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Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and Thereness: A Phenomenological Exploration of Mountain Experience

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Introduction

All my adult life I have enjoyed spending time in the mountains. At different times I am, or have been, hill walker, fell runner, climber, winter mountaineer, bird watcher, and mountain biker. Many of my most treasured memories are the varied and vivid recollections of days in the English, Welsh and Scottish mountains. Some years ago, reflection on my experiences led me to the belief that it could be characterized under the headings of Wildness, Intensity, and Thereness. Wildness relates to the degree to which the nature that is experienced seems untamed by humans, Intensity refers to the extent to which one is aware only of the moment. Thereness refers to the mystic element of mountain experience, of revelation or oneness with nature. More recently I have added Connectivity, the degree to which we are aware of our relationship to nature, and the relationships within nature. What follows is my attempt to gain a deeper understanding of this insight.

To introduce the sort of mountain experience that Wildness, Intensity, Connectedness, and Thereness may be used to describe I have given two examples of personal experience: It is a sunny day early in my climbing career and one of my first leads. I am 15 feet below the top of the cliff when a peregrine flashes overhead; surprised at my presence it gives vent to a harsh cry. The moment is burned indelibly within me, of the sight and sound of the peregrine, of its wildness and difference.

Another time, January in the Scottish Highlands at the end of a long and exhilarating day, we are still high on the mountain as the sun sets, a sinking orange globe in a blue sky, the peaks of innumerable white mountains have a sunlit glow, while the valleys are dark with shadow. As we pause there is a sense of oneness, or rightness, an inner stillness.

Characterization of mountain experience under the headings of Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and Thereness forms an insightful basis for understanding. They allow the experiencer to explore what they have experienced and serve as a prompt for deep reflection. Their presence or absence explains why a particular mountain experience is, or is not, special. Examination of the work of Toadvine¹ and James² shows that they can be successfully related to existing studies in both the phenomenology of nature and mysticism.

We can learn something about experience of nature in general from mountain experience. By looking at nature, and humans in nature in more extreme conditions, we can understand what is present, and what is not present, in other experiences. I make no claim that mountain experience is necessarily better in some sense than gentler and less extreme experiences. The tranquillity of a woodland glade in summer may move us in a different, but equally valuable, way.

Being in the mountains is an important part of my life and forms part of what makes my life worthwhile. It is important both as valued experience and for the opportunity it offers to understand nature and our relationship to it. The more extreme nature of (some) mountain experiences lets us see what is important in our everyday experience of nature. It gives us knowledge by acquaintance in contrast to the “knowing that” provided by science. No amount of numbers can convey the force of nature in the same way as does the experience of being on a mountain in a wind so strong that it is impossible to stand up, or that watching the action of a river in flood as it carves away its banks does.

At the core of what I want to explore is my experience of being in the mountains. In some sense the phenomena I am exploring is direct experience of the mountains, and in some sense it is the description of this experience. Even the direct experience is in some sense “woolly.” Is it a particular day in the hills, is it my memories of many years, is it the books I have read, the photographs I have taken, the conversations I have had? Or is it those special times when there is only now? Perhaps it is even more rare, those moments when there is insight, connection, a feeling of something more, of “seeing behind.”

This “seeing behind” or “mystic moment” is at the core of what I want to explore under the heading of *Thereness*. Both my own experience and the experience of others is that on occasions we have an experience of nature that goes beyond simply what we perceive with our senses. As with religious mystic experience, it is not something you can point to and say “look at that”: it is problematic to describe and share. I hope to show that even the ineffable in mountain experience can be explored. Words are not experience, but the attempt to articulate what at first appears inexpressible does allow us to both understand and to share what we have experienced; one outcome of this is that future experience is enriched. I have used William James’ work on religious experience as a basis to describe both the similarities with, and differences from, religious experience.³ The experiences described by James reveal both the variety of this kind of experience and the role that nature and especially mountains can play in triggering it.

The approach taken here suggests that an analytical view of values, in which value is either projected by humans onto nature, or exists independently of humans, fails crucially to allow for the interaction of humans with nature, or perhaps better, fails to allow for humans “being” in nature. Value is not something that exists “out there” to be discovered, or which we project with certainty on to nature. Rather, the value of mountains is expressed and experienced through our interactions. And in these interactions we are only one side of the story, the other is the story of the mountain and its inhabitants. Nature may be oblivious to our presence or agitated by it; we experience both and our valuing is shown in our responses.

Some, but not all, of what I have described could be termed aesthetic experience. Further work could be done to explore the overlap between the account given here and accounts of aesthetic experience, particularly as they apply to the environment. This is especially true for some of the pragmatist accounts of aesthetic experience. For example, John Dewey states that:

. . . the aesthetic arises through an almost primal, active engagement between ourselves and our environment, through ordinary activities including both practical and intellectual pursuits. The aesthetic emerges in “an experience” when the elements of ordinary experience come together in a meaningful and vital way, creating a unified experience that is complete and whole in itself. It is not disengaged or distant, but full of meaning and

expression, involving both “doing” and “undergoing” and engaging the “entire live creature.”⁴

I have drawn on Frank Sibley’s⁵ account of aesthetic qualities in explaining how, even though we cannot predict how a person will experience a particular mountain on a particular day, we can draw on objective factors such as the features of the mountain and its environment to explain the experience that they do have.

