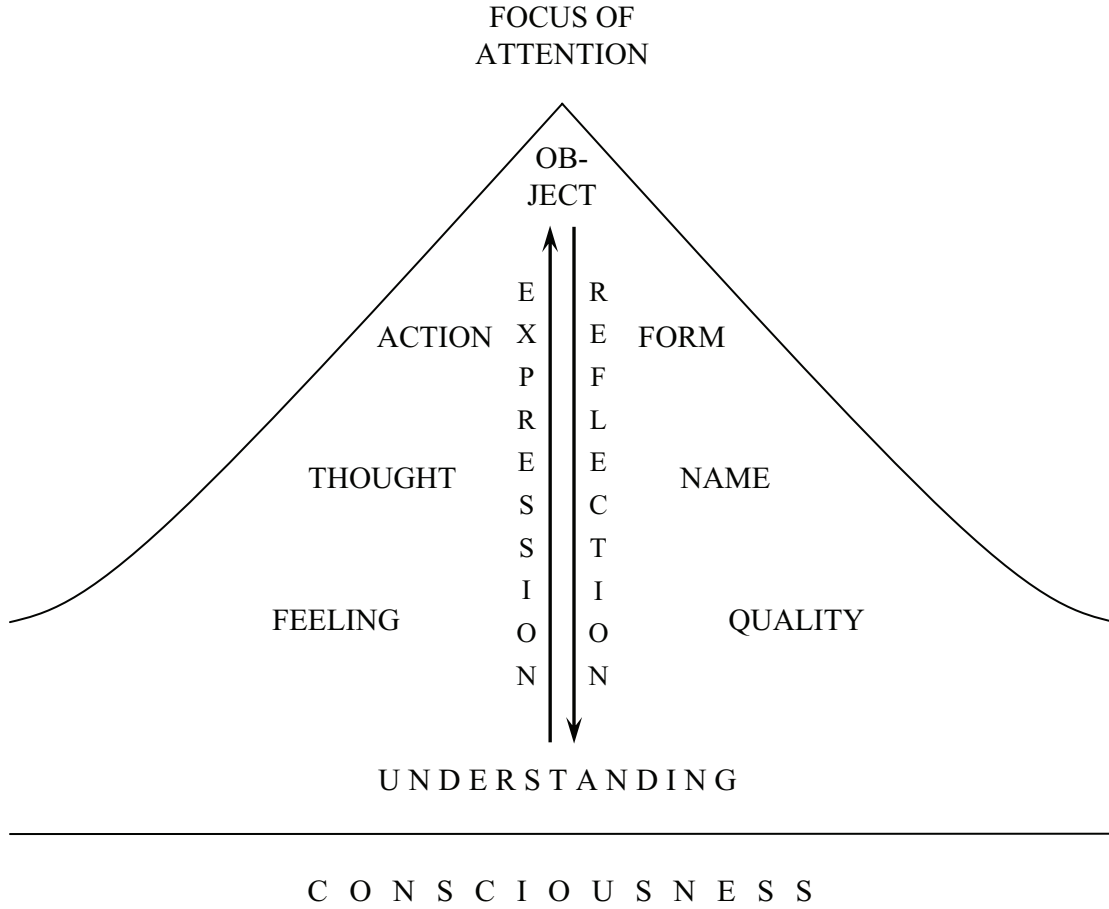
But as, on consciousness, there's a
reflected play of light and shade;
so too, on self, there is this [play
of life] that get's extended out.

Through the activity of mind,
it comes to be in body here.

3.3

In this passage, mind is conceived as a mediating process, between consciousness and objects. To understand the mediation in modern terms, it may be conceived as a repeating cycle: of expression and reflection.

- First, consciousness is expressed: through understanding, feeling, thought and action. But the expression has a limiting effect. It narrows down attention to some limited object, which then appears at the front tip of personal experience.
- As the object appears, it is perceived, interpreted, judged and understood. This is a reflection back: from the apparent object at the forefront of attention, to underlying consciousness, at the background of experience.

Fig 1 – Learning in the mind

There is thus a movement up and down, through five levels that are illustrated in figure 1 (within the broken triangle formed by the three lines). At the uppermost level, objects keep appearing and disappearing, as attention turns to them and turns away from them. At the second level, actions take attention to objects and thus perceive objective forms. At the third level, thoughts direct action and interpret names. At the fourth level, feelings motivate thought and judge qualities. At the fifth level, understanding co-ordinates our faculties and assimilates our changing experiences into continuing knowledge.

All five levels are supported by consciousness, which is their final ground. All levels and all living faculties depend on it, but it does not depend on them.

By repeatedly expressing consciousness and returning back to it, we learn from experience. It is thus that misunderstandings can get exposed and clarified, and that our living faculties can get developed and adapted. But, throughout this process of learning, consciousness continues quite unaffected by the achievements and failures of our dependent faculties. Beneath them, it is fully independent, on its own.

As our faculties perform their living functions – like feeling, thought, perception, speech – we experience in them a subtle sense of living energy, which expresses consciousness. In Sanskrit, this expressive energy is called ‘prana’. It is not just a subordinate possession that belongs to objects, which knock it on (or project it on) to one

another. Instead, it is an energy that rises up from its subjective source, in consciousness. And there it keeps returning to renew itself; and thus to rise again, refreshed.

In everyone's experience, this living energy makes up all objects and all happenings. The *Katha Upanishad* puts it like this:

The universe of changing things –
whatever may be issued forth –
it is all made of living energy:
which moves and oscillates and shines. 6.2

The shining comes from consciousness, as it continues through all changes of experience.

