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Reflecting the Pacific

Wolfgang Iser

Abstract

The title of my article has a double meaning: on the one hand, I intend to reflect the Pacific Ocean in the sense of mirroring it; and on the other, of course, also to think about this mirroring, to reflect on it.

Key Words

Pacific Ocean, phenomenology, extent, animal, individual, habitable world, alien world, communality

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;

We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident

As the rock and ocean that we were made from."[\[1\]](#)

1. Introductory remarks

1a. Background

At the outset I'd like to admit that my approach is very personal. I have often visited the Pacific coast during the last ten years. And it has always been the Californian coast. I became very involved with the Pacific Ocean. I used to walk, write, reflect at the coast. The way of thinking I am trying to develop these days is largely inspired by experience of the Pacific Ocean. I could even say I owe this new way of thinking to it. What, then, is my new line of thinking?

I am working on an epistemological project: a criticism of the modern stance, dominant for more than 200 years (and established in effect by Kant). This stance declares that all our cognition is bound by the human constitution; all we can recognize is--at best--our world, a man-made world; and we are able to recognize it precisely because we make it; for the same reason, however, our cognition is restricted to this human world and to be denied any validity beyond the human realm.

I have felt at odds with this modern stance for a long time; to me it appears to be a far too easily accepted prejudice; I experience it as a prison--whereas modern philosophy and the humanities praise it as a golden cage. To me it is suffocating, and I want to breathe again. My aim is to defend the potential objectivity--and not just cultural or social constructedness--of at least parts of our knowledge and to find a conception that can justify this.

One step lies in the insight that the picture of the human underlying all modern and current epistemology is in need of criticism--and perhaps of abolition: Cognition is conceived on the basis of the subject-object split, with the fiction that through cognition we, the subjects, connect with objects, and thus first establish a connection with the world. The human--or the human mind--is assumed to be something primordially alien to the world that, through cognition, then creates its contact with the world.

It is here that the Pacific comes in. It helped me to develop a different picture of humans' relationship with the world. It

suggested a much more original world-connectedness, one begun long before any cognitive attempt at hooking onto the world. In the following, I'd like to make this view plausible to you.

1b. The exceptional character of the Pacific

But why do I consider the Pacific Ocean an exceptional source of the experiences I am going to talk about? Why not the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean, or the Mediterranean Sea? Aren't they all more or less the same: immense expanses of water, with their tides, their saltiness and their dangerous as well as pleasant aspects?

Frankly, for me the Pacific Ocean is incomparable, and probably for two reasons:

First of all for its almost unimaginable hugeness. The Pacific Ocean comprises more than half of the oceanic surface of this planet (50.1 %). And you know that more than 70% of the earth (70.8%) is covered by oceans. (It's strange anyway that we call our planet "the earth"; "the ocean-planet" or something similar would be much more appropriate.)

The second reason is expressed in the Pacific's name: despite being so huge, it is astonishingly peaceful. When Magellan gave it its name, surprised by its calm, he was on to something that indeed distinguishes the Pacific Ocean. On the whole the Pacific is amazingly tranquil. It is far less agitated than the Atlantic--much more sovereign, so to speak. Tidal ranges, for example, are very small within the Pacific. On Tahiti they are about one foot, and at Yokohama they seldom exceed five feet.

It is this combination of hugeness and tranquility that, in my view, makes the Pacific Ocean so unique.

2. Phenomenology of the Pacific Ocean

Let me now attempt a closer description--or phenomenology--of the Pacific Ocean.

But how is this to be approached? By looking at the ocean from the coastal side: at the endlessly rolling surges and immeasurable breadth of the horizon Or by regarding it from a hill or mountain? In each case, the ocean's aspect is very different. You are faced by the "wall of the Pacific": projecting high like a blue retaining wall that heads for the earth and rams itself into it. Or should one set out from experience on the high sea? But where? The Pacific is so immeasurably vast and extensive.

