

A Philosopher Gone Wild

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Philosophy as biography has roots going back to Socrates, who “loved wisdom” by living out his protest against his native Athens. Socrates’ key insight is that “man is a political animal,” the animal who builds a town, inhabits a *polis*. Examining the character of life in this built, cultured environment is the time-honored mission of philosophers since.

Almost to a person, philosophers form their biographical creeds in a quarrel with the heritages they try to inhabit, and in that I take some comfort. Socrates so entwined his destiny with Athens-city that he left most of life unexamined; his biography ignored biology. “You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won’t teach me anything, and the people in the city do.” (*Phaedrus*) Quarreling with Socrates, I found that the forest and landscape taught what city philosophers could not. So I found my biography took a natural turn, away from culture. The political animal still had an ecology. Aphoristically put, I was a philosopher going wild.

Of course, I could be simply acknowledging the roots that had nurtured me. My childhood years were spent in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, where my father was a rural pastor; my first residence was among trees in a country place. Jump Mountain and Hogback were on the skyline; the Maury River ran in front of the house. There was no electricity; we trimmed kerosene lamps. Our water was a cistern pump outside and another cistern on the hill behind the house that flowed by gravity to the kitchen inside. Dad kept a large garden; there was a chicken yard, a wood pile. My mother was from an Alabama farm, and I spent a month each summer there, prowling the woods and swamps.

But formal education had its way, as it will in this country, and I entered Davidson College in the mid-1950s eager to learn the mysteries of physics. That seemed the science of fundamental nature, and I was and still am attracted by the physicist-philosophers probing nature in the very small and very large, microphysics and astrophysics, and the cosmology that results

from philosophizing over discoveries at these ranges. My college mentors had studied under the seminal physicists of the 1910s and 1920s. *Physis* is the Greek word for nature, and I needed a physics and, with it, a metaphysics. Perhaps there was nothing to learn from trees and rustic places, but there was everything to learn about matter-energy from cyclotrons and Geiger counters in town. This wasn't wild nature; it was mathematical nature. At the bottom of it all, there was ordered harmony, symmetry, universal law, beauty, elegance.

As an added boon, besides understanding how the world was made, the same physics gave us power to remake it. Was not the era of nuclear power, electronic wizardry, and computerized information at hand? In the 1950s, the humane city, fueled by science, was still a dream. So I set out to be a physicist, to understand and to remake the world; I applied and was admitted to some prominent graduate schools.

Still, I seemed to get lost—lost out there in the stars, lost in the mechanics of quantum theory. In the 1950s, cosmology dwarfed and mechanized humans; Earth was nothing but a speck of dust in galaxy after galaxy, a universe 20 billion years old, 20 billion light years across. The metaphysics that seemed demanded by the mathematical microphysics of matter reduced humans to less and less until they were nothing but matter in motion. I wondered. In those days physics had no “anthropic principle,” little or none of the insight that it has subsequently developed about how even the microphysics and the astrophysics are remarkably fine-tuned for life at our native ranges.

In college, though a physics major, I had gotten entranced in a biology class taught by a first-rate entomologist. The other students considered him a buggy freak, but he saw things nobody else was seeing. I learned that you could see things in a binocular microscope that you did not catch in cloud chambers. Twice, over spring break, several of us went on extended field trips with him to the Florida Everglades. He kept vials in his shirt pockets, and instead of swatting the bugs, he popped them into formaldehyde for later examination. He could name the birds, the plants; I couldn't. Maybe I wasn't getting it all in physics; maybe, foundational though it was, physics wasn't really getting at the nature of nature. *Physis*, with the root “to generate,” is not the only Greek word for nature, especially if such genesis knows only matter in motion. The Latin *natura* is from a Greek root “to give birth,” to be native. Life. That was the problem with physics; it had none.

Still, I did not yet move into biology. Or philosophy. I took a turn into theology. Lost in the stars, lost in mechanics, I was indubitably a Cartesian mind-inhabiting-matter, a spirit. So I went to Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.

The trouble was that I had to fight theology to love nature. I finished seminary, went to the University of Edinburgh, and wrote a Ph.D. thesis in

historical theology. The Reformers were terribly archaic, but the first generation of Reformers did have one thing right. Life was a kind of gift.