I will now move to a more detailed description of the four elements of mountain experience I have introduced, starting with Wildness.

Wildness

An initial description of Wildness is:

*the degree to which nature is experienced as untamed and untameable. For example, standing on a Scottish mountain in winter one is likely to experience a feeling of wildness. I’m tempted to say that the more the landscape has been modified by humans the less wild it seems, but there are times when nature “shows her strength” and this is not true. For example, experience of a flooded village has a strong element of Wildness and shows that human domination of nature is only temporary.*⁶

There is a difference between Wildness and wilderness. Wildness refers to the experience of nature, while wilderness is a description of place character. They also differ in that wilderness refers to nature which is unmarked by humans, whereas Wildness maybe experienced in an environment modified, though not dominated, by humans.⁷ Wildness may be more often experienced in areas of wilderness but wilderness is not essential to experiencing Wildness.⁸

As examples of different landscapes that can give rise to the experience of Wildness, consider the dramatic knife-edges of the Cuillin Ridge, or the round remoteness of the Cairngorm plateau. Contrasting the Cairngorms and the Cuillin Ridge shows us that it is not just one sort of mountain terrain that gives rise to Wildness. Some places will always seem wild, while others will only occasionally emote this feeling. For example, there is a ridge on the edge of Derbyshire called White Nancy; sheep graze over it, stone walls divide it and quarries have eaten away large chunks. Usually it feels pastoral rather than wild, but I have seen it on a winter’s day covered in snow with the cloud blowing from it looking positively Alpine. Even on a summer’s day, the Cairngorms feel wild, while White Nancy does so only very occasionally.

Clearly, it is possible to think of non-mountainous regions that offer the opportunity to experience a great deal of Wildness; sea cliffs, deserts, and oceans are often largely free of human influence. So experience of Wildness of the type we are looking for is not limited to mountains. Indeed we might well find that these other regions inspire similar experience to those I have described as part of mountain experience. We can also ask “what of Wildness in the city?”: for example, the fox that trots unconcerned across my patio? The fox is wild, but the environment that he occupies is not. The element of Wildness in the experience is likely to be small.

What part do plant and animal life play in our experience of mountains? The flora and fauna of a location affect its potential for experience of Wildness. For example, the presence of domestic animals reduces the possibility of experiencing Wildness. No matter how hard we have worked to gain our chosen peak the presence of a sheep grazing quietly by the summit cairn makes it feel less wild. Equally, the sight of a bird of prey can make it seem wilder, especially if the taking of prey is witnessed. On a recent walk in the Yorkshire Dales I was struck by how tame the grazed pastures made the land seem. It was not only the ordered nature of the fields: the monotony of the grazed pasture made the landscape tame and boring. Often the road verge offered the greatest interest through its profusion of wild flowers. Using one’s imagination reveals the difference that flora and fauna can make. Imagining sheep grazing on the remote Scottish island of Rum makes the island seem less wild; if we imagine the reintroduction of wolves then the potential for experiencing Wildness seems increased.

What part do the elements of the landscape and weather make to our mountain experience? Clearly weather can make a huge difference to how we experience a particular place. The summit of a popular mountain on a warm summer’s day gives a very different experience to the same mountain top covered in snow on a winter’s day. Crossing a stream that threatens to knock us off our feet gives a strong sense of Wildness, especially when we contrast its raging torrent with the gentle trickle we paddled across the last time we were there. Or being on a mountain ridge when the wind is so strong we cannot stand up lets us experience nature’s power. Perhaps one of the strongest factors in experiencing Wildness is the absence of the sounds of civilization, of cars, industry, television, and radio. In their place we may experience silence or any of nature’s myriad sounds unadulterated. Equally the absence of human constructions contributes to the experience of Wildness.

It is the experience of individuals that determines whether a particular landscape or situation has Wildness for them. To someone who has never been outside a town, a Lakeland mountain top may feel wild, to someone who regularly climbs in the Alps, it probably feels tame. However, it is not simply personal experience that determines Wildness. There is something we can point to as the cause of the experience. The experience is “felt,” but there are objective factors we can observe which have explanatory power. While the experience of Wildness depends on the experiencer, the source of the Wildness can be identified and shared. And the factors we can refer to are just those we have described above: flora, fauna, landscape, and weather. This has parallels with Sibley’s description of aesthetic qualities.⁹ On Sibley’s view the aesthetic qualities of an object can be explained by reference to the non-aesthetic properties of the object of appreciation. For example, the happy chuckling of a mountain stream can be attributed to the sound of flowing water disturbed by the rocks in the stream bed. While the properties give rise to the experience and can be used to explain it, the experience cannot be predicted on the basis of the features: different people may have a different response to the same object, and the same person may have different responses on different occasions. Explaining the different responses will require understanding subjective aspects of the agent, which I address in the following section on Intensity.

We seek the experience of Wildness for many reasons: for the emotions associated with the experience, for the contrast with our experience of the urban, for the understanding it brings of both the world around us and our selves. Prominent feelings associated with experiencing Wildness include wonder, awe, exhilaration, joy, frailty, risk, danger, of the elements being beyond our control, of nature in the raw, of nature proceeding unimpaired or ignorant of humans. As we will see in the following section, it is the Intensity with which we feel these emotions in response to mountain experience that marks the experience as special or otherwise. The greater our experience of Wildness, the more likely our experience is to have Intensity.