Knowing

Our minds themselves are nature's bits.
What can we know with these small wits?
Are minds so wise
that they surmise
the basis on which each mind sits?

How can knowledge be impartial, beneath the partialities of physical and mental perception?

According to traditional conceptions, nature is essentially complete and thus impartial, in itself. It is itself the source of all the actions that take place in it, of all the phenomena through which it manifests itself. It includes not only the environment, but also our personal and technological capabilities.

And yet, despite this inherent completeness, we keep on thinking of our personalities and their technologies in opposition to nature, as though our actions could somehow go against the nature that they manifest. There is a glaring contradiction here, which we go on ignoring. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a basic reason is given, for our persistent ignorance. It is a false image that we have of ourselves: as personal, doing egos.

Everywhere, all acts are done
by nature's constituting qualities.
Mistaking ego for the self,
a person thinks: 'I am the doer.' 3.27

Each particular doer is inevitably limited, by particular faculties and capabilities of action. If one identifies oneself as a doer, one's perception becomes inevitably limited, and therefore partial. There's no escape, the *Gita* says, through technical sophistication; nor through personal restraint.

One acts according to one's own nature.
A learned, knowledgeable person
is no exception. Beings follow nature.
What will holding back achieve? 3.33

Here, 'holding back' is treated as a negative action. Accordingly, the driven partiality of action cannot be avoided by doing or not doing anything, by any action or restraint

towards some limited object. To attain impartiality, a deeper understanding is required, beyond our senses and our minds.

Our senses are transcendent, it is said.
 Beyond the senses is the mind.
 Beyond the mind as well is understanding.
 Beyond the understanding is just *'that'*. 3.42

At the depth of understanding, all faculties are known objectively, as nature's happenings.

As truth is known, one who joins into it
 can understand: 'I don't do anything.
 'Sight, hearing, touch, smell, eating,
 going here and there, sleeping, breathing,
 speaking, holding on and letting go,
 eyes opening and closing...
 'these are just faculties, acting
 towards their various objects.' 5.8-9

This detachment is meant to uncover a pure impartiality of knowledge: as Krishna tells Arjuna, in the last chapter of the *Gita*.

Pure knowledge is just that by which
 one changeless principle
 of undivided nature
 is seen in all divided things.
 That's what you need to know. 18.20

In the approach taken here, knowledge is completed by detaching it from nature's manifesting actions. Through such a detachment, all objects and all faculties are left to nature: where they are seen objectively, as instruments of nature's happening. No faculty of body or of mind is then left out, to act on nature from outside. Thus nature is conceived to act spontaneously, moving of its own accord, from its own source within.

Since our perceiving faculties belong to nature, it manifests itself through them. In everyone's experience, it produces the appearances that come and go, succeeding one another in the course of time. At each moment, what appears is lit by consciousness. That consciousness is pure illumination, witnessing what comes and goes. It is not a changing act, but just that silent knowing which illuminates the changing acts that nature manifests.

As changing acts and objects come and go, they are manifested 'noisily', competing for attention in a stream of clamouring replacement at the surface of appearance. Throughout this passing stream, consciousness continues quietly, at the underlying background of experience. There, consciousness is utterly detached, from the appearances that nature manifests before its light.

Thus consciousness and nature are described as complementary aspects of an indivisible reality:

- Nature is the manifesting aspect, acting to express its underlying ground of consciousness, which manifests it from within.
- Consciousness is the illuminating aspect, shining out through nature's manifesting acts.

Each of these two aspects is complete within itself, in its own right. The problem of partiality arises from an unreal confusion between the two. In particular, our acts of physical and mental perception are only partial manifestations of nature. But we confuse them with the impartial knowing of consciousness, which lights them all from underneath. Through that confusion, the partiality of personal, perceiving acts is falsely superimposed upon a true impartiality of knowing, which is thus obscured.

Here's what the *Gita* says about these differing, but complementary aspects:

You need to know that consciousness
and nature are both unbegun;
and that all changes and all
qualities are nature's happenings. 13.19

In doing, doership and what
is done, the underlying principle
is spoken of as 'nature'.

In the experience of
enjoyments and dissatisfactions,
the underlying principle
is spoken of as 'consciousness'. 13.20

In manifesting nature, it
is consciousness that stands within,
experiencing the qualities
born forth as nature manifests.

For good or ill, as wombs give rise
to passing births, in every case
the cause is an association
of some manifesting qualities
with consciousness itself. 13.21

It is the witness, looking on,
confirming and supporting what
is seen. It is the subject of
experience, the boundless Lord
to whom all that's experienced
belongs. It is the truth of self,
with nothing to be found beyond.

But these are only ways of speech:
describing consciousness here in
the body, and yet quite beyond. 13.22

This passage (like many others from the *Gita*) can be interpreted two ways: one religious and the other philosophical. In particular, consciousness is described as the one

‘subject of experience, the boundless Lord to whom all that’s experienced belongs’. Here a religious interpretation is obvious: that an ultimate ‘consciousness’ may be approached through faith and worship, with an attitude of personal surrender towards an infinite God who is conceived to rule the universe.

But there is also a philosophical interpretation, which takes a sceptical approach of reasoned questioning. Then it is asked exactly what is meant by ‘consciousness’ and any other concepts that may be associated with it. As the questioning proceeds, it turns reflectively upon its own assumptions, in search of their own knowing ground. So long as any trace of anything constructed may remain, the questioning is not complete.