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The Aesthetics of Nature and the Ethics of Dwelling

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1. Introduction: The perspective of the aesthetics of nature

The aesthetics of nature takes into account that the humans are able to carry out their life form as far as they consume the terrestrial dimension of the world. Nevertheless, the aesthetics of nature maintains that the real quality of nature precedes this human need, because nature is the home of the humans; in other words, nature is the familiar space including all the places of human life. In this view dwelling is prior to all other relations between the human and the surrounding nature. Moreover, the task of the aesthetics of nature becomes broader. Without diminishing the existential value of the appreciation of nature, the aesthetics of nature investigates the significant space of the context of life and manifests nature as a source of values that are not limited to the realm of the economic activities.

Under these presuppositions, the aesthetics of nature meets the ethics of dwelling, which connects the positive meaning of humanity with the responsible attitude towards nature. Nevertheless, the conception of dwelling requires to reconsidering nature as appearance and exploring the correlation between the aesthetic experience and the world-character of nature. In the following I shall explore the main aspects of this issue.

2. Nature as appearance

In our times, the scientific rationality turns from the phenomenal character of nature and focuses on the so-called ‘scientific entities’ which are accessible only to the mathematical investigation. In this way, the primary qualities of natures are replaced through quantity and the original process is reduced to the experiments of the physico-chemical labor. This procedure leads to the paradox that science puts aside its object through explanation and still claims to preserve it. While determining the “scientific entities” beyond perception and intuition, science postpones them to the realm between mathematics and mystics, and abandons the significance of the appearance. Maybe this achievement of science is accompanied by the lived experience and joy of having an insight into the miraculous order of the world. But this kind of (meta-) aesthetic appreciation remains the exclusive reward of the scientist, and does not make up the scope of science.

Physics, however, goes forward without nature, and the etymology of its name reminds of its respectful origin in the world of the Greeks, who actually discovered “nature” as the ontologically consolidated object of science. As a matter of fact, the distance between the scientific investigation of nature and the immediate experience of nature is the high price for the progress of the science, and cannot be changed or paid off. The main point is that the prevalence of scientific rationality and of science-based technology in our society raises the impression that these represent the only valuable approach to nature.

Nevertheless, there are other sciences that investigate the organic forms and the systems of life, and, in this way, they remain close to the phenomenal character of nature. Thus biology, ecology or meteorology investigate the biodiversity in nature, the different life plans of the organisms, the organic and the inorganic elements of the ecosystems or the natural phenomena determining the everyday weather. It is plain that these sciences aim to knowledge and not to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. However, they contribute to understanding nature in great and small scale as the district of the organic forms, of the appearance, of the life process.

The aesthetics of nature neither questions the value of science nor defines its own approach to nature as an alternative to the scientific abstraction. It only introduces the conception of the living nature and the viewpoint of the participant, in order to correct the one-sided world-view resulting of the scientific abstraction. Nature as appearance means the variety of the living forms, of colours and sounds, of shapes of landscape, the becoming, and the going away, the changes of season, the day, and the night. In other words, it is the rhythmus of life, in which also the humans participate.

From the viewpoint of the participating observer, sense perception possesses its own value. It is not the narrow level that should be superseded by the discursive rationality for the purpose of scientific knowledge. On the opposite, dallying in perceiving the appearance is the moment of aesthetic appreciation of nature. It releases consciousness from cognitivist and practicist rashness and offers a moment of existential recreation. Thus the different aim of the scientific/theoretical and of the aesthetic/appreciating approach to nature becomes obvious in the evaluation of sense perception.¹ In the first case, the senses are almost instrumentalized, in the second case they receive their own value. Moreover, in the second case, the nature is considered in relation to the human existence. All these elements describe nature as the world of the living forms, in which the humans “originally are at home”.²

3. The world-character of nature

Nature is the space of the context of life, including flora and fauna, inorganic things, districts in large and small scale with the river and the trees, the sea and the mountains, the oasis in the desert or the “uninhabited” small island with the wild vegetation and the rare animals. This context of life is not only in a concrete space, but it also is seen or unseen according to the presence or the absence of light. Plants and animals have their natural surrounding namely their appropriate natural place, where they can realize their determined life plan.