Intensity

An initial description of Intensity is:

how focussed on the moment the experience is. For example, leading a climb at the edge of one’s ability, navigating in a whiteout, or running in a fell race all have Intensity. In the truly intense experience there is only awareness of now, the rest of life is on hold and does not feature in our consciousness.

There are different kinds of Intensity, for example, the fear felt on a hard move over poor protection when climbing, the physical exhaustion towards the end of a fell race or at the end of a long day in the hills, the beauty of a view, the unusualness of a scene which catches our attention, the physical sensation of driven spindrift striking bare skin, the focus that navigation in poor conditions requires, the attempt to recognize a new species of bird or plant. It might also be associated with a sudden event. For example, a rock falls or a bird swoops from a clear sky. So Intensity may be of both long and short duration. It may be the result of deliberate focus on an anticipated event or sequence, or it may be a reaction to the unexpected. It may be physical, emotional, intellectual or a combination of the three. For example, the intellectual skill of navigating in a Scottish whiteout combines with the physical demands of the situation and the emotional awe of nature.

Mountains are far from the only source of intense experience. Intensity may occur in other situations: the sudden burst of fear when reaching a bend too quickly on a bike, the exhaustion of running a road race, the appearance of a sparrowhawk in our garden, the derivation of a new mathematical theorem, an argument. So mountains are not a necessary condition for intense experience. It should be noted that being intense does not necessarily mean that an experience is a positive one. A situation may consume us with fear or anger yet this intensity is something we would avoid if at all possible.¹⁰

Equally, we can be in the mountains without the experience being intense, for example, a stroll up a rounded hill on a summer's day (though this still offers the chance of Intensity through the unexpected event). Would a day in the hills count as special if it did not include something of Intensity? No. So while Intensity is not a necessary part of mountain experience, it is part of what counts as the best experience. A day in the hills that did not in some sense have Intensity would be a disappointment.

The phenomenological method invites us to inquire what is "meant along with" the experience. One thing that is "meant along with" mountain experience is the absence¹¹ of the everyday, escape from the pressures of work, being outside the home and family life (not because these things are not important, they are, but because being on a mountain places one in the here and now). There is an opportunity for Intensity and immediateness that is missing from much of our lives. How often, to be dramatic, does one's life hang on the decisions we make? Late afternoon on a Scottish mountain, darkening cloud all around, spin drift rattling on your ski goggles, there can be no doubting that the decisions are important, and that now is the time that counts.

Once again, while Intensity is an individually felt response to a particular situation, there are objective factors that can have explanatory power for both the emotional response and the intensity with which it is felt, for example, the awe we feel when witnessing a peregrine's stoop. One might characterize Wildness as more concerned with the external aspects of the mountain experience and Intensity as more concerned with the internal or personal response. However, I want to be clear that this is a question of degree not an absolute division:¹² there are important internal aspects to Wildness, and external aspects to Intensity.

Connectivity links the internal and external aspects of experience.

Connectivity

An initial description of Connectivity is:

the degree to which we feel connected to nature and to others with whom we share particular experiences. For me, an example would be the connection I felt on seeing a flock of about 20 whooper swans take off from a Scottish loch, almost certainly at the start of their summer migration north; I can still hear their wild cries 25 years after it happened: they bring back a feeling of connection with life.

Connectivity describes our experience of the relation between us and nature, or of a relation in nature. The connection might be between the experiencer and the surroundings, it might be between the experiencer and other people or beings, or it might be awareness of connection between different beings or entities that we observe. The experience might be of a feeling of “oneness” with nature, that there is no fundamental boundary or difference between us and the beings around us. Equally, it might be experienced as exclusion, when we observe creatures so absorbed in their own lives that they are entirely unaware of us—nature as “the other.” For example, watching a peregrine feed her chicks we may be struck by how little connection there is with us from her point of view. Note that Connectivity is not necessarily positive. For example, the connection might be between a species that has been introduced into an area and an existing species in the area that is now threatened. I will start by considering Connectivity as shared experience, then go on to consider Connectivity as our experience of the relationships in nature, and finally to consider Connectivity as experience of nature as the other. This last is associated with a strong sense of the absence of a connection. If Wildness is our experience of the external and Intensity is our experience of the internal, then Connectivity is our experience of what lies between ourselves and

others, of the relationships between others, or of that which, by experience of its absence, defines the other.

An important aspect of mountain experience is the sense of sharing with others. We do not always dream or reminisce alone; we share out hopes and memories with our friends. Meeting someone new who shares a similar love for the mountains, we may soon connect with them as common experiences are shared and explored. Perhaps the most obvious and dramatic example of sharing is with a climbing partner. Literally, you trust your partner with your life—where else do we place this trust in another? While climbing is the most obvious example, this shared bond exists in many other mountain activities. We count on the fitness and courage of the people we accompany, as they do on ours. Our experience is not only our own but is enhanced by their presence, whether simply by a feeling of fellowship, by the friendship they offer, by their knowledge, by the activities we feel confident to undertake in partnership (which we would balk at on our own), or by the things they observe and point out to us. The others with whom we share mountain experiences need not be human. For example, when accompanied by a dog, one's experience is enriched by her response to the mountain. She too may experience Wildness and Intensity and this transmits itself to us—indeed we may need to restrain her response, For example, when the scent of a deer is just too enticing.

