

PHILOSOPHY OF FORESTS

Nature as a “new” task for the humanities.

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In recent years, global humanities have been exploring a relatively new phenomenon. When examined in the context of centuries during which established and affirmed the existing division of academia into natural science vs the humanities, both in logical and institutional terms, it may appear as something brand new; however, it stretches back to ancient eras when taking up this challenge was a natural duty of the philosophical reflection of the time. I am talking about nature, the study of which has in recent centuries been almost exclusively the realm of natural sciences, technology, and medicine. Philosophy, in turn, falling within the sphere of the humanities, has concerned itself with spiritual matters. However, in recent years, this status quo has become insufficient, and philosophers are starting to include nature in their considerations; while taking into account findings of natural-scientific disciplines, they are not enslaved to them and they reserve the right to shape their own position. With respect to the study of nature, the humanities and philosophy share a joint goal of breaking through the existing autocracy of the natural sciences and to introduce a more “democratic” approach to the field.

Nature is that which surrounds us

In spite of its obvious limitations and a large dose of ignorance about science, the above purely formal denotation of “nature” arises out of a reasonable conviction that if we are to answer the question of what nature is, we must take into account a certain

link, commonality, or relationship between us posing the question and the reality we are asking about. This is because even the most objective theoretical question which can be asked by anyone in almost the same format is by definition a certain relationship between a rational being and the reality in question. Such a relationship is inherent in the very concept of “surroundings”: in essence, surroundings are what surround a surrounded person or thing. This works out differently depending on whom or what the surroundings surround. There are no surroundings *per se*; there can only be surroundings of someone or something, affecting someone or something, and thus revealing themselves in this interaction. People can exist in manifold relationships with their surroundings, depending on their goal at a given time. And these goals can be rooted in values such as truth, good, utility, pleasure, health, beauty or sanctity, to mention just core values. They are reflected in different attitudes to reality: theoretical, practical (moral), pragmatic, hedonistic, vital, aesthetic, religious, etc. The differences between these values and the inevitable juxtaposition of positive values (good or beauty) and negative values (evil or ugliness) reveal different senses or ways of being what we refer to, which are further amplified by being linked with a given historical and cultural situation.

Nature's historicity

We can only learn what nature is through history. This historicity of nature means that any sense nature takes on should be regarded as a cultural record of the encounter between people and their surroundings, and as testament to a certain message about different experiences of nature. Therefore, the answer to the question “What is nature?” is as follows: nature as a whole is a meaningful, internally diverse, dynamic system of sense (biosense) which forms a framework for how humans relate to their surroundings. This means that the answer to the question cannot be formulated as



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a single, simple definition. There is not a single biosense: there are many, depending on their value and their positive or negative validity, on their manifestation in action. If what nature is always manifests itself in relation to humankind, we can just as well say that it is not humankind that is the work of nature but nature is the work of humankind. This means that protecting nature cannot be concerned with just its theoretical, utilitarian or vital sense, but it must encompass everything that belongs to nature, which includes its ethical, aesthetic and religious biosense. It means that full protection of nature is essentially equivalent to the protection of humankind's cultural heritage.

Phenomenology of forests

Just as there is no single sense of nature, there is no single sense of the forest. The fact that it is impossible to define a single sense of the forest in material terms – just like nature, forests exist in myriad ways shaped by a wide range of values and ways of implementing them in a historical reality – does not mean that it is impossible to define a single concept in formal terms to describe what or who the forest is, as an ontological category marking out a given sphere of being. We assert: a forest is a proper place for nature to happen.

By “proper place” I mean somewhere we experience nature in its full material and cultural glory. In other words, a forest is an agglomeration of natural sense, reflecting its inexhaustible diversity. Categories which describe the experience of being in a forest bring us closer to a greater understanding of nature.

So what is it like to experience nature in a forest? It certainly depends on who is experiencing it. Forests are experienced differently by rangers, hunters, city dwellers, children, elderly people, runners, firefighters etc. Although everyone perceives forests differently, there is a single type of experience which is common to everyone, regardless of the role they usually play in forests. First and foremost, it is the experience of being in a forest. The most universal, widespread and, in a cultural sense, the most common experience of being in a forest is *going for a forest walk*. But how does the forest appear from the perspective of walking within it?