2a. Immeasurable extent

Whichever approach you choose (you might even fly across the Pacific for hours), the primary and main impression is immeasurable extent, the sheer unlimited extension, the insurveyability of the Pacific--its phenomenal infiniteness. There is perhaps nothing on earth that can so directly, constantly and convincingly give us the feeling of unboundedness, infinity even. And it's not an imaginary or an abstract infiniteness, it's a concrete one.

Yet, when we see the ocean, its extension is clearly delimited by the horizon: a fine line that often seems needle sharp. But this line plays its own tricks. For one thing, you cannot determine how far away it is and how far therefore you are seeing the expanse of the ocean. Also, whatever limitation it may introduce, it's in any case the separating line of two infinities: the ocean and the sky. Finally, the horizon indicates

only where our view ends, whereas the ocean does not end there but continues stretching beyond. The horizon therefore shows our limitation, not the ocean's. It even underlines the ocean's extension beyond our possible reach. Compared to the ocean we are obviously very shortsighted.

2b. 'Animal'

Another trait is the Pacific Ocean's mightiness. It's hard to express how superior it is to us. To me the Pacific Ocean appears like the hugest, most impressive and unique animal I know, a kind of hyper-animal.

It never rests, but is permanently active: it is constantly breathing and pulsating, rocking its surface and sending waves towards the mainland. It is permanently energetic, and you cannot determine where singular activity originates from: waves rise all of a sudden and run in towards the coast.

There is permanent sound too. You always hear the ocean when you are at the coast. And the melody it produces is not fancy; rather it's cosmic power that you get to hear. To me, the Pacific Ocean is a kind of cosmic animal.

Of course, when I speak of it as an animal, I'm not using this term in the standard sense. According to the latter, the ocean is not only not an animal but not even a living thing on the lowest level, that of plants. It's just something 'inorganic.'

Yet, viewed from a phenomenological standpoint, it is an animal. It is in permanent motion, and it creates this motion by itself. Our standard categories of animate and inanimate being are getting into trouble here.

Animal being, on the standard definition, requires at least nourishment from elsewhere. The ocean, however, feeds itself by evaporating water and then, once it has fallen as rain, having it returned by the rivers. And the innermost trait of an animal, according to the standard definition, is that it possesses sensation and perception, that the ocean obviously lacks completely. But why is this? Only beings that are dependent and must hence react and adapt to their environment need perception. The ocean is not such a meager, dependent being. It must worry about nothing else, and so it has no need of perception. It is itself the superior power. Is that to be regarded as less than being dependent and having to find a niche?

The ocean seems to embody a different dimension than that of what we usually designate 'animals.' The ocean is a creature of endless extent and with a seemingly unlimited lifetime; yet it requires nothing, strives for nothing, and is incomparably powerful; it is like a giant life on earth, originating from another epoch and embodying a cosmic measure.

One further point: This creature is not an individual in the usual sense. It doesn't belong to a reproductive chain, rather it is singular in its kind: there is no second or third Pacific Ocean, and there never will be. The Pacific Ocean is obviously an individual--but of a higher type than the accustomed, reproduction-based individuality of plants, or animals, or us humans.

What I want to point out here is that one obviously cannot approach the ocean with the standard meaning of our categories. According to them the ocean would not be an animal--and yet it is somehow the most powerful animal. Similarly, its individuality is not to be grasped with the

standard understanding of individuality, it calls rather for a higher concept of individuality.

Perhaps the categories 'animal' and 'individual,' as we usually understand them, are undersized conceptions. But then so too is our concept of the 'animal rationale' and our pride in human individuality.

2c. The ocean's relationship towards us

What about the ocean's relationship towards us?

Phenomenally, the impression that the ocean concerns us is unavoidable. The waves constantly come in towards us. The ocean is active in our direction.

But it is just as clear that the ocean wants nothing from us. If it receives anything from us, then it throws it back: our cultural waste as well as our corpses. In this respect the ocean is a relentless civilizational diagnostician. You only have to go to a beach to see our calling cards: car tires, plastic bags, pieces of scrap. Delivery refused; return to sender. Refuse for the refuse society. The ocean does not allow itself to be polluted.

The ocean is of an incomparably greater scale than we are. It seems to belong to a higher order, to stem from such--from a superior order not caring about us at all.