I will start explaining our experience of the relationships in nature by exploring the role of knowledge in our mountain experience. Foster describes the difference between understanding the biology of why the leaves of a tree change colour and drop off and direct experience of what it means.¹³ She contrasts the biological “knowledge that” with the knowledge by acquaintance given by touching a soft, bright green new leaf in spring compared with the dry, crisp feel of a brown leaf in autumn. As another example, ecology may give us theoretical knowledge of the relationship between hunter and prey, but the sight and sound of a rabbit caught by a stoat reveals the full terror it involves. Both *knowledge that* and *knowledge by acquaintance* contribute to our experience of Connectivity. Intellectually, we understand that (in the Northern hemisphere) conditions on north-facing mountain slopes are tougher than on south-facing ones. A sunny day in the hills at the end of winter as we walk up an east-west oriented valley lets us experience exactly what this means as we move from sunshine to shade and observe the sharp divide between the snow-covered northern slopes and grassy, south-facing ones. If we really know our stuff then we will recognize the differences in the plant communities and our *acquaintance* with them reinforces our *knowledge that* conditions on north-facing slopes are different from those on south-facing ones.

Examples of connectivity within nature that we may experience include the relationships within a pack or the hunter-prey relationship. Within a pack the members have dominant-submissive relationships that affect an animal in both its feeding and breeding opportunities. We may witness this through particular events, for example, the fights between male deer in the rutting season. If we consider the hunter-prey relationships of sentient animals, typified by the relationship between wolf and deer, then we become aware that the hunter and its prey have Connectivity at more than the individual level. In “Thinking Like a Mountain” Aldo Leopold describes the impact of exterminating the wolves from a mountain, only for the deer numbers to swell uncontrollably, devastate the vegetation, and die of starvation. It is Leopold’s experience of the change in this mountain over a number of years that brings home so forcefully the Connectivity between the wolf, the deer, and the other members of the mountain community. Concerning the wolf’s howl he says that

Every living thing . . . pays heed to that call. To the deer it is a reminder of the way of all flesh, to the pine a forecast midnight scuffles and of blood upon the snow, to the coyote a promise of gleanings to come, to the cowman a threat of red ink at the bank, to the hunter a challenge of fang against bullet. Yet behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself.¹⁴

The wolf’s call is experienced along with a whole collection of meanings. We can ask whether the Connectivity is between a particular wolf and a particular deer, between a particular wolf pack and a particular deer herd, or between wolves as a species and deer as a species. Leopold’s description focuses on his different experiences of the mountain and we are left to wonder which particular interactions he has experienced. As Leopold’s example brings out, we can also ask what it is that connects the interactions between the wolves and the deer. Is it the “reminder of the way of all flesh,” the need for the deer to be ever alert, fear in every shadow, or is it the deeper meaning, “known only to the mountain,” of what will happen to the vegetation and deer without the wolves. What is clear is that the wolves and the deer have a connection in a deep sense and that Leopold becomes aware of this through his experiences. Leopold’s description of the wolf’s howl helps us realize that the deer’s memory of wolves and the chase causes them to fear through anticipation of the chase to come. And this leads them to an alertness and awareness that they might not otherwise experience.

For both the wolves and the deer the ongoing relationship is literally a matter of life and death. The stalk, the chase, and the kill have significance in the being of both that we may experience as Connectivity.

I want to return to the idea that experience of the *absence* of Connectivity can also be strong and important aspect of our experience. Nature, or a part of nature, is experienced as something other than ourselves. We may experience the absence of a relationship between ourselves and nature, or a sense of being irrelevant to a nature that proceeds without awareness or need for us, or of nature as something so big or different to us that we cannot understand or grasp it.

Why does Connectivity, a relation that requires an identity by which non-identities come together, require others and otherness? Mountain experience makes clear to us that we are not islands, that we exist in a world that contains others that are both distinct from us and very different. We interact with some of these others and have relations to them. Further, we become aware that some of these others interact and have relations between them. While this experience of difference is available to us as part of many of our experiences, the Wildness and Intensity of mountain experience make us especially aware of others and otherness that we may miss in our casual acceptance of the everyday. Connectivity requires others and otherness: without them there is nothing to connect. If there is no distinction or space between beings then there is no possibility of anything lying between.

Perhaps the most extreme form of connectivity that we experience is the feeling of oneness with nature. We are aware of difference, but go beyond this to what is shared or common between ourselves and others. This may best be considered as an aspect of Thereness, which I will treat next.

Thereness

An initial description of Thereness is:-

the mystic element of mountain experience, which is hard to put into words. When George Mallory was asked by the press why he climbed Everest he replied "because its there"; what he didn't tell the press was that for the people he climbed with being "there" meant being mystical.¹⁵

A better description of Thereness might be those things that are sensed but not through our physical senses. One example of this might be a

feeling of understanding the purpose of life, or of understanding our place in the universe. But the understanding is revealed—not reached by reason. The revelation may come as a flash of insight. Often the feeling is fleeting: sometimes the understanding remains, but often there is a feeling of disappointment that we were “offered a glimpse of the eternal,” but that we were unable to grasp or retain it. For some, the revelation is of God or the divine while for others it may be of oneness with nature. Of the four aspects of mountain experience this is the hardest to describe in that there are no objective factors we can fall back on for explanatory power.

There is a strong link (or perhaps a better word is commonality) between what I have termed *Thereness* and mystical experience. I want to give a better understanding of *Thereness* in mountain experience by comparing and contrasting it with religious mystical experience.