Going for a forest walk

As we approach a forest, the green-brown wall against the horizon gradually turns into a row of trees. We can literally no longer see the forest for the trees. One enters the forest through a wall. One may enter by

following a path, but also by straying from a path. The way into the forest is not marked by a particular entrance, unlike, say, entering a house through a door. Since the forest has no door, entering it means crossing a boundary, which creates an ambiguous sense of suspense between what we are and are not permitted to do. In any case, the forest stands open in the sense of its accessibility: since it can be entered from almost anywhere and at any time, it means it is accessible to almost anyone.

This limitless openness of the forest is its weak point; those entering can choose either to safeguard or to take advantage of it, to the forest's disadvantage. By entering the forest and making the most of its openness, we experience a sense of enclosure, unlike being in a field or meadow. The openness of fields and meadows has a sense of a free, uniform expanse which brings a sensation of freedom of movement. As we enter the forest, we experience a sense of enclosure which intensifies as we venture further in, which is often augmented by growing density of vegetation. In contrast to fields, the forest is a space of closeness

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where freedom to move is severely limited. While the openness of fields and meadows almost invites us to run, the forest is a place where we walk slowly. The open forest gradually surrounds us, encloses us, enfolds us, to eventually stir a sense of disquiet and being besieged; it limits our ability to move and to see.

When I approach and enter the forest, my field of vision becomes narrower: light becomes dim and the obstacles under my feet force me to look for them, which further forces my gaze at the ground ahead of me. I step carefully among the trees, splicing the distance between them. When I get a chance to look around, my eyes dart between trees; my gaze slips and slides and bounces off individual trees, not being able to find a permanent target. It is reflected by individual trees as though by mirrors. Reflected countless times, my gaze returns to me, but I have a feeling that it is no longer my gaze, that it no longer belongs to me only; that it has been intercepted and now it is the gaze of the forest itself. I see, and even more than that I am seen. This is at the root of the folk belief that if trees could talk, they would tell incredible stories. They are silent witnesses, observing, remembering.

This is why my presence in the forest, even the most inconspicuous, will always be noticed. The forest knows I am within it. This makes me watchful and cautious. It is as though the forest was a complex system of mirrors reflecting one another; a network of criss-crossing gazes, reflexes, and reflections. The structure of the mirror organizes the order of vision horizontally and vertically. Trunks reflect one another, tree branches mirror the undergrowth. Not to mention the paths, which look the same everywhere. This mirror dynamic of vision is closely tied to the experience of movement. I can choose to follow one of the forest paths, traced out by people or beasts, or I can head off the beaten track among the trees. Usually, when one walks in the forest, one cannot go in a straight line, as one might in an open space. One is more likely to meander and dodge obstacles. This makes it difficult to maintain a single direction. You need more than just your feet: your hands lean against trees, move branches aside, tear through cobwebs and help you keep your balance and move ahead slowly. I adjust my attention depending on how well I know the forest; I try to control my position in my surroundings. I can usually find my way back, especially if I've been to this particular forest many times before, but by its very nature the forest is a place where it is easy to get lost.

Forest as a labyrinth of mirrors

When walking in the forest, we must take good care not to get lost; and if and when we do, we must find our way out. While we are in the forest, we are constantly searching: searching for a place, for mushrooms, tracks, animals, people, trees, shed antlers, herbs, water... We must search for them because in the forest things are concealed. Combining our experiences of seeing and moving, we can say that the forest is a maze of mirrors. The concepts of mirrors and mazes are accurate representations of the forest space in the context of walking through it. As we walk, we search, we lose and find our way. We meander: we explore, reconnoiter, discover and try different options. As a maze of mirrors, the forest is an interplay between sameness and difference. Although the forest remains the same and its parts may seem almost identical, it is in constant flux. The system of mirrors is dynamic.