One would maintain that the humans as living beings have a natural surrounding in every place of earth. This is true, but it is not enough to elucidate the world-character of nature and of the human relation to nature as well. Helmuth Plessner has introduced the distinction

between the living body as an isolated living individual (*Körper*) and the living body as ‘the medium connecting the life subject with its surrounding’ (*Leib*).³

Further Plessner describes the difference characterising the human being. While the life subject possesses a self as the centre of the life process without knowing anything about ‘its self’, the human knows about itself, it is the “I” that is conscious. In this way it takes a frontal position to the centre of life and, consequently, it takes a position “extra the centre”, it is eccentric. This is what Plessner calls the “eccentric positionality”.⁴ The human is not the mere living being, but it is the embodied person. It conceives the perspective unity of its body and soul and understands its “surrounding” by using the grammar of the first and of the third person. The threefold definition of this perspective entails the distinction among the nature-world, the world of the things and the shared world of the persons.⁵

We can continue our argumentation and highlight the world-character of nature in different ways. The nature is a fragment of the open world of the humans and receives its meaning from the perspective of the shared world. Nevertheless, there is a primordial ‘aesthetic’ correlation between the senses and the nature. For, the senses correspond to the primary qualities of nature, as they are the shapes, the sounds and the light in such a way, that the result overcomes the distinction between subject and object. The fact that the human sees is neither a mere subjective ability nor a simple feature of the “visible” object. Seeing happens, because the world is seen. To the sight corresponds the visibility. Therefore, sensation and perception preserve the original world character of nature and make up the initial steps for the human self-understanding and the human understanding of the world.

According to this, argument, we can distinguish two aspects of the aesthetic experience of nature. On the one hand, the aesthetic experience of nature means the approach to the world-character of nature. On the other hand, the aesthetic experience includes the aesthetic appreciation of the richness of nature, the dallying on the view of the rich place of the context of life, the movement and the feelings before the beauty of nature.

There is a further aspect of the aesthetic experience beyond but not without perception. It is the hermeneutic consideration of nature, entailing a moment of respect and sometimes of fear about the circle of life, about the emergence and the disappearance of living forms.

4. Dwelling

Humans as living beings reside in nature. They share their space with other living beings, but they are the real “inhabitants” of nature. For, they are aware of this situation and, moreover, they discover that the rich exteriority of nature does not manifest some interior meaning. On the one hand, nature is the home of humans. It protects them and offers them a place to stay in the desert of the cosmos. On the other hand, the humans discover the asymmetry between the rich exterior and the poor interior of nature. They guess some hidden meaning, but this remains only a vague expectation without response.

Humans, however, have the existential need of interiority, of concentrating on themselves and of creating another exteriority that could correspond and express their interior meaning. As a matter of fact, humans remain connected to nature, but they do not belong totally to nature. Their need for turning to the interior is the authentic source for consolidating their dwelling.⁶ They elaborate space and build up their own home in the broader home of nature.

The Greeks had a significant word for this activity that has as its goal a complete work. This word is the verb “*poein*”. This infinitive indicates an activity leading from not Being to Being.⁷ In this respect, the first meaningful activity is “poetry”, which etymologically comes from the verb “*poiein*”. In the strict sense, poetry is the creation of the dwelling through language. If we take into account the earliest epic poetry, we conceive that the ideal elaboration of the home-place is realised as the creation of forms, of gods and heroes. The beautiful places in nature acquire some gods as their inhabitants. The beauty of nature is connected with the sacred.⁸

The tectonic activity (that is the original meaning of architecture) corresponds to the mentioned quality of dwelling, namely to the dialectics of returning to the interior of the soul and creating the exterior of this interior. The significant building, either the temple or the house realises this gathering to self and entails the creation of a community sharing the same existential need.

While the natural place becomes elaborated, it enters in a novel form of time, as well. The human creates history. In this respect, space and time are not the a priori forms of intuition facilitating the knowledge of the objects. On the contrary, they define nature and history as the dwelling of the human. Moreover, the creation of the home within the broader home indicates the ‘artificial’ character of the human world. Nevertheless, this is not to be misunderstood as a deficient feature in comparison to the “natural”. For, this indicates that art after nature is the route of the human world.