The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy defines mystical experience as:

an experience alleged to reveal some aspect of reality not normally accessible to sensory experience or cognition. The experience—typically characterised by its profound emotional impact on one who experiences it, its transcendence of spatial and temporal distinctions, its transitoriness, and its ineffability—is often associated with some religious tradition. . . . Non-theistic mystical experiences are usually claimed to reveal the metaphysical unity of all things and to provide those who experience them with a sense of inner peace or bliss.

By this definition, *Thereness* is a form of mystical experience. It reveals aspects of reality that are not accessible to sensory experience. *Thereness* is not given by sight, smell, touch, hearing, or taste; however, there is a link. *Thereness* is triggered by, or a response to, the experience of being in the mountains, but it transcends the spatial and temporal in the experience. A profound emotional impact is often characteristic. The definition uses the expression “*alleged* to reveal some aspect of reality.” A characteristic of *Thereness* is that the experiencer takes the experience to be of some aspect of reality. In considering *Thereness* we should therefore bracket our belief or disbelief in the reality of the phenomena.

William James proposes four marks that justify calling an experience mystical:

1. **Ineffability:** The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In

this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists.

2. Noetic quality: mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.
3. Transiency: mystical states do not last long.
4. Passivity: the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.¹⁶

The idea that *Thereness* or mystic experience necessarily defies expression more than other experiences can be challenged. It is true that the experience is not open to sensory perception, but then neither are any of our emotions. If another person has not experienced the emotion we are trying to express to them then we will struggle to convey it. It is also true that in any use, words are a representation of reality or experience: they are not the experience itself. So while I accept that mystic experience is difficult to express in words, I do not accept that there is nothing to gain by trying to describe the experience in words. Indeed by attempting to convey it in words we may gain further insight and understanding. The examples below drawn from James show that something meaningful can be conveyed. Even though *Thereness* does not relate to phenomena we can point to and “show” it does not follow that words cannot be used to attempt to share and understand. I want to be clear that *Thereness* refers to experience of something that is real to the experiencer and not simply in the mind.

Thereness may have noetic quality; the experience reveals knowledge of ourselves, of nature, of our relation to nature, or of the relations within nature.¹⁷ This revealed understanding is to be contrasted with the understanding given by reason. But it may also be accompanied by a feeling that there is something more to understand if we were only capable. Personal experiences of this led me to an analogy of my dog when she does not understand a complex command. She understands that I am asking something of her and searches frantically for what it is; but understanding does not come.

Mystic experience is real to the person who experiences it, and just as we can tell the difference between dreaming and waking, the mystic experience may be challenged and validated (or rejected) by the person who has it. Reason can thus support the feeling that these are the most

real experiences. Challenging the reality of a mystical experience, or an experience of *Thereness* by the person who has had it is a common feature of descriptions of the event. A feeling that these moments are the most real, more real than what is experienced through the senses and in the “everyday” is often held. James carefully distinguishes mystic experience from hallucination caused by illness, drugs, or alcohol. *Thereness* can similarly be differentiated from hallucination from these causes. For example, in his article “Street Legal,” Jim Perrin¹⁸ gives an account of climbing under the influence of LSD, articulating his emotional mood swing from elation to terror during the climb that is clearly attributable to the drug and substantially different from *Thereness*. I take *Thereness* to be an experience of something perceived as real: the experiencer can differentiate it from states that are perceived as imaginary.

I have included the two extracts from James¹⁹ below to illustrate mystic experience. Is it ultimate reality that is experienced, or God? Are these one and the same? The way in which people describe their experience is clearly influenced by their beliefs, so this question will remain open. What is clear from James is the frequency with which these experiences are linked to nature and how often the person is “out of doors” to use James’ expression. As he says “certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods.”²⁰ I take this to be the essence of the mountain experience I have termed *Thereness*.

An example quoted in James is:

In that time the consciousness of God's nearness came to me sometimes. I say God, to describe what is indescribable. A presence, I might say, yet that is too suggestive of personality, and the moments of which I speak did not hold the consciousness of a personality, but something in myself made me feel myself a part of something bigger than I, that was controlling. I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in Nature. I exulted in the mere fact of existence, of being a part of it all--the drizzling rain, the shadows of the clouds, the tree-trunks, and so on. In the years following, such moments continued to come, but I wanted them constantly. I knew so well the satisfaction of losing self in a perception of supreme power and love, that I was unhappy because that perception was not constant.²¹

A further example quoted in James:

One brilliant Sunday morning, my wife and boys went to the Unitarian Chapel in Macclesfield. I felt it impossible to accompany them—as though to leave the sunshine on the hills, and go down there to the chapel, would be for the time an act of spiritual suicide. And I felt such need for new inspiration and expansion in my life. So, very reluctantly and sadly, I left my wife and boys to go down into the town, while I went further up into the hills with my stick and my dog. In the loveliness of the morning, and the beauty of the hills and valleys, I soon lost my sense of sadness and regret. For nearly an hour I walked along the road to the “Cat and Fiddle,” and then returned. On the way back, suddenly, without warning, I felt that I was in Heaven—an inward state of peace and joy and assurance indescribably intense, accompanied with a sense of being bathed in a warm glow of light, as though the external condition had brought about the internal effect—a feeling of having passed beyond the body, though the scene around me stood out more clearly and as if nearer to me than before, by reason of the illumination in the midst of which I seemed to be placed. This deep emotion lasted, though with decreasing strength, until I reached home, and for some time after, only gradually passing away.²²

What the quotes in James bring out is listed below. A particular experience of *Thereness* may have one or many of these aspects.