And yet, as alien as this order seems to us, it touches us, we feel attracted by it. Confronted with this being that is greater than humans and the human scale, we feel compelled to think beyond human limits. The Pacific seems to issue a call: that perhaps we ought to reconsider the human condition, or at least our accustomed understanding of it, that we ought to rethink our concept of ourselves and maybe conceive of ourselves not merely in human (or humanistic) terms, and, perhaps, that we even ought to change our lives accordingly.

3. Between two worlds

Let me be more explicit about this by reflecting on what we do and what happens to us when we walk along the ocean's coast.

We move between two different worlds there--strolling along their borderline, in the zone where they meet and exchange with one another.^[2] There is the finite world that supports us and in which we dwell on the one side, and an endless world in which we cannot maintain ourselves and that yet fascinates and attracts us on the other side.

So why do many of us enjoy walking along the coast? Because it's beautiful or healthy, or because it makes a change and is relaxing?

This is certainly also the case. But there seems to be a deeper fascination too. And even someone who just wants to take a relaxing stroll may sense something of this.

Walking on the beach we move along the border between two worlds, one being our home, the other an alien world. Yet we feel that in some way the latter concerns us too. At least this feeling can arise in us when we linger there for a longer period. Maybe when walking along the beach, we move not only externally on the border of two worlds, but also along an inner boundary of our existence.

Aren't we indeed "citizens of two worlds"? And is it not precisely this that we become aware of here?

There is a habitable world, our home world to the left, on the land side, and an uninhabitable, alien and eerie world to the right, on the ocean's side; a finite world on the one side, and an infinite world on the other; the accustomed world on the left, and a world that perhaps awaits us on the right; a world of petty human bustle on the left, and a world that breathes more deeply and seems of greater veracity on the right. While walking, we indeed experience those two very different worlds and participate in both of them.

But in the evening at the latest we go back to the left, to our accustomed world, to the land world, the bourgeois and societal world, our home. This city world then absorbs us--with its pleasures, its bustle, its tasks. And we tend to forget the other world and to take our home world to be the true world.

We were in two worlds, but now we only move still in one. We had gone out, had become larger--open to an infinite world roused by the ocean. But then we went back home and constricted ourselves to the city world. Did we, by returning in such a manner, go astray--did we lose an important part of ourselves, even our best part?

The ocean had roused our cosmic side. It let us sense a side within us that is attached to the infinite. Wasn't this evocation also a promise, one given to us--and to be kept by us? What would a conception of the human faithful to this promise be like?

4. Familiarity

When I walk along the Pacific coast for hours, my relationship to the sea, the beach, the rocks, the animals, the clouds changes. I feel more and more as if they were partners and companions, contemporaries and relatives.

It's not only the view of these worldly things that is transformed but the experience of oneself too. One loses the standard sense of time. One's circulation slows down and one's thoughts become more connected, less distinct, more symbiotic. As the world one is moving in is symbiotic: Water, rocks, animals, wind, air and sand no longer appear as neatly distinct entities, but rather as parts of a common atmosphere, of a worldly and sensory symbiosis--that you are part of too. The world is less segregated into single objects and more like one being with various aspects.

One starts feeling like a relative of all these phenomena, getting a glimpse--or even evidence--of the communality of human and worldly things altogether.

These things share the same time as we do, and perhaps we all even share the same fate. We are all transient beings that emerged in the course of the same evolution and largely through the same conditions, and during those hours on the beach it becomes obvious how much we humans are part of the same conditions as other worldly beings.

When experiencing things this way, you will no longer walk along the coast like a modern, autonomous subject, dominantly observing beautiful or strange nature; rather, you will feel like a being very similar to or perhaps the same kind as the seal looking at you or the rock you are resting on.

Is there truth in this feeling? I definitely think so.

Seen on an earth-historical scale, we are entirely products of the evolution on earth. The earth came into being about 4.5

billion years ago (the cosmos 14 billion years ago). Life on earth originated almost 4 billion years ago. Mammals became prominent 12 million years ago. Prehistoric man originated 7 million years ago, and *homo sapiens* developed 200 thousand years ago. And the earth and its atmosphere, the climate and the ocean were strong common determinants in the emergence of those living things.