After all, the human remains connected with nature and extends beyond nature, because it creates culture. Since the human is the embodied person, it finds its dwelling in the broader space of the context of life. If the human can recollect the fragments of its world in a common perspective of meaning, it can be confident that it dwells at home. Nature as the primal dwelling of the human is often forgotten. Nevertheless, the anamnesis of nature as dwelling is not lost. Even though longer breaks from everyday work attest to the significance of work itself in highly developed societies, people use their ‘vacations’ for living in nature, for enjoying the landscape, for renewing their connection with nature.

It seems that the aesthetics of nature as a kind of theorizing opens up another possibility for the viewing of nature, since it brings to the fore the richness of forms, the original frame of human life and the significance of nature as dwelling.

5. The ethical aspect

The aesthetics of nature seems to have only a vague relation to ethics. Since freedom is considered as the liberation of the human from the pressure of nature and it is identified with the ideal character of the human, the domination over nature and the exploitation of nature are taken to belong to the further development of freedom and to social progress. This view, however, manifests the shortcomings in the philosophy of freedom and in the philosophy of nature as well. For, this kind of freedom is limited to the shared world, while the world-nature remains out of consideration.

According to my exploration, the aesthetics of nature points to the primal bond between humans and nature, because the surrounding nature and the artificial nature, in other words nature and culture constitute the home of the humans. Therefore, the aesthetics of nature can

be the “*magistra*” (master) of ethics. By considering nature as dwelling, we can emphasize two aspects of ethical conduct. On the one hand, we ought to treat nature with care and responsibility. On the other hand, we should understand freedom not only as ethical autonomy but also as endowing. We should let nature be what it is, the other of us and, at the same time, the dwelling for us and the space of the context of life.

These aspects presuppose the reflexive attitude of the humans towards nature and community. We should create the possibility for ecological responsibility and for the respect of nature. Since the home of the humans should also be protected for the coming generations, the reflection about the care of nature becomes connected with the care of humanity. This kind of understanding nature and, at the same time, the self-understanding of humans before nature defines the hermeneutic frame of decision making, while the decisions in themselves are the concern of practical judgement.

The conclusion is that the aesthetics of nature and the ethics of dwelling manifest the double aspect of being in the world. For, the human cannot simply survive at the limits of its natural condition, but it also presupposes the affirmation of its existence and the plenitude of being in the world. It seems that the discovery of nature by the Greeks is so important for our culture as it is their discovery of mind.⁹

¹ For this distinction cf. Adolf Portmann. *Biologie und Geist*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1973. 85 ff.

² Cf. Adolf Portmann. *Entläßt die Natur den Menschen? Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Biologie und Anthropologie*. München: Piper, 1971². 147.

³ Helmuth Plessner. *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie, in: Helmuth Plessner, *Gesammelte Schriften IV*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1981. 296.

⁴ Plessner o. c. 360 ff. Cf. Georgia Apostolopoulou. “Welterfahrung und Kunsterfahrung”, in: Karen Gloy (ed.). *Kunst und Philosophie*. Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2003. 43-59, especially 47 ff.

⁵ Plessner o. c. 365 ff.

⁶ This anthropological conception of dwelling takes into account the human situation in this world. Cf. Adolf Portmann. *Biologische Fragmente zu einer Lehre vom Menschen*. Basel / Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1969. 164. Martin Heidegger explores “dwelling” from a metaphysical-theological point of view. See Martin Heidegger. “Bauen Wohnen Denken”, in: M. Heidegger. *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen: Neske, 1967³. 19-36. English translation: Martin Heidegger. “Building Dwelling Thinking”, in: Martin Heidegger. *Basic Writings*. Revised and expanded edition. Edited by D. F. Krell. London / New York: Routledge, 1993 repr. 2004. 343-363.

⁷ Cf. Platon. *Symposion* 205b-c.

⁸ In Plato’s dialogue *Phaidros* 229-230, Socrates describes the beautiful landscape near the river Ilissos without intending naturalism. The dialogue finishes with Socrates’ philosophical prayer to the local gods: Platon. *Phaidros* 278b-c.

⁹ Cf. Georgia Apostolopoulou. “The Aesthetics of Nature and its Limits”: *Annals for Aesthetics* 41B (2001-2002). 453-464 (in Greek), especially 462.