- being brought on by nature, especially mountains or hills
- loss of self identity
- understanding of position in the order of things or significance
- awareness of God
- feeling of oneness with nature
- feeling of internal peacefulness
- loss or sadness when the experience fades

I have described *Thereness* as the mystical element of mountain experience. The question we must ask is how, if at all, is it anchored in sensuous experience? Is there a bridge between heaven and earth? I will argue that while a complete bridge does not exist, a link can be established by using the features of mystical experience identified in

James' work and by exploring how Wildness, Intensity, and Connectivity relate to these.

James' examples suggest that mystical experience is often brought on by nature, especially being in the mountains or hills. So the first link to the sensuous is that our physical situation and actions can act as a trigger. Simply walking in the hills or sitting and contemplating them can trigger There-ness. From the descriptions given, these moments clearly have Intensity. In the first example, the Intensity appears once the experience of There-ness commences, while in the second, Intensity is present before There-ness is triggered although the nature of the Intensity changes once There-ness has been triggered. What is also apparent in the experiences James describes is Wildness, a sensuous awareness of nature. The first author links their experience to "the drizzling rain, the shadows of the clouds, the tree-trunks, and so on," while the second author refers to the brilliance of the sunshine and the beauty of the hills and valleys. It also seems from this account that while the sensuous may trigger There-ness it is not automatic. Repeating the sensuous experience may not lead to a repeated experience of There-ness.

In the first example the author emphasizes the loss of self-identity: indeed it is the satisfaction of losing self that motivates the desire to return to the experience. The author's description of feeling a part of something bigger than oneself, of being one with everything in nature, of being a part of it, all strongly reveal the presence of Connectivity. Note, however, that rather than being a result of knowledge, the Connectivity is felt. In this example, the loss of self-identity is linked to a feeling of oneness with nature and an understanding of position in the order of things. Oneness is felt, not observed or deduced, and this is a mark of There-ness. There-ness and Connectivity are not mutually exclusive: they may be part of the same experience. What starts as experience of Connectivity may develop into an experience of There-ness. What this brings out is that while we can think of mountain experience under the headings of Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and There-ness, there is clearly an overlap. There is one experience and then there are the words we apply afterwards to try to understand and communicate it better.

How do Wildness, Intensity, There-ness, and Connectivity clarify and explain experience in the mountains?

Characterization of mountain experiences under the headings of Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and Thereness forms an insightful basis for understanding. They allow the experienter to explore what they have experienced and serve as a prompt for deep reflection. Their presence or absence explains why a particular mountain experience is special, or why it is not, and helps us understand why we value the mountains and the days we spend in their presence.

If we consider the more extreme mountain sports then it seems clear that Wildness and especially Intensity are at the core of the experience that is sought. The very fact that these are sports means that there is an element of control. The “game” draws a fine balance between the level of risk we run and the Wildness and Intensity that we experience. Individuals chose a level of risk that they are prepared to run. Think, for example, of the graded ski runs and skiing off-piste or the fine detail and grading provided in a climbing guide. Some of our most memorable days come from the Intensity that results from unintentionally over-stretching ourselves and having what is known as an *epic* in climbing slang. What gives these occasions Intensity is being at the limit of what we believe we are capable of and awareness of the nearness of the tragedy that befalls the unlucky few. Think also of the solo climber. Seeking Intensity undoubtedly, but also perhaps Connectivity with nature or even Thereness, a oneness with the rock unfettered by all the paraphernalia usually used to limit the risk involved.

Most of the more extreme mountain sports have some sort of ethics or “rules of the game” even if they are unwritten. They clarify what sort of behaviour is acceptable in pursuit of success and are sometimes hotly debated. For example, whether (if at all) it is acceptable to place permanent bolts on a climb for protection, or how much it is acceptable to clean a proposed route of vegetation. These affect not only “the game” but also the impact on nature. Guidebooks and fixed protection may increase the opportunity to experience Intensity in a risk-managed way while arguably reducing our opportunity to experience Wildness and Connectivity.

What about less extreme pastimes? Walking in the hills typically seems to offer less Intensity than the extreme sports, although a big day in the hills may lead to Intensity through exhaustion. Walking does, however, offer the opportunity to experience both Wildness and Connectivity. With extreme sports the focus is more on the activity whereas when we walk or even when we sit and contemplate we are open to experiencing the world around us. While we may wish for enough in the experience to make it sufficiently intense that it is not boring, what we seek is an

experience that has Wildness in a way that the everyday does not. And the experience of Wildness may lead to a heightened awareness of nature through this to the experience of Connectivity.

There is an overlap between Connectivity and Thereness that needs to be explored. Both can lead us to a sense of oneness with nature or awareness of our place within nature. The difference in these experiences can be brought out if we consider James marks of the mystic—the oneness with nature that is experienced as Connectivity does not bear these marks. Connectivity is not ineffable; knowledge gained during the experience is knowledge by acquaintance rather than knowledge through revelation, which is the mark of Thereness. The Connectivity experience is less likely to be transient and the experiencer does not necessarily feel passive. While the experience of Connectivity can be differentiated from the experience of Thereness, the awareness of oneness with nature is linked. The oneness is seen from different aspects, like looking at two sides of the same coin.