From this perspective, it is perfectly understandable that these beings, including ourselves, are relatives in a broad sense and have some overlapping communalities. Awareness of this is just uncustomary, but from the viewpoint of the sciences (the earth sciences and the biological sciences) it would be simply natural.

Certainly, when we are at the ocean nowadays, we go along the coastline and have the water opposite us--as a realm that is not a potential realm for human living. But were we not once fish? On some occasions, we may even regain a sense of this earlier state. "Somewhere within us", Joseph Brodsky wrote, "lives a dormant fish."^[3] And biology tells us that human embryos still exhibit gill slits and a tail reflecting our evolution from fish.

There remain other traces too of our evolutionary commonness with other products of evolution, like our fabulous capacity to intuitively understand at least parts of animal behavior (especially mammalian behavior)--a capacity that seems so strange and incredible to any conception of the human based on a non-natural distinction of the human (be it rationality or an exclusive relationship with God), but is so natural on an evolutionary view.

So the latter view substantiates the claim that experiencing communality of the human with other worldly beings is not an illusion: The claim makes good sense scientifically.

My focus, however, is on this experience of communality in itself and in its own right. To me, becoming aware of the deep familiarity with other worldly beings that, as I said, share the same conditions and, at least on a large scale, a fate similar to ours, is of utmost importance. We are all occurrences in this period of the earth's existence; we and those other creatures are in the same boat. And whereas you could hardly feel this while pursuing your life in the city and immersed in its practices, it can become evident to you when you are amidst nature, and to me in particular when I stroll along the Pacific Ocean.

Many of my Western colleagues will object to the experiences described and the view suggested that this is mere illusion and will soon turn out as such. The work of fantasy disappears once, back at home, one sits down to dinner or over one's books. The temporary exit from the city world, from the world of communication between people, and the isolation and the speechlessness between oneself and those beings one got involved with while strolling along the coast were artificial conditions allowing for that unusual view. But as soon as these conditions are gone, the mirage dissolves and turns out to be illusion. It gave a distorted, not the proper picture of things.

To be sure: Experiences and views of the kind mentioned--sensing the expanse of the ocean swell up within oneself, intuiting that one is similar in kind to seals, rocks, or waves, and seeing ourselves as deeply connected with the world, even as parts of it all the way through--are fairly unaccustomed (at least in Western thought). They appear 'romantic,' 'excessive'

or half-mad (or however this may be labeled).[4] Assessed from the standard view--that of citizens, business people and academics--that is indeed what they are.

But do we have any idea of the extent to which, through this standard view, we tie ourselves to a certain perspective on the world--and evaluate everything according to it? We can get an idea of this when we go outside, and when we do this persistently and for a long time. Unlike Socrates, however, who when Phaedrus led him before the city gates in the region of Ilyssos, where he saw in wonder natural things that he hardly seemed to know, declared that such things cannot interest us since they don't teach us anything--at least until we have found out what man is; for only then would we manage to understand everything else aright.[5] I consider this a foundational scene for city philosophy: it takes its gates with it into the open. A later reflection of Socrates' attitude is to be found in Diderot's typically modern statement that "man is the unique concept from which we must start and to which we must refer everything back." [6]

To be sure, one can proceed in this way, and where this is the custom hardly any objection will help. But one can also proceed differently. One can go into the open liberally unencumbered--or with little baggage. And a few hours in which we pause from the standard view may suffice to make a start and allow us to drift into a different experiential state, one in which we gain awareness of a relatedness with other beings and of a previously undreamt of boundness with the world.