Forest and time

That last observation leads us to another important category: time, which in the forest is measured not in hours or minutes, but in seasons and times of day; astronomical, meteorological and biological time. Time is cyclical. Just as the forest space continues with mirrored repetitions, forest time is shaped by repeats. While it is possible in theory to translate seasons into

quantitative time, experiencing forest time as seasons is not so much to do with the abstract category of quantity but with specific actions and with requirements of what we should and shouldn't do at a given time. Each season carries a warrant of the moment: opportunity and threat, right and obligation. Acting too soon or too late may lead to disaster, although the latter is more dangerous.

Whilst in the forest, one should avoid "being in the forest." This means acting at the right moment (*kairos*), which could also be described as synchronism or punctuality. One must be "on time." Wandering round a labyrinth has the sense of never-ending decision-making (*krisis*) driven by paths and time. It is a game which could become a matter of life or death.

Who is the forest?

When one walks in the forest, one experience it in myriad ways. Naturally there is a reason for any visit to the forest, but that does not mean that it overshadows experiences in other spheres of the biosense. As one walk in the forest, one can collect mushrooms, spot animals and plants, pause to admire a dew-strewn cobweb stretching between trees, ponder over the past function of this place and the fates of its former inhabitants... Like all human activities, walking in the forest is guided by intention, but this need not be instrumental. One can simply wander without an aim in mind. I already mentioned that nature, as our surroundings, has many senses which can be ordered following certain values guiding our attitudes and resulting behavior. Attitudes and behaviors resulting from them and correlated senses are historical. They arise in the course of phylo- and ontogenetic sedimentation: encounters between humankind and the forest are inscribed in individual and collective memory, predefining our relationship with our surroundings. Following the definition of the forest as a place where nature happens, the forest is where many biosenses arise and disperse, depending on the values they are ascribed to and on their history.

Natural forest

An excellent description of different senses of the forest, with a particular focus on those managed by the Polish State Forests administration, was presented in *Antropologia Lasu* ("Anthropology of the Forest") by Agata A. Konczal. In contrast to "wild forests," which from our perspective we could describe as forest-in-and-of-itself, and the forest understood primarily as a source of timber, or forest-just-for-us, "natural forests" are multifunctional ecosystems and can be seen as an excellent point of balance between humankind and nature. They have been shaped by human activities over the centuries, when people met their

needs resulting from living in a particular culture, its history and vision of the future in a sustainable way. Natural forests provide an intersection of influences, dependencies and interactions between humans and nature. They are a space for constructing and negotiating sense, with the process intertwining humankind and nature to create a single whole. In comparison with natural forests, wild and industrial forests are two extremes of this relationship, and they pose a threat to this relationship, which could result in the destruction of the delicate web of biosense.

So what is the sense of the forest? Let me give some examples. In a theoretical sense, the forest appears as a centrally-planned and managed complex with a dynamic, multi-layered structure, including that of an ecosystem inhabited by specific organisms. It is a piece of reality divvied up among specific sciences. In a pragmatic sense, the forest is a source of wood, food and raw materials, a laboratory, a warehouse, producer, workplace... In a practical (ethical) sense, the forest appears to be a harmonious community; a network of mutual benefits, a space for that which

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is "natural," a space for memory and equality, for national heritage, a subject of political struggle (privatization vs. nationalization), etc. In a vital and hedonistic sense, the forest performs nutritional and culinary functions by providing us with mushrooms, fruit, herbs and venison. It is a space of fresh air and somewhere we can indulge in healthy activities such as running, walking or cycling. In an aesthetic sense it is the subject of contemplation of the beauty of nature, a space for aesthetic experiences such as listening to wind rustling in the branches, birdsong or tinkling brooks, a source of artistic inspiration and wood used in sculptures. Finally, in a religious sense the forest is a place of divine manifestation and a place of worship. All this means that the forest shimmers with an incredible wealth of senses and meanings. Of course there are real conflicts between these experiences. We can also question their relative validity, showing that certain senses rise above others. But one thing that is unquestionable is this incredible diversity, which in itself resembles a forest – a forest of culture. Glimpsing it in its entirety is impossible, but being in it – absolutely essential and necessary.