Both Wildness and Connectivity contribute to understanding our position in the order of things and our significance (or lack of it). Mountain experience quickly leads us to a realization of both the power of nature and our individual and collective frailty. Although this realization starts in sensuous experience it can transcend it. The experience of a particular storm on a particular mountain leads to a general awareness and understanding. An experience that includes this has something of Thereness.

James brings out the importance of the feeling of inner peacefulness in the mystic and it is an important aspect of Thereness. Mountain experience can lead to this in a number of ways; perhaps the simplest is that, for a period, we forget our everyday concerns. The Intensity of a climb pushes all else out of our minds. Or it may be that we set ourselves a goal to climb a mountain and achieve it. Perhaps the Wildness or Connectivity we experience lets us see our concerns in a different perspective. At a deeper level, we may mirror the stillness of the mountain with an inner stillness of our own.

James makes clear that several of the above are likely to be present in the mystical experience. To the extent that any are present the experience can have an element of Thereness. While the most special experiences of Thereness are mystic in the way James describes, I want to allow that some experience of mountains that do not blossom into full mystic experience do still have something of Thereness, for example, the feeling of “stillness” we may experience at the end of a special day in the hills. Perhaps one way to think of these experiences is

that we (knowingly or otherwise) seek the mystic but fall short of (fully) achieving it. Nonetheless the experience is still treasured.

My conclusion after this brief exploration is that, while the mystic experience of *Thereness* can be linked to the sensuous experience, the link does not altogether bridge the gap between heaven and earth. The mystic may be triggered by the sensuous and may accord with our knowledge of the sensuous, but it cannot be reduced to it or fully explained by it.

From the discussion above it can be seen that exploring mountain experience under the headings of *Wildness*, *Intensity*, *Connectivity*, and *Thereness* helps to clarify and explain that experience. Exploration of the experience leads to an understanding of both how the experiencer values nature and the value that nature has to the experiencer. I will use this insight in the concluding section as a basis from which to argue that mountain experience explored under the headings of *Wildness*, *Intensity*, *Connectivity*, and *Thereness* has important implications for a philosophy of nature.

Conclusion: Towards a Philosophy of Nature

In his paper “The Primacy of Desire and its Ecological Consequences in Eco-Phenomenology” Toadvine puts forward a description of the experience of nature that accords well with the one I have put forward here. I have used the ethical implications that Toadvine draws out as a starting point to highlight more formally the potential significance of “mountain experience” for a philosophy of nature. Toadvine offers good insight as to how phenomenology can go beyond the “standard” intrinsic value approach to a philosophy of nature.

Toadvine states that

Environmental ethicists are invariably led to construct a philosophy of nature, since the question of whether anthropocentrism is a sound basis for environmental policy rests on the plausibility of attributing value to nature. . . . The battle lines are drawn by implication: either humans project values on an objective and valueless factual world, or nature enjoys some valuable and/or valuing status in its own right.²³

The implication that can be drawn from the account presented here is that the black and white dualism expressed in the closing sentence of the quote above, on which much discussion has focussed, misses the point. Valuing nature is not typically a clinical abstract judgement,

made as an intellectual exercise; rather it is expressed through our experience. And the experience of mountains given here is of nature experienced through action and interaction, not detached contemplation. As we have seen in the descriptions above, some aspects of experience are dependent on what is experienced, some on the experiencer. To think of the value as fixed is to miss the point that the value is expressed by the *interactions* of the particular valuer and valued. There is a relationship between the two that makes the value apparent; and in the course of the interaction both are changed. Each leaves its imprint on the other, be it footprints on the mountain, tired muscles or a memory. The mountain has become a mountain that has significance to someone; that person does not project values on the mountain, but rather shows the value that mountains have by returning to this mountain or others, or by the enthusiasm with which they recount their adventure.

The description just given is very different from an abstract “projection of values onto nature” or from a theoretical search for a set of values that exist independently of us. To continue exploration of this difference, let us consider another aspect of the traditional views. Implicit in both these views is a sense that the value something has is static, existing essentially unchanged through time. We are correct or mistaken in either the value we project, or the value we perceive. This is very different from the ever-changing way in which value is shown by our actions and interactions, and our experience of these. For example, consider our different experiences of a place we visit regularly. The place changes over time, but our experience of it also changes. It is rarely the same place twice, as every time we approach it our (long-term) history is different and our (short-term) mood is different. A tree may have different values (to us) on different days— one day we stop and view its bare branches against a winter sky, absorbed in the delicate tracery etched against sunlight clouds; another day we hurry past thinking of work. Not only do we change, but the tree changes through its life and annual cycle; indeed, if we are familiar with the tree, experience of this change catches our attention and (in some sense) makes the tree more valuable to us. Finally, different people experience differently depending on who they are, and depending on their previous experience. My experience of a familiar walk is very different from that of my reluctant child taken on the same walk for the first time.