If one still desires a companion when going into the open in this way, then the Californian poet Robinson Jeffers might be such - for instance with his recommendation "to uncenter our minds from ourselves, to unhumanize our views a little, and to become confident as the rock and ocean that we were made from." [7] Or, among philosophers, one might choose Merleau-Ponty who compared himself with a wave: "one crest among others and all the surrounding sea consisting of a ridge of foam." [8]

The fact that, seen from the city world view, the cosmic perspective appears to be mere illusion does not invalidate it. Otherwise, the city world view could likewise be declared mere illusion by the cosmic view. The fact that different conditions stimulate different world-views does not discredit those views. In many cases conditions just permit awareness of things--without simply making them up. They have a disclosive function, allowing us to realize something that would remain occluded given other modes of access. It is true that the diverging perspectives arising from different conditions are mostly blind for each other. But what follows from this is that any fair evaluation must be based on other grounds.

Completeness would be one possible criterion. I take the city view to be restrictive. It refers to just one side of our being, to the side of citizens constructing a specifically human world, while omitting our cosmic side and our being shaped by the world. [9] The cosmic view, on the other hand, is able to include the city one (seeing those human efforts, and human technology in particular, as our means to secure human survival on this planet and perhaps beyond it). So while the city view excludes the cosmic view, the latter includes the former one. In being more comprehensive it is superior.

Maybe future generations will develop a paradigm of human existence no longer aligned to citizenship (an approach that has typified philosophy for more than 2000 years), but that

allows our world-connectedness and our relatedness with other beings to flourish. I don't speak as a prophet here; I am not forecasting anything; I am only taking the liberty of questioning something and advocating something different.^[10]

5. Outlook

I guess you will understand by now what I am driving at with my reflections on the Pacific Ocean. Experiences of the kind described can, I think, help us to leave the accustomed picture of the human condition behind us. At least the one suggested by Western, and in particular by modern, philosophy: that of the human as being primordially autonomous and opposed to the world, not connected with it: *res cogitans* as opposed to *res extensa*. This anthropological assumption--that we are primordially alien to the world--constitutes the first part of the Western fiction. And the second, epistemological part follows from this. It is assumed that we are the ones who then, secondarily, establish our relationship with the world; that we do so from our side alone; and that it is--miraculously enough--precisely through that essentially non-worldly capacity called 'mind' that we are able hook on to the world.

I take this picture of the human as originally standing opposed to the world--man against the rest of the world--to be fundamentally misguided. Even cognition is misconstrued when it is omitted that all our cognitive and linguistic reference to objects thrives on a prelinguistic disclosure and acquaintance with things, one deriving from primordial world-connectedness, that for its part stems from our being evolutionary products of the same processes in which the things we have contact with came into being. Through cognition and language alone we would never get to objects. It's rather our primordial world-connectedness that allows for this.

This is what my exposition on the Pacific Ocean is ultimately all about: that experiencing the coastal world and the ocean can give us a strong sense of our deep connectedness with the world.^[11] At bottom we aren't, as modernity claims, autonomous subjects opposed to the world. No, at bottom we are world-connected beings and we are so, I guess, even on a very large scale, on a cosmic scale. This is the lesson the Pacific Ocean has taught me and that my reflections were meant to gratefully reflect.

Endnotes

^[1] Robinson Jeffers, "Carmel Point," in *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt, vol. 3 (1938-1962) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), part III: "Hungerfield" (1948-53), pp.313-408; ref. on p. 399.

^[2] Of course, when we walk along the coast our position seems to lie not exactly between these worlds, but to be one-sidedly shifted in favor of the land side (we are, after all, walkers not swimmers). But this strip of land on which we are walking is shaped by the ocean in an extreme way. In its formation the ocean had the active part, the earth the passive one. To some extent one is walking along the temporary line of compromise drawn by the ocean. The beach is the strip that the ocean has decisively wrested from the land. And the ocean continues to show its power over the land. Within a few months changes in shape can come about that make a beach unrecognizable: it used to be the most magnificent sandy beach, now you find a stony lunar landscape. And coastal residents are aware of the constant threat of the sea--even of

the 'peaceful' sea, the Pacific: all of a sudden it can engulf entire cliffs along with the human estates on them. So at the coast we might well walk on a strip of land, but it is so to speak oceanic land. So we walk indeed, as far as is possible, at the border of the two worlds.

[3] Joseph Brodsky, "Lullaby of Cape Cod" (1975), in *A Part of Speech* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), pp.107-118; ref. on p. 110.

