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REFLECTIONS ON MIND IN NATURE

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My attitudes toward nature were shaped in my boyhood years, during which I spent many happy hours playing in the woods and fields across from my home in a small Ohio town. Nature did not at all seem like an "object" whose only value was as an instrument to further my own purposes. The trees and streams, squirrels and glacial cliffs seem to have a life and rhythm of their own, quite apart from the busy affairs of humans. In college, the poetry of romantics such as Wordsworth gave voice to my intuition that "nature" was in fact alive and somehow even "conscious." Subsequently, in reading Hegel, I discovered that at least some thinkers in Western philosophy recognize a dimension of reason awareness in the natural world. For Hegel, nature is "petrified spirit," or consciousness "frozen" into patterns that lack the freedom of human consciousness. Science, according to Hegel, makes possible the overcoming of mind-nature dualism, because through science reason or consciousness recognizes itself in nature, which previously appeared to be wholly "other" than mind. Nevertheless, despite Hegel's insight, Western science conceived of nature as nothing more than a complex mechanism, totally lacking in the freedom which apparently characterizes human awareness. So long as we conceive of nature in dualistic terms, as something other and lesser than human life, we will be able to justify the practices that are leading to the destruction of the ecosphere.

The science of the late 20th century has in some ways displaced the mechanistic and positivistic views of science which seemed to block the way for a change in the humanity-nature relationship. Today, in the light of quantum theory, chaos theory, theories of self-organization and ecological theory, we have before us the possibility of a very different understanding of humanity's relation to nature. We can begin to see the outlines of a cosmic "narrative" that describes the emergence of human awareness from the enormously long evolutionary processes that were initiated with the Big Bang, billions of years ago. The emergence of human awareness, according to such a narrative, is not merely a cosmic accident, but instead may be an inevitable outgrowth of the universe's capacity for self-organization. Cosmologists interested in the cosmic anthropic principles now ask whether the universe is in some sense "designed" to bring forth self-conscious forms of carbon-based life. In our vast universe, there may be many such life-forms. Certainly, there was no necessity that self-aware life turn out to look like human beings, but perhaps there is a *nisus* toward life and self-awareness on the part of the cosmos itself. If so, then we may understand human existence as one instance of how the universe has brought forth a form of life by which the universe can become aware of itself — through culture, religion, philosophy, and science. Seen from this point of view, one developed in interesting ways by Ken Wilber, the history of the universe is the history of the development of

"mind" or "freedom" or "consciousness."

Of course, many contemporary scientists remain skeptical of such an interpretation, since it seems to reintroduce the idea of "purpose" into accounts of the universe. Many evolutionary

biologists, for example, maintain that for Darwin there is no "direction" to evolution. Human life is simply a result of the complex processes of evolution, which works in accordance with the mechanical principles of natural selection. But does Darwin's mechanistic understanding of evolution as the blind construction of organic mechanisms prove fully satisfying today in view of theories of self-organization, according to which natural processes seem to contain internal principles which lead them spontaneously to develop new levels of organization when placed under sufficient stress? Did Darwin's mechanistic model of nature, much like Freud's, lead him to interpret natural processes in ways that from our own viewpoint prove misleading or unsatisfying? What might be the environmental consequences if we could develop a more satisfying narrative, one grounded in scientific theory but also attentive to human experience, that depicts human existence as having originated as part of a great cosmic drama, an adventure of cosmic self-creation and exploration whose destination remains obscure? Would such a narrative help us to appreciate the natural world in a new way, as the maternal matrix from which human and all other forms of life have arisen? Would this narrative provide us with the guidance needed to respect natural processes, animals, plants, and the whole living Earth in a way that we currently fail to do, guided as we are by dualistic, anthropocentric, atomistic, and mechanistic narratives which justify the human domination of nature? To what extent can modernity's narrative of human emancipation be extended to include the emancipation of nature? And to what extent does that modern narrative call for the exploitation of nature? Does the post-modern critique of anthropocentrism and dualism contribute to the search for a "deeper" ecology? Or is post-modernism a politically dangerous relativism which reveals little concern for the natural world? Currently, I am writing a book that will deal with the relation between radical environmentalism (deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology) and post-modernism. An important component of that book will concern the extent to which human awareness both arises from and is, in part, in the service of the self-revelation of the cosmos. Does human self-realization somehow involve both bearing witness to and participating in the creative event which brought us forth, for ends that may be known only to the species which evolve long after we are gone?

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