A philosophy of nature must therefore start in our varied and changing experience of nature. It should incorporate the insight that it is through our actions and interactions with nature that valuing occurs. The account I have offered goes beyond Toadvine’s. The richness of

mountain experience clearly brings out how value may arise from the interaction of valuer and valued. It is thus a possible starting point for both a philosophy of nature and to explore the rest of our experience of nature.²⁴ Articulating experience under the headings of Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and There-ness shows how a better understanding of our experience can be gained by seeking to understand what is of importance in our experiences. My anticipation is that further exploration of experience of nature (and mountains) will reveal other aspects that have importance to the experiencer: indeed, some of these will be highly personal. What I hope I have shown is how we might begin such an exploration.

In addition to considering those aspects of nature that we can sense and comprehend, a philosophy of nature must recognize those aspects of nature that we cannot directly sense or comprehend.²⁵ Toadvine quotes Rolston, in the context of denying that value arises only with the human valuer, as follows: “Something from a world beyond the human mind, beyond human experience, is received into our mind, our experience, and the value of that something does not always arise with our evaluation of it.”²⁶ Toadvine states “Perhaps nature’s value, if value is the word, should be sought in this ‘something’ that is beyond the human mind and experience.”²⁷ As a minimum, this seems compatible with much of what I have described as There-ness. A stronger claim is that There-ness gives a glimpse of what is beyond our everyday or sensual experiences and reinforces the need for a philosophy of nature to recognize the mystic element that accompanies some experience of nature.

Toadvine goes on to explore Evernden’s alternative to what he characterizes as the dialectic between nature-as-object and nature-as-self. This alternative is

the idiosyncratic experience of nature to which each of us, as an individual, is privy is itself contrary to the laws of nature with which we are indoctrinated. . . . Perhaps we can return to a “direct experience” of nature in which the “laws of nature” do not always apply.²⁸

Evernden holds out the possibility for an alternative “return to the things themselves.” It might be, he suggests, that

nature-as-miracle, some experience that transcends the normal understanding and holds it temporarily in abeyance so that the personal awareness of the living world is restored, is a prerequisite to any real change in awareness of individuals and therefore also to a change in the conceptions of nature in popular culture.”²⁹

While I'm not especially keen on the expression "nature-as-miracle," There's "transcends our normal understanding and holds it temporarily in abeyance." The account of mountain experience that I have given above shows how we can return to the "thing in itself," to direct experience, in the way Evernden suggests.

The exploration of mountain experience gives us insight into our personal experience of nature and how we value nature. What I have presented here is only the start of a longer journey. If phenomenology asks us to listen to the phenomena, then the phenomena of mountain experience, as characterized by Wildness, Intensity, Connectivity, and especially There's, have only just begun to speak. They have more to say.

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Notes

¹ Toadvine, 2003.

² James, 1902.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Dewey, 1934, p. 49.

⁵ Sibley, 1991.

⁶ This was written some months before the events in Boscastle (England), where torrential rain led to flash flood causing significant damage.

⁷ I am aware that it can be argued that there is nowhere on earth that is unmarked by humans, so there is no wilderness. However, my concern here is to differentiate Wildness as experience from wilderness as environment, rather than give a specific definition of what counts as wilderness.

⁸ I want to be clear that I am limiting my use of Wildness to experience of nature. A rough area of a city may also give rise to an experience of some thing wild. In this case it is the human that is experienced as in some sense untamed and wild.

⁹ Sibley, 1991.

¹⁰ See, for example, J. Glen Grey's "The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle" for insight into ambiguous response to horrific situations encountered in war. There is clearly intensity in the experiences and, despite the fact that the participants would in no sense choose the situations, looking back there is sometimes a feeling that this was the time when the experiencer was most alive.

¹¹ I use the term absence here in the sense used by Robert Sokolowski in *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000) pp. 33–41.

¹² I want to be clear that I'm not linking this to a mind-body split.

¹³ Foster, 1998.

¹⁴ Leopold, 1968, p. 129. Leopold's text is a good example of how narrative "brings to life" place description and how the aesthetic features in the narrative—the sound of the wolf, the image of trees, snow and blood.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, I have not been able to find a reference for Mallory's use of "being there" as mystical. My recollection is of reading it about 20 years ago, possibly in "Walt Unsworth: *Everest—a mountaineering history*." Whether or not I am correct in attributing this usage to Mallory, this understanding is where my use of the term *Thereness* originates.

¹⁶ James, 1902.

¹⁷ There is an overlap with Connectivity here.

¹⁸ Perrin, 1986.

¹⁹ James, 1902.

²⁰ James, 1902 p. 355.

²¹ From James, 1902, footnote 2, p. 355, taken from Starbuck's manuscript collection. James quoted heavily from Starbuck's manuscript collection but he did not indicate who Starbuck was quoting.

²² From James, 1902, pp. 357–8. James is quoting from the autobiography of J. Trevor, *My Quest for God*. (London, 1897) pp. 268–9.

²³ Toadvine, 2003, 139.

²⁴ Roderick Nash, quoted in Emily Brady, pp. 30–1, points out that wild nature has been appreciated by Asian cultures since early times through art and direct experience; "Far from avoiding wild places, the ancient Chinese sought them out in the hope of sensing more clearly something of the unity and rhythm that they believed pervaded the universe ... the wild was thought to manifest the divine more potently than the rural."

²⁵ My thought here is to include phenomena that we can only detect with instruments that we have developed within what we can sense.

²⁶ Toadvine, 2003.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁹ My summary of Evernden's position is based on the exposition by Toadvine (2003, p. 142), which is in turn based on Neil Evernden, "Nature in Industrial Society," in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, edited by Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 151–64.