[4] In fact, my view differs from the romantic one. The Romantics were ultimately humanizing the world and thus cutting it one more time down to human size.

[5] "I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230 d). "... I can't as yet 'know myself,' as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters" (*ibid.*, 229 e - 230 a).

[6] "Une considération surtout qu'il ne faut point perdre de vue, c'est que si l'on bannit l'homme ou l'être pensant & contemplateur de dessus la surface de la terre, ce spectacle pathétique & sublime de la nature n'est plus qu'une scène triste & muette. L'univers se tait; le silence & la nuit s'en emparent. Tout se change en une vaste solitude où les phénomènes inobservés se passent d'une manière obscure & sourde. C'est la présence de l'homme qui rend l'existence des êtres intéressante;...L'homme est le terme unique d'où il faut partir, & auquel il faut tout ramener" (Denis Diderot, "Encyclopédie" [1755], in: Diderot, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. VII: *Encyclopédie III*, Paris: Hermann, 1976, pp.174-262; ref. on p. 212 f.). The only difference from Socrates is that in Diderot's case the outside is not nature in front of the city gates but the whole cosmos beyond the earth.

[7] Robinson Jeffers, "Carmel Point" (from "Hungerfield", 1948-53), in *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt, vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 399.

[8] As reported by Jean-Paul Sartre in his obituary: "Il se comparait volontiers à une vague: une crête parmi d'autres et toute la mer debout tenant dans un ourlet d'écume" (Jean-Paul Sartre, "Merleau-Ponty Vivant", in: *Les Temps Modernes*, numéro special: Merleau-Ponty; 17, no. 184-85, 1961, pp.304-376; ref. on p. 310 f.).

[9] I experienced one of the most revealing surprises while searching for literature on the Pacific Ocean. I was looking for books that connected myths and tales, reflection and facts, imagination and photos. Although there are thousands of titles, nothing of the kind sought was to be found. Next to purely scientific works, they were mainly 'ecological.' One is concerned about the maintenance of the sea and its inhabitants or coastal zones. The perspective is unbelievably 'human,' 'city'-like, not to say small-minded. Concern for the ocean is a concern for people. The ocean is thus underestimated in every respect, even in an ecological respect. Time and time again the damage done by humans and the importance of human salvage measures are exaggerated. As if the ocean's sovereignty--its power of self-purification for instance--had not long since taught us better (remember the blatantly false assessments that followed the Exxon Valdez tanker accident in 1989). The alarming prognoses are certainly good for increasing the profile of the eco-sector and for the creation of corresponding jobs. But the superiority of the sea

manifests itself even in that it must be far less concerned about the damages done by us humans than we think; it eliminates them far quicker than we believe and does not require our help to do so. In brief, the literature I found says a lot about human preoccupations, but hardly anything about the ocean.

[10] Cf. my paper "Art Transcending the Human Pale--Towards a Transhuman Stance," given at the International Congress of Aesthetics, "Aesthetics in the 21st Century," Makuhari (Tokyo), August 27-31, 2001 (*International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol. 5, 2001, pp. 3-23; *The Aesthetics of Japan*, No. 34, 2002, pp. 106-125).

[11] In this, my view is very different from Kant's theory of the sublime--to which it might appear similar at first glance. Kant's theory comprises two aspects (both already expressed in the "Conclusion" of his *Critique of Practical Reason* that is most significant for his view of the sublime). According to Kant's assessment of the sublime, we feel, on the one hand, physically completely insignificant, a lack of any chance against the power of nature, while, on the other hand, we have a sense of ourselves as intellectually elevated to our true nature, to our "intelligible character," one unable to be entirely affected by the physical world but completely superior to it. On my view, neither of these aspects applies: We feel neither physically annihilated by the physical world nor intellectually superior to it, and the result of the experiences described is, above all, not a flight from the physical world into an intellectual one. It's quite the opposite: We are led to experience our deep connectedness with the world--in a physical as well as an intellectual respect. According to Kant, the experience of the sublime takes us beyond the physical world; on my view experiencing the ocean and the coastal world connects us with the world.

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