So I had grace and still a hankering after biology, when I set out to be a pastor in southwest Virginia, even though nobody who was anybody thought that these two would make a respectable combination. Biology, even more than physics, was an impossible science to reconcile with religion. Nature was red in tooth and claw, fallen; Paley's argument from design (a watch and its watchmaker) had fallen before evolutionary random mutations and survival of the fittest. There was neither creation nor Creator, only cold, fortuitous nature. I performed my roles as pastor, but inwardly I was searching. I remember once stumbling on a whorled pogonia in a secluded glade to exclaim, "Amazing grace!"

Partly to relieve the pressures, I took two days off each week, one to prowl the Southern Appalachian mountains, and one to sit in on biology classes at nearby East Tennessee State University. Graciously, the science faculty there welcomed me. I spent nearly a decade being a pastor, but becoming a naturalist, bringing in the Kingdom five days a week, going wild the other two. I learned the mountain woods in splendid detail. After the botany and zoology, came geology, mineralogy, paleontology. Now in my late twenties and early thirties, I was for the first time free of mentors telling me what I should study; I could figure it out for myself. I loved it! The trees and country places did have something to teach.

And I began to become alarmed; the natural world I had so long taken for granted, that once seemed so vast, was now vanishing with the surge of development. The sense of wonder turned to horror when I found favorite forests reduced to clearcut wastes, mountains stripped for the coal beneath, soils lost to erosion, wildlife decimated. I worked to preserve Mount Rogers and Roan Mountain, to maintain and relocate the Appalachian Trail. The natural world didn't seem so graceless, and no sooner had I learned that then here we were, treating it disgracefully.

As yet I had read no philosophy, save for a few physicists turned philosophers. For the most part, I had been warned against it. But I began to wonder. Just as I earlier had needed a metaphysics to go with my physics, I needed a philosophy of nature to go with my biology. Denied a theology of nature, I took a philosophical turn. Though I had never formally taken even one course in philosophy I applied to graduate schools. Most turned me down. The University of Pittsburgh accepted me; and I was attracted there because of their strong emphasis in philosophy of science.

But now I had to fight philosophy as before I had to fight theology. Philosophy of science was one thing, really the only kind of philosophy that was reputable; philosophy of nature was disreputable. That seemed the consensus of the logical positivists, then in vogue. The best philosophers of

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science insisted that natural history was the worst kind of science. For my interest in it, I had to apologize. These hard naturalists were worse humanists than the theologians. Nonhuman nature was value-free, nothing but a resource for the satisfaction of human desires, abetted by the skills of science. Value was entirely in the eye of the beholder, assigned by the preference of the valuer.

In the moments when I could escape the philosophers and the theologians, there were the mosses. I had developed a particular interest in them because they are so luxuriantly developed in the Southern Appalachians, and also because nobody else seemed much to care about them. There they were, doing nobody any good, yet flourishing on their own, not listening at all to the philosophers and the theologians. Indeed, there the whole natural world was—forests and soil, sunshine and rain, rivers and hills, the cycling seasons, wildflowers and wildlife—all these timeless natural givens that support everything else, all prior to these arrogant humans who thought that “man is the measure” of things. That valuable world, that world that humans are able to value, is not value-free; to the contrary it is the genesis of value, about as near to ultimacy as we can come.

My teachers all said I was all wrong. Almost the first lesson in logic is the naturalistic fallacy; there is no implication from descriptive premises to axiological or ethical conclusions. But in the wilderness, hearing a thrush singing to defend its territory, maybe even singing because it enjoyed it, seeing a coyote pounce on a ground squirrel, spooking the deer who fled fearing I was a hunter, searching for signs of spring after winter, even peering through a hand lens at those minuscule mosses, I knew they had to be wrong. There was life abundant in the midst of its perpetual perishing. These creatures valued life, each in their own way, regardless of whether humans were around. Indeed, we humans were part of that history. Philosophers have to reckon not just with the *polis*, culture, but also with the *anima*, inspirited matter, by which they become philosophers. Something of the meaning of life does lie in its naturalness. Forgetting this nature is that for which we need to apologize.

No one can really become a philosopher, loving wisdom, without caring for these sources in which we live, move, and have our being, the community of life on Earth.